Central Institute of Indian Languages

53rd Foundation Day Lecture Series

Lecture 9
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From code to discourse: the unfinished transition

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Probal Dasgupta is Former Professor of Linguistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata. He holds an NYU (1980) PhD. He has taught in Kolkata, Pune, Hyderabad, as well as San Francisco, Melbourne, and Brlaston (England). He has written extensively in English, Bangla, French and Esperanto about the linguistics and sociolinguistics of Bangla, Hindi and Indian English. He served as President of the World Esperanto Association from 2007 to 2013. Working with Rajendra Singh and Alan Ford, he has articulated Substantivist Linguistics, a perspective that deploys formal linguistic tools for macro-linguistics encompassing sociolinguistic and translation-theoretic issues.

Current thinking needs to bridge the gap between the unreflective pretheoretical term “natural languages” and Grice’s 1967 definition of verbal “meaning”, i.e. Non-Natural. Even if spoken language is rooted in our biology, written language has never been viewed as disconnected from the natural world due to its cultural artifact status—a status that is also widely acknowledged. This gap between the natural and the non-natural in our intuitive understanding of the nature of language proves addressable in the context of the slow transition from studying languages as codes to studying languages as discourses. The version of generative linguistics that has been particularly self-consciously managing this transition is known as substantivist linguistics. Substantivism places language, as a precariously exact object of study, half-way between geometry’s exact shapes and geography’s inexact coastlines. Human language is amphibian, adapted both to the craggy literary land and to the shapeless, artless spoken sea. Responding to the hard-core exactitude needs of the science of spoken language and the soft-core impression-sensitive demands of traditional lexico-grammar wedded to the written arts, substantivism seeks a goldilocks solution that helps make sense of the precarious exactitude of language. In terms of the old adequacies, substantivism’s goal is criterial adequacy: its criteria that choose different exactitude settings for different levels of description, e.g. for syntax vs morphology, due to their distinct alignments with discourse. Empirically, this exposition will explore some consequences of the fact that the typical aabhaasa-dyotaka affixes er (English) and wala (Bangla) contrast with typical artha-vaacaka words.

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