

METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS IN LINGUISTIC

Naimova A.M.,Bukhara State University, English linguistics department teacher,
a.m.naimova@buxdu.uz, anaimova1991@gmail.com**Yuldoshova M.U.**Bukhara State University, student,
munisayuldoshova48@gmail.com

Abstract: This article explores the concept of metalinguistic awareness by tracing back its origins, development, and contemporary significance. It first outlines how the notion evolved from early linguistic and cognitive studies to encompass bilingual and literary research. The discussion then highlights how metalinguistic awareness has expanded beyond structural analysis to include pragmatic, intercultural, and digital dimensions of communication. By examining recent insights from studies on bilingual reading and technology-mediated feedback, the article argues that metalinguistic awareness in the 21st century function as a vital cognitive and social resource, enabling critical thinking, adaptability, and informed participation in modern discourse.

Key words: human cognition, generative perspective, thinking about language, interpretation, metalinguistic competence, executive function

Introduction: Language is not only a means of communication but also a reflection of human cognition. The ability to think about language itself- known as metalinguistic awareness- has long been central to understand how individuals learn use, and reflect on linguistic systems. The evolution of metalinguistic awareness has unfolded over many centuries. In early human societies, language primarily served as a means of survival, cooperation and cultural transmission. However, as civilizations grew more complex, individuals began to reflect critically on the ways in which language shapes meaning, thought, and social power. With the emergence of multiple languages and registers, people started to question why certain forms of speeches were considered “formal”, while others were seen as a “casual”. Over the time, humans developed the capacity for metacognition- the ability to think about their own thinking- which naturally extended to language itself. This growing curiosity led to deeper inquiry : how do people not only learn language but also become conscious of how it works? The traditional scope linguistics was insufficient to capture this dimension, thus giving rise to the concept of metalinguistics, a term that represents thinking beyond language itself.

To comprehend how metalinguistic awareness evolved into a central construct of modern linguistics, it is essential to examine the foundation ideas proposed by Roman Jakobson and Noam Chomsky, whose contributions marked as a turning point in the study of language cognition and reflection. Russian-American linguist Jakobson identified six key functions – referential, emotive, conative, phatic, poetic, and metalinguistic in his book called “Metalanguage as a linguistic problem”.¹ The metalinguistic function, according to him, refers to the use of language to discuss, describe, or clarify language itself. For example when someone asks, “What does this word mean?” or “Is that the correct pronunciation?”, they are using language metalinguistic – reflecting consciously on its structure, form, or meaning. He proposed that speakers do not merely use language unconsciously; they also possess the capacity to

¹ Roman O.J Metalanguage as a linguistic problem, - The Hague: - Mouton, 1971.

analyze, question, and negotiate linguistic meaning. This theoretical recognition of language's self-referential capacity became the foundation of modern metalinguistic awareness.

Noam Chomsky, another cornerstone of modern linguistics, approached language from cognitive and generative perspective. He deepened the understanding of metalinguistic awareness by linking language to human cognition. He argued that people possess an internal knowledge of language rules and can consciously reflect on them. This idea showed that metalinguistic awareness is not only a communicative ability but also a mental capacity for analyzing and understanding language itself.

In recent decades, scholars have expanded the understanding of metalinguistic awareness by connecting it to pragmatic, intercultural, and dimensions of communication. From a pragmatic standpoint, J.L. Austin in his book "How to do things with words"² introduced the concept of speech acts, arguing that language is not only used to describe reality but also perform actions, such as promising, apologizing or commanding. This performative nature of language requires speakers to possess a certain level of metalinguistic awareness, as they must consciously recognize how words function not merely to express meaning but to carry out intentions within specific context. When an individual promises, apologizes or commands, they are not only using linguistic forms but also reflecting, often intuitively, on the social conventions and power relations that make these utterances effective. For instance, a promise is meaningful only when the speaker and listener both understand the implied commitment; an apology succeeds only if it adheres to accepted norms of sincerity and politeness. These acts demonstrate metalinguistic awareness because they involve awareness of how language operates as social action, requiring the speaker to evaluate form, context, and interpersonal meaning simultaneously. In the intercultural dimension, Michael Byram in "Teaching and Assessing intercultural communicative competence"³ argued that true communication involves comparing one's own language and cultural norms with others. This act demonstrates metalinguistic awareness, as it requires individuals to reflect on how language functions differently across cultures and how meaning is shaped by social and cultural context. For instance, English speakers often use polite expressions like "thank you", "please", while other cultures like Japanese, politeness may be conveyed through indirect speech, silence, or nonverbal gestures rather than explicit words like. Similarly, what might be considered a polite refusal in one culture, such as saying "no" indirectly, could be interpreted as evasive in another. Such comparisons show that individuals are consciously aware of how language reflects cultural attitudes and social relationships, which is a key feature of metalinguistic awareness. In "Language and culture"⁴ written by Claire Kramsch it is emphasized that, "learners must interpret the symbolic meanings of cultural expressions, not only grammar". The author meant that, words and phrases carry cultural values, emotions, and social meaning, not just dictionary definitions. For example, The English phrase "How are you" is often just a polite greeting, not a real question about health. In Uzbek, calling someone "opa"(sister) or "aka"(brother) does not always mean they are your real sibling – it reflects respect and social closeness. Because when a person interprets symbolic meaning, they are not using language- they are thinking about language. Such reflective questions may be appear as: "Why do people in this culture say it like that?" or "What does this word mean socially, not literally?" This reflection – seeing how words express social roles, politeness, respect, or identity- is metalinguistic awareness, since it involves understanding how language works beyond its structure.

In today's 21st century communication, the digital dimension refers to how people use and understand language in online environments- such as social media, messaging apps, or digital

² Austin J.L how to do things with words, - Cambridge:- Harvard University press,-1962.

³Byram M. Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence, - Clevedon:-Multilingual matters,- 1997

⁴ Kramsch C. Language and culture,- Oxford:Oxford university press,- 1998

classrooms. Emojis are not words, yet they shape how words are interpreted. When someone adds to a message, they are not just communicating emotion- they are consciously modifying or clarifying the meaning of their linguistic message. This ability to reflect on language use and adjust it intentionally shows metalinguistic awareness. David Crystal in “Internet linguistics: a student’s guide”⁵ states that emojis serve as “paralinguistic restoration”- they restore emotional and tonal cues that spoken language naturally provides but written digital language lacks. To use them effectively, users must be aware of how these symbols influence interpretation- a clear demonstration of metalinguistic competence.

Among the various fields that connect with metalinguistic awareness, bilingualism holds a particularly significant place. It plays a fundamental role in enhancing individuals’ ability to reflect on language as an object of thought rather than merely a means of communication. Studies in this area, such as Ke, Zang and Koda’s research⁶ involved more than 2.600 bilingual and monolingual children to investigate how managing two languages affects linguistic understanding. Their findings revealed that bilingual children exhibited greater metalinguistic awareness. In fact, this is one of the core debates in psycholinguistics and cognitive linguistics. There are some reasons why in bilingualism metalinguistic awareness can be developed stronger. In “Bilingualism in development : language, literacy, and cognition” written by E.Bialystok⁷ found that bilingual people use a kind of mental control system to manage two languages – switching between them, choosing words and avoiding mixing them up. This constant mental exercise strengthens what psychologists call executive function – the brain’s ability to control attention, focus, and flexibility. And because of this constant monitoring, bilinguals become more aware of the boundaries and rules of each language- which is exactly what metalinguistic awareness is about. Furthermore, bilingual individuals develop an early understanding that words are just symbols, not the things themselves. For example, an apple is “apple” in English, “яблоко” in Russian, and “olma” in Uzbek. So bilingual people understand that language is not fixed- it is a system of conventions. This realization builds abstract understanding of what language is – beyond vocabulary- which is the core of metalinguistic awareness. As Bialystok notes in “Bilingualism in development: language, literacy, and cognition”, bilingual individuals become more aware that linguistic forms are arbitrary and culture dependent. They realize that a word’s meaning in one language may not align precisely with its equivalent in another, which strengthens their metalinguistic sensitivity and flexibility in communication. Take the word “awkward” as an example. The meaning of this word is a feeling of social discomfort or unease in a situation – not quite embarrassment, not quite fear, but something in between. When awkward is translated into uzbek, noqulay, sharmandali or g’alati holat is a uzbek version of it, but none of these fully express the social tension mixed self-consciousness that “awkward” conveys. Similarly, the word mindset does not have concise translation in Uzbek. In English it means a person’s mental attitude or established way of thinking, while Uzbek equivalents like fikrlash tarzi, dunyoqarash partially express it, but they do not fully match the modern nuance of mindset- especially its use in self-improvement or motivational context. Since the bilingual mind constantly compares, adjusts and interprets between systems, process naturally cultivates metalinguistic insights. That is why bilinguals can sense that translation requires interpreting thoughts and frameworks, not just words – a reflection of cognitive-level metalinguistic awareness. Overall, these discussions demonstrates how bilingual experience deepens the understanding of how language functions a both a cognitive and cultural tool.

Conclusion: Metalinguistic awareness stands at the heart of human communication, linking language, thoughts, and culture. From Jakobson’s early theories of language functions to

⁵Crystal D. Internet linguistics: a student guide, -London:- Routledge, 2011

⁶ Zang X, Wong, Ku Ka, Lau, Kit-ling predictors of Chinese reading in Chinese monolingual and Chinese- English bilingual children in mainland China, -Dordrecht: -Springer, 2024

⁷ Bialystok E. Bilingualism in development: language, literacy, and cognition , - Cambridge :- Cambridge University Press, - 2001

Bialystok's modern studies on bilingual cognition, scholars have shown that awareness of language as a system goes beyond grammar or vocabulary- it is an awareness of how meaning is shaped, negotiated, and transformed across contexts. Pragmatic understanding helps speakers choose words that suit social situations, intercultural awareness enables them to interpret meaning across cultural boundaries, and digital dimension challenges them to adapt communication in technology-mediated spaces. In turn, bilingual experience enriches this sensitivity, training the mind to recognize that words are not fixed but fluid, changing with the perspective and culture that use them. Ultimately, metalinguistic awareness empowers individuals to think critically, communicate effectively and navigate the complex linguistic realities of the twenty-first century

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