Language and Linguistics

An Introduction

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An Introduction

Dr. P. Suresh

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AKHAND PUBLISHING HOUSE
DELHI (INDIA)

Published by



AKHAND PUBLISHING HOUSE

Publisher, Distributor, Exporter having an Online Bookstore

Head Office : L-9A, Ist Floor, Street No. 42,
Sadatpur Extension, Delhi-110094 (INDIA)
Phone No.: 9968628081, 9555149955 & 9013387535
E-mail : akhandpublishing@yahoo.com,
akhandpublishinghouse@gmail.com
Website : www.akhandbooks.com

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© Author
Ist Edition 2017
ISBN 978-93-81416-70-9

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Printed in India

Published by Jhapsu Yadav for Akhand Publishing House. Cover Designed and Laser Typesetting at VM Graphic and Printed at VM offset Printers, Delhi.

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Preface

Language and Linguistics is a course which has been made optional as well as compulsory papers in many of the undergraduate and post-graduate courses across universities in India as scholars and academicians have come to realize the significance of teaching Linguistics to the young minds to make them prosper both academically as well as be prepared for their professional life. It is with these objectives, that the course on Language and Linguistics has been introduced in different universities across India. In the CBCS syllabus, Language and Linguistics has a special place as it is provided as an important course for the development of the students.

The book *Language and Linguistics: An Introduction* written especially keeping in mind the acumen and competence of the students in mind. Probably the undergraduate students study language and linguistics for the first time in a formal atmosphere and therefore find the subject often dry and difficult. The book is written and structured in a manner in which the students who are new to this field will find the book to be up to the mark not only in terms of the content, but also in terms of its compactness, conciseness and utility.

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Wish you a happy reading and will like to have your suggestions for the further improvement of the book.

–Dr. P. Suresh

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Language: Language and Communication; Language Varieties: Standard and Non-Standard Language; Language Change

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What is Language?

Many researches and studies across the world have gone into figuring out the ways in which human language marks the essential identity of the human beings, their civilization and culture. Many scholars opined that it is only through language that humanity has come out of the Stone Age and has developed science, art and technology. In other words, it can be said that human culture is dependent on language. Moreover, the basic feature of human language is that it is a means of communication, in the sense that we communicate through language (though it consists only seven percent of our communicative needs and the other ninety three percent is achieved through non-verbal means). But language is not merely a tool of human communication; it is also the carrier of our culture. It is in language that the whole of our human culture finds its expression.

Some Definitions of Language

Language is defined by various scholars in various ways –

1. "Language is that system by which sounds and meanings are related." (Fromkin and Rodman, 1974)
2. "Language is the most sophisticated and versatile means available to human beings for the communication of meaning." (Brown, 1984)
3. "Language is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols." (Sapir, 1921)
4. "Language is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory symbols." (Hall, 1964)
5. "Language is a 'system of sounds, words, patterns etc used by humans to communicate thoughts and feelings." (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 1989)
6. "Language is a patterned system of arbitrary sound signals, characterized by structure dependence, creativity, displacement, duality and cultural transmission." (Aitchinson, 1987)

Human language has many characteristics which make it distinct from any other communication system of the world; but the following are the most important ones which makes human language distinctive: language is arbitrary, productive, creative, systematic, vocalic, social, non-instinctive and conventional. These characteristics of language set human language apart from animal communication. Some of these features may be part of animal communication; yet they do not form part of it in total.

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Language is Arbitrary

Language is thought to be arbitrary in the sense that there is no inherent relation between the sound or a combination of sounds (words, "morphs" in linguistic terminology) of a language and their meanings or the ideas conveyed by them. We do not know why we call a thing or an idea by the sound or set of sounds (phonemes) that we use for it. There is no reason why a female adult human being be called a 'woman' in English, 'aurat' in Urdu, 'zen' in Persian and 'femine' in French. This feature of language where the choice of words selected to mean a particular thing or idea is purely arbitrary is significant in language. Ferdinand de Saussure in his famous book *Course in General Linguistics*, a book compiled by his students from his lectures, emphasizes on this feature of language, as he points out the arbitrariness of human language. Except for the onomatopoeic words (words which carries with it the sense of it, for example, the snake "*hisses*" – the hissing sound connotes its sense) all other words or meaningful sounds of a language are arbitrary.

But one should keep in mind that once a word (morph, in the sense of a sound or set of sounds) is selected for a particular referent, it more or less remains as such, though we could find out that meaning of words changes over the years, as language is not a constant thing. Language evolves over the ages with its use. For example, in the eighteenth century, 'whitewash' meant doing make up by the females, but over the course of years the meaning has changed altogether. We will discuss the change of

language over the years in detail in the later part of the book.

Language is Social

As we all know, language is a medium of communication among members of a particular community (also known as Speech Community; that is the community which is bonded in terms of all the people of that particular community sharing the same language as a means of communication) Language, in that sense, is a possession of a social group, comprising an indispensable set of rules which permits its members to relate to each other, 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 civilization as well as a means of establishing human relations.

Moreover, it can be said that whatever we do, we do it in terms of language. Nothing exists in this world for humans which do not have a name. Naming is the way in which we incorporate everything we come across within our cultural purview. Therefore it can be said that the world exists within language.

Language is Symbolic

Language is not only used for oral communication; but written also for written communication which also serves a significant communicative need. For each sound or combination of sounds in a particular language a corresponding symbol are employed to denote its meaning. These symbols are arbitrarily chosen (similar to the way sounds are chosen arbitrarily) and conventionally accepted and

employed. Words in a language are not mere signs or figures, but symbols of meaning. The intelligibility of a language depends on a correct interpretation of these symbols. Correct interpretation of the symbols assumes that the society as a whole (the speech community) shares among themselves certain codes which everybody follows so that the meaning becomes intelligible.

Language is Systematic

Although language is symbolic, yet its symbols are arranged in a particular system. All languages have their system of arrangements. 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 systems such as those of plural, of mood, of aspect, of tense, etc. For example, in English, the syntactical word order is Subject – Verb – Object (SVO); and everywhere in the world, English-speaking people use this order. The word Syntactical order of Hindi is Subject – Object – Verb (SOV).

Language is Vocal

Language is primarily made up of vocal sounds only produced by a physiological articulatory mechanism in the human body. In the beginning, it appeared as vocal sounds only. Writing came much later, as an attempt to represent vocal sounds. Writing is only the graphic representation of the sounds of the language. So many linguists are of the view that

speech is primary.

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 outcome of evolution and convention. Each generation transmits this convention onto 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 beings. Nobody gets a language in heritage; s/he acquires it because s/he has an innate ability to do so. (Though many scholars have doubted the theory of Innatism and consequently many theories of language acquisition came into existence.)

Language is Productive and Creative

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 made or heard before; yet both sides understand each other without difficulty. Language changes according to the needs of society.

Finally, language has other characteristics such as *Duality* referring to the two systems of sound and meaning, *Displacement* which means the ability to talk across time and space, *Humanness* which means that animals cannot acquire it, *Universality* which refers to the equilibrium across humanity on linguistic grounds, *Competence* and *Performance* which means that language is innate and produced is society and furthermore, language is culturally transmitted. It is

learnt by an individual from his elders, and is transmitted from one generation to another. Thus using J. Firth's term, language is a '*polysystametic*'. It is also open to be studied from multifaceted angles.

As discussed, language has hordes of characteristics which make it unique to human beings. Moreover, language can be used in multifarious ways in different social and cultural setting and in different circumstances which leads to immense variations in use of language. Language varies according to class, gender, region, from person to person, from context to context and so on and so forth. As there are multifarious ways of using language and loads of characteristics of language, therefore it is pertinent that language can be studies and is studied from various points of view. Linguistics and socio-linguistics are some of them which we will be interested in for our present purpose.

Linguistics can be defined as the scientific study of human language which tries to uncover the underlying structure of human language. Before twentieth century what the scholars primarily focused on when they studies language is the aspect of grammar and evolutionary aspect of language which is terms as philology (philology is a branch of study of language where one tries to trace the origin of words and primarily attaches importance to the realm of vocabulary of a particular language) but linguistics is far wider than that as the realm of linguistics to figure out the underlying structure not only of a language, but languages per se.

There are different sub-fields of linguistics which tries to structurally figure out the ways language is

manifested by us in our use of it. The different sub-fields include –

i. **Phonetics**, the study of the physical properties of speech (or signed) production and perception

ii. **Phonology**, the study of sounds (or signs) as discrete, abstract elements in the speaker's mind that distinguish meaning

iii. **Morphology**, the study of internal structures of words and how they can be modified

iv. **Syntax**, the study of underlying structures of sentences

v. **Semantics**, the study of the meaning of words and how words combine to form the meanings of sentences

vi. **Pragmatics**, the study of how utterances are used in communicative acts, and the role played by context and nonlinguistic knowledge in the transmission of meaning

vii. **Discourse analysis**, the analysis of language use in texts (spoken, written, or signed)

There are more areas which come under the area of linguistics or are connected with linguistics – some areas which are directly connected are –

1. Sociolinguistics, the study of variation in language and its relationship with social factors.
2. Applied linguistics, the study of language-related issues applied in everyday life, notably language policies, planning, and education.
3. Stylistics, the study of linguistic factors that place a discourse in context.
4. Semiotics the study which investigates the relationship between signs and what they signify more broadly.

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