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## 1. Learning outcomes

After studying this module, you shall be able to:

- Define what is “Language”
- Understand the origin of language.
- Differentiate between human and animal language.
- Know the structure of language.

## 2. Introduction

Language is a system of symbols with an agreed upon meaning that is used by a group of people. Language is a means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized sounds and signs, thus, being the spoken and written language. It is a human tendency to communicate with others and this could underlie the emergence of language. Montessori said, “To talk is in the nature of man.” Humans needed language in order to communicate, and soon, the powers that come with language were revealed. This module will help you understand about language structure and its evolution.

## 3. DEFINING LANGUAGE

Language is a system of symbols that are used to communicate ideas among two or more individuals. Language uses both mental and external representations. Thus it is a system for combining symbols such as words, letters by which numerous meaningful statements can be made for the purpose of communication with others. In conversation, the speaker and listener exchange mental and intellectual thoughts through spoken rather than written symbols. It further helps us in putting ones ideas across each other through our own mental activity. In other words, language is a very important part of how people think.

The important function of language is to use symbols to convey meaning. Humans, use words, or pattern of sound, to refer to objects, events, beliefs, desires, feelings and intentions. For example, your friend tells you that she is happy today; this holds meaning to you as you can interpret it and this explains about her emotional state also. But on the other hand if she whistles a tune, her behaviour may say something about her emotional state, but it is less meaningful. Unlike speech, whistling is not specialized to convey clear meaning.

Clark & Clark in 1977 explained that languages share four elementary properties. They observed that children can learn them, adults can speak and understand them easily, they capture the ideas and information that people generally communicate, and this can further enable communication among groups of people in a social and cultural context.

Language is considered to be the most refined and sophisticated human ability. Therefore this is the reason for language to be possibly associated as one of the most difficult areas for understanding, despite the fact that there are numerous methods available to research language. In short, humans live in a world which is affected by language.

## 4. ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE

It has been the topic of scholarly discussion to understand the question: How did language begin? The answer to this is still unknown and perhaps will never be, but the question is too provoking to ignore. One problem that makes the topic difficult to study is the lack of direct evidence. Linguists studied the relationships among the written records of ancient languages about 5,000 years ago and reconstructed what they believed early languages were like up to about 10,000 years ago (Atchison, 1996).

A long-debated idea is that language developed from gestures. However, it appears that language and gestures may well have evolved together (Atchison, 1996). When our ancestors first began to communicate their ideas and thoughts to other individuals, they required a way through which they could specify objects and further relate to those objects. It is well-known that gestures are often synchronized in time with oral statements to convey meaning. Therefore it was this gestural development that led to specialized way for communication of information.

Another viewpoint in the origin of language evolved as a consequence of the large brain of humans (Gould & Lewontin, 1979). Language might be an example of taking existing biological structure and adapting it for a new purpose. The concern which arises with this viewpoint is that language is a very complex function. It has been said that the possible alternative would be that language and the large brain must have emerged more or less simultaneously (Deacon, 1977).

### *How it is different from animals?*

Pioneer work in this area was done by von Frisch (1950), where he assessed the communication process in the animals. Therefore humans are not unique in using communication or exchange information between sender and receiver. Animals also use coded forms of signals which are understood by both. For example, the waggle dance of the honeybee directs other members of the hive to distant sources of nectar. The precise nature of the dance communicates the direction and distance from the hive, which has been discovered by the dancing bee. Other examples including these communications are seen among monkeys where they give alarm calls, and even the complex signaling of the dolphins and whales (Griffin, 1984). All these explain the nature of signaling which further leads to communication of information in the other primates.

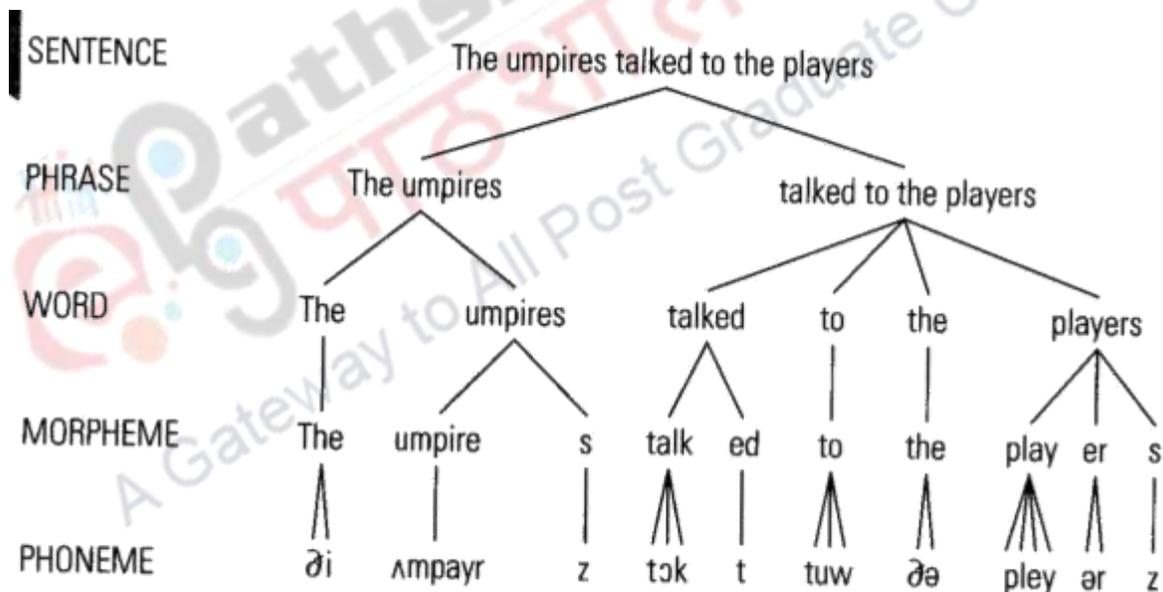
There are at least three ways in which communication differs with that of other primates. First difference between animal communication and human language is that animals do not use symbols to represent objects. For example, the dance of a honeybee conveys information about the environment after the bee returns to the hive. The communication to other bees is about the location of the nectar source. The honeybee dance cannot be termed as symbolic in nature, because it is linked directly to the situation. It is not a separate entity that the bee is using to communicate later, when they are returning or preparing to go to a food source. The symbols involved do not simply express emotions; rather, they describe or designate objects, events or actions. On the other hand for human beings, words are detached from their referents, and we use them to recall events from the past or to imagine events that have never ever happened. Also, humans use purely arbitrary symbols that have no relation to the concept being communicated.

Another major difference is that most animal communication does not involve a theory of mind (Seyfarth & Cheney, 2003). When a human being speaks, the listener learns things about the mind of the speaker such as his or her attitudes or behave in particular manner (Pinker, 1994). Tests on animals have failed to reveal that they make any attributions about the mental state of others. Therefore humans attribute the mind of the listener and frame the communication accordingly.

## 5. Structure of language

Spoken language can be broken down into a number of elements, such as phonology, syntax, semantics, morphology and pragmatics as referred earlier. Language is a means of using words that helps in communication. However, it is also used to gather information from our environment. For example if you have spent time in a country that speaks a foreign language you would be aware of how difficult it is to communicate and obtain information about local affairs. This clearly helps in understanding, often when we are deprived of something; we fully appreciate its function and value.

In order to study language one needs to understand the types of physical and linguistic information involved, such as speech and the written word. We begin this segment with an analysis of phonology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics before considering more general theories of language. The overview of its elements can be understood through the following figure.



### Phonology

The study of linguistic sounds is known as phonology. It refers to the congregation of sounds made by the mouth, tongue, vocal chords and so on, whose combination produces speech. The basic unit of speech is the phoneme. Each phoneme is produced by the vocal apparatus in the unique manner. The /p/ of pay and the /b/ of bay are pronounced nearly identically; they differ only in that the vocal cords vibrate for /b/ but not for /p/. This difference is called voicing.

Another distinction in which languages differ from each other is in terms of the sorts of phonemes that are used. Phonemes basically consist of consonants, such as /d/, /b/, or vowels, such as /i/, /a/. Phonemes are also voiced as (/b/, /k/, /g/, etc.) or voiceless (/s/, /t/, etc.), and are characterized as such based on the location at which the initial sound burst is made, whether it is in the vocal chords (voiced) or within the mouth (voiceless).

## Syntax

Another landmark of language is its structure. The grammatical rules that specify how words and other morphemes are arranged to yield acceptable sentences are called syntax. Syntax is referred as only part of the study of grammar that contains a set of rules by which people speak and write correctly. A sentence consists of a number of words. The way words are put together to form sentences is known as syntax. It is used in the rules of language. The grammar helps in placing the words in the correct order to form meaningful sentences.

For example, if we transpose two words in the sentence ‘the dog bit the man’ to form ‘the man bit the dog’, we create an entirely different meaning. If we recall from our English lessons, words are categorised as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and so forth. In English, the first noun is the subject of the sentence and the second noun is usually the object. Between them is usually a verb. Thus in the previous example the sentence are of the form of the (Subject), (Verb) and the (Object), and this is known as an S-V-O word order. It has been estimated that 75 per cent of all languages use the S-V-O form (Ratner and Gleason, 1993).

## Semantics

Syntax alone is insufficient to abstract meaning from a sentence, whereas semantics is the study of meaning. The theory of semantics must explain how people mentally represent the meanings of words and sentences. The expression of one’s thoughts and their comprehension by listeners or readers obviously depend on these mental representations. The obvious example of this would be that formation of sentences depends on S-V-O word order. But it would hold no meaning if meaningful representation is not achieved, as in the sentence ‘the jumper milked the sideboard’. The study of semantics is concerned with how we process the meaning of linguistic information.

There are five aspects of language that are important for the study of semantics (Bierwisch, 1975):

- **Ambiguity**

Words can have more than one meaning and this can make a sentence ambiguous, as in go to the right table – does this instruction refer to the correct table or the table on the right-hand side?

- **Anomaly**

This is a sentence with correct syntax but one that has no meaning, as in tables fly long hairs in the air.

- **Entailment**

In our language we often say something that conveys more information than that contained in the sentence, as in Rita is my best friend, who further also reveals, by inference, and that my best friend is female.

- **Conflicting meanings**

A sentence may contain items that appear to contradict with one another, as in the example of my cat is not my pet. Generally, my cat and my pet would be synonymous, except that here the word does not create a conflict. It also means the cat is something more than just a pet.

#### • Implication

Words and sentences can have more than one meaning; let us take an example to understand it in a much better manner, Students hate annoying lecturers. It could lead to two interpretations: those students dislike those lecturers who can be annoying or that students dislike annoying their lecturers.

### Morphology

Let us now understand what refers to Morphology. In our previous discussion we have understood that phonemes are the basic physical unit of speech whereas morphemes are the basic units of word meanings. Morphemes include prefixes (pre-, un-, mis-, dis-, and so on) and suffixes (such as -s, -ness, -d, and so on) as well as individual words.

Let us understand this with the help of an example. The word skirts have two morphemes, skirt (article of clothing) and s (a suffix to denote more than one of these items). Morphemes which include most prefixes and suffixes are not words by themselves but are therefore said to be bound. Morphemes that are words by themselves are said to be free.

### Pragmatics

The last aspect in the language structure is known as pragmatics. Language is used differently for referring to many different contexts. Pragmatics concerns about the social rules that determine how language is used in certain contexts. For example, you might describe your college differently to a future employer than you would to a close friend. In the former, you might emphasize on the academic aspects of being a student at the college, but in the latter you might emphasize the social aspects of college life.

According to Grice (1975) conversations in different contexts vary according to four maxims. Thus a discourse can be:

- Highly informative versus weakly informative;
- Completely truthful or untruthful;
- Most relevant or irrelevant;
- Perfectly clear or completely unclear.

People vary on each aspect depending upon with whom they are conversing. So, for example, someone who is lying to their boss about why they didn't turn up to work might use a discourse that is weakly informative, untruthful, irrelevant and unclear. On the other hand, the same person talking to a friend might use a discourse that is informative, truthful, relevant and clear.

Other rules of conversation have been identified that concern the type of utterance that might be used (Searle, 1979):

- An assertive is a statement of opinion or belief, as in “I study more than my fellow students do”.
- A commissive is a statement that commits the speaker to some action, as in “I am going to study for three hours this evening”.
- A declaration is a factual statement, as in I spent two hours watching TV yesterday evening.

- A directive is an instruction directed at the listener, as in “Carry these books for me”.
- An expressive is a description of the speaker's internal state, as in “I'm so pleased I got an A+ for my cognitive psychology essay”.

In each case it is the listener's job to respond appropriately and some statements require more of a response than do others. Therefore the pragmatic dimension of language stresses the essential point that language involves a dialogue (Clark, 1996). Speaking is bilateral activity in which it is equally important to listen to what others say in response to utterances. Not only, must a speaker engage in self-monitoring behaviour to avoid an error or miscommunication, but he or she must also monitor listeners for their understanding of what is said.

## 6. SUMMARY

- Language is a system of symbols that are used to communicate ideas among two or more individuals.
- Language uses both mental and external representations.
- Linguists studied the relationships among the written records of ancient languages about 5,000 years ago and reconstructed what they believed early languages were like up to about 10,000 years ago (Atchison, 1996).
- The origin of language evolved as a consequence of the large brain of humans (Gould & Lewontin, 1979).
- Pioneer work in this area was done by von Frisch (1950), where he assessed the communication process in the animals.
- Spoken language can be broken down into a number of elements, such as phonology, syntax, semantics, morphology and pragmatics.
- The study of linguistic sounds is known as phonology. It refers to the congregation of sounds made by the mouth, tongue, vocal chords and so on, whose combination produces speech.
- The grammatical rules that specify how words and other morphemes are arranged to yield acceptable sentences are called syntax.
- Semantics is the study of meaning. The theory of semantics explains how people mentally represent the meanings of words and sentences.
- Morphemes are the basic units of word meanings. Morphemes include prefixes (pre-, un-, mis-, dis-, and so on) and suffixes (such as -s, -ness, -d, and so on) as well as individual words.
- Pragmatics concerns the social rules that determine how language is used in certain contexts.