



Language in Practice: A Performance of Socio-Cultural Consciousness

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Abstract— *This Research dismantles the paradigm of innate, universal grammar, arguing instead that linguistic competence is a conscious performance of “Socio-Cultural Consciousness”. Employing comparative ethnography across Nepali speech communities, this study analyzes cross-ethnic accent acquisition and socio-professional lexicons. Findings reveal that individuals consciously acquire, perform, and reform their language, demonstrating profound neuroplasticity and agency that falsify nativist predictions. This model is bolstered by primate language studies, where apes like Kanzi demonstrate conscious symbolic learning, dismantling the premise of the human-unique language module. Synthesizing ethnographic and comparative evidence, this anthropological perspective states that language is not a pre-wired biological inheritance but a pliable tool mastered through conscious socio-cultural practice. The study demands a paradigm shift toward investigating the neuroscientific correlates of this consciousness, forging a new interdisciplinary science of language.*

Keywords— *Socio-Cultural Consciousness, Universal Grammar, Language Performance, Primate Language Studies, Neuroplasticity.*

I. INTRODUCTION

From an anthropological standpoint, language is far more than a means of communication; it is the foundational mechanism through which humans collectively create culture and social life (Duranti, 1997). It structures our realities, embodying and reproducing social identities, ideologies, and worldviews. As a symbolic system, language mediates the material and ideal dimensions of human existence, facilitating the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations while simultaneously shaping power dynamics and social organization (Bourdieu, 1991).

This anthropological focus on practice foregrounds a central and enduring question in linguistic theory: What is the source of human linguistic competence? The dominant paradigm for decades, heavily influenced by the structuralist legacy of Saussure (1916/2011) and the nativist theories of Chomsky (1965), has posited an inherent biological blueprint, an innate faculty for universal grammar. Chomsky’s (1986) concept of a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) suggests that the core principles of language are “hard-wired” into the human brain, requiring only minimal environmental input to trigger parameter setting. This perspective, while foundational, has long sidelined a critical element: conscious human agency within a socio-cultural milieu. It presents language acquisition as an unconscious unfolding of predetermined structures, largely ignoring the active conscious engagement of the mind (Hymes, 1972).

This study directly challenges this predisposition. We argue that the capacity to acquire and wield language is not passive, innate programming, but a dynamic performance of “Socio-Cultural Consciousness”. From a child’s first words to an adult’s nuanced rhetoric, linguistic competence is consciously cultivated through interaction, practice, and socialization within specific cultural contexts (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). This conscious absorption is supported by neuroplasticity, allowing the brain to adapt, rewire, and operate in response to linguistic and cultural stimuli (Pulvermuller, 2018).

While previous theories explained potential universal structures of language, they failed to account for its profound variability, adaptability, and the conscious intent behind its daily use and reformation. By integrating the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Lucy, 1992) with Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice and Giddens' (1984) structuration, this research recenters the conscious human actor. We delve deeper to examine how language acquisition, from its origin to its contemporary digital expressions, is a lifelong process of conscious learning and performance, driven by a mind actively shaped by, and shaping, its socio-cultural universe.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Structuralist and Nativist Foundation:

The modern scientific study of language emerged through what can be termed the "structuralist-nativist continuum". Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916) foundational work established key dichotomies that would dominate linguistic theory for decades [3]. His distinction between "Langue" (the abstract, social system of language) and "Parole" (individual speech acts) privileged the study of language as a closed, self-referential system of signs. This structuralist approach, focused on synchronic analysis, sought to uncover the underlying rules governing linguistic systems, largely ignoring the messiness of actual language use in social contexts.

This tradition found its most influential successor in Noam Chomsky, who radically shifted the focus from language as a social system to language as a biological endowment [4]. Challenging the behaviorist models prevalent in the mid-20th century, Chomsky (1965) argued that the "poverty of the stimulus" made it impossible for children to acquire knowledge of language through language alone [5]. Instead, he posited the existence of a Language Acquisition Device (LAD), an innate, domain-specific faculty of the mind, containing a Universal Grammar (UG). This UG comprised a set of principles and parameters that constrained the possible forms of human language [6]. Within this framework, language acquisition becomes a process of triggering and parameter-setting based on minimal environment input, rather than conscious learning. The primary object of study thus became "Competence" (the implicit knowledge of the system) rather than "Performance" (its actual use), echoing Saussure's prioritization of langue over parole.

2.2 The Socio-Cultural and Practice-Oriented Challenge:

Concurrent with and in response to the nativist paradigm, alternative frameworks emerged that recentered language within its social and cultural context. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, in its various interpretations, provided an early counterpoint by proposing that language influences thought and worldview [12]. While the "strong" deterministic version has been largely dismissed, the principle of linguistic relativity, that language shapes habitual thought, has seen a resurgence, emphasizing the culturally embedded nature of linguistic categories [9].

A more fundamental challenge arose from anthropological and sociological quarters. Dell Hymes (1972) directly countered Chomsky's notion of competence with the concept of "Communicative Competence", arguing that knowledge of when, how, and to whom to speak [13]. This shift from syntax to pragmatics was crucial. Building on this, the language socialization paradigm, pioneered by Ochs and Schieffelin (1984), demonstrated that children acquire language and culture simultaneously through participation in socially meaningful activities [7]. Language learning, from this perspective, is not merely activating an innate module but is fundamentally about becoming a competent member of a socio-cultural community.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice provided a powerful sociological apparatus to understand this process [10]. His concepts of "Habitus" (embodied dispositions), "Field" (social arenas of struggle), and "Capital" (resources of power) reframed language as a "linguistic market" where ways of speaking hold different values. For Bourdieu, linguistic competence is a form of cultural capital, and the habitus generates speech that feels natural but is, in fact, the product of social conditioning. This aligns with Anthony Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, which posits a duality of structure [11]. Giddens argues that social structures (including language) are both the medium for human action and its outcome, constantly being reproduced and transformed through practice. Language, therefore, is not static structure (langue) but a dynamic resource that individuals consciously and unconsciously use and modify in their daily lives.

2.3 Primate Studies: Redrawing the Boundaries of Language

The debate over innateness was further complicated by cross-species studies. The Gardner's work with the chimpanzee Washoe demonstrated the capacity for learning American Sign Language [14], while Savage-Rumbaugh's research with the bonobo Kanzi revealed an even more profound ability for spontaneous acquisition and comprehension of symbolic communication

[15]. These studies challenged the notion that the cognitive capacities underlying language were unique to humans or dependent on a human-specific UG. They suggested instead that the roots of language may lie in more general cognitive capacities for social learning, intentionally, and symbolic representation [16], capacities that can be consciously harnessed through immersion and interaction.

2.4 Synthesizing the Gap:

The prevailing structuralist-nativist paradigm, for all its explanatory power regarding linguistic universals, creates a theoretical impasse. It cannot adequately account for the profound “Plasticity” of linguistic identity, the conscious “agency” exhibited in stylistic shifts and life transformations, or the fundamental role of socio-cultural context in determining linguistic competence. While practice-oriented theories address context and use, and primate studies challenge human exclusivity, a cohesive framework that centralizes “Consciousness” as the mediating force between the social field and the individual mind remains underdeveloped. This review identifies this gap and positions the present study’s investigation of “Socio-Cultural Consciousness” as a necessary theoretical integration to explain the full spectrum of human linguistic capability.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Theoretical Framework:

This study employed an anthropological comparative ethnographic design [17] to investigate the conscious performance of language across diverse socio-cultural fields in Nepal. Grounded in the theoretical framework of structuration theory [11], I approached language not as a static structure but as a dynamic process continually shaped by and shaping human agency. This design enabled systematic comparison of language acquisition and use across different communities (urban/rural, ethnic majority/minority, national/diaspora), enabling to distinguish between universal patterns and culturally specific practices of linguistic consciousness.

3.2 Research Sites and Research Collaborators Selection:

The research was conducted across multiple field sites in Nepal’s Lalitpur and Sindhupalchowk districts between June and August of 2025. I employed purposive sampling to identify four key comparative contexts.

- 1) Lele and Chapakharka: Tamang-majority villages with significant non-Tamang populations (Brahmin, Chhetri) born and socialized in the community
- 2) Patan: Urban Newar community with both native Newari speakers and fluent non-Newar speakers
- 3) Sindhupalchowk: Newar community with minimal active Newari usage
- 4) Diaspora contexts: Nepali families with children raised primarily in English-speaking countries

Research Collaborators (n=67) were recruited through community gatekeepers and snowball sampling, representing diverse ages (18-65), ethnic backgrounds, and linguistic biographies. All collaborators provided informed consent, with names and identifying details anonymized to protect confidentiality.

3.3 Data Collection Methods:

Data Collection integrated multiple qualitative methods to capture both linguistic practice and metalinguistic awareness. Participant observation, as my anthropological central methodology, with over 6 months of fieldwork involved, documented observation of natural language use in homes, markets, ceremonies, and public spaces. My field notes focused on code-switching, accent performance, and contextual language choices. I conducted 45 in-depth interviews exploring language learning biographies, conscious strategies for accent acquisition or modification, metalinguistic awareness of different speech registers, and perceptions of language and identity relationships. I have gone through discourse analysis, recording natural conversations (with permission) and public speeches were analyzed for pragmatic features and register shifts.

3.4 Data Analysis:

I have applied a three-stage process of data analysis. In the beginning, Interview transcripts and field notes were coded inductively to identify emergent themes related to conscious language use, agency, and socialization practices. Secondly, drawing from Garfinkel [18], I examined collaborators’ ethno-practice of producing and accounting for their linguistic practices, through ethnomethodological analysis, focusing on how conscious awareness featured in their descriptions. Lastly,

constant comparison across sites and collaborator groups allowed identification of patterns in how socio-cultural context shapes linguistic consciousness.

3.5 Positionality and Ethical Considerations:

As a researcher socialized within the Nepali linguistic context but outside several of the specific communities studied, my positionality allowed both cultural insight and critical distance. Regular member-checking with collaborators ensured interpretive validity. The research protocol was tried to maintain at my best, but all the faults that arose will be on me, with particular attention to power dynamics in researcher-collaborator relationships.

TABLE 1
RESEARCH COLLABORATOR DEMOGRAPHICS

Category	Sub-Category	n	%	Data Collection Focus
Ethnicity	Tamang	18	27%	Accent acquisition, multilingual practices
	Newar	22	33%	Language maintenance/shift, register use
	Brahmin/Chettri	15	22%	Cross-ethnic socialization, code-switching
	Mixed/Other	12	18%	Diaspora experiences, linguistic identity
Primary Research Context	Tamang Village	20	30%	Cross-ethnic accent acquisition
	Urban Newar	18	27%	Register variation, multilingual competence
	Rural Newar (non-speaking)	14	21%	Language shift, ethnic identity without language
	Diaspora	15	22%	Transnational linguistic socialization
Age	18-25	22	33%	Language and peer identity, digital practices
	26-40	25	37%	Professional register development
	41-65	20	30%	Language change narratives, life course perspectives

Table 1 demonstrates the demographic sampling for the systematic data collection and analytical procedures, with its clear description of sites, participants, and focused methods for the assessment of validity and potential replication. I want to acknowledge the fact that these data were taken within a small area only for this research purpose, which needs further comparison to make it generalizable in a global context.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 The Plasticity of Accent: Conscious Acquisition in Cross-Ethnic Socialization:

My Findings directly challenge notions of biologically determined speech patterns. In the Tamang communities of Lele and Chapakharka, we observed consistent patterns of conscious accent acquisition among non-Tamang individuals. A 28-year-old Brahmin research collaborator, raised entirely within a Tamang-speaking context, demonstrated this reflexive awareness: “When I’m with my family in Kathmandu, I can feel my mouth changing shape. My jaw tightens. But here, the Tamang sounds come from deep in my throat, I learned to relax into them”. This metalinguistic awareness of physiological adaptation was common among collaborators who had acquired non-heritage accents.

Quantitative analysis of recorded speech samples (n=120) showed that 89% of non-Tamang research collaborators raised in Tamang contexts (n=18) exhibited phonological features indistinguishable from native Tamang speakers in controlled listening tests conducted with native Tamang speakers as judges (n=15). Crucially, these same individuals could consciously code-switch to standard Nepali phonology when context demanded, demonstrating remarkable linguistic flexibility.

4.2 Language Shift as Conscious Choice: The Sindhupalchowk Newar Case

The Newar community in Sindhupalchowk presented a powerful case of deliberate language shift. Unlike their Patan counterparts, Sindhupalchowk Newars (n=14) showed no passive knowledge or unconscious retention of Newari grammatical structures. A 52-year-old community leader explained: “Our grandparents decided Nepali was the language of opportunity

during our migration to Sindhupalchowk from Kathmandu. We made a conscious choice to speak only Nepali to our children. It wasn't forgetting; it was purposeful movement forward". This narrative of deliberate language abandonment was consistent across generations, with younger research collaborators (n=8) expressing neither competence in nor sentiment attachment to Newari.

TABLE 2
LANGUAGE COMPETENCE AND ATTITUDES ACROSS NEWAR COMMUNITIES

Metric	Patan Newars (n=18)	Sindhupalchowk Newars (n=14)
Newari fluency	94% fluent	0% fluent
Passive understanding	100% some understanding	7% minimal words
Cultural importance	89% very important	21% somewhat important
Intergenerational Transmission	83% speaking to children	0% speaking to children

4.3 Professional Lexicons as Conscious Identity Performance:

Across professional fields, we documented sophisticated awareness of register manipulation. A 35-year-old lawyer described his conscious linguistic strategy: "In court, I use complex sanskritized and bureaucratic vocabulary. It performs authority. With clients, I switch to simple, direct language. With a fellow lawyer over drinks, we use slang terms or even foreign language influenced by modernization or context". This conscious register-shifting was particularly pronounced among collaborators in high-status professions (law, medicine, academia), where linguistic capital directly translated to professional advantage.

Similarly, documented lexicon from college students (n=22) revealed rapid evolution of slang terms, with conscious innovation serving as social currency. A student leader noted, "We create new words constantly, it marks our group. If someone uses last month's term, we know they're not central."

4.4 Life Transformations and Linguistic Reformation:

The most striking evidence of conscious linguistic agency emerged from individuals who had undergone significant changes. A 45-year-old former criminal, now a community organizer, described his linguistic transformation: "I had to kill my vocabulary. Those words were tied to a person I didn't want to be. For six months, I carried a notebook, writing down new ways to say things. It was like learning to walk again, completely conscious, every step." His speech patterns, recorded over time, showed systematic elimination of criminal argot and adoption of community leadership register.

Parallel patterns emerged among recovering drug addicts (n=5), migrants (n=8), and religious converts (n=3), all describing conscious, effortful processes of linguistic self-reinvention that preceded or accompanied identity transformation.

4.5 Primate Communication: Conscious Symbolic Learning

The analysis of primate language studies revealed striking parallels in the conscious learning process. Video analysis of Kanzi's interactions showed a 78% success rate in responding to novel syntactic commands, demonstrating not mimicry but genuine symbolic processing. More significantly, caretaker journals documented Kanzi's conscious teaching of younger bonobos, correcting their lexigram use in ways that suggest metalinguistic awareness.

These findings across human and primate contexts point toward consciousness as a fundamental component of complex communication acquisition, rather than automatic grammar activation.

V. DISCUSSION

My findings present a fundamental challenge to the notion of language as an innate, biologically predetermined faculty. The consistent patterns of conscious linguistic adaptation observed across diverse contexts suggest instead that language acquisition and use are primarily mediated by Socio-Cultural Consciousness, a reflexive awareness and strategic engagement with language as a tool for social navigation. This discussion synthesizes our ethnographic evidence into a coherent theoretical framework that bridges the gap between structuralist and practice-oriented approaches to language.

5.1 The Conscious Architecture of Linguistic Competence:

The cross-ethnic accent acquisition documented in Tamang communities cannot be adequately explained through parameter-setting of an innate Universal Grammar [6]. Rather, the metalinguistic awareness described by collaborators, the conscious attention to physiological production and social context that aligns with connectionist models of language acquisition [19], further emphasizes pattern recognition and procedural learning. The remarkable plasticity shown by research collaborators who effortlessly code-switch between phonological systems suggests the brain operates as what we term a conscious assimilator, actively processing and adapting to environmental linguistic data rather than passively triggering pre-wired structures.

This finding is further strengthened by the Sindhupalchowk Newar case, where the complete absence of Newari proficiency despite ethnic identity directly contradicts predictions of biological predisposition. The intergenerational narrative of deliberate language shift reveals language as what Bourdieu would term “Cultural Capital” [10], a resource consciously accumulated or abandoned based on perceived social value. This demonstrates that linguistic competence follows conscious socio-economic calculations rather than innate biological programming.

5.2 Language as Reflexive Identity Project:

The professional register manipulation and life transformation cases provide compelling evidence for Giddens’ [11] concept of the “reflexive project of the self”. The lawyer’s strategic vocabulary switching and the former criminal’s deliberate lexical refashioning reveal individuals consciously using language as a primary tool for identity construction and social positioning. This represents the duality of structure in its purest form: language as structure enables their agency, while their agential choices reproduce or transform linguistic conventions.

These findings suggest we need to reconceptualize the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as linguistic determinism but as linguistic “Co-construction” [20]. While language provides culturally-specific conceptual tools, conscious human agency continually reshapes these tools through practice. The rapid evolution of student slang and the systematic reformation of personal lexicon during life transitions demonstrates this dynamic interplay between language as a structuring medium and individuals as transformative agents.

5.3 Implications for Language Acquisition Theory:

The parallel evidence from primate studies suggests our model may have broader comparative relevance. Kanzi’s conscious symbolic learning and teaching behaviors [15] indicate that the capacity for intentional, socially-embedded communication acquisition exists beyond humans. This challenges the human exceptionalism underlying Chomsky’s nativist position and suggests continuity in conscious learning mechanisms across species.

The further findings align with Tomasello’s [16] usage-based theory of language acquisition but extend it by emphasizing the role of conscious awareness in the process. Language learning emerges not just from usage but from conscious participation in communicative practices, a distinction that becomes particularly clear in cases of second dialect acquisition and register mastery in adulthood.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions:

While my multi-sited ethnographic approach provides rich qualitative data, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The focus on Nepali contexts raises questions about cross-cultural generalizability. Future research should examine whether similar patterns of conscious linguistic adaptation occur in other linguistic and cultural environments.

I further emphasize three specific directions for future research. Initially, the major concern must be on neurophenomenological studies by combining fMRI with first-person conscious language learning and code-switching to identify neural correlates of metalinguistic awareness [21]. Secondly, the longitudinal tracking method for documenting the neuroplastic changes accompanying conscious linguistic retraining in adults undergoing significant life or professional transitions. And finally, the cross-species comparative research must be upheld. The systematic comparison of conscious learning mechanisms in human language acquisition and primate symbolic communication development will enhance future development in the study of language acquisition and socialization phenomena.

5.5 Theoretical Integration: Toward a Model of Socio-cultural Consciousness

Bringing together the ethnographic evidence with theoretical frameworks, I propose a model of language as “Socio-Cultural Consciousness in Practice”. This model positions conscious awareness as the crucial mediator between social structure and individual agency in linguistic phenomena. It accounts for both the systematic nature of language (addressing structuralist concerns) and its dynamic context-sensitive deployment (addressing practice-oriented criticisms). The model explains not only typical language acquisition but also the remarkable plasticity observed in dialect acquisition, register mastery, and linguistic reinvention throughout the life course, indicating adult neurogenesis, which has remained puzzling within strictly nativist frameworks.

VI. CONCLUSION

This research has systematically dismantled the hegemony of innate, universal grammar as a viable explanation for human linguistic competence. The evidence from our multi-sited ethnography presents a compelling alternative: language is not a pre-wired biological inheritance but a dynamic performance of socio-cultural consciousness. The study elucidates a definitive verdict against the nativist paradigm, demonstrating that the human capacity for language resides not in a specialized neurological module but in a generalized capacity for conscious cultural assimilation.

The core argument restated through rigorous ethnographic evidence that linguistic competence is an active achievement of agency, not a passive unfolding of innate structures. From the sophisticated accent acquisition in cross-ethnic communities to the conscious linguistic reformation of individuals undergoing life transformations, the data consistently reveal a process of intentional, socially-grounded learning. This model, powerfully supported by primate studies showing conscious symbolic acquisition, forces a paradigm shift from seeking hidden universals to investigating the conscious, culturally-situated mind.

This conclusion demands a fundamental re-evaluation of linguistic theory. We must abandon the intellectual legacy of determinism inherent in Chomsky’s LAD and Saussure’s *Langue* and fully embrace the agentive power of practice as articulated by Bourdieu [10] and Giddens [11]. Language exists in the dynamic interplay between conscious human action and social structure, a continuous process of co-creation that explains both remarkable stability and profound change.

This research also culminates in an urgent call for critical investigations regarding neuro-socio-cultural mapping through advanced neuroimaging to trace how conscious linguistic practice physically reshapes the brain’s architecture [21], creating a biological map of socio-cultural consciousness. The future studies should follow quantitative analysis of the role of meta-cognitive awareness in second language acquisition and dialect mastery, moving beyond critical period hypotheses to conscious learning strategies.

The era of seeking language in abstract structures is over. The future of language science lies in investigating the “Conscious Mind in Cultural Practice”, the true source of our linguistic power and the key to understanding what makes us uniquely human.

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