CHAPTER 2

LANGUAGE LEARNING BACKGROUND

I Language Learning

Language is a communication system with special characteristics. It has a system of signs and can be syntactically related to each other, semantically related to the things referred to, and pragmatically related to the users of language. There are many features of human language. The most important appears semanticity and syntax, meaning and grammatical patterning. Learning means embracing a wider range of phenomena. Learning and comprehension are fundamentally inseparable. Language learning occurs when an individual comes to know something he did not know before. The actual mechanism of learning lies within the learner. All normal human infants are born with the potentiality of acquiring knowledge. Language learning consists in acquiring command of a language to the level which is adequate for the communicative purposes of the individual. Members of the speech community should find his speech acceptable. Learning of one’s first language occurs informally, while second language learning occurs in a formal learning situation which supplements the informal learning.

The learning of any language beyond the first may be informal, as in multilingual community, or it may be almost formal in a school setting. First language acquisition has often been regarded as the ‘natural’ language learning situation. The strategies are determined by the learner, not imposed by the teacher. The learning of reading and writing takes place in formal learning situation. First language
acquisition takes place in an informal context, while second language learning takes place in a formal context. Second language learners differ from the first language learners. The second language learners already have a language and are older than the first language learners.

II First Language Learning

The systematic study of the child's first language acquisition was done by psychologists, beginning with the first utterance of the child to the school age. In the first half of the present century most of the study of the child language assumed that language learning though very complex is not different from other kinds of learning.

A new approach (Mac Carthy 1954) to language and language behaviour began to develop in 1950. In the early 1960s Noam Chomsky brought a revolution in the study of child language. He pointed out that all human beings have innate knowledge of the essential underlying grammatical relations. In studying child language the issue of innate knowledge and environmental learning came up. The environmentalist said that the child came into the world as a piece of raw material which is moulded by the experiences he undergoes into some sort of reactions which makes his individuality and skills. (J.P.B. Allen & S.Pit Corder 1975)

According to the theory of extreme innate knowledge the child comes into the world with very specific innate endowment. The children are born with the knowledge of the nature of the world and specifically with the knowledge of the nature of language. According to this view children are
born with knowledge of the basic grammatical relations and categories for example, subject, verb, nouns. This knowledge is universal and these categories and relations exist in all human languages and all human infants. All human beings acquire language provided that there is no organic defect in them and that there is a small amount of exposure to language.

The language acquisition may vary among the children. It may be due to variation in general cognitive capacities, the environments, and individual differences of the children. The child discovers at the earliest stage some of the sounds he hears. He selects sounds and sound sequences. These habits are largely phonetic. As he grows older, he begins to organise his speech into patterns of grammar to acquire a stock of items—lexical and grammatical. The child who begins to speak early is regarded as intelligent. The disparity between children can be very large. It shows that the cognitive development and language development are closely related. The environment also contributes a lot to the child's language acquisition. The main contribution of the people in the child's environment is to initiate the whole interaction. All children work their way towards adult language through trying out the same hypotheses and revising them in the same way. The children acquire language according to the adult's language. A very small proportion fails to develop control of basic grammatical categories. The failure is not related to intelligence or social class. But older children do better than the young, intelligent children do better than the less intelligent and middle class children do better than lower class children. These
factors also play a role in language acquisition.

Through the above language learning stages the child learns to acquire the knowledge of language, things, sounds, colours etc. Thus the language learning process starts from the birth of a child. Gradually the process develops into skills and develops proficiency of comprehension among the children.

The Nature of the Learning Process

The language learning of children is full of irregularities and individual variations. The fundamental assumption that language development is a very important part of cognitive development makes us think about the capacities and the strategies the learner brings to situation, the intrinsic nature of the learning job and the contribution of the environment in language acquisition.

The capacities and the strategies of the learner consist in motivation, perceptual and cognitive development and learning strategies.

Motivation

The need to communicate motivates the child to utter in the first place and later master progressively more complex structures. Babies have a tremendous need to relate to other human beings and this need persists throughout life. According to J.P.B. Allen and S. Pit (order (1975)) there are three main sources of child language development. One is the joy of recognizing things and remembering the name for them. Children use question tags after acquisition to enjoy
and exercise new skills. Another source is the child's growing perceptual and cognitive understanding of the world. Children become aware of more complex meaningful relations which force them to adopt more complex linguistic structures.

In the comprehension process the perception stage develops cognitive abilities of the learner and makes him aware of more complex meaningful relations of the things around him. It shows that the learner achieves the capacity to reveal complex linguistic structures.

The third and most important source is the need to relate people and establish and maintain emotional contact with other human beings. This need remains throughout the life. Out of this children adopt customs and rituals of the society.

The child's cognitive structures are generally in advance of his linguistic structures. The child responds to the words uttered by his elders and goes on repeating them. The reception stage in comprehension makes the child acquire language. These are cognitive universals, not formal linguistic ones. Children resemble one another in their language development because of their comparable needs, comparable experiences and comparable cognitive capacities. With the help of these cognitive capacities children try out linguistic forms before they properly learn how to use them. For example children differentiate the use of plural appropriately.
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Thus the language development underlies the cognitive, perceptual factors, which we have discussed in the process of comprehension. As a learner naturally the child employs a number of strategies which in the majority of cases are successful, for example, Learning in context - generally children use perception ability in learning language at this level. They acquire language by constant reference to the situational and communicative context, for example, their early action words like 'peebo'. Thus the children perceive and extract the relevant meaning aspects of a recurring situation. This enables them to use correctly various grammatical markers, for example, plurals, when referring to more than one. This is the level of perception. Children can recognize, understand colours, words etc. The verbal and non-verbal perception process starts and leads to language acquisition among children.

Simple and Complex Learning

Children learn by associating a particular item with the particular occasion. The child through perception starts discriminating between right and wrong. The process underlies the ability to use grammatical structure in language acquisition.

Children use strategies, such as using the words that are learnt by them in a specific context.

Similarly, children utter and use various words with minimum cognitive and memory strain. But the second language learners have to adopt the same cognitive strain-reducing strategy. In the first language acquisition
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Children use words only to be understood by others. Nobody cares whether the child makes errors or not. Thus children try to acquire models provided by adults in the environment.

**Frequency** - of occurrence of any linguistic event is responded to by a child. It is useful generally in rote learning.

**Practice** - A child imitates his elders' words. Language acquisition is closely related to practice. Children go on imitating and repeating the words used by the elders around him.

In second language learning the practice helps in increasing the accuracy of discrimination. The learner tries to understand the concepts of noun, verb, third person, present tense etc. and tries to learn the rule in order to form present tense in practice.

The child's habit of accompanying action with descriptive remarks provides further occasion for practice. The intrinsic nature of learning consists of the acquisition of sounds and sound contrasts that children learn and easily discriminate. Children also acquire the knowledge of semantic complexity. The semantic relations and concepts are easily learned in early age. Children also understand the use of comparative words in sentences.

Children acquire language out of their need to communicate and to relate to the people around them. If they succeed, they are encouraged and they go on trying. The main contribution of the people in the child's environment is to
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make them develop the communication process and encourage them.

In the comprehension process we find that the above levels of language acquisition play basic roles. Children acquire knowledge and learn how to speak and listen, then in the school, to read and write. The language acquired in this manner naturally brings proficiency to the learners. The first language comprehension by students is expected to be superior to the second language comprehension.

III Second Language Learning

Second language learning occurs in a formal learning situation which supplements the informal learning. Second language is more readily acquired by the very young. A large number of children learn two or even more languages simultaneously if they are exposed to them during their formative period. There are two kinds of learning, habit learning (rote learning) and rule learning (concept learning). The learning of second language involves mainly stimulus response learning, chaining, multiple discrimination, concept learning and principle learning.

Stimulus Response Learning - It is the most elementary kind of learning in which a particular stimulus configuration is linked to a particular identifying or recognizing responses.

In comprehension process this kind of identified or learned form helps us to grasp his response. Because of our previous knowledge we are stimulated to respond to the poem.
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Chaining is the process of attaching words as labels to objects or actions. It develops from stimulus response learning and becomes a more complex form of learning. A chain consists of two or more stimulus response links, for example, word 'infant'.

S : Presence of child -> R identifying response
       (human, non adult small body)
S : Presence of word -> identifying response.
       (i.e. Somebody uttering word 'infant') -> Pronouncing 'infant'.

At this stage the learner responds to a sound or word uttered by somebody and identifies it, and identifying response stimulates him to pronounce that word.

At this stage we find that the learner achieves the state of understanding the thing or sound from the utterance. In the comprehension process this stage helps the learner to catch the exact idea and its meaning from the text. When such a chain becomes well established the stimulus part becomes internalised. Thus the learner directly responds to the word or text, for example -

S : (the word) Child - (the word) infant
S : Child - (mediating link infant) R infant

Multiple discrimination consists of keeping links and chains intact without getting them confused. The student has to learn hundreds and thousands of chains that are required for language learning. The learner has to retain sound symbols, morphological markings, forms of verbs, nouns etc. The learner may memorize rules. The rules enable the
reader to choose appropriate forms.

This form of learning develops the ability of the learner in using, discriminating different forms of words, sounds. The learner, in comprehension, can squeeze the meaning of the text, for example, a poem, with the help of this ability. In comprehension the knowledge to discriminate reveals the correct meaning of the text. Concept learning occupies the next position in the form of learning hierarchy. The concept is independent and still based on correct perceptual identification. Concept formation involves the process of isolating and extracting a particular feature from a configuration of features, which characterises a total situation according to a particular purpose.

It can be said that the concepts have been learned when the learner applies appropriate tense forms to actual experiences. Thus forming a concept consists of classifying a number of occasions as equivalents for the purpose of making a particular response of treating them as equivalent for a particular purpose.

Concept learning makes the learner frame concepts in language. The learner achieves the capacity to extract a particular feature of the object or aspect of language. With the help of this ability a learner can understand the text or a poem specifically. In the comprehension process the student can use this experience to analyse and understand the poem.

Principle learning consists in learning the relationship between concepts and other principles. It is a learning to respond appropriately to instances of the concept. For
example A child shows that he has a concept of "time past" when he uses past tense appropriately. Secondly it consists of the ability to define the concept. A linguist may know much about grammatical categories and relations of the language but he may not be able to operate these in the actual situation, like the native speaker.

The learner may understand a concept perfectly but may fail to respond to it appropriately. For example failure to use he or she for the third person in English if the native language has only third person pronoun as in Hindi.

In language learning the principle learning occupies an important place, particularly in second language learning the learner first learns to respond appropriately and develops the ability to define the concept. So that the learner achieves the best learning of language.

In comprehension the student is expected to utilise his knowledge of responding appropriately and defining the concept in language. Naturally students with this ability will comprehend the text or poetry perfectly. In comprehending poetry the student needs to respond and understand the concepts in the language.

To develop comprehension ability the learner must learn stimulus-response, for example chaining, discrimination, concept learning etc.

Conditions of Second Language Learning

To learn both simple and complex forms of the second language the learner must acquire Stimulus-response learning,
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chaining multiple discrimination, concept and principle learning etc.

All forms of learning are hierarchically related and interdependent. At the same time there are differences in the nature of the learning job as one progresses from simpler to complex. Therefore the conditions which assist learning will vary to some extent according to the form of learning which is involved.

Major conditions that contribute in language learning are practice, reinforcement, mediation. Practice is central to all learning. In second language learning practice is needed to link up the correct categorization of utterance and occasions (principle learning) with the language rules. The stimulus - response learning practice increases accuracy of discrimination. In chaining and concept learning, practice, serves to establish the number of chains and number of trials.

Practice gives knowledge of the concepts of noun, verb, third person, present tense etc. which develops fluency in using language.

Reinforcement

At all stages of learning the knowledge of right and wrong is extremely important. The steps of learning must be arranged in such a way that the learner achieves progress. The achievement motivates the learner. Thus in learning, reinforcement is necessary.
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Mediation

Practically all learning is mediated. A code by which we reconstruct the perception and the verbal label that goes with it, for example, 'Red' we recognize because we have stored something in memory from previous experience.

Transfer

It shows the effect of past learning on present learning. Transfer may be either positive or negative. There may be difficulties in transfer. The similarity relations, the multi level nature of language may have strong influence on the transfer, for example, it is easy to learn to pronounce aspirated voiceless stops in a second language, if the first language also has aspirated stops.

In second language learning the stages that contribute to language learning simultaneously develop the ability of comprehension of the individual. We expect the students of the second language to have the ability to comprehend. Unfortunately we come across a number of students who lack proficiency in the second language. (Jawale V.G., M.Phil. Unpublished Dissertation). Apart from these stages an individual may differ in language learning ability. The students may differ from one another in their general learning ability, in phonetic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, inductive learning ability, motivation etc. Thus these abilities also may have their influence on the language learning of the students.

But at the undergraduate level naturally the
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comprehension ability is expected from the students of second language. Because language learning depends on exposure, drive, context, reinforcement etc. Whether the learner was exposed to the second language, how much time he was exposed; what importance the children give to second language learning, whether they regard it as a need or just use it for the sake of examination? In our country majority of the students use it from the second point of view. Another thing is whether a context is provided to language learners. Second language learners need appropriate contextual support for every utterance. But in the class room it is rarely possible to relate utterances to a real communicative purposes. Naturally this may have an adverse effect on language learning. This is seen in our country where classes are full of bilingual or multilingual students.

In short we find out that second language learning consists of both simple and complex learning from perceptual identifications to the understanding and application of abstract rules. As the learner grows older he is increasingly able to handle abstract concepts explicitly. If special attention is given, language learning can take place speedily. According to the analysis of second language learning, we must find our students motivated in second language learning that is English at the College level, because the second language is introduced at class five. At the college level we expect good proficiency in the second language from these students. But the reality is exactly the opposite. The majority of students appear weak in second language proficiency.
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To test this proficiency in the second language we can set them to comprehend poems because poems require the use and execution of all the language skills - reading, listening, speaking and writing.

Psychological Approaches to Second Language Learning.

In addition, it would be interesting to bring in different approaches to second language learning.

Behaviouristic Approach

Many behavioural approaches distinguish between learning and performance. These theorists (Pavlov, Skinner) and others tend to have both a theory of performance and a theory of learning. (Benette W.A. 1969)

Behavioural theories consider learning as the establishment of association between a class of stimuli and a class of responses. Performance theories attempt to explain the occurrence of verbal behaviour in various situations.

Learning is analysed by the principle of two kinds of conditioning. Classical conditioning, operant (or instrumental) conditioning, refers to the acquisition of overt verbal responses by the mechanism of reinforcement. Where a reinforcer is a stimulus, response becomes more likely.

Skinner's Functional Approach to Verbal Behaviour

Skinner is clearly materialistic rather than mentalistic in his analysis. The meaning of the word is simply its tendency to occur under certain conditions plus its stimulus effect on the occurrence of the words.
Cognitive Psychological Approaches

The cognitive approach is called the mentalistic approach. It focuses our attention on the knowledge of the world and on cognitive process. Piaget was interested more generally in intellectual development and saw language as only a part of that development. Language develops on a basis of sensory motor cognitive structures or schemes. Structures are acquired through a child's action upon the interaction with the people and things.

The study of language acquisition has undergone rapid and drastic changes over the last couple of decades from a descriptive cataloguing of developmental changes in children's speech patterns to apparent and classical conditioning approaches to verbal behaviour, to the linguistic nativism of language acquisition device and most recently to cognitive psychological approaches in which non-linguistic representations are dominant.

The valuable contributions of the cognitive code approaches are -

(i) Emphasis is laid on the need of learning for language learning forms in association with meaning, (ii) The fact that it utilizes the capacity and the need of the learners for understanding the underlying abstract systems of language.

None of these approaches need to be rejected. We still require better and more detailed descriptive information about language development.
The behaviouristic emphasis is on language as a behaviour which is determined by experimental variables and processes such as reinforcement, generalisation and discrimination, remain relevant. At the same time language is a species-specific and is therefore influenced by heredity mechanisms peculiar to humans with other higher primates perhaps following close behind in the evolutionary ascent toward meaningful communication.

All these approaches converge on language behaviour as a specific skill founded on more general cognitive abilities, which in turn comes from the infant's exposure to a world of concrete objects and events and his or her own actions toward them. Linguistic skills built on this foundation remain at least partly interlocked with it.

Thus the functional development and language acquisition through cognitive, sensory motor skills and comprehension process—reception, perception, understanding and comprehension are the same. It shows that the language development and the ability development occur simultaneously.

During much of the learning stimulus-response procedure may be sufficient. As the learner nears the end of his course, he needs to master a complexity of skills. He needs to be ready precisely to move in the behavioural environment. The learner must understand his goal. The adult learner will work to a highly complex and well described goal. There are great differences between child and adult learners. Language learning proceeds at different rates for
different persons under seemingly the same condition. These differences are related to capacities.

Language learning develops listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Reading and writing are partial skills and exercising them constitutes partial language experiences, while speaking and listening are total language experiences.

The means of language learning are not external to the language learners, their body, mind, aptitude etc. participate. The capacity for language learning is innate and the acquired elements may vary with the age.

The second language learning develops proficiency in the learner. It develops the ability to read easily and understand books written in that language within a prescribed range of vocabulary and sentence structure and to read with good understanding. It develops readiness to proceed to the more advanced reading stage.

It gives the ability to understand a talk in that language on a subject of general experience and interest. It develops the ability to write comprehensibly in that language and without gross errors on familiar subjects.

It develops the ability to carry out comprehensibly a conversation in that language on a topic fully within the range both of his experience and interest and within the range postulated by the syllabus. Therefore the primary task of language teaching is to impart a practical command of the four basic skills of language for use in the widest possible range of different situations.
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Thus we have considered behavioural and cognitive approaches to language. In the language learning process both the theories show how language learning takes place. The most developed Skinner's theory stresses the associations between classes of observable events as the central aspect of language. Cognitive or mentalistic approaches focus our attention on the knowledge of the world and on the cognitive processes.

Both these approaches reveal how language learning takes place. From the point of view of comprehension ability we understand that the learner, with his age, develops language. At the undergraduate stage the learner's language proficiency must be achieved by him. It seems that by this time the learner must achieve all the four skills of language. The poetic comprehension may be a test to measure this competence, because poetry as a literary form requires full comprehension. Understanding of literature is the highest achievement especially, of poetry. Poetic comprehension is the best way of testing competence in both languages.

IV Bilingualism

A large number of children learn two or even more languages simultaneously if they are exposed to them during their formative period. Bilingualism means speaking more than one language. Some define a bilingual as one who has equal ability in two languages, others describe any one as bilingual who has even a smattering of knowledge of a second language. Still others refer to degrees of bilingualism. India is an extreme example of linguistic diversity.
Bilingualism poses important social problems ranging from language-based social conflicts to the practical problem of providing educational opportunities in more than one language. The majority of children speak two or more languages. A child who hears three languages instead of one, early enough, learns the units of all the three without added efforts and without confusion.

Learning second language does not reduce intellectual capacity. Two languages are represented as two verbal codes capable of independent but interconnected activity. Because of this independence (at least partial), switching from language to language requires time, both in comprehension and production.

Cognitive and motivational factors play an important role in second language learning. Some people are more successful than others in learning the second language. The differences may be due to differences in opportunities.

In India generally children learn more than one language. The national policy of education has included the three language formulae throughout the country resulting in a large number of bilinguals. But general observation of students makes us conclude that though second language is taught in schools from standard five, students lack proficiency in second language. So we can call them partial bilinguals. Bilingualism depends on the background of the student. If he comes from an English Medium school, he shows a better performance in English as a second language. Some students learn other languages as second language in the
surrounding society.

In case of bilingualism the interference of one language in the use of another language in common. It happens because of their familiarity with more than one language. Psychological and sociocultural setting also plays an important role in language content.

Psychological Theories of Bilingualism

From the point of view of the individual the two languages are two types of activities in which the same organs are employed. Psychological, sociocultural setting of bilinguals shows interference of one language in the use of other.

Coherent Theory of Interference

This theory was constructed by Epstein (a student of Psychology). According to him thinking is the association between ideas and words. A direct association between an idea and a foreign word is possible. According to earlier studies on memory, the knowledge of one language intervenes in the learning of subsequent ones. Associations with other languages interfere especially in the expressive use of language.

Then W. Stern, a noted student of child language, pointed out that Epstein's conclusions can be applied only to adults. It was superseded by modern psychology of thought. Stern said, "the difference in languages... not only leads to the associative phenomena of interference, but is a powerful stimulus to individual acts..."
of thought, to comparisons and differentiations, to the realisation of the scopes and limitations of concepts, to the understanding of nice shadings of meaning". (Uriel Weinreich 1953).

The issue of interference was thus taken up as an important one. Psychologists have succeeded in throwing light on the psychological mechanisms of the switching code. According to the neurological theory of bilingualism, there exists at the posterior edge (in brain) and in the adjoining regions of the brain a special language switching mechanism. Complete rigidity in one language or the ability to switch at will from one language to the other are the only ways in which this switching centre can function or be disturbed. If this hypothesis is confirmed, the individual differences among the bilinguals according to speech mixture will be revealed.

Characteristics of A Bilingual Speaker

Aptitude and switching facility may be regarded as the two characteristics of a bilingual speaker. The individual's aptitude for learning a foreign language is a factor in his performance in the second language. We can test this by applying second language aptitude tests.

According to one school of thought, a very early bilingualism affects adversely the individual's aptitude for language learning.

A special claim made in favour of bilingualism is that it helps in the acquisition of the third language. Not
because of the similarity of the third language to one of the first two, but simply because of the greater experiences of the bilingual in language learning. The ideal bilingual switches from one language to the other according to appropriate changes in the speech situation, but not in an unchanged speech situation and certainly not within a single sentence. If he does not include expressions from another language he may mark them off explicitly as 'quotations'.

Relative Status of Languages

The individual's dominant language serves as the source of interference in his speech. To find out which language is dominant, we have to test proficiency, the order of learning, attitude etc. of the bilingual.

Relative proficiency in two languages can be easily measured on various levels of understanding and expression. The inner speech test must be taken against (1) the realistic scale, (2) it must satisfy certain special requirements, (3) it should be measured in the bilingual's life... Since the ratio can change.

The visual reinforcement in the use of language a bilingual gets by reading and writing, may put that language in a dominant position over a purely oral one.

The order of learning and age are also regarded important. The first learned language - the mothertongue - is generally considered dominant by definition. In the initial stage of bilingualism, the mothertongue is indeed the language of greatest proficiency. But later on many bilinguals exceed their mothertongue proficiency in the
second language under certain circumstances.

Usefulness in Communication

Bilinguals can be asked about their usefulness of language but not the usefulness of language for the foremost reason of learning but the extent to which one language used may make it a source of interference for that very reason.

Emotional Involvement

Many persons develop an emotional pre-rational attachment to the language in which they relieve their fundamental training in semantic behaviour. More frequently, in childhood the mothertongue enjoys strong attachment.

Functions of Social Advance

Under certain social conditions, the mastery of language becomes important for an individual not merely as a medium of communication but as a means to social advance. The value of language in social advance may be designated to prestige.

Literary Cultural Value

A bilingual's intellectual and aesthetic appreciation of the literary culture expressed in that language may be dominant in the target language.

The Dominance Configuration

The dominance of language for a bilingual individual can be interpreted as a specific configuration on which the language rests. When a connection between types of
interferences and a certain dominant configuration is successfully established, many linguistic changes which until then have appeared accidental or even paradoxical, will be required to be explained.

The Speech Situation and Interference

The same bilingual may display varying amounts of interference in his speech according to circumstances in the immediate speech situation. The circumstances are bilinguality of interlocutors, departure from specialised uses of language and emotional stress.

Bilinguality of Interlocutors

In speaking to a bilingual, the bilingual often tends to limit interferences and to eliminate even habitualized borrowings from his speech. He is a subject to what is called interlocutory constraint, which requires that he somehow make himself understood in his unilingual interlocutor's tongue, when the interlocutor is also bilingual. The requirements of intelligibility and status assertion are drastically reduced. Under such circumstances there is hardly any limit to interference: forms can be transferred freely from one language to the other and often used in unadapted shape.

Departure from Specialized Uses of Language

Many bilinguals are accustomed to discuss some topics in only one of their languages or to use only one language on given occasions. A sudden transition to the other language opens the door to interference.
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Some bilinguals are accustomed to use only one language with a given person and find the transition to another language extremely difficult.

Emotional Stress

Emotional stress is a psycholinguistic problem. The speaker who acts under emotional stress, reveals the amount of interference with varying degrees. It is also called affective borrowing.

Bilingualism is closely related to the study of the comprehension - competency of the students. Particularly our students, who as, partial bilinguals, may come across the difficulty in using second language. In comprehension of poetry we can reveal how bilingualism affects the learning, competency in the second language. Similarly we can find out the competency in the first language by asking them to comprehend poems in Marathi and English.