

Lecture №01: Language and Linguistics

Everyone thinks because he can talk, that he can therefore talk about language.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

1. What is *Language*?

Language is the central object of study in linguistics. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Encyclopedic Dictionary*, language is a “system of sounds, words, patterns, etc used by humans to communicate thoughts and feelings.” In General, people in their daily life tend to use the term *language* to signify many aspects of human and animal communication such as the language of flowers, the language of colours, the language perfumes, the language of bees, body language, the language of dreams, the language of traffic lights, etc. Surely it is not that sense of language in which linguists are interested. One of the distinctive features of linguistics is its focus on *human verbal communication*.

2. What is *Linguistics*?

Linguistics is usually defined as ‘the scientific study of language’. When we say that a linguist aims to be scientific, we mean that he attempts to study language in much the same way as a scientist studies physics or chemistry, that is systematically, and as far as possible without prejudice. It means observing language, forming hypotheses about it, testing these hypotheses, and finally constructing theories. In addition to this, the scientificness of linguistics lies in the fact that it is bound to four major principles which govern in language analysis:

1. **Exhaustiveness:** it means that the work has to be complete and thorough.
2. **Systematicness:** The work is characterized by order and planning
3. **Consistency and objectivity:** the work has to be clear and without contradiction.
4. **Economy:** the linguist is bound to use few words to mean much.

Linguists today understand their job as that of *description*, their purpose being to *describe* how people use language, not to *prescribe* how they *should* use it. Linguists don't invent rules; they discover them. Linguists study language for the sake of its understanding.

3. Language: Human Language vs. Animal Communication Systems

If asked to name the trait which most decisively distinguishes human beings from all other creatures on the planet, most people would come up with a single answer: *language*. Most linguists currently regard the faculty of language as a defining characteristic of being human. After all, nearly every creature on the

planet seems to have some kind of signalling system; however, language is a highly elaborated signaling system. This is because language has fundamental properties which are often collectively known as the design features of language:

3.2 Design Features of Language

3.2.1 Duality: A principle feature of human language is the duality of patterning. It enables us to use our language in a very economic way for a virtually infinite production of linguistic units. All human languages have a small, limited set of speech sounds. That is, we can assemble and reassemble speech sounds such as /d/, /o/, /g/ into larger linguistic units like *dog* and *god*. These are commonly called "words". Although our capacity to produce new speech sounds is limited, we frequently coin new words. Hence, our capacity to produce vocabulary is unlimited. Animals' communicative signals are fixed and cannot be broken into parts (e.g.: meow is not /m/ + /e/ + /o/ + /w/).

3.2.2 Displacement: In contrast to other animals, humans have a sense of the past and the future. A gorilla, for example, cannot tell its fellows about its parents, its adventures in the jungle, or its experience of the past. The use of language to talk about things other than "the here and now", is a characteristic of humans. Displacement is thus our ability to convey a meaning that transcends the immediately perceptible sphere of space and time. Although some animals seem to possess abilities appropriating those of displacement, they lack the freedom to apply this to new contexts. The dance of the honey-bee, for instance, indicates the locations of rich deposits of food to other bees. This ability of the bee corresponds to displacement in human language, except for a lack of variation. The bee frequently repeats the same patterns in its dance, whereas humans are able to invent ever new contexts.

3.2.3 Open-endedness (Productivity): The ability to say things that have never been said before, including the possibility to express invented things or lies, is also a peculiar feature of human language. Most animal communication systems, however, serve to convey at most a few dozen different possible messages.

3.2.4 Stimulus-freedom: It is another aspect that distinguishes human language from animal communication. The honey-bee must perform its dance, the woodchuck must cry out in order to warn its fellows when it beholds an eagle. Humans have the ability to say anything they like in any context.

3.2.5 Arbitrariness: The absence of any necessary connection between the form of a word and its meaning. Why is a table called "table"? Obviously, the thing never told us its name. And tables do not make a noise similar to the word. The same applies to most of the words of our language. We cannot tell

from the sound structure which meaning is behind it. There are, however, exceptions to this rule: language can be *iconic*, which means that there is a direct correlation between form and meaning. The length of a phrase, for example, could represent a length of time the phrase refers to, like in "a long, long time ago". Here, the extension serves to visually represent emphasis. Iconicity in language can be found frequently. Another example for nonarbitrariness is *onomatopoeia*. These are words that seem to resemble sounds. There are many examples for onomatopoeic words, like *splash* or *bang*. Some names for animals are also onomatopoeic, for example, "cuckoo".

3.2.6 The human vocal tract: An elaborated language requires a highly sophisticated speech organ that will enable the speaker to produce the many differentiated sounds. Only humans are endowed with a speech organ of this complexity.

3.2.7 Cultural transmission: This process whereby a language is passed on from one generation to the next is described as cultural transmission. It is clear that humans are born with some kind of predisposition to acquire language in a general sense. However, we are not born with the ability to produce utterances in a specific language such as English. We acquire our first language as children in a culture. The general pattern in animal communication is that creatures are born with a set of specific signals that are produced instinctively.

3.2.8 Discreteness

The sounds used in language are meaningfully distinct. For example, the difference between a *b* sound and a *P* sound is not actually very great, but when these sounds are part of a language like English, they are used in such a way that the occurrence of one rather than the other is meaningful. The fact that the pronunciation of the forms *pack* and *back* leads to a distinction in meaning can only be due to the difference between the *p* and *b* sounds in English.

3.2.9 Interchangeability: All utterances that are understood can be produced. This is different to some communication systems where, for example, males produce one set of behaviours and females another and they are unable to interchange these messages so that males use the female signal and vice versa.

3.2.10 Learnability

Any normal human can learn any one of a variety of languages whereas animals do not have this ability.

3.4 Language and Medium

A *language* is an abstraction based on the linguistic behaviour of its users. *Medium* is the realization of language through speech and writing. In other words, whereas language is abstract, medium is concrete. All normal children of all races learn to speak the language of their community, so speech has often been seen as the primary medium of language. The abstract system which is language can also be realized as writing, and although speech and writing have much in common, they are not to be equated or hierarchically ordered. It has been claimed that speech is 'primary' and this is true in a number of ways:

- a) Writing is a relatively recent development in human societies.
- b) Thousands of speech communities rely solely on speech.
- c) All of us speak a great deal more than we write.
- d) Although we acquire speech without conscious effort, learning to read and write is usually less spontaneous and less automatic.
- e) Writing is permanent while speech is instant.

4. The Components of Language

Linguistics is concerned with the study of language systems. For the purposes of study, language is divided into levels, or components. The study of language involves us in an examination of all of the following levels of language: phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels.

4.1 Phonology: Phonology is the study of the distinctive sounds of a language, the so-called phonemes. It is a detailed study of the sound system of a language. Phonology examines the functions of sounds within a language. Its ultimate aim is to discover the principles which govern the sound system of a language.

4.2 Morphology: Morphemes are the smallest meaningful elements of a language. Morphology is the study of these meaning units. Not all words or even all syllables are necessarily meaning units. Morphology employs discovery procedures to find out what words or syllables are morphemes.

4.3 Syntax: Syntax is derived from the Greek word *syntaxis*, which means *arrangement*. It deals with the basic principles which govern the way in which words are arranged in a sentence.

4.4 Semantics: Linguistic semantics examines the meaning and the change of meaning of *linguistic* signs and strings of signs.