Sociological Significance of Language

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A society owes its existence to inter-personal relationships among men and a common language brings them together. There are different groups and societies and there are different languages. Some languages are more evolved than others, and this is all due to different sociological needs. The level of language is determined by cultural standards of living, which account for the difference between a language and its dialects—that is, between language with standard vocabulary and conventional grammar and non-standard varieties of the language lacking refinement and grammar. With the development of human society, there cropped up problems of communication as well as realization of social ends. The paper discusses the scope of language widening with the growing needs of society and inter-personal relationships going beyond local limits.

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A dialect is not free from basic grammar because it determines the social context of speech and makes communication possible. For example, the situation that obtains for communication is that there is a speaker and (at least) a listener and the speaker talks about himself or

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the listener(s) or about somebody or something. The speaker addresses himself as "I," addresses the listener as "you," and refers to beings and things as "he, she, it" etc. Thus we know that it is the pronouns that provide the context of speech.[2]

.We may ask as to what we communicate. The question addressed needs explanation lest it becomes ambiguous. The expression "what we communicate" does not refer to specific content but the general *framework*. For example, talking about a Subject—that is, somebody or something—we either say what the Subject is or is not, or what the Subject does or does not do, and this involves *the use of verbs and modifiers.* Then, the use of naming words and modifiers necessitates words that serve as connective.

With the development of human society, there cropped up problems of communication because basic grammar and an infinitesimal vocabulary could not fulfill the needs of communication. Therefore, early societies increased their vocabulary, developed grammatical conventions and worked out certain concepts and devices to facilitate communication. The scope of communication widened[3] with the growing needs of society and inter-personal relationships going beyond local limits. Further social development exposed the narrow limits of verbal communication, and the ways and means of communicating ideas and feelings in writing had to be worked out. Languages devised their

alphabets so that the sounds obtained in the pronunciation of their words could be represented by letter(s.) But writing down words using a particular alphabet has its own problems relating to spelling and pronunciation of words. Take for example, the English language. As there is less number of letters in its alphabet than there are sounds, English uses a group of letters to produce units of sound—e.g., ch, chh, dh, etc. English, being a syllabic[4] language then, faces the problem of spelling. The word "often" contains two units of sound (syllables) "aw" and "fn" and to retain both sounds in the pronunciation of the word it has to have a silent letter in between to keep the two sounds intact and separate. Now, take the example of Urdu language. An Urdu-speaking person pronounces names differently than the way we do. He calls out Ravindra's name as 'Ravinder.' It is not that he cannot utter 'dra,' but the Urdu script does not allow him to say it. The letters "re," "vao" and "dal," which respectively represent the sounds "ra," "va" and "da," do not join their following letter. Thus, the way of writing the name gives the person's name to read as R(a)-v(a)-ind(a)-r(a)—that is, R(a)Vin-D(a)R(a), or to read the same at one stretch—Ravinder. Perhaps, our alphabet, the alphabet for Sanskrit and other languages, is most rational, scientific and orderly: each letter of the alphabet has a distinct sound and— to say it the other way—each sound has a distinct letter to represent it. Taking down dictation without

committing spelling mistakes or reading out the written text with correct pronunciation is easy; however, the case is different with other languages. The superior quality of such alphabet may be referred to make this point that the society that had it in its language was more developed than other societies having other alphabets.

A sociological aspect of language emerged in the last century during the days of women's lib movement. The women fighting against male supremacy in society vehemently opposed the use of words that implied gender bias.[5] For example, they would object to such statement as this one: "If anyone encounters difficulty in solving a mathematical problem, he may consult me." They would object to the use of the pronoun "he" as it refers to a male human being. They would argue that one could legitimately use the pronoun "she" instead of "he," but if one used the pronoun "he" instead of "she," one was showing preference for the male person. Why males should be given pre-eminence or priority over females if they all are equal and in a cultured society women are considered more respectable? To give women equal importance, one could write "he/she." But, then there is a problem. One could write 'he/she,' but how one would say it. It was suggested that "them" should replace the phrase "he/she." The statement as modified would then be: "If anyone encounters difficulty in solving a mathematical problem, they may consult me." This sentence obviously violates the grammatical rule of number agreement between the terms, for "anybody" is singular whereas "them" is plural.

This objection had to be overruled and accepted as usage. Such usage is free from gender bias and it becomes indicative of a society which denies men priority against women or authority over them. I may comment here that the use of language is not without sociological significance because the use of a gender-neutral language seeks to undermine patriarchal authority and give women equal status with men.

The vocabulary of a language can be used to infer stages or levels of societal development. Not much need be said about it, because it is an obvious truth. You need more words because you have more ideas, and you need more words because you care for better expression. Saying things in a better way is a cultural issue, and refinement in expression is more than a matter of an individual behaving nicely; it signifies the standard of society. Moreover, a language with a large vocabulary can be interpreted as being the language of a society, which is powerful. For instance, English has perhaps more words in its dictionary than any other language because it has in it words from languages of the countries the British ruled.

An important aspect of communication is translation. Ideas available in one language can be communicated in another language. This, then, is an extension of inter-personal relationship between members of two different lingual communities, and an indication of the society growing up.

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4. Syllable means a group of letters serving as a unit of sound.

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