



## **Language**

**Prof. Israa Burhanuddin Abdurrahman (PhD)**

**israaburhan@tu.edu.iq**

**Tikrit University**

**College of Education for Women**

**Department of English**

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# Language

Before answering the question 'What is language?', we should know that there is both a 'functional side' to language, i.e., the jobs language does in human society and there is a 'formal side', i.e., the way language is structured.

## Language: The Functional Side

Language is a part of culture. It is part of human behaviour. Language is an acquired habit of systematic vocal activity representing meanings coming from human experiences, i.e., it is an acquired vocal system for communicating meaning. In other words, language is said to be an oral controlled system used for communication by a single society. This tells us that:

1. Language operates in a regular and systematic fashion.
2. Language is basically oral and that the oral symbols represent meaning as they are related to real life situation and experiences.
3. Language is a controlled system.
4. Language has a social function, and that without it society would probably not exist.
5. Language is the most fundamental means of human communication. It is the primary object of the study of linguistics. It is the most frequently used and the most highly developed form human communication.

## A Definition of Language from Different View Points

1. **Anthropologists** regard language as a form of cultural behaviour. The American anthropologist linguist Edward Sapir (1884-1939), for instance, defines language as "a purely human and non-instinctive method of

communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntary produced symbols." This implies that:

- a) Language is a purely human activity, although some animals have communication system which have certain analogies to human language.
  - b) All human beings use language to interact with other members of the same speech community.
  - c) Language is not only used as an instrument of communication, but also as a means of individual expression.
  - d) Language is not instinctive. It has to be learnt as a system of arbitrary symbols which are primarily vocal produced by the organs of speech but, secondary by other systems such as writing.
2. **Sociolinguists** define language as an interaction between members of social group.
  3. **Students** of literature view language as an artistic medium.
  4. **Philosophers** think that language is a means of interpreting human experience.
  5. **Teachers** say that language is a set of skills.

### **Language as an Act of Communication**

Language as an act of communication is basically the transmission of information of some kind – a 'message' from a source to a receiver (both are human and the message is transmitted either vocally through the air or graphically by marks on a surface usually a paper). There are other forms of communication (not necessarily human) such as the instinctive voices which animals of a given species use to communicate with each other. This is communication, but not language; since language is essentially a human phenomenon. There are other

systems or methods of communication connected with human beings which linguists do not consider as language. They are simply other possibilities of human communication. For example, some secret societies have a system of communication by touch or with their mouths or other parts of their faces or any other senses (only the visual and vocal/auditory senses are frequently used). The use of the senses of taste, smell and touch are restricted as far as human communication is concerned.

- *Note (1): The science that deals with the scientific study of the properties of signaling systems whether natural or artificial is known as 'semiotics'. In recent years, the study of semiotics has come to be applied to the analysis of patterned human communication in all its sensory modes, I.e., hearing, sight, taste, touch and smell and in all contexts (e.g., music, film, dance, politics, etc., as well as language). The extension of the subject of the analysis of animal systems of communication is known as 'Zoo semiotics'. Further, semiotics investigates the structure of all possible sign systems and the roles these systems play in the way we create and perceive meanings in socio-cultural behaviour.*
- *Note (2): Examples of other human systems and facial expressions of communication other than language are 'body language', (e.g., gestures), 'sign language', (e.g., railway signals and traffic lights). Others are the languages of ants, bees, and birds.*
- *Note (3): Esperanto is a language based on pre-existing natural languages which was invented in the late 19th C. for the purpose of international communication.*

### **Language as an Oral Activity**

The visual system is well-established in human beings. In addition, all the facial expressions and bodily gestures, hand signals, winks, raised eyebrows and so on

communicate a great deal of information. Despite its importance, the visual system of communication in humans does not have by any means the same structure, as the vocal-there is nothing really like grammar, for instance. Therefore, linguists do not call it language. They restrict the term 'language' to a vocal system of human communication. Language is basically oral. The message is transmitted vocally through the air from the speaker to the listener. The spoken language is alive, while the written is a fossil. The spoken language always changes by introducing new terms to it while the written language is something artificial.

### **Language as a Controlled Act of Communication**

Language should be controlled by the brain to give sense. Our speech must be controlled. We must think before we speak and our language should be based on rules that govern our speech telling us what is right and what is wrong. Besides, we cannot breathe, snore or sneeze at our will, but we can control our language. We can speak or not at our will or we can use certain words at any time we like. There is a difference between information and communication. For example, audible vocal noises such as a sneeze or a snore do not communicate a message in the same sense as when we speak words or sentences. A sneeze, for example, may inform us that there is a person who has a cold. Words, on the other hand, are not tied down to our bodily state. Thus, uncontrolled vocal noises lacking any clear internal structure or conventional meaning are not part of language.

Language is a system of systems. It has both a phonological system and a grammatical system, each with its proper units and rules of acceptable combination and order. Language is systematic because it can be described in terms of a limited number of units that can combine only in a limited number of ways.