Interview

Rajesh Kumar (RK) talks to

Professor Rukmini Bhaya Nair (RBN)

Rukmini Bhaya Nair has been called 'the first significant post-modern poet in Indian English'. The standard reference volume Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry which covers the world century from 1910-2010 and includes all time greats like T.S. Eliot and Pablo Neruda says of her work that "it has been widely admired by other poets and critics for its postmodern approach to lyrical meaning and feminine identity." Prof. Nair herself says that she does research for the same reason she writes poetry. that is, to discover the possibilities and limits of language. She is Professor of Linguistics and English at the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi and received her Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge. Since then, she has taught at universities ranging from Singapore to Stanford, and delivered plenary addresses worldwide from Aarhus to Xinjiang. Awarded a second honorary doctorate by the University of Antwerp for her contributions to linguistic pragmatics, Nair has published about one hundred papers, articles and books. Of her books, Narrative Gravity: Conversation, Cognition, Culture is perhaps representative. Her research interests are in the fields of cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, English studies, philosophy of language, techno-cultures, literary, narrative and postcolonial theory, gender and creative writing.

RK: Though I know about your work in some detail, I'd still like to hear from you the major landmarks in your academic journey in both linguistics and other major areas of your interest.

RBN: Thank you for this opportunity, Rajesh. Let me begin by saying that I often compare life not to a Greek tragedy where you already know the ending, but to a television serial where you are always in the midst of life's episodes. So I will try my best to tell you about some of the landmark episodes in my still incomplete journey. To begin with, I studied in various parts of India, growing up in multilingual settings and, of course, this is true of people in our country in general. In college, I studied English literature and there was always this question in my mind about the relationship of English to the other languages of India. When I got a scholarship to study at Cambridge University, I therefore switched from doing English literature, a subject I loved, to doing linguistics, a subject I knew nothing about. At this point, I asked a basic question of myself and of the texts I read. It was: *what* does language mean, *how* does language mean? And this has been a central motivating question for me throughout. I have looked at the relationship of languages to each other, at language and perception, and the idea that there is a hierarchy of languages in social space rather than necessarily a democracy of languages. How does one remedy this natural tendency towards what one might call 'linguistic elitism', where in certain social contexts, we privilege the written over the spoken, English over Hindi and so forth. So, one landmark was going to Cambridge and realizing that I could try and study linguistics and philosophy as well as literature to understand these conundrums. Then the next landmark, I suppose, was coming back to India and trying to teach linguistics.

Linguistics as it stood then - and more or less as it stands now! - is often a narrowly defined discipline. One of the things I wanted to do was to discover the relationship of linguistics to other disciplines. We always describe ourselves as a richly multilingual, plural culture and I see interdisciplinarity in academia as a cousin of multilingualism in society. This is one of the important things that I learned. Teaching

linguistics at IIT to students with a mathematical bent was another revelation - and very rewarding.

RK: Do you think that language teachers need to know about the nature and structure of language, even if it is in a preliminary way?

RBN: Yes, I definitely do. Just as I would recommend that maths and physics - or possibly basic logic - be taught across the board, with the underlying assumption that integration is needed across a curriculum. Do language teachers need to know about the intricacies of linguistics? Well, of course Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch have made a famous distinction between the faculty of language narrowly defined (FLN) which involves studying recursion and the automatic processing of language in the brain, and the faculty of language broadly defined which involves the conceptual intentional system (FLB). Now, FLB covers, in a sense, the relationships of all types of knowledge, since language is the primary instrument of thought and regulates the process of thinking in humans. Therefore to my mind, everyone needs to know about the principles of this faculty of language broadly defined even if they are not concerned with the narrow definition which is the study of the arbitrary syntactic rules which govern recursion. All teachers need to understand that language is the central backbone, the spine, so to speak, of all the other forms of knowledge.

RK: Which branch of linguistics is more useful for language teachers?

RBN: It goes without saying that language is invariably a critical element in a classroom. Teachers have to use language to communicate with students, whatever subject they teach. But language teachers in particular would benefit from knowing about linguistics. Linguistics tells us exciting things about language. That it has structure. That it connects words to the world. That it enables you to think of yourselves as beings who can navigate their way through social structure. These sorts of insights about language are critical. You ask: which particular branch is most important? In my opinion, although we have always said: let's begin with grammar, this is no longer necessarily an accepted view. I think we should experimentally begin to reverse these old norms and perhaps begin with disciplines such as pragmatics and sociolinguistics. We should bring user knowledge into the classroom. And above all, we should bring the child's knowledge into the classroom. But how do we do this?

Well, here's my 'LANGUAGE' mnemonic. When a child begins to learn a language, she always needs some initial 'live' input from a previous user or user. The language machine will not work if you do not have this input. In short, we need some sort of a 'Lexicon' to begin with. What next? Well, a child needs to grasp early on that language is arbitrary, that there is a quite arbitrary relationship between words in a language and concepts in the world. A bilingual child, for example, may realise fast that 'cheez' in Hindi means something other than 'cheese' in English. That's 'Arbitrariness'. Thirdly, you need to understand that language is always novel. Survey studies show that educated adults have about 40,000 or so words in their minds. We also know that through recursion we can, in theory, combine all these words into one very long sentence and also that each time any sentence is uttered by a speaker, it will never be uttered again in the history of the world! That is the remarkable property of novelty captured by the 'N' in the word 'Language'. And I think that, so far, these 'literary' aspects of language, that is, novelty and creativity, have not been emphasised nearly enough. So here's how I

define language. L stands for the lexicon and lexical semantics; A for arbitrariness, ambiguity and abstraction; N for novelty; and G for grammar and syntax, which are at the heart of language. Then we have U for usage, while A stands for what I call language 'anomalies' which constitute another neglected aspect of language that has importance for pedagogy. For example, a child may have a stammer, or autism or dyslexia other conditions that interfere with language production, spoken and written. In these cases, we need to study the anomalies connected with language. Another aspect worthy of study, especially in language teaching, are the developmental processes in language. We need, that is, to look at language acquisition or growth, which is the G in my language mnemonic. Finally, E stands for both evolution and emotion, the fact that language learning goes alongside and promotes overall emotional growth. If you look at each of these features in my mnemonic 'LANGUAGE', I believe you will be able to connect them to FLB - or the 'broadly defined' aspects of language which every single language teacher deals with all the time.

RK: Given the diversity of learners in our classroom, how do you think a teacher should handle it?

RBN: If one compares diversity in a classroom in America with a classroom in India one finds the following interesting difference. In America, although Spanish, Chinese, Hindi and Gujarati and other 'immigrant' language are protected inside the classroom, the default language, the language of the street and marketplace, is almost always English. In our situation, this is reversed. There is diversity all around us, but in the classroom we actually try to tame that diversity. We say: now, this is an English class, so you learn English in it; this is a mathematics class, so it's reserved for mathematics; this is a Hindi class, so you now learn Hindi. Ideally, though, the Indian classroom should reflect the diversity in our streets, so many languages in so many forms and registers. The question you are really asking is: how might we deal with all this diversity and how we might bring it into our classrooms. There are many approaches to this and this is where 'child-centred' learning becomes critical.

The classroom is a place where we make explicit certain arrangements of the relationship of languages to each other. I think what we should do now is to also to bring into the classroom the child's notions of 'language'. In a dominantly Hindi classroom, for example, which has just one Tamil child, the Tamil-speaking child is extremely valuable as she can add to the self-reflexivity of Hindi speaking children. This single child's output may show to us how the structures of Tamil may differ from Hindi, tell us about different communicative repertoires. So, in this respect, I think it is really critical that the teacher picks out individual children's language use and doesn't homogenize the classroom. Learn from our diversity and never neglect children who are different; who are either differently abled or speaking a different language - or the child who sits in a corner and refuses to speak at all! All these differences need to be focalized, not forgotten. They must be brought into the mainstream of the class because these linguistic practices may be sufficiently and interestingly different so that we can learn from them, theorize them. The child can then be a critical source of knowledge in the classroom that increases and does not stifle diversity. This method of 'learning from children' is relevant in an Indian classroom because the diversity of the street is quite naturally found in an Indian classroom as well. Teachers can develop innovative teaching methods whereby languages can be compared and contrasted with each other simply by drawing upon knowledge that is already present in the classroom.

RK: I am sure you are familiar with the NCERT's document NCF 2005. It has been suggested in NCF 2005 that languages of children could be used as a resource. What are its pedagogical implications for the practising language teachers in their day to day teaching?

RBN: Of course. In practice, however, we all know that teachers are under considerable strain in our classrooms. They have concerns about 'covering the syllabus' and completing various time-bound activities. So we cannot expect teachers to be persistently innovating and coming up with new methods which they can try out. However, I do think corpora collected in classrooms can be used in interesting ways for research. For example, in one study, we have looked at some material where longitudinal samples over three years were collected from monolingual Hindi and Tamil speaking children. One of the things that we can do is to begin to make such corpuses of stories, children's language, etc., which can be used as a basis for creating classroom teaching materials as well as for research. We could start across the various regions of India collecting corpora of ordinary conversations, not necessarily just child language - because these are good materials for observing how language interaction works in evolving multilingual contexts. In fact, this goes back to the point I was making about pragmatics—that maybe we should begin with usage and the relationship of words to the world rather than the strict relationship of grammar to language. So in this respect, I think that we need much more to work across the regional diversity of India collecting the kind of materials we can use in the classroom if we want develop the notion of a 'child-centred' multi-lingual and multi-faceted approach to language learning.

RK: While talking of language teaching methods some language researchers dub the modern era as the post-method era. What are its implications for the language teacher?

RBN: This is an interesting question. Actually, an important aspect of 'methodology' is what you manage to do with a method inside the classroom. The method spelled out in the text book is one thing, but when you bring it to the classroom, that's a 'post-method' space, in effect. In India, I feel that we haven't experimented sufficiently with linguistic methods in this 'post' space. For example, one familiar method is to use narratives, stories, as pedagogic devices in the classroom. But why are stories important in the first place? This is a research question as well as a pedagogic one. My own argument in my research has centred on 'recursion', which as we have already discussed, Chomsky considers the central feature of the defining faculty of language in humans. You know of the recent controversy between Dan Everett and Chomsky. Dan Everett maintained that the Amazonian Piraha did not have recursion in their language and this went bang against the central tenet of Chomskian linguistics. Everett said the Piraha only produce simple sentences but not embedded sentences allowing for recursion. Here, then, was a language which didn't have recursion! However, one interesting thing that got missed in the course of this argument was that Everett *did* find recursion in Piraha language, but it was there in the form of *narrative* structure and not in the form of *syntactic* structure. So the syntax was that of simple sentences but the relationships of concepts to each other was in the form of a embedded, recursive narrative. Now, we know that narrative is a discourse universal found across all known cultures and it is also good for teaching causality and logic. So to teach though narrative in a classroom would not only introduce interesting content but would also enable a focus on the nature and scope of those

all-important 'recursive' properties of language, both narrowly and broadly defined.

RK: Is there an ideal method of teaching or is eclecticism our best bet?

RBN: On eclecticism, begin by observing the teaching methods of mothers! Mothers have an almost 100% rate of success. Almost all children manage to learn language from mothers and other care givers, without fail. It's been said that the 'immersion method' works better with the first language and mothers naturally use this method. They immerse their children in whatever language they know. Children, in turn, learn to swim naturally in this bath of language. And when we look at the mother-child dyad, what we find that the mother is able to teach quite complicated concepts to her child in a very simple manner indeed. For example, she points to a bird and says "*dekho ciDiyaa*". Well, she's pointing somewhere but the child cannot know *exactly* where the mother's finger is pointing. How can it? Neither does the child doesn't know whether there exists a category called '*ciDiyaa*' in the world. Slowly, the child finds out about types of *ciDiyaa* as, at one time, her mother points to a crow, at another, she points out a sparrow but each time uses the deictic speech-act '*dekho ciDiyaa*!'. The child thus gradually figures out that *ciDiyaa* is not an simple category because crows, sparrows, mynahs etc. all fit into the category *ciDiyaa*. Such everyday examples from mother-child interactions show that there is an ideal method that could involve 'immersion' in a way that a child learns language. This is not the only method, though. In the case of a second or third languages, we also rely on the first language for teaching. That would be a second ideal method. The third method, which I think is very important and which is often forgotten by linguists is 'the book'. Learning to read is an abstract ability. But a book pulls the child in. The story pulls the child in. We hardly ever talk about the book as a mode of learning but it is an important abstract mode of learning. I know that many people in India and elsewhere, including myself, have learnt English, not from spoken inputs but, in the main, from books. I would say, in this context, that we should not forget that India has several literary 'book' traditions. So, there is a hierarchy of methods or a patterns of methods of which the central one may be immersion. In addition, we certainly can and must use literature (stories, poems, etc.) and, importantly, our everyday bilingualism, in imaginative ways for learning.

RK: Basically, we will have to pick?

RBN: We do pick. We pick and combine. That's human nature - we don't have a choice in this behaviour! For instance, we know Rabindranath Tagore never went to school. He didn't have any formal education. But he had many tutors, he had an enriched environment for learning. So I would say we need this 'enriched environment' for learning, which naturally incorporates more than one 'method'. We should also recognize that such an environment contains elements from the 'sensory motor interface' as well as the 'conceptual intentional interface'. This enriched environment for learning is very important because language is one faculty which does not march alone. It always moves forward hand-in-hand with the senses, with the emotions, and with inputs from the whole wide world. We need to acknowledge this if we want to understand the 'immersion' method in its fullest sense. Enrichment, that is, includes all the other types of 'learning' as well. So I would say: ideally, create an enriched learning environment rather than picking one language learning method over another.

RK: Though Chomsky has in general not made any major recommendation for language teaching, do you think his theory has any relevance for it?

RBN: Let's take the most basic variety of Chomskyan theory here, which says that, as a species, we have mental representations and cognitive similarities in brain-processing with which we come pre-programmed. Now we are asking: can we use the notion that we share this 'innate language faculty' to educate teachers and students? Obviously we can. Chomsky is saying that we share something and such sharing, to my mind, is the basis of every kind of learning. In fact, this argument can be extended to making language central to all teaching in humanities, social sciences, mathematics, everything.

The faculty of language that Chomsky talks about is important for all forms of learning really, though he may not share this view! For example, it's important for the ideas of manners, politeness and cultural difference that permeate society. Language carries the cognitive load from different kinds of information systems and the brain itself is a complex information system. Chomsky's view is that language as a faculty is unique because it enables us to handle and 'merge' all this information into complicated thought patterns. This property of being able to 'merge thought-information' is, to my mind, the essence of 'recursion'. So, yes, we learn something very important from Chomsky. Whether we can directly apply much that Chomsky says about syntax, I don't know - but I am sure the linguistic 'program' that he is now presenting does need, as he emphasizes, alliances with biologists, psychologists, neurolinguists. It's therefore bound, in the longer term, to have interesting insights for classroom teaching.

RK: Are you in favour of allowing only the most accepted and standard form of any language in a language class? What place would you attach to the use of varieties of languages used in everyday life?

RBN: Again, a difficult question. Ferguson onwards, so much work has been done on language 'standardization'. But note that the process of having children together inside a classroom *automatically* involves standardization, not to say coercion. In India, according to the Guinness book, we have 1/6th of the world's population; but also, 1/6th of the world's languages - so about 800 languages. Whether you take the Guinness book as the gospel is a different question! Anyway, what does having '800 languages' mean? It means we have a huge language continuum. And whenever we have a continuum and we want to teach one standard language which everybody will share, we will have the problem that we do violence to some these forms of language - especially, the oral forms. So standardization and a certain concomitant 'violence' takes place as part of the education process. It happens across languages. The question in India, particularly in modern times, is: how do we standardize best, given that, unlike China, we have so many scripts as well as languages? And how might we preserve the richness of the spoken word, the regional variety? I believe this is where Indian linguists especially need to do research in bringing the two poles of orality and written discourse together. And of course, as I just mentioned, we have more writing systems in India than the whole world put together! We have twelve to thirteen writing systems at least, often used by millions of people. You intuitively realize this when you as a Hindi speaker listen to a Bengali and can more or less understand may be forty to fifty per cent of the language. But, when you

are a Hindi speaker and you are learning the Bengali script, you will find that it looks similar, but it is hard for you to read at all. The script is not as porous as the spoken word. What this implies for 'standardization' is that when we write things down, we partly remove or erase their similarity to other oral systems. So we say with greater ease when contrasting written systems: this is Bengali, this is Hindi, this is Tamil, etc. - although they come from the same root, that is, the Brahmi script. But what bearing does all this have on the practical use of oral and literacy modalities in the classroom? Here. I go back to the point that we use oral modes for certain components or certain parts of classroom teaching where we have replays of free thinking and debate - and then we deploy the usual written standards as well. The oral and written modes are complementary. Standardization forces people to come together to both speak and write in a 'common language' and this standardization has already happened in our country to a large extent with the formation of geographical 'linguistic states' in the nineteen fifties, from the very inception of independent India.

RK: Can you suggest some steps that could be taken to safeguard the local languages from the tyranny of the 'privileged' languages?

RBN: I think it is unavoidable that 'universal literacy' is a common goal. However, I think it would be a pity if you made that such a powerful goal that you shut out orality. So, I would actually say that, as our technologies grow, we should use them to make standardization a process which is increasingly sensitive to our local, oral traditions. This is what linguistics teaches us. That it, modern linguistics is a discipline that consciously moved away from the literary text to the everyday spoken word. But even so,

modern linguistics still uses standardized versions of language in most of its grammatical examples. So, what we need to do is to build sensors into this process of the near inevitable use of standardized language - which, to a great extent, we definitely need in teaching. Otherwise, we can't really run any examinations in our vast country! Oral, local and discursive components must, however become a core part of teaching in the classroom and, also, part of research in our universities. And. once again, I would emphasize that India is one of the best places in the world in which to do this because India has such great depth and richness in its oral traditions. I believe it would be absurd to say that there should be no standardization in the context of classroom teaching. On the other hand, it would be absurd to say in a country like India that we can afford to be insensitive to our oral traditions.

RK: This brings me to a related question. A few minutes ago, you were saying something like when we say 'bird', there is no entity such as a bird.

RBN: Yes. It's a type. It's an abstraction of which we have only 'token' examples, such as sparrows, crows or penguins, in the world out there.

RK: We only have types - or 'tokens' - of birds. Similar thing applies to language. So when we say Hindi, or Bangla. These are cover terms and then they are several connectives of these things, which do exist in reality.

RBN: Yes, exactly. That's a good parallel.

Question: And then there are lot of other variety of these things, there are lots of other languages which are under great threat.

RBN: Endangered languages.

RK: Not only the officially recorded endangered languages. I am referring to languages in the following way. Sometimes people argue that Indian languages are under threat in the presence of English. Similarly lot of local languages are under threat in presence of dominant languages like Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, and Panjabi. What would you suggest to preserve these local languages and varieties from the tyranny of dominant languages?

RBN: We want to believe that we live in a democracy where everyone is equal. But when we look at social structure, it is obvious that everyone is not equal. We have the caste system, we have colour biases and so forth. We have thousands of elements which make our society hierarchical. This is why we should not only narrowly focus on syntax. I think Chomsky himself deeply recognizes this connect between the formal and social aspects of language. He has two hands, so to speak - or two tongues! On the one hand, in some of his work, he talks about syntax and the power of language as a recursive system and, on the other, he talks about society and its ills and how you can change the world. So Chomsky has contributed to thinking about a freer society, one where there is not so much hierarchy. In this way, he does allow that language and society go hand in hand. I often say that, when you look at the language situation in India or anywhere else, because of the relationship of elite languages like English and Hindi with other languages, you are going to witness a very undemocratic set up. So, languages teach you that democracy is an ideology to be communicated. It is not a given.

In linguistics, we say that *all* languages are equally capable of handling thought. It is not that there are primitive languages and there are non-primitive languages and there are backward languages and forward languages. There is no such hierarchy and we believe this. But when we see languages in operation, there is an enormous social lack of democracy. You're asking how we handle this. This is a very difficult question to answer honestly, as opposed to being politically correct. For instance, I have conducted several informal surveys among my own students. I have said to them: I am giving you a choice, which language do you want to learn most of all? Now, they invariably answer: English! Then, I give them a choice of two classical languages—Tamil and, say, French. Which would you choose, I ask? They say: French! Then I give them the choice between an 'endangered' language like Brahui and Tamil. Which one would they choose? They answer in chorus: We would choose Tamil! This little experiment shows how strongly language hierarchies subtly infuse classroom choices. People have to *care* enough about varieties of language. As a species, we are emotionally invested in the idea of language. We do care about it but I don't think so far we have educated our young to be emotionally invested in the local. This is a part of post-colonization. This is part of caste, this is part of the hierarchical organization of society. We have to still to educate ourselves to care about things that do not seem to us to matter, such as the many varieties of language we have - but which in fact contribute enormously to our sense of ourselves as part of a larger human community.

RK: The three-language formula was evolved to address the unity and multilingual diversity of India, but it has not been followed in its true spirit. What is your advice to language planners in this context?

RBN: Well, I think society is obviously not static. Today, you might be using English more than you use Maithili. So, you are not using this resource, but you do have it. A society or a

country evolves in the same way. We have all these infinite language resources. This three-language formula tried to roughly capture this insight and was good at one time. Now it might need revision given the youth of our population, inter-regional connections, etc. We do have to rethink it. But mother tongues remain critical. The recent large studies we've conducted with mothers at IITD are relevant here as we have consciously made mothers and 'motherese' central to our research. The mother tongue and the mother-child relationship or the quality time that the mother spends with her child is severely undervalued in our society. Caregivers' roles, home roles, are in general severely undervalued.

Our linguistic research says loud and clear: if you really value mother tongue education, then please give importance to mothers! And this brings us back to gender and caste discrimination. Many linguists talk about the mother tongue as important. But do they talk about the mother? The mother's role in understanding 'the mother tongue' is actually critical. Of course, in using the term 'mother', I actually mean primary caregivers to the child in his or her primary years. For example, all Indian children now have the very important 'Right to Education' from the age of 6 years to 14 years. Yet we do not sufficiently connect this right to education to the development of the 0-6 age group, saying that this arena belongs to the Ministry of Mother and Child Development. So we educationists are not going to look at this. This, I think, is absolutely myopic. We need to bring these developmental sequences together. At IITD, our studies of the inter-related growth of emotion and language - indeed, studies all over the world - have shown that in language development, the most important landmarks are from 0-5 years. The ages 0-5 are critical for language development as well as overall cognitive development. We cannot afford ever to forget this when developing classroom pedagogies.

RK: Recently CBSE has introduced a newer form of evaluation known as CCE. Do you think CCE has really improved the teaching learning situation?

RBN: CCE been so far practiced in a haphazard way with schools each interpreting the requirement in its own way. It is actually very difficult to handle continuous evaluation and thus far, anyway, CCE does not feed into the final assessment of the child. It should be there, of course, but we have to have some robust measures for it. In our research at IITD, we have been developing a picture-based Cognitive Capability Scale (CCS) as a possible, partial index for this purpose. Our scale seeks rationalize the mode of continuous assessment that you mention. More generally, as human beings, we are actually designed to continuously evaluate ourselves 'online' from moment to moment via 'feedback loops'!

Question: Has the CCE improved teaching?

RBN: Well, we have not had this sort of assessment before, so we don't have much 'feedback'. We may infer that, as everybody feels it a good thing, we should have CCE in our schools but we need to think seriously, in a research based way, about how to implement it.

RK: Government organizations such as the SCERTs and NCERT are being increasingly asked to include issues such as life skills, road safety, gender, caste, colour, sexual abuse, etc., in the school textbooks from Class 2 or 3 onward and all such burdens squarely fall on language books. What is your response to such proposals?

RBN: Prima facie, simplistic value-based teaching does not work. This country has approximately six to ten lakh teachers short in

primary and secondary schools across the country, if not more. There's a shortage of teachers, there's chronic absenteeism. These are basic problems. So, we are going to have all this moral and politically correct instruction - and there are no teachers! We most urgently need to train committed teachers in the disciplines. Ethics is part of this effort and does not consist in the piecemeal addition of 'good topics' to an already overloaded syllabus. Much investment in this process is required at least over the next decade or two. To begin with, as I've already emphasised, we must recognize the signal value of the teaching that happens at home between 0-6 years, to enrich these homes and give support to the mothers and the caregivers at home. Secondly, we could even use college students like students at the IITs to teach as part of their social training and perhaps give them incentives like green ribbon certificates that will also confer on them an advantage in the corporate jobs which they eventually want! Given the present shortage of teachers, we could certainly try and enthuse college students to be 'resource persons' to teach basic mathematics, basic PCM, basic language, and basic technology skills in our schools. Such a measure will also sensitize these elite college students and inculcate in them the understanding that they, too, are a part of society.

RK: When should we use them as resources of teaching in schools?

RBN: At least until we meet the backlog in our states! We should also make such service something which is prized and not perceived to be a burden on the student. Such novel methods are required in a society like ours where we have plentiful human resources and, simultaneously, a complex network of commitments and prejudices. For instance, a mother may not naturally discriminate between her male and female children but society forces her to make such 'unfair' choices. If we look at the mother's practice in 'teaching' her children, we can in this sense say that we learn from mothers something important about democracy. A mother is emotionally attached to both her male and female children and inclined to treat them equally but society may not be quite like that. In short, we need lots of democratization in education and while some of this can come from learning from mothers and kinship relations in family settings, other forms of democratic education can come from college students - and senior citizens - voluntarily engaging in educating school children.

RK: You have been deeply interested in pragmatics. Does it have any major implications for language teaching?

RBN: Pragmatics is usually defined as a 'theory of use'. This involves the 'conceptual intentional' system as it manifests in language. Pragmatics is, further, a theory of use which in its most foundational interpretation is premised on the fact that we are built, our bodies are evolutionarily constructed, in a way that our intentions have to be made evident to others. We don't, that is, have transparent screens on our chests! So, we make our intentions evident through 'speech-acts'. But even language is an inadequate tool, so non-verbal means such as facial expressions and gestures, the 'sensory motor' systems in effect, are also deployed side by side with language to project 'what we mean'. The areas of intentionality and conceptual communication and, increasingly, interfaces with sensory motor abilities including in computer communication, are thus covered by pragmatics.

Intentions are critical in this sort of theory and human beings are seen to be 'intending' and purposeful language users for the most part. This

is where pragmatics interfaces with theories of mind as well, since we do not always do things purposefully. We often do things without knowing why we are doing them or in error. This is also a large area of pragmatics, namely, misunderstandings in language. Two different people from two different cultures using the same language may severely misunderstand each other. Pragmatics is an area of study where you can look at things like politeness and micro-areas of social interaction - in this sense, it is close to sociolinguistics in many ways and to the philosophy and biology of language as well.

RK: Professor Rukmini Bhaya Nair, it was pleasure talking to you. Thank you for sharing your insights with the readers of *Language and Language Teaching*.

RBN: Thank you Rajesh!

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