

Basic Concepts in
Modern
English
Linguistics

马冬丽 著

现代英语语言学
基础

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Chapter 1

Linguistics and Language

§ 1 Defining Linguistics

Nowadays linguistics is usually defined as the scientific study of language, alternatively, “the study of the way in which language works.” However, there have been arguments about whether linguistics is a science, especially when it was just coming into being. Now the arguments die away and linguistics has firmly established its place as a major branch of social sciences. As a science, linguistics now has a set of established theories, methods and sub-branches.

§ 2 On Language

Since linguistics is a science about language, aspects related to language will be the starting points.

What is language then? People have attempted to define it in a number of ways. The following definitions are a few examples: language is

1) a system for representing things, actions, ideas and states.

2) a tool people use to communicate their concepts of reality into the minds of others.

3) a system of meanings shared among people.

4) a code that members of a linguistic community use to mediate between form and meaning.

5) a set of grammatically correct utterances (i. e. words, sentences, etc.).

6) a set of utterances that could be understood by a linguistic community.

7) thought.

These answers reflect the nature of language based on people's own observations. Each of these definitions has its own special emphasis, but is not totally free from limitations.

Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1987) offers several most frequently used senses of the word "language", namely, (a) a system of communication which consists of a set of sounds and written symbols which are used by the people of a particular country or region for talking or writing; (b) all the words which are used in a particular language at a particular time; (c) the study of the words and grammar of a particular language, used especially in schools and universities; (d) the signs, actions or movements which have special meanings in a

particular situations or for particular groups such as deaf people ... Obviously (a) is the primary sense among all .

Any one who is asked this question would give different answers for having different life experiences and thoughts about language. “However, there are some important characteristics of human language linguists have agreed on; these are embraced in the following generally accepted definition: language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication.” (梅, 2003) In the statement, four points capture the main features of language.

A. Language is a system. The system of something is the way in which it is arranged so that all its parts fit together or work together. The system of language is the rules for combining elements of language. By phonological rules of English, one can say that “obpt” is not an English word and that “She have like not Chinese” not a correct sentence according to grammar. “bpt” can not be put together as a consonant cluster like “str-” (street), “spl-” (splendid), “spr-” (spring) which are often at the beginning of a word. If language lacks rules, it could not be mastered.

B. Language is arbitrary. Being arbitrary means the relation between a word and its meaning is not decided according to any plan or for any particular reason. There is no natural connection between a word and the meaning it represents. This conventional nature of language is well illustrated by a famous quotation from Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*:

A rose by any other name would smell as Sweet.

- C. Language is vocal. Sounds are the basic elements of language. Without sounds, language can not be itself. Babies learn to use language by identifying the sounds they hear firstly. Normal people tend to speak rather than write to others in communication. It is said that one-third of the world languages have only spoken forms.
- D. Language is used for human communication. The word “human” is meant to specify that language is human-specific. Other animals, such as birds, bees, whales, have their ways (songs, dances) to communicate, but their systems are far from the same with human beings’ which are much more complex and advantageous.

§ 3 Origins of Language

There are many theories about the origins of language for the reason that we can not know the situations far back to ancient time. “Many of these have traditional amusing names”:

3.1 The Mama Theory

Language began with the easiest syllables attached to the most significant objects.

3.2 The Ta-ta Theory

Sir Richard Paget, influenced by Darwin, believed that body movement preceded language. Language began as an unconscious vocal imitation of these movements—like the way a child’s mouth will move when they use scissors. This evolved into the popular idea that language may have derived from ges-