# Language in perspective. Structural notions in linguistics

# The purpose of language

This is primarily functional, language is used to <u>convey information</u> or to <u>express emotions</u>, for example. But there is a strong <u>social component</u> to language as well. It is used to **maintain social relationships** and to **identify with a certain section of society**. This means that all human languages have two sides: an ***internal structure*** concerned with the organization of linguistic information necessary for communication and an ***external aspect*** where the manner in which language is expressed carries social significance. When one considers the first aspect, the internal organization of language, one can see that in the course of human evolution our ability to speak would appear to have become autonomous and self-contained. Not only that but the levels within language, those of sounds, words and sentences, would also seem to have become independent but with connections linking them. This modularization is a distinct advantage to the organization and maintenance of language and is the reason for treating the levels separately in theoretical books.

# Defining language

- Language is a system of communication

- It involves sounds with arbitrary symbolic value

- It is used by humans

- It is a rule-governed system which is open-ended

# Language is a system of communication

This fact is fairly obvious. Despite the secondary functions to which language can be put to – for instance as a carrier of social attitudes, it remains primarily a <u>sign system for conveying information</u>, i.e. a **semiotic system**.

# Language is stimulus-free

As opposed to most animal communication systems, human language does not need a trigger such as danger or the search for food or the desire for procreation. In essence, <u>we can speak without any external motivation</u>.

# Language is structure-dependent

Language does not consist of a string of random elements. The elements of language – sounds on the level of phonology, words on that of syntax – are <u>arranged in a certain meaningful order determined by the rules of the language</u>. If the elements are not, then the structures, words or sentences, would be incomprehensible.

# The relationship of words to concepts/objects language is arbitrary

We should understand that the word 'arbitrary' is used in linguistics to denote a relationship between linguistic signs (words) and what they stand for (concepts which typically refer to objects in the outside world) and that this relationship is not fixed or determined by the nature of the objects. Of course individuals do not change the signs (words) used in their language – here the relationship is set by convention but one should remember that for instance there is no reason why a *cow* should be referred to as [*kau*] in English, after all *vache* [*va$*] in French, *bó* [*bo:*] in Irish and *korova* [*kv/rovq*] in Russian sound very different and nonetheless seem to speakers of these languages to be entirely appropriate as the word for this animal.

# Language shows duality of structure

One of the major principles in the organization of language is that it involves two levels of structure, one of units and one of elements use to build these units. Take the structure of words as an example. These consist of sounds which in themselves have no meaning. For instance, one cannot say that **/p/, /^/** or **/n/** have a meaning but the combination /p^n/ **pun** does.

# Language consists of discrete elements

The sounds of a language must be kept apart clearly, that is they are **discrete** in the technical sense. In English one cannot use a sound which is intermediary between /p/ and /b/ as this would not be sufficiently separate from both of these. This applies equally to vowels. Again in English one must distinguish clearly between the vowels is *bid*, *bed*, *bad*, *bud* and *bush*. The difference between the vowels in the second and third words is especially important for English and many Europeans have difficulty here, often using the same vowel for both.

Discreteness requires that one has an exact realization of each sound in the language variety which one speaks. This is the essential difference between noise and the sounds of human language. Noise can vary at random but sounds of language must hit their target closely otherwise they are in danger of being confused.

# Language is productive

The number of utterances one can make in a language is not limited. For instance, new sentences are produced by taking one of a limited set of sentences structures and filling it with words from one's vocabulary. By these means one can produce a theoretically unlimited set of sentences.

# Language reflects reality

By and large it is true to say that languages have words for the objects of the world, the thoughts and feelings which its speakers experience. And to a certain extent it is the case that separate words for objects tend to reflect their relative importance for speakers.

For instance, English has a special word for **thumb**, the finger on the inside of the hand which is at a slightly different angle from the others. But the equivalent on our feet, the **big toe**, does not have a special word for it. One could say that one uses one's thumb more and one sees it more often and so there is a separate word for it. But not all languages work like that.

# Correct language

There is <u>no such thing as correct language</u> in any absolute sense as language is not in itself either right or wrong. However, in a given society there may be some external norms imposed on language which are used to decide what usage is socially acceptable and what is not. External attitudes to language and the nature of language itself should not be confused. **Language is neither good or bad**; such value-laden judgements are made by people on the basis of opinions which derive from social attitudes and prejudices.

# Primitive languages

A frequent belief among non linguists is that some languages are more primitive than others. Typical examples of such 'primitive' languages would be ones spoken in non industrialized regions of the developing world. This notion is definitely wrong. <u>No language is primitive in the sense of being underdeveloped and demonstrably simpler in structure than others</u>. Every language has a grammatical system which is adequate for those who speak it and a vocabulary which is appropriate for their needs. Of course a nontechnical society will not have words for the many phenomena of the modern industrialized world but that does not make such a language primitive.

# Languages should be logical

One should not expect languages to be logical in any strict sense. Given that the function of language is **primarily** as an instrument of communication, then when this function is fulfilled that is all that matters. For example, a common expectation among those seeking logic in language might be that if there is a negative there should also be a positive. However, many forms in English show that this is not the case, compare *uncouth* which does not have an equivalent *couth* in the standard language. Negatives are not always the simple reverse of positive terms. There are two matters here: form and meaning. In English one has the adjective *real* but its formal negative *unreal* is not simply the opposite of the positive but has the meaning '*hard to believe, most unexpected*'. A similar pair is possible and impossible where the latter frequently means '*highly unacceptable*' as in impossible behaviour.

# Written language is superior to spoken language

This is another common misconception about language. For social reasons the written word is highly valued, for instance because of its status in contracts, legal documents, and official material in general. Furthermore, the written word is much more permanent than the spoken word. These aspects of the written word led to it being more highly valued in Western-style societies. However, from an internal, structural point of view, it is the spoken word which is more complex, intricate, sophisticated. **Written language** is codified and normally quite inflexible. Its range of uses is restricted to formal styles and whole areas of language use, such as intonation, are excluded from written language. Writing is always more formal and slightly more conservative than the spoken word because innovations come from colloquial language and take time to be accepted in the written form. There is always a time lag between change in spoken language and its acceptance in writing.

# The goal of linguistics

There is a common view that the purpose of linguistics is to provide tools such as those used in the teaching of languages or to offer means for providing remedies to language impairments. Useful as such applications certainly are, they only represent some of the concerns of linguistics. Furthermore, as applications they result from a previous concern with the nature and structure of human language. Without a general study of human language, applied linguistics cannot be developed. Examining the structure and principles of human language provides us with insights into its organization which must necessarily precede any practical uses to which such insights might be put.

# Linguistic terminology

The study of linguistics involves learning a whole series of new terms. Indeed the terminology is most often the main stumbling block for the student. This applies not just to new terms. In linguistics one comes across terms which have the same form as everyday words but the meaning is somewhat different. For instance, the term **accommodation** refers in linguistics to a *process where speakers make their speech more like that of the people they speak to*. This meaning cannot be directly derived from the general meaning of the word.

# Structural notions in linguistics

The study of linguistics has two main aspects. Firstly, it is an attempt to understand the internal structure of language. Secondly, it end eavours to account for the way in which social significance is superimposed on this structure, i.e. how speakers manipulate language – if only unconsciously – to make a social statement of some kind, frequently either identifying themselves with those they are in contact with or dissociating themselves from them. First of all, one must consider the structure of language.

# Closed class

This refers to those elements or forms in a language which are limited in number. For instance, the distinctive sounds of a language are limited, a figure of not much more than 40 such sounds is a typical average. Other examples are the group of prepositions, the number of verb forms all constitute closed classes. These are acquired in early childhood, are retained fully throughout the rest of one's life and are virtually unalterable (though instances of language change in this area can lead to slight shifts).

# Characteristics of closed classes

1) small number of units

2) poly functional

3) acquired in early childhood

4) low or non-existent awareness for lay speakers

# Open class

This is a group of elements which can change in size, by adding new elements and of course by losing others. The typical example of an open class is the set of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. If one reflects for a moment one recognizes that nearly all the new words which one learns are members of one of these word classes. The vocabulary of all speakers fluctuates throughout their lives.

# Marked ness

This is a principle of language structure whereby pairs of features, seen as oppositions, are given different values (by linguists) as marked or unmarked. In its most general sense, this distinction refers to presence versus absence of a particular linguistic feature. For instance, there is a formal feature marking plural in most English nouns. The plural is therefore 'marked', and the singular is 'unmarked'. The reason for postulating such a relationship becomes clear when one considers the alternative which would be to say that the features simply operate in parallel, lacking any directionality. Intuitively, however, most linguists would seem to prefer an analysis whereby *dogs* is derived from *dog* rather than the other way round – in other words, to say that '*dogs is the plural of dog*', rather than '*dog is the singular of dogs*'. Most of the discussion of markedness centres on the extent to which there is intuitive justification for applying this notion to all such oppositions. But there are cases where the plural is more common than the singular, e.g. *twins*. Here one can say that the plural is unmarked and the singular marked, i.e. a sentence like *Fiona is a twin* is less likely to occur than, say, *Fiona and Nora are twins*.