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BA English Honours | Semester III | Calicut University

Language in Action

Course Code: ENG3CJ202 • Module 1 Notes

MODULE I: LANGUAGE IN SOCIETY

1. The Social Ontology of Language: Interaction, Power, and Reality

Language is humanity's primary social institution. Far from being a neutral, isolated computational code for transferring abstract thoughts between individual brains, language is an embodied, lived social practice. As sociolinguist Michael Halliday observed in his Systemic Functional Linguistics, language does not merely reflect human society; it actively *constitutes* social reality. Every human utterance simultaneously performs three metafunctions: the *Ideational* (representing our experience of the physical and mental world), the *Interpersonal* (enacting social relationships, roles, and power dynamics), and the *Textual* (weaving verbal sequences into coherent, unified discourse).

In our daily lived reality, language functions as the primary medium through which human beings establish intimacy, negotiate social status, resolve interpersonal conflicts, or inflict psychological trauma. When communicative breakdowns occur—in personal relationships, diplomatic negotiations, or cross-cultural exchanges—they rarely stem from simple lexical ignorance; they arise from misaligned pragmatic assumptions, unacknowledged cultural schemata, and asymmetric power relationships embedded within the communicative act.

2. Language in Social Practices: Identity Formation and Hegemonic Structures

Human identity is not an innate biological essence; it is discursively constructed through language. We "talk ourselves into being." Through the linguistic registers we adopt—accents, dialects, slang, specialized technical jargon, and sociolects—we signal our allegiance to specific social classes, regional communities, gender identities, and subcultures.

> **SOCIOLINGUISTIC THEORY** **Pierre Bourdieu's Linguistic Habitus and Symbolic Capital**
>
> French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu demonstrated that linguistic competence is a form of **Symbolic Capital**. In socially stratified societies, the dialect of the ruling class is consecrated as "Standard English" or "proper speech," while the dialects of working-class, rural, Dalit, or minority speakers are stigmatized as "vulgar," "crude," or "broken." Linguistic discrimination operates as an insidious mechanism of social exclusion, maintaining economic and political dominance without physical coercion.

Key dimensions of language in social practice include:

- **Politeness Strategies and Face-Work:** Sociolinguists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson demonstrate that all human speakers navigate "Face"—the public self-image that every individual claims for themselves. Speakers employ *Positive Politeness* (solidarity, compliments, shared humor) and *Negative Politeness* (deference, formal apologies, minimizing imposition) to manage face-threatening acts (FTAs) in daily life.
- **Gendered Linguistic Practices:** Feminist sociolinguists (Deborah Tannen, Robin Lakoff) examine how patriarchal conditioning historically pressured women into adopting deferential linguistic patterns—frequent tag questions ("isn't it?"), rising intonation on statements, and hedging ("sort of", "maybe")—

which male-dominated institutions subsequently weaponized to dismiss female speech as indecisive or unauthoritative.

- **Code-Switching and Multi-Dialectal Agility:** In post-colonial, multilingual nations like India, speakers constantly code-switch between their regional mother tongues (e.g., Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi) and English, using code-switching as a creative resource for social bonding, humor, and situational solidarity.

3. Language as an Instrument of Public Opinion: Persuasion, Rhetoric, and Propaganda

In democratic and authoritarian societies alike, language is the supreme instrument for manufacturing public consent, shaping political ideology, and mobilizing collective behavior. The political arena is a rhetorical battlefield where words are deployed as weapons of persuasion.

- **Rhetorical Tropes and Framing:** George Lakoff's cognitive metaphor theory reveals that political discourse relies on deeply buried cognitive metaphors. For example, framing social spending as "tax relief" subconsciously frames taxation as a painful affliction and the government as an extortionist, whereas framing taxes as "civic membership dues" highlights shared democratic investment in schools and healthcare.
- **Propaganda and the Manufacture of Consent:** As Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky articulate, mass media institutions filter reality through linguistic framing. Regimes deploy Orwellian "Doublespeak" to sanitize horrific state violence: civilian casualties in military bombardments are reframed as "collateral damage"; economic retrenchment and mass firings become "workforce rationalization"; and invasive mass surveillance is labeled "national security protection."
- **The Rhetoric of Demagoguery:** Authoritarian populists manipulate public fear through polarizing binary discourse ("us versus them"). Minorities, refugees, and political dissidents are systematically dehumanized through predatory biological metaphors ("infestation", "parasites", "cancer"), lowering the public's moral resistance to state-sanctioned violence.

4. The Role of Language in Documenting Policies: Clarity, Ethics, and Social Impact

Policy documents—legislative bills, government whitepapers, institutional guidelines, and corporate charters—constitute the formal architectural blueprints of society. The language of policy must satisfy exceptionally demanding communicative and ethical standards:

- **The Imperative of Precision and Unambiguity:** Unlike poetic literature—which thrives on metaphorical ambiguity and emotional resonance—policy discourse mandates mathematical semantic precision. An ambiguous comma or vague qualifier in a healthcare regulation or labor policy can deny life-saving benefits to thousands of vulnerable citizens or create legal loopholes exploited by predatory corporations.
- **Accessibility versus Bureaucratic Obscurantism:** Traditional bureaucratic language ("legalese" and "bureaucratese") is notoriously convoluted, characterized by multi-clause compound sentences, passive voice constructions, and archaic jargon. Modern democratic governance demands the *Plain Language Movement*, arguing that citizens have a fundamental democratic right to understand the laws and policies that govern their lives.
- **Ethical Responsibility and Inclusivity:** Policy language must be audited for unconscious exclusion. Progressive policies explicitly define gender-neutral pronouns, mandate accessibility accommodations

for disabled citizens, and ensure that indigenous and marginalized communities are granted equitable representation.

Advanced Critical Discourse Analysis, Linguistic Pragmatics & Policy Hermeneutics

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1. Theoretical Foundations of Critical Language Studies

Academic investigation into Language in Society, Sociolinguistics, and Policy Architecture centers upon three foundational linguistic and sociological paradigms:

- **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Hegemony:** Formulated by Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak, CDA posits that language use (discourse) is dialectically entangled with social structure. Dominant institutions (governments, judiciaries, corporate media) employ specific discursive strategies—nominalization, passive voice deletion of agent, euphemism, and presupposition—to naturalize ideological biases and manufacture public consent. Analyzing Language in Society, Sociolinguistics, and Policy Architecture requires de-naturalizing linguistic choices to expose the underlying interests they serve.
- **Speech Act Theory and Performative Pragmatics:** J. L. Austin (*How to Do Things with Words*) and John Searle demonstrate that language does not merely describe the world (constative utterances); it performs actions (performative utterances / speech acts). When a judge issues a verdict, an official signs an act, or a protester utters dissent, language produces immediate material, legal, and ontological transformations in reality.
- **Linguistic Capital and Symbolic Violence:** Pierre Bourdieu argues that linguistic exchanges function as economic markets. Standard, elite dialects command high "symbolic capital," while non-standard vernaculars, subaltern dialects, and minority languages are devalued, inflicting "symbolic violence" upon marginalized speakers who are systematically excluded from institutional decision-making.

2. Comparative Analytical Matrix: Discourse Domains

A structured comparative assessment delineates linguistic registers, power dynamics, and interpretive protocols across discursive fields in Language in Action:

Discourse Domain	Primary Pragmatic Function	Key Syntactic & Lexical Hallmarks	Institutional Power Dynamic
Literary Discourse	Aesthetic defamiliarization, emotional subversion & ethical critique.	Metaphor, polysemy, syntactic ellipsis, interior monologue, narrative framing.	Subverts dominant ideological consensus and restores voice to marginalized subjectivities.
Media & Digital	Information framing, attention capture &	Sensational hooks, active voice, multimodal	Shapes public mood and reproduces commercial

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3. Glossary of Essential Applied Linguistics and Discourse Terms

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Performativity	J. L. Austin / Judith Butler	The capacity of language to not merely describe an act, but to actualize that act into existence through its very utterance (e.g., 'I declare you guilty').
Nominalization	Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday)	The grammatical transformation of an active verb or process into a static abstract noun (e.g., 'police shot protesters' becomes 'the shooting of protesters'), frequently deleting responsible agency.
Interdiscursivity	Norman Fairclough	The constitution of a text from diverse discourses and genres (e.g., a modern political speech mixing religious rhetoric, corporate marketing, and street colloquialisms).
Remediation	Bolter & Grusin	The formal logic by which new media technologies refashion and absorb prior media forms, transforming textual documents into dynamic digital performances.
Biopolitics	Michel Foucault	The techniques and rationalities by which modern sovereign states manage and regulate human biological life, health, gender, and populations through legal statutes.
Defamiliarization (Ostranenie)	Viktor Shklovsky	The artistic technique of disrupting habitual, automated perception by rendering familiar reality strange and difficult through unexpected literary language.

4. Four-Phase Critical Discourse Analytical Protocol

Conducting scholarly analysis of Language in Society, Sociolinguistics, and Policy Architecture adheres to a structured four-phase research methodology:

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