

## HUL 242 : Introduction to Language Sciences:

### 4/1: Introduction to language

#### What is language?

- a. When you know language, you can use it to either speak or (sign) in order to communicate with other humans.
- b. An early definition of language came from Charles F Hockett (1960). He described 16 design features of language i.e. properties that distinguish human communication from primate/animal communication. These design features can be further classified based on the following 5 major properties:
  - i. Relating to the channel: Language is produced and understood by the **vocal-auditory** channel, it is **broadcast** and is **rapid fading**
  - ii. Pragmatic dimension: Language is **interchangeable** such that we are both receivers and senders, its users can give immediate **feedback**, and language is **specialized** for communication (and nothing else)
  - iii. Semantic dimension: Language refers to things and has **semanticity**, it is also **arbitrary**, and can refer to objects in remote time and space- hence it is also has the property of **displacement**. Language can be used to **lie** and also to talk about itself (**metalinguistic** property).
  - iv. Acquisition dimension: Children learn the language of their parents hence it is **learnable** but they also need to be taught this language via **cultural transmission** i.e. they have to be born into a society.
  - v. Dimension of language as a code: Language is **discrete** and can be broken down into individual units. It is also **productive** i.e. it possible to create infinite number of novel utterances. Finally, it has **duality of patterning** i.e. it consists of words and sounds.
- c. Hockett's features have **limitations** and are **outdated**. E.g. he does not take into consideration sign languages, which do not involve traditional modes of vocalizing/broadcast, but are nevertheless very much languages in their own right. In Martha's Vineyard (hereditary deafness) people would switch between both spoken and sign language in the same way as English/Hindi.
- d. As more research is done on animal communication, we find that some bird songs are learnt in the same way as language. E.g. chaffinches have a primitive song when young, but this becomes more complex as they learn from their parents. Similarly, primate studies have looked at whether chimps can learn sign language (Nim Chimpsky, documentary Project Nim), combine signs to form sentences (Kanzi). However, these systems are still not comparable to human

communication as they are not **productive** i.e. they cannot generate infinite sentences from a finite set of signs.

- e. Now, such 'design features' are replaced by the view of language as a more general cognitive ability, parallel with vision and hearing. Pinker (1994) argues for a more evolutionary approach to language, describing it as a 'complex design feature'. He states that natural selection is responsible for a design feature such as language to have gradually emerged from our nearest ancestors to present day humans (*Homo sapiens*).

## Main themes

### 1. How do we mean what we mean?

What are the units (forms) that make up language? What is the relationship between form and meaning in language?

One of the foundational ideas of language analysis is Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the **arbitrariness** of the sign. For example, the concept of a 'tree' has no direct relationship with the word *tree* or the German *Baum*. It has come to mean this concept because of convention. Thus, arbitrariness also explains why language has conventional, socially accepted meaning for particular words (It will not be so easy to rename a *tree* as a *wookie*).

Some exceptions to this are cases of phonetic **symbolism**: in some languages, words containing high vowels (like *i*), where the tongue is high and at the front of the mouth seem to indicate smallness/small things. In contrast, when the tongue is low and back (*a* and *o*), such words indicate larger things. This is not a deterministic rule but is instead a case of sound symbolism. (E.g. the diminutive marker *-i* in Hindi can make a noun smaller: *dibba-dibbi*, *kurta-kurti*)

### 2. Descriptive not Prescriptive Grammar

Grammar (not the kind one learns in school) can be seen as the "knowledge" that speakers have about the units and rules of language (Fromkin, pg 13). Therefore, as linguists, we study grammars that are models of the way speakers communicate in a particular language. They describe to the extent possible, this shared knowledge.

It is not true that some variety of language is better or more correct, or appropriate as compared to another. All languages are equally complex, logical and capable of conveying the required meaning. In linguistics, each of these varieties are objects of study hence the operative mode is 'descriptive' and not 'prescriptive'.

For example, David Crystal described texting, (wen ppl write lyk dis) as a fairly sophisticated use of language and abbreviation. In fact, one must know the language well in order to manipulate it

during texting (leaving letters out). Crystal claims that texting does not affect spellings/literacy contrary to popular fears and doesn't turn up in other contexts. It is also not new--in 19th century English abbreviations were not uncommon (rebuses, language games).

'Standard' varieties of language are nevertheless ones that one needs to learn in order to function in literate societies (e.g. appear for exams or job interviews).

### 3. Language Acquisition

Children learn language gradually, but by the age of five or six, they can produce a range of linguistic utterances, many of which are novel. By that time, children are not merely imitating the words or expressions of their parents, but have learnt the grammar of their language and are generating sentences on their own.

There appears to be a critical period for humans, i.e. a period upto the age of 5 years when language development takes place. Once this critical period has passed, language can be learnt, but it is much more difficult. Evidence for this comes from the 'wild/feral' children who have not been exposed to language at an early age and cannot use language normally. The acquisition of language by children is a field of study in its own right.

### 4. Modular approach to the study of language

In linguistics, we approach the analysis of language in a modular fashion. In this course, we will more or less follow the same order to analyze the various components of language. Following are the major components:

- Phonetics and Phonology : study of sounds and sound systems (of a language)
- Morphology and the Lexicon: study of word formation and the knowledge of words
- Syntax: study of combining words into phrases, and phrases into sentences
- Semantics: study of meaning
- Discourse and Pragmatics: how context contributes to meaning

### References

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