

Chapter 1

LANGUAGE

Language is the unique possession of man. It is God's special gift to mankind. Without language human civilization as we now know it would have remained an impossibility. Language is ubiquitous. It is present everywhere—in our thoughts and dreams, prayers and meditations, relations and communications, and rituals. Besides being a means of communication, and a storehouse of knowledge, it is an instrument of thinking as well as source of delight (e.g. singing). Language dissipates superfluous nervous energy, directs motion in others, both men and animals; sets matter in motion as in charms and incantations, transfers knowledge from one person to another, from one generation to another. Language is also the maker or unmaker of human relationships. It is the use of language that makes a life bitter or sweet. Without language man would have remained only a dumb animal. It is our ability to communicate through words that makes us different from animals. Because of its omnipresence language is often taken for granted. But many a time it has become the serious concern not only of linguists but also of philosophers, logicians, psychologists, scientists and literary critics, to name only a few.

DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE

Since linguistics is the study of language, it is imperative for a linguist to know what language is. Language is a very complex human phenomenon; all attempts to define it have proved inadequate. In a nutshell, language is an 'organised noise' used in actual social situations. That is why it has also been defined as 'contextualised systematic sounds.'

In the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol.13, language is defined as "a system of conventional, spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, communicate." Some other definitions which are currently popular in linguistic circles are cited below—

(I) "Language is a primarily human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols."

—Sapir, *Language*, 1921.

(II) "Language in its widest sense means the sum total of such signs of our thoughts and feelings as are capable of external perception and as could be produced and repeated at will."

—A.H. Gardiner, *Speech and Language*, 1935.

(III) "Language may be defined as the expression of thought by means of speech-sounds."

—Henry Sweet, *The History of Language*.

(IV) "A system of communication by sound, i.e. through the organs of speech and hearing, among human beings of a certain group or community, using vocal symbols possessing arbitrary conventional meanings."

—Mario A. Pei and Frank Gaynor,
Dictionary of Linguistics, 1954.

(V) "Language is human.....a verbal systematic symbolism.....a means of transmitting information.....a form of social behaviour.....(with a)

high degree of convention."

—J. Whatmough, *Language*.

(VI) "A language is a device that establishes sound-meaning correlation, pairing meaning with signals to enable people to exchange ideas through observable sequences of sounds."²

—Ronald W. Langacker,
Language & Its Structure, 1967.

(VII) "A Language (is a) symbol system....based on pure or arbitrary convention.....infinitely extendable and modifiable according to the changing needs and conditions of the speakers."

—R.H. Robins, *General Linguistics*.

(VIII) "Language is "audible, articulate human speech as produced by the action of the tongue and adjacent vocal organs.....The body of words and methods of combining words used and understood by a considerable community, especially when fixed and elaborated by long usage; a tongue."

—Webster's *New International Dictionary*, 2nd ed.

(IX) According to Transformational Generative linguists like Noam Chomsky, language is the innate capacity of native speakers to understand and form grammatical sentences.

Anthropologists regard language as a form of cultural behaviour, sociologists as an interaction between members of a social group, students of literature as an artistic medium, philosophers as a means of interpreting human experience, language teachers as a set of skills. Truly, language is such a complex phenomenon that to define it in terms of a single level as knowledge, behaviour, skill, habit, an event or an object will not solve the problem of its definition. None of the above definition is perfect. Each of them just hints at certain characteristics of language.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LANGUAGE

1. **Language is verbal, vocal: language is sound**

Language is an organization of sounds, of vocal symbols—the sounds produced from the mouth to convey some meaningful message. It also means that speech is primary to writing. There are several languages in the world which have no writing systems, yet they are languages because they are spoken. Music and singing also employ vocal sounds, but they are not language. Language is a systematic verbal symbolism; it makes use of verbal elements such as sounds, words, phrases, which are arranged in certain ways to make sentences. Language is vocal in as much as it is made up of sounds which can be produced by the organs of speech.

2. **Language is a means of communication**

Language is the most powerful, convenient and permanent means and form of communication. Non-linguistic symbols such as expressive gestures, signals of various kinds, traffic lights, road signs, flags, braille alphabets, the symbols of mathematics and logic, etc. are also means of communication, yet they are not so flexible, comprehensive, perfect and extensive as language is. Language is the best means of self-expression. It is through language that humans express their thoughts, desires, emotions, feelings; it is through it they store knowledge, transmit message, transfer knowledge and experience from one person to another, from one generation to another. It is through it that humans interact. It is language again that yokes present, past and future together.

3. **Language is a social phenomenon**

Language is a set of conventional communicative signals used by humans for communication in a community. Language in this sense is a possession of a social group, an indispensable set of rules which permits its members to interact with each other, to co-operate with each other: it is a social institution. Language exists in society; it is a means of nourishing and developing culture and establishing human relations. It is as a member of society that a human being acquires a

language. We are not born with an instinct to learn a particular language. If a language is not used in any society, it dies out.

4. Language is non-instinctive, conventional

No language was created in a day out of a mutually agreed upon formula by a group of humans. Language is the gift of evolution and convention. Each generation transmits this convention on to the next. Like all human institutions languages also change and die, grow and expand. Every language then is a convention in a community. It is non-instinctive because it is acquired by human being. No body gets a language in heritage; he acquires it, and he has been provided with an innate ability to acquire language.

5. Language is arbitrary

By the arbitrariness of language we mean: there is no inherent or logical relation or similarity between any given feature of language and its meaning. That is entirely arbitrary, that there is no direct, necessary connection between the nature of things or ideas language. Furthermore, these are at variation in different languages of the world and have no uniformity.

6. Language is symbolic

The symbolism of language is a necessary consequence of the feature of arbitrariness discussed above. A symbol stands for something else; it is something that serves as a substitute. Language is a system of arbitrary symbols. For concepts, things, ideas, objects, etc. We have sounds and words as symbols. Language uses words essentially as symbols and not as signs (e.g. in Maths.) for the concepts represented by them.

7. Language is systematic

Although language is symbolic, yet its symbols are arranged in a particular system. All languages have their system of arrangements. Though symbols in each human language are finite; they can be arranged infinitely, that is to say, we can produce an infinite set of sentences by a finite set of symbols.

Every language is a system of systems. All languages have phonological and grammatical systems, and within a system there are several sub-systems. For example, within the grammatical system we have morphological and syntactic systems, and within these two sub-systems we have several other systems such as those of plural, of mood, of aspect, of tense, etc.

8. **Language is unique, creative, complex and modifiable**

Language is a unique phenomenon of the earth. Each language is unique in its own sense. By this we do not mean that languages do not have any similarities. Despite their common features, each language has its peculiarities and distinct features.

Language has creativity and productivity. The structural elements of human language can be combined to produce new utterances, which neither the speaker nor his hearers may ever have said or heard before any yet which both sides understand without difficulty. Language changes according to the needs of society.

9. **Language is both linguistic and communicative competence**

A language is an abstract set of psychological principles and sociological consideration that constitute a person's competence as a speaker in a given situation. These psychological principles make available to him an unlimited number of sentences he can draw upon in concrete situations and provide him with the ability to understand and create entirely new sentences. Hence language is not just a verbal behaviour; it is a system of rules establishing correlations between meanings and sound sequences. It is a set of principles that a speaker masters; it is not anything a speaker does. In brief, a language is a code which is different from the act of encoding; it is a speaker's linguistic competence rather than his linguistic performance. But mere linguistic or communicative competence is not enough for communication; it has to be coupled with communicative competence. This is the view of the sociolinguists who stress the use of language according to the occasion and

context, the speaker and the listener, the profession and the social status of the speaker and the listener. That language is the result of social interaction is an established truth.

10. Language is human and structurally complex

No species other than humans has been endowed with language. Animals cannot acquire human language because of its complex structure and their physical inadequacies. Animals do not have the type of brain which the human beings possess and their articulatory organs are also very much different from those of the human beings. Furthermore, any system of animal communication does not make use of the quality of features, that is, of concurrent systems of sound and meaning.

TYPICAL QUESTIONS

1. *What is language? What are its chief characteristics?*
2. *Explain what is meant by the statement that language is a system of systems.*
or
"If we add together phonetics, grammar, vocabulary and meaning, we still do not get a complete picture of the language. For language is not a group of these systems, it is a system of systems." Discuss.
3. *Language may be defined as "a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which thought is conveyed from one human being to the other". Comment briefly on each of the elements of this definition: system, arbitrary, vocal, symbol, a vehicle of thought.*
4. *Language does indeed involve sound and meaning; but it also involves the study of the situation. Discuss.*

5. *Discuss the statement that a language is a network of system, give suitable example to illustrate your answer.*
 6. *Write a brief note on the statement that a language is based upon the culture and conventions of the people who speak it.*
 7. *What purpose does the study of language serve in society?*
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