

PAPER 6 (DESCRIPTIVE LINGUISTICS)

What is language? What are its special features? OR How does human language differ from other systems of communication?

Language is a divine gift to mankind. It is that very thing which differentiates him from other creatures of the world. It helps him in shaping his ideas, feelings, and emotions and communicating them to others. It is a source of delight and inspiration. So it is "the faculty of speech, which all human beings hold in common."

Language is a very complex phenomenon. It is infinitely extendible. So any attempt to define it seems to be futile. Persons, engaged in different professions, have tried to define it, but their definitions are inadequate as they do not contain all elements that are found in language. Linguists, psychologists, and philosophers all have their own concepts of language, but here the discussion is chiefly concerned with the linguist's concepts. Definitions given by some of the eminent linguists are given below:

"Language is primarily human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols."

SAPIR, LANGUAGE 1921.

"Language is human...a verbal systematic symbolism...a means of transmitting information...a form of social behavior...(with a) high degree of convention."

J. WHATMOUGH, LANGUAGE.

"A language is a symbol system, based on pure and arbitrary convention...infinitely extendible and modifiable according to the changing needs and conditions of the speakers."

R. H. ROBINS, GENERAL LINGUISTICS.

From the given descriptions, it is apparent that none of them is sufficient to describe all the characteristics of language. Hockett, too, suggests seven characteristics of language. According to him, language has duality of structure, cultural transmission, arbitrariness, productivity, interchangeability, displacement and specialization. But even Hockett fails to observe some important characteristics that are found in the above discussed definitions. Thus we have the following special characteristics of any human language:

A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION: Language is primarily a means of communicating ideas, feelings, and emotions. But it is certainly not the only means which human beings use. Beside it, they use gestures (distinctive gestures, semiotic gestures and paralinguistic gestures) in communication. The signals used to control traffic, mores code used to transmit telegraphic messages are also the system of communication. But they are not as much powerful as language or talking face to face. It is also used for ceremonial and ritualistic purposes. Prayers to God are also offered through it. Language is abundantly used for self-expression even in literature, particularly in poetry.

ARBITRARY: Language is entirely arbitrary, as there is no inherent or logical relation between the words and the objects the words represent. Due to this feature

(arbitrariness of language) it is very difficult to give any reason why the four footed small pet animal, the best friend of man is called 'dog' in English, 'kutta' in Hindi, 'kukkur' in Sanskrit, 'nayi' in Kannada, 'chien' in French, 'hund' in German and so on. The use of such different words like 'dog', 'kutta', 'nayi', 'chien', and 'hund', which stand for one and the same creature is merely an accident of linguistic history.

If arbitrariness were not a property of language, and if there were an important connection between the sounds and the meanings expressed by them, there would have been no question of different languages, rather than one language in the world.

Onomatopoeia, the use of words that imitate sounds, seems to invalidate the concept of arbitrariness of language. But onomatopoeic words are a few in English. These onomatopoeic words are 'hum', 'buzz', 'cow', 'giggle', etc. But even the onomatopoeic words of different languages differ in sounds. For example, 'cow' in English is 'croasser' in French and 'giggle' in English is 'kichern' in German. Sometimes onomatopoeic words that represent the same thing also echo the same; 'meow' in English and 'miaou' in French, are for instance.

NON-INSTINCTIVE, CONVENTIONAL: Language does not grow in a day. It is a set of conventions that develop in the society in which people live. Each generation learns this set from its predecessors. Like all other human institutions, it changes and dies if the last speaker of that language dies. Being a set of conventions, it can only be learnt and transmitted through convention. It cannot be enjoyed as an inherent quality. This non-instinctiveness of language is partly responsible for the change in language. Each generation learns language from its ancestors. During the course of learning, some changes occur. These changes are observed after a long period. Charles Hockett, an eminent linguist, observes that the system of conventions particular to each language is culturally transmitted, i.e. acquired through heredity.

SYMBOLIC: The symbolism of language is a necessary consequence of arbitrariness. Symbol is something that serves as a substitute and language is a system of arbitrary symbols. There are sounds and words as symbols for concepts, ideas, objects, notions, etc. Each word of a language is a symbol. The word 'cat', for example, is a sequence of the sounds /k// /t/, which stands for the idea or a class of four legged small animals. Here the sequence of sound forms the concrete object, the meaning of the word. The concept of cat is the abstraction for which it stands.

SYSTEMATIC: Besides a collection of symbols, language is a symbolic system. Due to its systematicity, language has proved to be the most powerful of all communicating tools.

Language is, indeed, a system of systems, at least two of which are basic:
(a) a system of organizing sounds into words, and
(b) a system of organizing words into sentences.

The speakers of a given language use only certain sounds and use them only in certain combinations. Thus although the sounds /b/ and /z/ occur in English, there is no word in English that begins with /bz/. Again the words in a language, which are formed by the systematic sound combinations, can occur in sentences only in certain specified orders. "The police caught the thief" is an English sentence, but "Thief the police caught the." is

not an English sentence though the constituent words are the same. Thus all languages have the dual systems of sound and meaning. The linguist is chiefly concerned with the relationship between these two sub-systems.

Charles Hockett refers to this property of language as "duality of structure". By 'duality' he means the double level structure of language, namely, the arrangement of sounds into words and the arrangement of words into sentences.

VOCAL: Language is an organization of sounds, of vocal symbols-the sounds produced by the use of articulatory organs, to convey some meaningful message. It also suggests that speech is prior to writing. Writing is in fact a way of recording speech. Still there are many societies in the world which use languages in speech, but they have not invented their alphabet. As a consequence they do not know how to write.

SOCIAL BEHAVIOR: Language, as has been described earlier, is a conventional communicative system used by humans for communication in a society or community. Language in this sense is a possession of a social group, an indispensable set of rules which permits its members to relate to each other. It is a social institution and so it exists in society. It is a means of nourishing and developing culture and establishing human relations. It is not inherited rather it is acquired by man in society. If it is not used in the society, it dies.

HUMAN: Human beings are the only species on the earth that are endowed with the power of speech. Animals, too, communicate, but their system of communication cannot be regarded as language. They cannot acquire human language, as they do not have the type of brain and articulatory organs human beings have. Human language is a system of systems. It is so complex, infinitely extendible and modifiable that no animals can use it. Then arises a question in what respect human language differs from the communicative system of animals.

Most animals have inter and intra-species communication systems. They cry, hoot, bleat, dance, and coo and these noises function for the animals as language for humans. They make instinctive noises which are inherited by their offspring. Animals, as some scholars who studied or study animal communicative systems believe, have both discrete and indiscrete systems of communication. Non-discrete in the case of bees that communicate through a dance, and discrete in the case of monkey that communicates through a bark, lip smacking and sounds. According to the scholars, monkeys and other animals use certain symbols that do not undergo any change. But human languages contain all the features being discussed in the question.

PRODUCTIVITY: Language provides opportunities to send the message that has never been sent before and to understand novel messages. It also suggests that number of sentences in language is limitless. Any speaker can construct a sentence that has never been constructed before. It is this feature of language that is referred to as productivity or creativity of language.

A gibbon call system lacks productivity, for gibbons draw all their calls from a fixed repertoire which is rapidly spent and which disallows any possibility of novelty. Likewise the communicative systems of all animals are non-productive.

INTERCHANGEABILITY: This feature suggests that humans can be both producers and receivers of messages. This feature is present in the communicative systems of gibbons and bees also, but it is not found in most animals.

DISPLACEMENT: Language has the power of displacement either in space or time. Language can be used to refer to real or imagined matters in the past, present or future. It can even be used to talk about language itself. A gibbon's food call results from contact with food and is made in the presence of food. But it never talks about what it ate last year. Of course bees communicate the fact that they have found nectar, but they must do immediately on returning to their hive. A man dreams of his future but an animal never dreams.

SPECIALIZATION: This feature suggests that communicating organs should not have a total physical involvement in the act of communication. They should not have to stop what they are doing to make a response, nor should the response be totally determined by the stimulus. Humans can talk while engaged in activities totally unrelated to the subjects under discussion. They can talk about strenuous pursuits without making any kind of abnormal effort. A bee, in the bee-dance, is completely involved physically in the communication process.

OPEN ENDED, EXTENDIBLE AND MODIFIABLE: Animals' communication systems are closed systems because no novel items can be added to them. Thus the vervet monkeys have a limited number of signals and they cannot increase these signals. As opposed to this, human language is open-ended, that is to say new items can be added to the set of symbolic units. So we can always add new words to the existing vocabulary.

Animals' communicative systems are not modifiable. A bee's dance today is what it was several hundred years ago. Human languages, on the other hand, undergo modifications. Thus the systems of language with which 'Chaucer' was familiar is not exactly the system found in 'Dylan Thomas'.

Animals' communicative system cannot be extended to incorporate new experience. A bee can communicate the distance of the source of nectar from the hive, but it cannot tell another bee how hungry it was. Human languages change to meet the new requirements of language community.

STRUCTURALLY COMPLEX: An equally crucial difference between human language and animal communication lies in the fact that the signals in the former have a great structural complexity. There is very little internal structure either to the bee's dance or to the monkey's cry. As pointed out earlier, a human language consists of sentences which display complexity of structure at least of two levels. The variety of English we are familiar with uses words built from sounds which come from inventory of forty four sound units. These sounds can occur only in clearly specifiable combinations. Again, the words in the language cannot occur in any random order. There is a complex grammatical structure to English or to any other language. Such structural complexity is not found in any animal communication system.