

Stuart C. Poole

An Introduction to Linguistics



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AN INTRODUCTION TO LINGUISTICS

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Preface

This book introduces the nature of language. It deals with the sounds that we make when we speak, with the way in which we construct sentences, with the ways in which our speech varies between social situations, and so on. It does so by the commonly adopted method of having chapters with such headings as phonetics, syntax, social variation. Less conventionally, it has a major chapter which, against the background of these aspects of linguistics, presents the principal features of the languages of western Europe.

You have at least one remarkable skill; you can speak a language. For at least one language you generally know what can and what cannot be designated by the everyday words, you know what is and what is not an acceptable way of combining words to form a sentence, you have a good idea of whether or not a particular statement would be acceptable in a particular social situation. As a skilled user, then, you already have a substantial foundation for the study of language. That foundation and an interest in language are all you need; given those, this introductory book can lead you to an understanding of what language consists of, of how it works. It serves as an introductory book for students of linguistics and as important background material for students of modern languages. Reflecting my work in continuing education, I have attempted to write in a readable style that will also make the book attractive to the many people who want to explore the fascinating world of language without entering full-time education.

I would like to thank my wife Beryl and a student, Arthur McIvor, for taking time to read and comment on my draft. I also thank Beryl for her support and tolerance while I was working on the book. I also thank Arthur as a representative of those students whose interest and enthusiasm help to inspire and reward my work. The facilities of the University of Edinburgh such as the library and word-processing facilities have been of great assistance.

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1

What Is Language?

or

Why Can't Chimpanzees Build Power Stations?

1.1 The Significance of Language

For better or worse, the human race dominates life on Earth. If we want to consider why this should be so, we might usefully think about such features of our way of life as our use of things in the world around us to extend our capabilities, our complex social structure with its hierarchies and its division of labour, and our ability to conceptualise, to learn, to solve problems, and so on.

The human race is by no means unique in exhibiting these features. Chimpanzees use 'tools': they strip twigs and use them to extract termites from their nests. The chimpanzees and the termites both live in social groups. Chimpanzee females live on individual home ranges within a territory that is defended by a group of related males. Termites live in a colony with three castes: reproductives, workers and soldiers. Chimpanzees can be trained to respond in accordance with different symbolic gestures.

So if we can build power stations, why can't chimpanzees? A major reason is that they lack a larynx and a mouth that allow the articulation of a wide range of distinguishable sounds. Without these they are doomed to making little progress. One can scarcely imagine us building and operating power stations or implementing a system of justice as intricate as ours without us having an extremely complex system of communication like that provided by our speech. Far simpler tasks require language: language for learning, language for planning, language for co-operation. Without speech it is, indeed, difficult to refer to anything that is removed from us in space and time, anything that we cannot point to here

and now; this becomes clear as soon as you try to arrange to meet a friend outside the town hall at seven o'clock without saying or writing anything. Language allows human beings to learn and adapt to changing circumstances far more quickly than would be achieved by evolution; a word of warning passed from father to son is a much more direct and efficient way of adapting the species to its environment than is a process of natural selection whereby those not inclined to do the right thing are eventually weeded out. Human language is infinitely versatile; honey-bees have a remarkable way of letting others know the direction in which a source of nectar lies and how far away it is by means of a 'dance', but they could not begin to discuss the merits of other foodstuffs or alternative ways of constructing their homes.

The power that language gives us is, indeed, so great, the Bible tells us, that God felt obliged to restrict it; in Genesis, chapter 11, we read that our plans to build a tower, that of Babel, up to Heaven were countered by God putting an end to our common language because it gave such power:

And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

Some would even maintain that the very contemplation of building a tower reaching up to Heaven would be impossible without speech, arguing that even our thoughts are impossible without speech, that we cannot conceptualise without the framework that our language provides for perceiving the world around us.

In short, the nature and the dominance of the way of life that the human race leads is, despite any obstacles that God may have put in its path, due in very large part to the fact that human beings can speak.

1.2 What Is Language?

We have just seen that even chimpanzees lack the physiological equipment required for speech as we know it. That is, of course, not to say that animals cannot communicate. Animals have developed

ways of letting others know that they have found a supply of food, of warning others of danger, of attracting a mate, and so on. Such communication may be by means of sight, smell or sound.

Given the huge range of forms of communication, it is important that before we embark on our study of language we have a clear understanding of what we mean by the term *language*. Our first response might be that language relates to communication between human beings and not to communication between animals, and that is certainly a useful first step towards a definition. But are applause in a theatre, an expression of friendship by means of a smile or attracting somebody's attention by means of a 'cough' any more a part of language than are the alarm calls of vervet monkeys which distinguish between snakes, leopards and eagles?

One attempt to define human language was made by the American linguist **Charles F. Hockett** (Hockett, 1958). He enumerated a number of features which, he argued, constitute human language. Other communication systems might exhibit one or more of these features but only human language has them all. The 'dance' of the honey-bee which informs other bees about the location of a source of nectar meets many of the criteria. It meets, for example, that of **interchangeability**: any creature that can transmit the information can also receive such information and vice versa. It meets that of **productivity**, the ability to vary a message to reflect differences in the circumstances concerned; this is clearly necessary in a case where the source of the nectar may be constantly changing. The dance does not, however, meet the criterion of **cultural transmission** for the bees are acting instinctively, not behaving in a way that they have learnt from others. This last criterion is particularly associated with human language for the one stimulates the other; we acquire our native tongue by cultural transmission and it is by means of our native tongue that we receive cultural transmissions, that we learn and adapt. This is the spiral that has driven human development.

So how, then, might we define the term *language*? An earlier American linguist, **Edward Sapir**, gave a definition in a book published in 1921 (Sapir, 1921, p. 8). He supported the hypothesis that language relates to communication between human beings. Just as Hockett was to associate human language with cultural transmission, so too Sapir considered that it is 'non-instinctive' and 'voluntarily produced'. Thus for him language does not include

such instinctive forms of communication as smiling and cries of pain. His definition is as follows:

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

He goes on to say that these symbols are, in the first instance, auditory; thus language is primarily a matter of speech as opposed to, say, sign language.

The element '**symbols**' reflects the fact that there is rarely an inherent association between a word and the object or concept that it denotes. Any sequence of sounds can serve to denote an object as long as the speakers of the language concerned make the same association; we could just as well denote a dog using the word *perro*, the word *chien* or the word *hond*, as the Spaniards, the French and the Dutch have shown. The element '**system**' reflects the fact that language provides us with the framework for generating appropriate utterances rather than providing us with an infinite store of ready-made utterances. We can create utterances never uttered before; this may possibly be the first time that anyone has ever written the following: 'An elderly mariner leading a monkey by a chain staggered into a bank and asked a teller for a glass of whisky and a banana!'

For comparison we may look at a definition given by a modern British linguist, **David Crystal**, who wrote the following (Crystal, 1989, p. 251):

The discussion may be summarized by referring to language as human vocal noise (or the graphic representation of this noise in writing) used systematically and conventionally by a community for purposes of communication.

Thus this definition also proposes **communication** as the principal function of language. What it does not do is attempt to specify what is communicated; as the British linguist **John Lyons** points out (Lyons, 1992, p. 3), Sapir was too restrictive in this.

Nor is there any element corresponding to 'non-instinctive'; while any particular language is culturally transmitted – an infant acquires

the language of the society in which it grows up, irrespective of the language of its parents – it is now generally accepted that humans inherit a predisposition towards acquiring language. Indeed the modern linguist and cognitive scientist **Steven Pinker** uses the word **instinct** to embody the essence of human language (Pinker, 1994, p. 18). Whether one considers language to be instinctive or not depends on precisely what one is talking about. Language is instinctive in so far as we are all born with a predisposition to speak, we all acquire a language without tuition and when we speak we do not consciously convert our thoughts into speech. Language is, however, non-instinctive in that we can choose what to say or whether to say anything at all; it is not instinctive in the way that removing one's hand from a very hot plate is, done before we are even aware of the situation.

Both definitions refer to the element of system and both allude to the fact that the association between the words used and the things that they denote is not inherent, Sapir by using the word *symbols* and Crystal by referring to the fact that the association is the result of **convention**. Crystal, in referring to **vocal noise**, is more specific about the principal way in which the message is physically transmitted.

While, as **R. H. Robins** suggests (Robins, 1990, p. 12), there is a danger of definitions of language being simplistic, it might help us to focus our study of language if we try to distil a definition. Such a definition might be something like the following: 'Language is a form of human communication by means of a system of symbols principally transmitted by vocal sounds.'

1.3 The Functions of Language

The term *communication*, then, can be used to cover most of the function of language. But the function of language is varied. *I've got a knife* could imply that it is now only necessary to find a fork before one can start eating or it could be a warning. *Do you have a knife?* could be an offer to lend a knife or a request to borrow one. If the person we are talking to has been ill we probably want an honest answer to the question *How are you?*; if we ask it simply as part of a greeting we may not want an honest answer. Linguists have different terms for the different functions of language. In the case of *How are you?* used just to be sociable, for example, they use the term

phatic communion, that being the use of speech with the aim of establishing or maintaining social relations. In such cases the important thing may be simply that one says something, as saying nothing might be taken as a sign of displeasure. An expression of emotion such as *That's fantastic!* or *Shit!* may be called an **emotive utterance**. When an utterance is an act in itself, the utterance being spoken by somebody with relevant authority, it may be called a **performative utterance**; a bridge, for example, may be officially opened by some dignitary saying *I declare this bridge open*. Such matters will be developed further in section 3.8.

1.4 What Is a Language?

Having considered what language is, let us briefly contrast what we have hitherto been considering with what we are concerned with when we talk about the Russian language or the Arabic language. The use of the word *language* in both cases clouds a very significant difference.

Language, the faculty for communication by speech sounds, is a universal characteristic of the human race. But we do not share one medium of communication; Russians and Arabs speak different languages. A language, then, is a medium of communication specific to a society; it forms part of the culture of that society. Being a feature of the human race, 'language' is inherited genetically, whereas we acquire 'a language' from the society in which we spend our first years. A child born in Russia of Russian parents will acquire Arabic if it is taken away from its parents and spends its earliest years in an Arabic environment in, say, Jordan or Algeria.

1.5 The Elements of Language

If a young child sees a dog he may draw it to his mother's attention by pointing to it and saying 'dog'.

Even such a simple utterance involves a number of facets of language. The speaker has to recognise which category of the world around him the animal concerned belongs to and he has to know the label that attaches to that category. He has then to transmit the sequence of sounds that convey that label to the hearer, thereby generating the thought of a dog in the mind of that person. The study of words is **lexis** and that of meaning, of the relationship

between word and the real world, is **semantics**. The study of speech sounds is **phonetics** and, in the context of language systems, **phonology**. These facets of linguistics will be dealt with in chapters 2-5.

An older child may well say 'That dog is bigger than our dog.' This more complex utterance exhibits further facets. The word *bigger* is a complex word in that a modifying element has been added to the basic word *big* in order to express the idea of comparison. The words have to be assembled in a certain order to indicate the relationship between them; swapping round the phrases *that dog* and *our dog* would clearly completely change the sense of the sentence. The structure of words, **morphology**, is dealt with in chapter 6 and the structure of phrases and sentences, **syntax**, is dealt with in chapter 7.

A person in Glasgow might pronounce the word *dog* in the same way as he pronounces the word *dug*. A Glaswegian dustman is more likely to do so than is a Glaswegian solicitor. Here we are touching on the fields of **regional variation** and **social variation** which are dealt with in chapters 8 and 9 respectively.

The Anglo-Saxons denoted a dog with the word *hund*, the precursor of the word *hound* that has now been relegated to a very restricted use. It is generally accepted that the word *hound* is related to, say, the Italian word *cane*, one of the distinctive features of the Germanic languages being the development of the phoneme /k/ into a fricative sound. The French equivalent of *cane* is *chien*, a feature of the phonological development of French being the development of /k/ before /a/ in Latin to /ʃ/. Such changes to language over time belong to the field of **historical linguistics**, the subject of chapter 10. Drawing on what has been presented in earlier chapters, chapter 11 outlines **the languages of western Europe**, giving a profile of the distinctive features of these languages and indicating the relationship between them. The final chapter, chapter 12, deals with how language is recorded on paper, with **writing systems**.

Summary

Speech has allowed human beings to develop in a completely different way from other animals. This is due in large part to the cultural transmission that our speech allows, which facilitates a faster adaptation to changes in our environment.

Language is generally considered to be a form of communication between human beings by means of a system of symbols which are principally transmitted by vocal sounds. While the faculty of speech is considered to be inherited, the system that we use, the specific language, is determined by the society in which we grow up, it being culturally transmitted.

Communicating by speech requires symbols to be transmitted orally in an order that shows the relationship between them. The form of utterance will be affected by geography and social factors.

Our utterances have a variety of functions in addition to communicating facts; we may speak to express our emotions, for example, or to reinforce a relationship with somebody.

Exercises

- 1.1 Write what you consider to be a good definition of the term *language*. Justify the choice of the elements that you have incorporated in your definition.
- 1.2 What do you consider to be the principal benefits to the human race of language?
- 1.3 How well, in your opinion, does the word *communication* represent the function of human language?

2

Lexis

or

Are Slithy Toves Smoothly Wet?

2.1 What Is a Word?

If we stripped language down to its barest essentials we would, we might intuitively feel, have to retain words. When a child shouts 'Dog' we have little material for a discussion of syntax or social variation. What we do have even in this simplest of utterances is a word and, as the nature of a word implies, an association with something in the real world and a sequence of sounds that conveys that something to other people. If we set aside exclamations of joy, fear, and so on we can communicate little verbally without words. It is words which, expressed as sounds, convey the thought of a thing, of a concept, from the mind of one person to the mind of another person, providing, of course, that these two people speak the same language. For speakers of English the word *dog*, conveyed by means of the sound sequence /dɒg/ or, in the case of many Americans, /dʌg/, transmits the concept of a particular kind of animal. The word *large*, conveyed by the sounds /la:dʒ/, refines the image.

But what idea is represented by the word *spick*? Very little. Only when that word is accompanied by two more words, *and span*, do we have a symbol that represents a concept, a concept similar to that represented by the word *clean* or the word *spotless*. The meaning of the phrase *kick the bucket* can, in the literal sense of striking one's foot against a pail, be arrived at by a summation of the meaning of the constituent words, but in the idiomatic sense of dying it cannot. The verb is variable for subject and for tense as is the verb *die*, but otherwise the phrase is set; we do not have the leeway that we have in the literal sense to say 'kick the pail', 'kick this bucket', and so on.

Thus the three words *kick the bucket* used idiomatically must, from a functional point of view, be regarded as a single unit, for this unit fulfils the same function as the single word *die*. Similarly, the more prosaic phrasal verbs of English are a lexical unit; *give in* is as much a unit as *concede*. Why do we have to use two words to denote a female singer when we can denote a female actor with one: *actress*?

Thus a unit of meaning may consist of more than one word. It may also consist of less than one word; the *un-* in *unhealthy* is a unit of meaning, a very significant one in so far as it completely inverts the sense of *healthy*. A unit of meaning can, then, range from an **idiom**, a phrase that has a meaning not apparent from its constituent words, to a **morpheme**, a minimal unit of meaning of which there may be several in a word.

Word, then, will not do as a term for a unit of meaning. Recognising that phrases like *give in* are no different functionally to single words like *concede*, linguists devised the term **lexeme** or **lexical item** to denote an item of vocabulary with a single referent whether it consists of one word or more than one word. The term *lexeme* also allows greater precision in that the forms *gives*, *gave*, and so on, can be considered to be different forms of the one lexeme: *give*. The lexeme, which one can equate to the form that one would look up in a dictionary, encompasses the set of forms that may be used to realise the lexeme in various environments.

So how can we define a word?

Useful tests might be indivisibility, insertion and substitutability. Words are indivisible and they can be inserted between other words; we can insert *large* between *the* and *dog* but not within *dog*. We can substitute the word *cat* for the word *dog*. But then much the same can be said of phrasal lexemes like *kick the bucket* and *give in*. Similarly, morphemes cannot be divided, can be inserted and can be substituted; the *un-* of *uninformed* can, for example, be replaced by *mis-*.

The American linguist **Leonard Bloomfield** (Bloomfield, 1933, p. 178) considered a word to be a minimum free form:

A word, then, is a free form which does not consist entirely of (two or more) lesser free forms; in brief, a word is a *minimum free form*.

The inclusion in this definition of the word *free* removes bound