On June 16th, 2014, Prof. S.N. Sridhar Speaks On Multilingualism at the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bangalore

The World of a Multilingual: Implications of the Indian Experience for Models of Cognitive Science and Sociolinguistics

Abstract: The effortless ease with which multilinguals weave in and out of languages is a wondrous cognitive feat. This phenomenon, involving intricate grammatical patterning and sociolinguistic sensitivity, raises fascinating questions for cognitive science, such as: Is multilingualism but an extension of monolingualism? How are the languages represented in the multilingual mind (and brain) and how do they interact in acquisition and processing? What are the cognitive mechanisms, costs and benefits? How are sociolinguistic constraints incorporated into a mental model? What are the limits and possibilities of current paradigms of research on the acquisition of multilingualism?

Conceptual breakthroughs, drawing on insights from multilingual communities in Asia and Africa, demand a convergence of linguistics, sociolinguistics, second language acquisition studies and cognitive science. These have made this phenomenon of central interest to a broad array of fields, including linguistics, sociolinguistics, stylistics, historical linguistics, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, first and second language acquisition, and second language teaching. In this lecture, I shall analyze some of these developments and propose some potentially fruitful directions of research.

This talk explores the linguistic, social, and cultural context of language contact in South Asia and to outline its implications for an adequate theory of language use. One of the concrete examples I explore is the proposition that Indian English cannot be accounted with reference only to English. It is well-known that there is an apparently accelerated tendency to bring in material from Indian languages while using English in India. This is witnessed in a wide range of domains – domestic and coffee-house conversations, radio disc jockey banter with callers, print advertising copy, bilingual bill boards, television talk shows, commentaries, news copy and commercials, newspaper and magazine interviews and articles, Internet chat rooms, SMS texts, and so forth, not to speak of academic, legal, and legislative discourse. The Indian language material inserted is not so limited that they can be considered instances of nonce borrowings, nor are they so established (e.g., attested in dictionaries) that they can be considered regular borrowings. It is beyond that, they involve extensive cases of code-weaving or code-gliding (more fluent, continuous, non-discrete, frequent and spontaneous than the traditional terms, code-mixing and code-switching, would suggest). This interweaving of languages serves a wide range of sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and stylistic functions – for example, signaling a hybrid identity encompassing the local and the global, traditional and modern, regional and cosmopolitan, crude and refined. I shall complement this with an analysis of language intercalation from Kannada literature ranging over a thousand years.
I shall argue that only a “rich analysis”—one that recognizes that a language in a multilingual culture is used in a rich multilingual ecological context where all the languages in the repertoire potentially contribute value to the transaction—each enhancing the speaker’s expressive versatility and adding to its lexical, morphological, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and stylistic richness—can insightfully account for the power, the complexity, and popularity of the use of English in India. “Rich Analysis” of multilingual discourse calls for more sophisticated theoretical concepts (e.g., a notion of a syncretic multicompetence, rather than conjoined unicompentences) and methodological tools (e.g., cross-linguistic variable rules and discourse rather than sentence units). Such an analysis also has implications for theories of how languages are represented and processed in multilinguals (as opposed to segregated models), for the target of language acquisition—first and second—in multilingual cultures, a re-calibration of language competence required of native speakers of world languages when they interact with speakers of indigenized varieties, to name a few.