

I-LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

I-1 DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE

I 1.1 DEFINITION WITH RESPECT TO FORM

Language is a system of speech symbols. It is realised acoustically (sound waves), visually, spatially (sign language) and in written form.

Speech symbols

Entity consisting of formal element which has been assigned a meaning, the correlation between form and meaning is arbitrary, but conventionalised within a speech community.

I 1.2 DEFINITION WITH RESPECT TO FUNCTION

Language is the most important means of human communication. It is used to

- convey and exchange information (informative function)
- prompt actions(appellative function)
- commit oneself to do something(obligatory function)
- open, hold and end social actions(content functions)
- convey and exchange artistic and/aesthetic function(poetic function)

I.2 MEANINGS OF THE TERM LANGUAGE

- refers to the human language faculty.

e.g. The phylogenesis of human language lies in the dark of prehistory

- refers to a single language system

e.g. English is a Germanic language

- refers to a concrete utterance

e.g. Don't say that it is bad language

Language includes a wide range of concepts in itself, as it is used for reflecting the communication system of any kind of species including animals. Yet, our concern here is human language; so definitions of language and discussions will be concerning the language of human beings (not bee communication or the sign language of chimps etc.). In this respect, it would be appropriate to draw upon the definitions of famous scholars by analyzing the underlying trends, beliefs and ideas within their words.

According to Sapir (1921) “*Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntary produced symbols.*”

In this definition, some of the words and phrases are worth discussing in order to reveal Sapir’s understanding of language. By using “*communicating ideas, emotions and desires*” Sapir stresses importance to both transactional and interactional functions of language (which will further be discussed in II. i). In other words, the informative and social perspectives of language are reflected. Another point to discuss is “*voluntary produced symbols*” by which he means language consists of symbols produced voluntarily unlike animal communication which is dominantly instinctive. Another definition is put forward by Bloch&Trager (1942):

“*A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates.*”

In this definition, there are two striking points to discuss. The first one is “*arbitrary*”, which reflects the idea that the relation between the signifier and signified has an arbitrary nature. In other words, there is no direct relation between the concept and the vocalic symbol that is used to name the related concept. It may be argued that this definition- as it reflects the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign- has roots from Saussurean structuralism. The other point to consider in this definition lies under “*by which a social group co-operates*”. Here, the social aspect of language is reflected as it is viewed as the tool used for the co-operation of a social group. In addition to this definition, Hall (1968) states that:

“*Language is the institution whereby human communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols.*”

This definition also reflects the arbitrary nature of symbols in a language. The difference emerges from the word “*habitually*”, which carries a behaviouristic perspective. The idea behind a behaviouristic view of language is the belief that language is a set of stimuli-response patterns and it is a process of habit formation.

This approach to the nature of human language was opposed by Noam Chomsky, who defines language (1957) as:

“A set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.”

Chomsky’s view of language includes its creative aspect as it is claimed that it is possible to produce an infinite number of sentences from a finite number of rules and structures. Therefore, this definition includes a rationalist and mentalist perspective. All the definitions mentioned above reflect some particular aspect of human language and are mainly affected by schools of thought like behaviourism, structuralism or rationalism. A comprehensive definition of language should include all aspects of language free from a particular philosophical thought and should reflect the nature of language holistically:

Language is a dynamic, creative and systemic tool for communication of information and building interpersonal relations by means of verbal and non-verbal signs and codes, which are community specific, arbitrary as well as productive.

This broad definition of language includes all its aspects:

“Dynamic”: Language is dynamic as it tends to change through time according to the needs of the society, or randomly. Any diachronic analysis is the proof for the dynamic nature of language.

“Creative”: There is no clear cut limitation for the creativeness of human language. Human beings can produce infinite number of sentences or unlimited utterances by making use of finite number of structures in language or rules in grammar.

“Systemic”: Language has a system in itself which composes of many particular signs and results with a synergic whole.

“Communication of information”: Language is used for transference of information and content of knowledge from an individual to another or from one generation to the next.

“Interpersonal relations”: Language is the primary source for the continuation of a society and each individual necessarily uses language to be a part of any social group or to build interpersonal relations and rapport.

“Verbal and non-verbal”: In addition to verbal signs, human language includes non-verbal signs which we generally name as body language, but it covers more than this. Areas of study like para-linguistics, proxemics, kinesics etc. analyzes this aspect of language.

“Community specific”: The signs and codes of language are unique to a particular community. In this respect, the term “culture” is avoided; since a specific culture may not be always homogeneous. However, the term community covers any sort of social group.

“Arbitrary”: The nature of the linguistic sign is arbitrary; there is no specific relation between the signifier and signified (except for onomatopoeic words).

After dealing with the definition of language with all its components, it may be appropriate to focus on the functions of language.

I 3. The functions of language

According to linguistic philosophers and discourse analysts, language has two major functions. These two functions will be dealt concerning two views as: the transactional view and the interactional view. Brown (1983:1) states that “the distinction between transactional and interactional functions stands in general correspondence to other functional dichotomies as; ‘representative/expressive’ (Buhler), ‘referential/emotive’ (Jakobson), ‘ideational / inter-personal’ (Halliday), and ‘descriptive/social-expressive’ (Lyons)”.

I.3.1 Transactional view

Transactional view reflects the idea that the most important function of language is the expression of content. According to the supporters of this view, the aim to communicate information dominates the use of language. According to Bennett (1976) “communication is primarily a matter of a speaker’s seeking either to inform a hearer of something or to enjoin some action upon him”.

The speaker sets the transference of information as his/her primary goal for communication; thus the use of language is mostly message oriented. In educational settings, the nature of the classroom also seems to be message oriented which is mostly informative. The teacher seeks to transfer the content as informative as possible; yet it should be kept in mind that the affective considerations has an important function in classroom and this may be well understood by the interactional view.

I.3.2 Interactional view:

The function of language involved in expressing social relations and personal attitudes is interactional function of language. It is the case that a great deal of everyday human interaction is characterized by the primarily interpersonal rather than transactional use of language. The interactional function mostly refers to emotive and affective uses of language in daily discourse and is claimed to be in spoken form in general. At this point, some exceptions may be given like some sorts of letters which have emotive function rather than an informative one.

I.4 Design features of communication:

There is an ongoing communication process in our lives. But what does communication consist of? To answer this question, Charles Hockett proposed design features of communication (adopted from: Miller; 1963)

- a) ***Auditory-vocal channel***: Sound is used between mouth and ear.
- b) ***Broadcast transmission and directional reception***: A signal can be heard by any auditory system within earshot, and the source can be located using the ears' direction finding ability.
- c) ***Interchangeability***: Speakers of language can reproduce any linguistic message they can understand.
- d) ***Total Feedback***: Speakers hear and can reflect upon everything that they say.
- e) ***Specialization***: The sound waves of speech have no function other than to signal meaning.
- f) ***Semanticity***: The elements of the signal convey meaning through their stable association with real-world situations.
- g) ***Arbitrariness***: There is no dependence of the element of the signal on the nature of the reality to which it refers.
- h) ***Discreteness***: Speech uses a small set of sound elements that clearly contrast with each other.
- i) ***Displacement***: It is possible to talk about events remote in space or time from the situation of the speaker.
- j) ***Productivity***: There is an infinite capacity to express and understand meaning

k) *Traditional transmission:* Language is transmitted from one generation to the next primarily by a process of teaching and learning.

l) *Duality of patterning:* The sounds of language have no intrinsic meaning, but combine in different ways to form elements that do convey meaning.

All these features are components of human communication system and a language teacher should have a heightened awareness of communication as an ongoing verbal and non-verbal process.

I. 5 Human language Versus Animal Language

Language is the modeling of human language in non- human animal systems. While the term is widely used, most researchers agree that animal languages are not as complex or expressive as that which they attempt to model - the human language.

Some researchers argue that there are significant differences separating human language from animal communication even at its most complex, and that the underlying principles are not related.

Others argue that an evolutionary continuum exists between the communication methods these animals use and human language.

The following properties of human language have been argued to separate it from animal communication:

Arbitrariness: There is no rational relationship between a sound or sign and its meaning. (There is nothing "housy" about a house.)

Cultural transmission: Language is passed from one language user to the next, consciously or unconsciously.

Discreteness: Language is composed of discrete units that are used in combination to create meaning.

Displacement: Languages can be used to communicate ideas about things that are not in the immediate vicinity either spatially or temporally.

Duality: Language works on two levels at once, a surface level and a semantic (meaningful) level.

Metalinguistics: Ability to discuss language itself.

Productivity: A finite number of units can be used to create an infinite number of utterances.

Research with apes, like that of Francine Patterson with Koko, suggested that apes are capable of using language that meets some of these requirements. However, now the validity of such research is widely disputed and, for some, discredited.

In the wild chimpanzees have been seen "talking" to each other, when warning about approaching danger. For example, if one chimpanzee sees a snake, he makes a low, rumbling noise, signalling for all the other chimps to climb into nearby trees.

Arbitrariness has been noted in meerkat calls; bee dances show elements of spatial displacement; and cultural transmission has occurred with the offspring of many of the great apes who have been taught sign languages.

However, these single features alone do not qualify such instances of communication as being true language.