

# **LECTURE 1**

## ***WHAT IS LANGUAGE? WHERE IS LANGUAGE?***

# Academic truths

Language is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. It has at least the following features:

- i) physical nature (physically, physiologically and neurologically)
- ii) ideal nature (notional-symbolic)
- iii) signifying, systematic and highly patterned ephemeral unity
- iv) constitutes an involved interactional behavioural complex

# Academic truths – cont'd

v) is tightly linked up with identity-construction and expression (social, ethnic, religious, discourse-communal, etc.)

vi) has a strong individual side (psychology of language processing; embodied experience based on personal histories)

vii) is socially constitutive and dependent (hardly any kind of social interaction occurs without language as an intermediary. No trait of language behaviour is free from social determination.)

# Academic truths- cont'd

- viii) is a genetically pre-determined development in normal human beings with a universally shared maturation path with a critical onset period;
- ix) has political and economic repercussions (language, policy, language planning, language vs. dialect/variety, etc.);
- x) is used for creating art, etc.;
- xi) is a secondary representational system (superior to sensory representational systems and thus based on synthesis) but primary semiotic/signifying system;
- xii) is a complex adaptive emergent system transmitted socially and culturally.

# So, what is language?

For most linguists, *language* is the pattern of human speech, and the (implicit) systems that speaking, listening and signing rely on. Other phenomena come to be called "language" because of more or less close connections or analogies to this central case: writing, computer languages, the language of dolphins or bees. The ordinary-language meaning of the word reflects this process of extension from a speech-related core. The etymology of the word, from Fr. *langue* "tongue," makes the same point.

# What is language for linguists?

“It is a treasure buried by the practice of speech in people belonging to the same community, a grammatical system which has virtual existence in each brain, or more exactly in the brains of a collection of individuals; because language is not complete in any individual, but exists only in the collectivity” (Ferdinand de Saussure)

# Uncontested facts about language

- All languages are human. Some animals may seem to have languages (in particular, the cries of birds, dolphins, and monkeys) but studies have shown that the sounds and patterns used are, beyond a certain vocabulary, invariable.
- Whereever humans exist, language exists.
- Sign languages are not surrogates for vocal language but are languages in their own right.

# Facts – cont'd

- There are no "primitive" languages: all languages are equally complex and equally capable of expressing any idea in the universe. The vocabulary of any language can be expanded to include new words for new concepts.
- The relationships between the sounds and meanings of spoken languages and between the gestures (signs) and meanings of sign languages are for the most part arbitrary.



# Facts – cont'd

- All human languages utilize a finite set of discrete sounds (or gestures) that are combined to form meaningful elements or words, which themselves form an infinite set of possible sentences.
- All grammars contain rules for the formation of words and sentences of a similar kind. All grammars leak.

# Facts – cont'd

- Every spoken language includes discrete sound segments like /p/, /n/, or /a/, which can be defined by a finite set of sound properties or features. Every spoken language has a class of vowels and a class of consonants.
- There are semantic universals, such as "male" or "female," "animate" or "human," found in every language in the world.
- Every language has a way of referring to past time, negating, forming questions, issuing commands, and so on.

# Facts – cont'd

- All languages constantly change through time.
- Change is not a symptom of decay or a herald of progress, it is the *modus vivendi* of language.
- Everybody speaks a dialect with an accent.

# Facts – cont'd

- Speakers of all languages are capable of producing and comprehending an infinite set of sentences.
- Any normal child, born anywhere in the world, of any racial, geographical, social, or economic heritage, is capable of learning any language to which he or she is exposed. The differences we find among languages cannot be due to biological reasons.

[Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams 2010: 25]

# Where is language?

- Language is in society – sociolinguistics, sociology of language
- Language is in the individual (mind/consciousness) – psycholinguistics
- Language is in the brain – neurolinguistics

Language is a phenomenon of the third kind – neither a mechanism, nor a living organism. It is neither exclusively societal, nor the privilege of the individual. It cannot be controlled in its natural development, but it can be sanctioned in its social functioning.



**...Linguistics?**

**...give me a  
break!**

# References

- Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2007/2010) *An Introduction to language*, 7<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> edition. Thomson, Wadsworth.
- Lamb, Sydney M. (1999) *Pathways of the Brain: The Neurocognitive Basis of Language*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing House.
- McArthur, Tom (1996) *The Oxford Companion to the English language*. OUP.