

---

## **Language and society: Steps towards an integrated Theory**

*Jayant Lele (Professor Emeritus, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada)*

Our decision in the 1970s to work towards an integrated theory of language and society resulted from some serious concerns in Dr. Singh's mind about the current state of sociolinguistics and my intrigued fascination with Habermas' attempt to engage Chomsky's universalist notions of linguistic competence. We wanted to develop further, Habermas' attempt (early and short-lived), grounded at that stage in some of Marx's insights, to arrive at a theory of communicative competence (Habermas 1970).

In this paper I propose to review our attempts and struggles, over the years, to pursue this path. We were trying to develop an argument that took into account Dr. Singh's slowly emerging unease with UG's universalistic claims with respect to a human individual's linguistic competence. Dr. Singh's work on language acquisition in multilingual societies had, in part, led to this unease. We were trying to find a way to move from this unease towards a recognition of and greater attention to the sociality of the human subject as an inherent element of a more comprehensive notion of multi-dimensional human competence.

I intend to review the inadequacies and blind spots in some of our joint work at this stage as well as reasons for my reluctant withdrawal from the project. I also hope to briefly review the highly potent subsequent work by Dr. Singh on his own and with some of his colleagues from within the discipline of linguistics, leading to a richer response to the inadequacies of the near total preoccupation with a theory of linguistic form. These have been highly rewarding contributions to that still unfinished project of developing an integrated theory of language and society.

### **References**

Habermas, Jurgen, 1970. "Toward a Theory of communicative competence". In: H.P. Dreitzel (ed.), *Recent sociology*. New York: Macmillan, pp. 14–148.