

1.1 WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

Everybody knows the answer to this question but nobody has so far been able to come out with any standard definition that fully explains the term language. It is a situation like trying to define the term life. Everybody knows what life is but one cannot present a satisfactory definition of life. In order to understand a term like 'life', one has to talk of the properties or characteristics of living beings (e.g. motion, reproduction, respiration, growth, power of self-healing, excretion, nutrition, mortality, etc.). Similarly, the term 'language' can be understood better in terms of its properties or characteristics. Some linguists, however, have been trying to define language in their own ways even though all these definitions are far from satisfactory. Here are some of these definitions:

1. Language is a symbol system based on pure or arbitrary conventions... infinitely extendable and modifiable according to the changing needs and conditions of the speakers.

Rodan (1985)

According to this definition, language is a symbol system. Every language (that exists in the written form) selects some symbols for its selected sounds. For the sound /k/, in English we have the symbol k and in Hindi we have क. These symbols form the alphabet of the language and join in different combinations (according to a well laid out system) to form meaningful words.

The system talked of here is purely arbitrary in the sense that there is no one to one correspondence between the structure of a word and the thing it stands for. The combination of letters p.e.n., for example stands, in English, for an instrument used for writing. Why could it not be e.p.n. or n.e.p.? Well, it could also be e.p.n. or n.e.p., and there is nothing sacrosanct about the combination p.e.n. except that it has now become a convention—a convention that cannot be easily changed.

As stated here, language conventions are not easily changed, yet it is not impossible to do so. Language is infinitely modifiable and extendable. Words go on changing meanings and new words continue to be added to language with the changing needs of the community using it. Shakespeare, for example, used the word stomach to mean courage. Similarly words like laser, sputnik, and astronaut are of quite recent origin in the English language.

There are two issues in the definition of language and all normal humans uniformly possess it. It is said to be species-specific and species-learned. Also, language does not pass from a parent to a child. In this sense, it is not instinctive. A child has to learn language and he/she learns the language of the society he/she is placed in.

3. Language is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols.
Hall (1969)

This definition rightly gives more prominence to the fact that language is primarily speech produced by oral-auditory symbols. A speaker produces some string of oral sounds that get conveyed through the air to the listener who, through his hearing organs, receives the sound waves and conveys these to the brain that interprets these symbols to arrive at a meaning.

4. A language is a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.
Noam Chomsky (1957)

Chomsky meant to convey that each sentence has a structure. Human brain is competent enough to construct different sentences from out of the limited set of sounds/symbols belonging to a particular language. Human brain is so productive that a child can at any time produce a sentence that has never been said or heard earlier.

5. A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication.
Wardhaugh (1972)

6. A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates.
Bloch and Trager (1942)

Both the definitions 5 and 6 above prominently point out that language is a system. Sounds join to form words according to a system. The letters k, n, i, t join to form a meaningful word knit, whereas combinations like n-k-i-t, t.k.n.i. or i.n.k.t. do not form any meaningful or sensible combinations. As said earlier, although initially the formation of words, is only arbitrary, convention makes them parts of a system. Words too join to form sentences according to some system. A sentence like: Cricket is a game of glorious uncertainties is acceptable but one cannot accept a string of words like: a game is of cricket uncertainties glorious. It is in this sense that language is said to be a system of systems.

7. Language is undeniably a kind of means of communication among human beings. It consists primarily of vocal sounds. It is articulatory, systematic, symbolic and arbitrary.

Derbyshire (1967)

Derbyshire, while accepting that language is the property of human beings and that it is primarily speech, brings out the point that it is an important means of communication amongst humans. Before the start of civilization, man might have used the language of signs, but it must have had a very limited scope. Language is a fully developed means of communication with the civilized man who can convey and receive millions of messages across the universe. An entire civilization depends on language only. Think of a world without language—man would only continue to be a denizen of the forest and the cave. Language has changed the entire gamut of human relations and made it possible for human beings to grow into a human community on this planet.

1.11 Some More Definitions

8. Language is 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.

Encyclopaedia Britannica

9. Languages are the principal systems of communication used by particular groups of human beings within the particular society (linguistic community) of which they are members.

Lyons (1977)

It is clearly evident from all these definitions, none of which completely defines the term 'language', that it is not possible to have a single definition that brings out all the properties of language. On the basis of these definitions, one can, however, list out the various characteristics of language. It would, therefore, be better to list these characteristics and discuss them in detail.

1.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF LANGUAGE

1.2.1 Language is a Means of Communication

Language is a very important means of communication between humans. A can communicate his or her ideas, emotions, beliefs or feelings to B as they share a common code that makes up the language. No doubt, there are many other means of communication used by humans, e.g. gestures, nods, winks, flags, smiles, horns, short-hand, braille alphabet, mathematical symbols, Morse code, raised sketches, maps, acting, mime, dancing, and so on. But all these systems of communication are extremely limited or they are, in fact, depend language only. They are not as flexible, comprehensive, perfect and extensive as language is. Language is so important a form of communication between humans that it is difficult to think of a society without language. It gives shape to people's thoughts, and guides and

controls their entire activity. It is a carrier of civilization and culture as human thoughts and philosophy are conveyed from one generation to the other through the medium of language. Language is ubiquitous in the sense that it is present everywhere in all activities. It is as important as the air we breathe and is the most valuable possession of man. In the scheme of things, all humans are blessed with language and it is the specific property of humans only. Language is thus species-specific and species-uniform. It is because of the use of language that humans are called "talking animals" (*Homo loquax*).

Animals too have their systems of communication but their communication is limited to a very small number of messages, e.g. hunger, and thirst, fear and anger. In the case of humans, the situation is entirely different. Human beings can send an infinite number of messages to their fellow beings. It is through language that they store knowledge, transfer it to the next generation and yoke the present, past and the future together.

1.22 Language is Arbitrary

Language is arbitrary in the sense that there is no inherent relation between the words of a language and their meanings or the ideas conveyed by them (except in the case of hieroglyphics, where a picture of an object may represent the object). There is no reason why a female adult human being be called a woman in English, *stree* in Hindi, *maat* in Urdu, *Zen* in Persian, *Femine* in French or *stree* in Punjabi. Selection of these words in the languages mentioned here is purely arbitrary, an accident of history. It is just like christening a new born baby John or James. But once a child is given some name in a purely arbitrary manner, this name gets associated with the child for his entire life and it becomes an important, established convention. The situation in the case of language is a similar one. The choice of a word referred to create a particular thing or idea is purely arbitrary, but once a word is referred to a particular referent, it ceases to stay so such.

It may be noted that had language not been arbitrary, there would have been only one language in the world.

The arbitrary nature of language permits or pre-supposes change, but such changes do not normally take place. Human languages grow and are normally changed. Words in a language are more difficult to change because a wholly arbitrary has acquired them. Therefore, while the arbitrary nature of language permits change, an unconsciously given stability.

There are words in some languages, which do have a relation with the meaning of what they stand for. *Internationalism* is a word used for words that possess the same idea, such as, e.g. *king*, *queen*, *king*, *queen*. The words *king* and *queen* are not the same word in all languages. Different languages have different words. These words, however, do not change. The fact that words in a language are arbitrary is not the reason why they are arbitrary. It is because they are arbitrary.

1.23 Language is a System of Symbols

Language is a system of symbols. It is a system of signs, symbols or words. The words are the symbols of a language. They are not the same as the

graphic symbols standing for the sounds of a language. Sounds are arranged in certain fixed or established, systematic order to form meaningful words or words. Similarly, words are also arranged in a particular system to form meaningful meaningful sentences. These systems operate at two levels: phonological and syntactical.

At the phonological level, for example, the sounds of a language appear only in some fixed combinations. There is no word, for example, that starts with *br-*, *lr-* or *zl-* combination. Again, while there are several English words having an initial consonant cluster with three consonants (e.g. *spring/striving*), there are no initial tetraphonemic consonant clusters (a string of four consonants in the same syllable) in English. There is no word that begins with a /*h/* sound or ends in a /*h/* sound*. Similarly, words too combine to form sentences according to certain conventions (i.e. grammatical or structural rules) of the language. The sentence "The hunter shot the tiger with a gun" is acceptable but the sentence "hunter the tiger a shot gun with the" is not acceptable as the word order in the latter sentence does not conform to the established language conventions.

Language is thus called a *system of systems* as it operates at the two levels discussed above. This property of language is also termed *duality* by some linguists. This makes language a very complex phenomenon. Every human child has to master the conventions of the language he or she learns before being able to successfully communicate with other members of the social group in which he or she is placed.

1.24 Language is Primarily Vocal

Language is primarily made up of vocal sounds only, produced by a physiological articulatory mechanism in the human body. In the beginning, it must have appeared as vocal sounds only. Writing must have come much later, as an intelligent attempt to represent vocal sounds. Writing is the graphic representation of the sounds of the language. The letters *k* or *q* represent only the /*k/* sound. Graphic symbols had to be invented for the sake of some sounds. There are a number of languages which continue to exist, even today, in the spoken form only. They do not have a written form. A child learns to speak first; writing comes much later. Also, during his lifetime, a man speaks much more than he writes. The total quantum of speech is much larger than the total quantum of written materials.

It is because of these reasons that modern linguists say that speech is primary, writing is secondary. Writing did have one advantage over speech—it could be preserved in books or records. But, with the invention of magnetic tape or audio cassettes, it has lost that advantage too. A number of modern gadgets like the telephone, the tape recorder, the dictaphone, etc. prove the primacy of speech over writing in the present time.

1.25 Language Differs from Animal Communication in Several Ways

Language is primarily human. It is humans alone that possess language and use it for communication. Language is, in that sense, species-specific—it is specific

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... of communication. In that sense, language is a system of communication that is very small number of messages. Animal communication is the following way:

(a) Language can convey a large number, rather an infinite set, of messages whereas the number of messages conveyed through the communication system of animals is very limited. Animals, for example, are able to convey to their fellow animals if they are hungry or afraid. A bee, by its dance, is able to convey the distance or the direction of the source of nectar, but it cannot convey how good or bad this honey is. Similarly, a bee cannot tell another bee that the source of honey is 10 metres to the left of a point 15 metres to the right. Language can thus convey messages along several dimensions whereas, in the case of bees, messages are differentiated along two dimensions only, i.e., direction and distance. Even monkeys, it is known, can produce a number of less than 10 or 15 sounds to express fear, aggression, anger, love, etc., but these messages are not infinitely limited in number.

(b) Language makes use of clearly distinguishable discrete, separately identifiable symbols while animal communication systems are either continuous or non-discrete.

One can clearly distinguish between 'k', 'ck' and 'c' in the word 'ack', but one



Fig. 1.1 Language is discrete.

cannot identify different discrete symbols in the long humming sound that a bee produces or the 'caw-caw' sound of a crow.

(c) Animal communication systems are closed systems that permit of no change, modification or addition. A bee's dance or a crow's caw is today the same that it was 200 years ago. It is not so in the case of language. Language is changing, growing every day, and new words continue to be added to it in the course of time. Words like 'spatnik', 'laser', 'video', 'software' did not, for example, exist anywhere in English language 50 years ago. Language is thus open, not modifiable and extendable.

(d) Human language is far more structurally complex than animal communication. English (KF variety), for example, has 44 sounds that give 48 different groups to form thousands of words. These words can be arranged into millions of sets to form different sentences. Each sentence has its own internal structure. There is no such structural complexity in a bird's fluting or a monkey's cry.

(e) Human language is non-instinctive in the sense that every human child has to learn language from his elders or peers in society. The process of learning

play an important part in the acquisition of language. On the other hand, most animals that deal in directing or locating require the skill to walk. They are sometimes able to make directional moves. They do not learn any grammar. Their knowledge is achieved, instinct. It is not so in the case of human beings who have to learn a language.

(ii) Displacement. Animal communication, as in the case of communication systems in birds, dogs, monkeys, insects etc., is limited to its relation to their immediate time and place, here and now or near about. It does not contain any information about the past or the future or about the events taking place in the distant multidimensional set up. When your pet animal produces a sound, a cat meow or a dog bark, you understand the message as relating to your immediate present and place at the moment. It cannot tell you where it was ten days ago or where it would be at the evening or what it was up to in the next few minutes. Human language users are capable of producing messages pertaining to the present, past or future, near or distant places, i.e. in a multidimensional setting. One can say, for example:

I was 200 km north of New York but month but will be deep down in the south of America next week. I witnessed a flighty match in September but but will be an umpire in the one-day cricket match at the Mohali cricket ground.

This property is called displacement. It allows the users of language to talk about things and events which are not present in the immediate surroundings of the speaker. Animal communication lacks this property.

Even if some animals do display this property of displacement in their communication systems, the messages are extremely limited. A honeybee can, for example, convey the distance and the direction of the source of nectar, but it cannot tell another bee that it should first turn right for a distance of 15 metres and then fly across the left wall into a well in the rose garden on the east. The property of displacement in human language enables us to talk even of things, persons or events that are non-existent or imaginary or are likely to be found on other planets. We can talk of a superman, test-tube babies, artificial hearts, heroes of war, faeries, angels, demons, the spiderman, Santa Claus and the like. It is this property of displacement that allows humans to create, for example, literature, fiction, fantasy or the stream of consciousness stories.

1.26 Language is a Form of Social Behaviour

As already stated above, language has to be learnt. This learning is possible only in society. A human child learns to speak the language of the community or the group in which he or she is placed. A Chinese infant, if placed in an Indian family, will easily learn to speak an Indian language. He or she picks up the language of the social set-up in which he or she grows. Language is thus a form of social behaviour.

1.27 Language is a Symbol System

A symbol is a concrete event, object or mark that stands for something abstract, abstract. The cross (+), for example, is a symbol that stands for the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ, i.e., his suffering and death on the cross. It is also a symbol of a Christian. Similarly, words are symbols that stand for objects. The symbol *table* stands for an object consisting of a wooden-board supported by four or three legs. A speaker or a writer wants to communicate with another fellow-being, puts his message across in the form of symbols (in speech or writing). The receiver of the message, who shares a common code with the sender of the message, decodes the message sent in the form of symbols and interprets these to arrive at a certain meaning. Thus language is a symbol system, though different languages use different symbols.

1.28 Productivity

Language is creative and productive in the sense that a user of a language does not always produce only sentences that he has heard or learnt previously. On the basis of his 'knowledge' of the grammar and syntax of the language, he can always produce new sentences, write new poems or produce many other kinds of new literature. He can produce an infinite number of sentences as per the circumstances he is facing within the framework of the grammar of the language being used by him. This property of language is called **Productivity**.

1.29 Interchangeability

It is an important characteristic of human language that it permits a speaker to become a listener and vice versa without impairing the function of language i.e. communication. This property has been named **Interchangeability** by C. F. Hockett (*A Course in Modern Linguistics*). It can also be called **reversibility**, i.e. any speaker/sender of a linguistic signal can also be a listener/receiver.

1.3 WHY STUDY LANGUAGE?

Having outlined the various characteristics of language, one may like to ask why study or learn language at all? An answer to this question can only be derived from a consideration of the situation that would exist in *before* language came into existence. One can easily imagine that man must then have been a creature of the forest very much like anyone of the other animals, viz. horse, cow, tiger, chicken and dog. The entire human progress, in fact everything that distinguishes human from animals, depends on language only. Language is, today, a medium of science, science and technology, computers and cultural exchanges between social groups and the most powerful, convenient and permanent means of communication in the world. It is ubiquitous, present everywhere in all human activities, thoughts, dreams, prayers, meditations and relations. It is only through language that knowledge and culture are stored and passed on from generation to generation. Thus, all human civilization and knowledge are possible only through language.

SUMMARY

It is as difficult to define the term language as it is to define the term life. Just as life can be defined only in terms of certain characteristics (growth, reproduction, excretion, respiration, etc.), language can also be defined in terms of its characteristics. Various linguists have tried to define language in their own ways but one would like to list all the characteristics of language as contained in these definitions. Here are the various characteristics or properties of language:

1. Language is a means of communication.
2. Language is arbitrary.
3. Language is a system of systems.
4. Language is primarily vocal. Speech is primary; writing is secondary.
5. Language is human. It differs from animal communication in several ways:
 - (a) Humans convey and receive an infinite number of messages through space whereas animal communication system is extremely limited and undeveloped.
 - (b) Language makes use of clearly distinguishable, discrete, separately identifiable symbols while animal communication systems are often continuous and non-discrete.
 - (c) Animal communication systems are closed systems and permit no change whereas language is modifiable, extendable and open-ended.
 - (d) Human language is structurally more complex than animal communication system.
6. Language is a form of social behaviour.
7. Language is a symbol system.

Language is, today, an inseparable part of human society. Human civilization has been possible only through language. It is through language that humanity has come out of the stone age and has developed science, art and technology in a big way.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the various definitions of the term language?
2. List the various characteristics of language. Explain any two of these.
3. How does language differ from animal communication?
4. Write short notes on the following:
 - (a) Language is arbitrary.
 - (b) Language is a system of systems.
 - (c) Speech is primary, writing is secondary.
 - (d) Language is open-ended, modifiable and extendable depending on the needs of the people using it.

- (c) Language is a means of communication.
- (d) Language is species-specific and species-uniform.

5. Fill up the blanks:

- (a) There is _____ one-to-one correspondence between a word and the thing it stands for.
- (b) Human language is discrete, while animal communication is _____.
- (c) Speech is _____ but writing is _____.
- (d) Language is a system of systems. This property of language is also called _____.
- (e) Language does not automatically pass on from one generation to the other. It has to be _____ by practice.