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**Linguistics: Lectures for First Year – LMD Students**

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**Language and Linguistics**

**I. Language**

**Introduction**

Language is relevant to many disciplines and activities: education, religion, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, literature, culture, politics, economics, science, etc. Language has also a bearing on our daily life. It is a common belief that language reflects human behaviour. Lyons states that language is behaviour. Since language is a very complex phenomenon, and has multifarious aspects, any definit

ion of it will be incomplete as this definition will inevitably depend on the angle from which language is looked at.

**1. The origin of language**

Anthropologists believe that if we knew when language first appeared, we would know when Man came into existence. They think that Man came into existence around one or two million years ago; however, the first writings go back to the Sumerians of 4000 B.C. Still, these figures provide no significant information as to the actual origin of Man and hence language. In this regard, the linguist Robins states:

***Language as a human faculty is immeasurably older than the earliest attested languages (some 4000 years old), and writing is, compared with speech, very recent, the product of settled and developed civilization.***

In other words, the spoken form of language is older than the written form, for the latter has only recently been introduced by great civilizations. Furthermore, there are many languages which are still unwritten even nowadays.

In modern linguistics, linguists are interested in the origin of language; it is strongly believed that knowing the origin of language can help to understand the nature of human beings, and language acquisition, as language is the most important feature which distinguishes Man from animal.

**1.1. The Divine Origin of Language**

It is believed by different religions that language was created by God. According to many religious beliefs and traditions all over the world, language has a divine origin. For Moslems, Allah provided Adam with the authority to name things. In the Quran, it says: “God taught Adam all names”. For the Hindus, the human faculty of speech is a gift from a female God, Sarasvati, Brahma’s wife, the creator of the universe.

**1.2. Language Adapted from the Cries of Nature**

In the mid eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau thought that language stemmed from emotional cries pain, anger, joy, etc. He said that Man first used gestures and cries, but as both of these had no efficacy in communication, Man adapted the cries of nature to form words.

**1.3. The Rationalist View of Language Origin**

The German philosopher Johann Herder believed that Man was born with a language and a faculty of thought, and that language was not invented by Man. His arguments are remarkably similar to those modern linguists like Chomsky who advocate that children acquire their native language without being taught any rules. Herder believes that language faculty is innate, and that language is part of Man: it is neither given to him nor invented by him.

**2. Some Definitions of Language**

According to Sapir:” Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols”. This definition suffers from several defects. However we broadly we construe the terms ‘idea’, ‘emotion’ and ‘desire’, it seems clear that there is much that is communicated by language which is not covered by any of them; and ‘idea’ in particular is inherently imprecise. On the other hand, there are many systems of voluntarily produced symbols that we only count as language in what we feel to be an extended or metaphorical sense of the word language. For example, what is now probably referred to by means of the expression ‘body language’- which makes use of gestures, postures, eye-gaze, etc.

Bloch and Trager wrote in their Outline of Linguistic Analysis:” A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates”. What is striking about this definition, in contrast with Sapir’s, is that it makes no appeal, except indirectly and by implication, to the communicative function of language. Instead, it puts emphasis upon its social function; and, in doing so, it takes a rather narrow view of the role that language plays in society. The Bloch and Trager definition differs from Sapir’s in that it brings in the property of arbitrariness and explicitly restricts language to spoken language.

In his Essay on Language, Hall tells us that language is “the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols”. Among the points to notice here are, first of all, the fact that both communication and interaction are introduced into the definition and, second, that the term ‘oral-auditory’ can be taken to be roughly equivalent to ‘vocal’, differing from it only in that ‘oral-auditory’ makes reference to the hearer as well as to the speaker (i.e. to the receiver as well as the sender of the vocal signals that we identify as language-utterances).

**3. Properties of Human Language**

Many philosophers think that language is the dividing line between Man and animals. For instance, Descartes states that it is very significant that human beings, however dull or stupid, can speak a language whereas animals, no matter how intelligent or well-bred they are, can’t do so. This proves that animals have less reason than Man do or no reason at all.

***Vocal –auditory channel***: human language uses vocal signals via the vocal-auditory channel. The speaker uses a vocal tract (containing most of the speech organs) to produce speech sounds, and the hearer employs an auditory apparatus (the sense of hearing) to receive and process the speech sounds.

***Arbitrariness***: Human language is arbitrary in the sense that there is no natural relation between objects in the real world and the names that are attributed to them.

**Discreteness**: This feature involves the use of a particular signal for a specific number of situations. For instance, if we consider the two words sit and set, we notice that they are different in spoken and written forms. We may replace the vowels /i/ and/e/ by an intermediate vowel in the same environment, but the result will be either a wrong pronunciation of sit or set or an impossible word.

***Displacement***: It is the act of referring to objects or events that are remote in time and space. In contrast to other animals, humans have a sense of the past and the future. A gorilla, for example, cannot tell his fellows about his parents, his adventures in the jungle, or his 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.

***Productivity***: Human language allows new signals to be produced. Productivity makes it possible to create and understand new forms which have not been produced or heard before, which implies that human language is unpredictable, spontaneous and unbounded.

***Duality:*** Human language is associated with two levels, a physical level and an interpretive level. For instance, the orthographic symbols a,c,t, taken individually, represent sounds, but when combined as in act, cat, they form words with different meanings. Duality, then, implies that the lexicon of language is rule-governed and structural.

***Learnability***: Human language is learnable and so is animal language; animals can learn only their own systems of communication whereas humans can learn their own and other species’ systems. In other words, human beings can learn more codes other than theirs.

**4. Knowledge of Language**

Knowledge of language means the ability to articulate strings of speech which have certain meanings, and understand other such strings produced by the users of the same language. You can also distinguish the sounds of your native language from those of a foreign language.

Language is a system which establishes a relation between sounds and meanings. For instance, if you listen to a Chinese radio, and you do not know the language, then the speech sounds you hear will be meaningless and unrecognizable to you. This is due to the fact that the relationship between speech sounds and the meanings they convey is essentially arbitrary. Thus, knowing a language implies knowing its sounds, its sound combinations and their meanings. However, you cannot learn a language just by memorizing its vocabulary; if you try to do so, you will not be able to make a single phrase or sentence, nor understand the native speaker of that language. This is because knowledge of language involves the ability (1) to arrange the speech sounds into words, and (2) to put words together to form phrases and phrases to form sentences. Moreover, it entails the ability to produce and understand sentences never spoken or heard before.

Language, therefore, is a rule-governed system which is made up of sounds, words and sentences. The sound system of a language is referred to as phonology, the rules of sentence-formation are referred to as syntax, and the system of meaning is called semantics.

**4.1. The Importance of Studying Language**

The task of the linguist is mainly to study natural languages and to investigate systematically whether they share some properties that other systems lack. His main task is not to describe the English language as an end in itself, nor to improve language teaching. Rather, his major task is to understand the major principles on which all languages are built. The linguist attempts to answer questions like: What are the features of human language? What are the differences between languages? How can we describe and classify them?

Language study is ultimately important because it contributes to the understanding of human behaviour in general.

**4.2. Spoken and Written Language**

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| --- | --- |
| **Spoken language** | **Written language** |
| - Made up of sounds  - Make use of intonation, stress, pitch  - Produced effortlessly  - Perceived by the ear  - Addressee present  - Spontaneous | - Made up of letters  - Make use of punctuation  - Produced with efforts  - Perceived by the eye  - Addressee absent  - Not spontaneous |

**II. Linguistics**

**Introduction**

Linguistics is referred to as the science of language. It is concerned with the study of human language in all its aspects and manifestation. Its scientificity is unquestionable since it relies on the canons of the scientific method, namely objectivity, exhaustiveness, consistency and economy. It is different from traditional grammar mainly because it takes spoken language to be its primary subject matter.

**1. Definition of linguistics**

**Linguistics has two major goals:**

1. Bringing our unconscious knowledge of language to the level of consciousness by familiarizing us with this linguistic knowledge.

2. Studying how the different units of language are combined and how they operate in human brain.

In general, linguistics is defined as **the scientific study of language**. Such a definition touches on the relationship between linguistics and other disciplines, namely psychology, sociology and philosophy, because language is linked to the study of the brain, society, thought, culture and knowledge of the world.

Linguistics deals with language as one of the most intricate and important traits of Man. It studies language as a universal part of human behaviour and human faculties. Linguistics is not concerned with a specific language as its subject matter, but with human language in general. In other words, linguistics as a new science, deals with all the languages of the world, estimated at about 3000; consequently, any language can be the subject matter of linguistics.

It is not possible for a linguist to know about, let alone speak, all human languages. A linguist, then, should be distinguished from a polyglot, for he does not necessarily have to master many foreign languages; however, it is preferable that a linguist know about a number of languages. ***David Crystal states that (…) it is not a question of ‘speaking’ a language which makes a man a linguist, but of being able to ‘speak about’ a language, of knowing about the principles on which languages can be said to work, and about the kinds of difference which exist between one language and another.***

Linguistics is guided by the three canons of science:

**1) *Exhaustiveness****:* it strives for thorough-goingness in the examination of relevant materials

**2) *Consistency***: that is, there should be no contradiction between different parts of the total statement

**3) *Economy***: other things being equal, a shorter statement or analysis is to be preferred to one that is longer or more complex.

**2. The Difference between Traditional Grammar and Modern Linguistics**

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| --- | --- |
| **Traditional grammar** | **Modern linguistics** |
| 1/ written language as primary  2/ more emphasis on grammar  3/ prescriptive  4/ Force languages into a Latin-based framework | 1/ spoken language as primary  2/ deals with all aspects of language: sounds, structure and meaning.  3/ descriptive  4/ don’t judge one language by standards of another. |

**3. Primacy of Synchronic Linguistics**

**The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure**, the pioneer of modern linguistics, introduced the ***dichotomy diachronic/synchronic*** linguistics.

*Diachronic linguistics* is the study of language through history while *synchronic linguistics* means the study of language as it is used at a given point in time by its speakers. The first type of study can be called historical ( hence the phrase “historical linguistics”) and the second type descriptive ( hence the phrase “descriptive linguistics”).

*Diachronic linguistics* is historical in the sense that it deals with the historical evolution of particular languages. For instance, a diachronic study of English would examine the development of Old English into Middle English and then into Modern English; a diachronic study of Arabic would be concerned with its evolution from pre-Islamic period to the present day.

*Synchronic linguistics* looks at specific state of a language at a given time. It can examine a language that is spoken today as well as an old language. A linguist can investigate a language that is no longer used if he has sufficient recorded data on which to rely.

It was Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), who first stressed the importance of synchronic linguistics, which is more complete and precise than diachronic linguistics. The synchronic study of language was undertaken in the first half of the twentieth century as a reaction against the nineteenth-century “comparative philology”. Modern linguistics is characterized by the primacy of the synchronic description of language.

**4. Components of Linguistics**

The grammar of language can be divided into five major components, each of which deals with a particular aspect of language.

***Phonetics*** is mainly concerned with speech sounds as physical entities regardless of their functions in language. It is essentially descriptive and general in the sense that it describes the features of all human sounds whichever language they belong to.

***Phonology*** deals with the speech sounds of particular languages and the way they are distributed, with reference to their role in communication.

***Morphology*** is concerned with the study of the structure, forms and classes of words; it looks at the way words are formed and the way their parts combine to yield different forms.

***Syntax*** studies the way words are combined to form sentences. Syntax is considered these days as the core of linguistics, especially within the generative grammar framework. The syntactician explains the grammatical relationship between words in sentences and the way sentences are used by speakers.

***Semantics*** deals with word and sentence meaning; it examines the way words are related to objects and concepts, and the meaning of different sentences.

**5. Subfields of linguistics**

As linguistics deals with all aspects of language, it includes many branches, each of which aims to focus on a special form of language. Like other sciences, linguistics is a broad subject which must be divided into subfields. Language then can be studied from different angles or perspectives. So as not to mix these perspectives, a number of distinctions or dichotomies have been established.

The first dichotomy distinguishes between ***general and descriptive linguistics***. General linguistics is concerned with all the components of language in general (phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics) and also includes historical and comparative studies, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, etc. It provides linguistic concepts, models and methods useful for the description of language. Descriptive linguistics deals with the description of particular language data using the principles and techniques of general linguistics.

The second division has to do with ***theoretical and applied linguistics***. Theoretical linguistics studies language as an end in itself with the aim of devising a theory that can describe and account for the rules which govern the structure of language. Applied linguistics deals with the way linguistic concepts, methods and research findings can be applied to a wide range of specific tasks such as language teaching, language acquisition and artificial intelligence.

The third distinction to be drawn is that between ***microlinguistics and macrolinguistics***. Microlinguistics is concerned with the aspects of language structure, i.e, with the direct analysis of, for instance, the phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics of language without regard to extralinguistic factors, namely the sociocultural, philosophical, historical and psychological factors that are related to language behaviour. Macrolinguistics investigates these latter features of language which are involved in all kinds of human communication. It contains microlinguistics in the sense that it deals with phonology, syntax and semantics; in addition, it examines the paralinguistic aspects of cultural behaviour. Many interdisciplinary fields can be included within macrolinguistics; psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, stylistics and computational linguistics.

All these branches of linguistics are interrelated in one way or another. Each serves a specific purpose, by looking at language from a particular point of view, and each depends directly or indirectly on the other.

**6. Branches of Linguistics**

**6.1. Phonetics**

Phonetics is a branch of linguistics that studies the material aspects of speech sounds. What is meant by "material aspect"? And what other features exist which characterize sounds? Well, material aspects of sounds are those aspects that make for the physical production, transportation and comprehension of the sound.

It is stated above that there are three different physical aspects of a sound. These are the articulatory aspect of the speaker, the acoustic aspect of the channel, and the auditory aspect of the hearer.

• Articulatory phonetics researches where and how sounds are originated and thus carries out physiological studies of the respiratory tract, trying to locate precisely at which location and in which manner a sound is produced.

• Acoustic phonetics examines the length, frequency and pitch of sounds. Special instruments are required to measure and analyse the sounds while they travel via the channel.

• Auditory phonetics studies what happens inside the ear and brain when sounds are finally received. It also interested in our ability to identify and differentiate sounds.

**Articulatory phonetics – consonants**

Any speech sound is caused by a stream of air that, originating in our vocal apparatus, escapes our mouth or nose. The various sounds all differ according to the voicing, location and manner of their production. A minor change of any of these three factors may alter a sound significantly. For example, if a stream of air leaves the vocal tract unhindered, the result is a vowel. If the stream of air is obstructed in any way the result is a consonant. Although the procedure is very complex, it is possible to determine the exact voicing, location and manner of articulation of all sounds of a language**.**

**VOICING**

Try to utter two long consonants, first [z], then [s], continually: "zzzzzzzzsssssssssszzzzzzz". Hold your fingertip to your larynx (Adam's apple) and try to notice what happens. You will feel a vibration. This is caused by a stream of air that is being pressed through a narrow aperture, called glottis, between the vocal cords. It is the pressure of the air on the walls of the glottis that causes the vibration of the cords. We are able to produce two different sets of sounds, which are otherwise identical: voiced and voiceless sounds, by this small change of the glottis. There are many consonants which are differentiated in this way, like [f]—[v], [t]— [d], or [g]—[k].

**MANNER OF ARTICULATION**

**Plosives and continuants**: Another fundamental distinction of consonants is made between so-called plosives and continuants. Plosives are consonants that are brought about by an explosive release of air from the mouth, e.g. [t]. They are also called stops, or oral stops. If the air is released through the nose, we call the resulting consonant is a nasal plosive, as in [m] or [n], which is also called nasal stop since the mouth is kept closed for the most part. If the air continues to be released after the articulation of the consonant, the sound is a continuant. If we let out air continuously through a space behind the upper teeth, the so-called alveolar ridge., we produce a type of continuant sound called fricative, e.g., [f]. Affricates are produced by a plosive and a fricative continuant following immediately thereafter, as in [tS], e.g., in the word "chair". Fricatives and affricates with a hissing sound, as [z] in "zip", or [Z] in "measure" are also called sibilants. Oral stops, i.e. nonnasal plosives, and fricative and affricative continuants all have in common that the air is not let out through the nose; consonants produced in this way are called obstruents. If air is released also through the nose, these consonants are called sonorants. The sounds [l] and [r] are called liquids.

**Aspiration**: A further manner of articulating a sound is by either aspirating or not aspirating the sound. Try to pronounce these: [pit]—[spit]. You will notice that while saying the word ‘pit’, a stream of air evades your mouth, whereas when saying ‘spit’, your glottis starts to vibrate immediately after the pronunciation of [sp]. Hence, we may call the [p] aspirated when saying ‘pit, while it is unaspirated when saying ‘spit’. This distinction results from the glottis remaining open after certain occasions of a sound, namely in the case of aspirated ones.

**PLACE OF ARTICULATION**

Consonants are distinguished also according to the location of their production, that is, after the various organs of the vocal tract. • Labials are consonants that are articulated by use of the lips. Some of these are created by bringing the lips together, like [m]. These are called bilabials. Other consonants are brought about by bringing the bottom lip to the upper teeth. These are called labiodentals, e.g., [f]. • Alveolars. These are articulated by raising the tip of the tongue to the alveolar ridge, like [d].

Velars. If you raise the back of your tongue to the soft velum, velars are produced. An example is [g].

• Interdentals are the sounds at the beginning of "thin" and "then", in IPA: [T] and [D]. In order to articulate these, you have to press the tongue between the teeth. Again you can see that the difference is voicing.

• Palatals (or Alveopalatals) as in the middle of the word "measure" are produced by the contact of the front part of the tongue with the hard palate just behind the alveolar ridge.

With the help of this detailed information we can now refer to every consonant by its location and manner of articulation; [f], for example, is a voiceless, labiodental fricative.