
UNIT 5 LANGUAGE AS A MEDIUM FOR COMMUNICATION OF THOUGHT

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5.0 OBJECT

After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- know the nature of language in terms of its main functions and chief characteristics;
- discuss the reasons for language variation; and
- describe the difference between written and spoken communication.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

As librarians, *we are, as it were, surrounded by language - several languages*, in fact. So much so, that we often begin taking the books in different languages that we handle everyday, for granted. But sometimes we may pause to ponder about the medium in which thought is expressed in these books, i.e., language.

What is a language? What are its main functions, and its chief characteristics? Why do different speakers who apparently seem to speak the same language vary so much in their accent, vocabulary and even sentence structure? Since we are mainly surrounded by written language, we should know what is the nature of written communication, and how it differs from the spoken form?

These are some of the questions that we shall address ourselves to in this Unit.

5.2 ORIGIN AND FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE

Our curiosity about ourselves, and our most unique possession, language, has led to numerous theories about the origin of language. However, there is no way, at present, to *prove* or *disprove* any of these theories. But, although, how language began is a puzzling question; why language began is much clearer.



Language, perhaps began because human beings needed a greater degree of cooperation with each other in order to survive, and this cooperation required an effective communication system. Therefore, the primary function of language is to convey information. In fact, it is the function of language that we find in the books in the libraries.

Language can also be used to communicate feelings and emotions. In addition, there is the language of social talk; 'How are you?' 'Good to see you', 'Isn't it hot and humid today?'. This is known as *phatic communication*, and it is a device to establish and maintain social contact at a friendly level.

Language also has a 'clue-bearing' role, that is, it is an indirect means of conveying information about the speaker. It is through a person's language that we can find out the region where she/he comes from, her/his social status, occupation, etc.

Human beings also use language for purely aesthetic reasons. In writing a novel or a poem, people manipulate words in the same way as they use colour in painting a picture.

Self Check Exercise

1) What are the functions of language?

Note:

- i) Write your answer in the space given below.
- ii) Check your answer with the answers given at the end of this Unit.

5.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMAN LANGUAGE

In the previous section we discussed some of the functions of language. In this section we go deeper into the issue of what exactly is language. Can one define it? Is language the exclusive property of the human species? If language is viewed only as a system of communication, then obviously many species communicate with each other. Human beings also use systems other than their language to relate to each other and to send "messages". For example, they wave to each other, they smile and use other means of "body language" to convey a message.

To understand human language one needs to see what is special and unique to language. One of the best ways to answer this question is to compare human language with animal communication, and see where the similarities and differences lie.

5.3.1 Use of Sound Signals

Human language is a signalling system which utilizes sound to express meanings. However, this is not a unique characteristic of human language, as several insects, birds and animals also use sounds to communicate.

5.3.2 Arbitrariness

In animal communication, there is frequently a connection between the signals and the messages sent. For instance, an animal who wishes to warn an opponent may simulate an attacking attitude. A cat, for example, will arch its back, spit, and appear ready to pounce.

In human language, the reverse is true, and there is no link between the signal sent and the message intended. That is, the symbols used are *arbitrary*. For example, there is no connection between the word DOG and the four legged animal it symbolizes. It can equally be called Kutta (Hindi), chien (French), Hund (German).

5.3.3 Cultural Transmission

It is said that human beings are biologically programmed to acquire "language". However, they learn a specific language only by exposure to it. That is, language is handed down by one generation to another. A child brought up in isolation, away from human beings, does not acquire language.

In animal systems, a far greater proportion of communication is genetically inbuilt. For instance, a cuckoo will sing a fully developed song, even if it never hears another cuckoo sing. On the other hand, a skylark's song is almost wholly learned.

5.3.4 Displacement

Most animals can communicate about things in the immediate environment only. For instance, an animal will utter its danger cry only when danger occurs. It cannot give any information about a dangerous situation that had occurred yesterday.

Human beings, on the other hand, can communicate about events which are separated in time and space. For example, if someone says that 'I was afraid when the thief arrived', it is not necessary that the speaker still is afraid. This phenomenon is known as **displacement**, and is an essential property of human language, although it occurs occasionally in the animal world as well.

The best known example of this in the animal world is the communication system of honey bees. If a worker bee finds a new source of nectar, it returns to the hive and performs a complex dance in order to inform the other bees of the exact location of the nectar, which may be several miles away. But even bees are limited in this ability. They can communicate with each other only about nectar. Human beings, however, can talk on any topic, and it does not matter how the topic of conversation is separated in time and space.

5.3.5 Structure Dependence

Animals have a stock of basic sounds (a cow has under ten, while gorillas and chimpanzees have between twenty and thirty) which they can use only once. That is, the number of messages an animal can send is restricted to the number of basic sounds, or, in the more complex systems, a few simple combinations of sounds. And there is no known internal organisation within this system.

Human language, on the other hand, is not a haphazard list of individual sounds. Most sounds become meaningful only when they are combined with other sounds. This organisation of language into two layers - a layer of sounds, which combine into a layer of larger units (such as words) - is known as *duality of structure*. A communication system with duality is much more flexible than one without it, because many more messages can be sent.

Moreover, there is an internal order which these sounds follow. For instance, sounds such as a, b, s, t can be arranged only in 4 possible ways in English - tales, bats, stab, bast. Possibilities such as sbat, abts, stba are excluded.

A similar kind of internal organisation occurs at the sentence level. Human beings can automatically recognize the patterned nature of language and





manipulate 'structured chunks' of language.

For example,

That beautiful woman		gave me flowers.
That woman		gave me flowers.
She		gave me flowers.

Human beings can understand that these sentences are structurally equivalent.

Animals, as far as we know, do not use structure dependent operations.

5.3.6 Creativity

The most important distinction between human and animal communication is that human beings are essentially *creative* in their use of language. On the other hand, animals have a limited number of messages that they can send or receive. For example, bees can communicate only about nectar. Dolphins, in spite of their intelligence, use a large number of clicks, whistles and squawks, to communicate merely about the same thing over and over again.

This type of restriction is not found in human language which is essentially a *creative process i.e.*, human beings can produce absolutely new utterances whenever they feel like it. A person can utter a sentence which has never been said before, in the most unlikely circumstances, and still be understood. Even in every day routine communication, a person is not obliged to say the same thing over and over again.

There is another dimension to the essential creativity of human communication, and this dimension we may call *functional creativity*. This basically refers to the ability of human beings to evolve more complex communicative systems, as the complexity of their life increases. As human beings have progressed from nomadic life, to the more stable homestead and agricultural society, and finally to the highly complex urban society, language has also evolved to meet the demands of each type of society. For example, a person living in a complex urban society, where she/he is expected to play a variety of roles at the same time, will need to have command of more than one language, as well as several registers, in order to perform her/his roles effectively.

Take the instance of a Tamilian living in Delhi, she/he needs to have command of at least 3 languages:

Tamil : Mother tongue - to communicate with family members.

Hindi : Language of the host society required to interact with vegetable and fruit vendors, shopkeepers, peons in offices, etc.

English : Necessary for business. Also required for communication with other educated people, whether in the office or the neighbourhood.

Besides being multilingual she/he must also be aware of stylistic differentiation, from the formal to the casual style, as well as different registers required to negotiate interaction in diverse fields.

An Eastern Hindi-speaking person in Delhi will also need to have a fairly large linguistic repertoire at her/his disposal. For example she/he may require.

Bhojpuri : For communication with family members--especially of the older generation.

Khari Boli : For communication with neighbours, shopkeepers as well as close friends. They will probably speak to their children in this dialect rather than Bhojpuri.

English : Required for communication with educated non-Hindi speakers, in offices and educational institutions.

Self Check Exercise

2) Suggest three properties of human language which are rare or absent in animal communication.

3) What is creativity?

Note:

- i) Write your answers in the space given below.
- ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of this Unit.

5.4 LANGUAGE VARIATION

If you and your neighbours are Hindi mother tongue speakers, you can talk to one another and understand each other quite easily. Yet, you must be aware that you do not speak exactly like your neighbours, even though you speak the same language. For instance, a young neighbour (say a teenager) would speak quite differently from you, a lady in your neighbourhood would probably have a very 'correct' pronunciation. Another neighbour is a 'purist', and insists on speaking a Sanskritized variety of Hindi. These unique characteristics of a speaker are referred to as the speaker's *idiolect*.

However, beyond these individual differences, the language of a group of people may show regular variations from that used by other groups who speak the same language. For example, the Hindi spoken by people living in Varanasi is systematically different from that spoken in Delhi and Aligarh. The two groups of people are, therefore, said to speak different dialects of the same language. These systematic or dialectal differences may be due to regional separation, socio-economic status, caste, ethnic group, sex, and so on.

In this section you will learn about some of these dialects.

5.4.1 Regional Dialects

If we travel from one place to another in a particular direction, we notice linguistic differences. When the areas are close to each other, the differences will be relatively small. However, the further we get from our starting point, the larger will be the differences from that point. In other words, dialectal diversity tends to increase proportionally to the degree of communicative isolation between the groups. This is obvious if we merely consider the different native varieties of English spoken in England, America and Australia. Nearer home, if we take the case of Hindi spoken in different parts of India, we will find differences in the level of sounds, as well as vocabulary and grammar.



We give you some examples of Khari Boli (Hindi of Delhi) and Bhojpuri.

Differences at the level of sounds

English	Khari Boli	Bhojpuri
boy	ladka	larika/laika
Fish	Machali	Machari
Fire	Aag	Aagi
to take	Lena	Leb

Differences at the level of words

English	Khari Boli	Bhojpuri
tree	per	gaach
meat	maas	segoti
gram	chana	bhut
foot	paer	god
light	prakash	anjor

5.4.2 Caste Dialects

In many parts of India, society is stratified into different castes and linguistic differences are observed among them. However, increasing education and urbanization has narrowed down these linguistic differences. Certain examples from Telugu are given below which were initially due to caste differences, but now exist only in the case of rural vs. urban speakers.

At the level of words

Word	Urban/(originally Brahmin) Variety	Rural / (originally Non-Brahmin) Variety
What	eemiti	eendi
sari	chiira	kooka
sickness	jabbu	roogam

At the level of sounds

went	velleanu	elleanu
lakshmi (Goddess)	Lakshmi	lacmi

5.4.3 Social Class Dialects

Besides regional dialects, dialects can also vary due to differences in social class. In fact all dialects are both regional and social, since all speakers have a social background and a regional location.

Social classes, however, cannot be clearly defined, because they are simply aggregates of people with similar social and economic characteristics; and social mobility, i.e., movement up or down the social hierarchy is always possible.

Social class dialects are not very prevalent in India, but are part of the class societies of the English speaking world. In Indian languages, the difference exist on rural-urban axis and educated-uneducated axis.



A number of studies have shown that certain variables correlate very closely with social class in a number of English varieties. The example given below will give you an idea.

In standard English the third-person present tense singular form of verb has a suffix-`s', which distinguishes it from other persons:

1st person	I know
2nd person	you know
3rd person	she/he/it knows

In some varieties of English this - `s' is not present, at least in the speech of some people. The following forms may occur at least in the speech of some people.

- She like milk.
- He go home.
- He do a lot of mess, don't he?

Since standard English has the suffix -'s', and the standard variety is generally most closely associated with higher social groups, it is suspected that there may be a direct correlation between social class position and the usage of -'s'. Table 1 shows that the suspicion is quite justified, i.e., there is a clear correlation between social class and the usage of -'s' in Norwich in England.

Use of verbs without 's' in Norwich

Middle middle class	0%
Lower middle class	2%
Upper working class	70%
Middle working class	87%
Lower working class	97%

Table 1: Use of Verbs Without - `s' in Norwich

These scores suggest that there is a clear division of society into two main social class groups, `middle class' and `working class', and this social barrier gets reflected in language.

5.4.4 Sex Differences

Linguistic research has shown that in many societies, the speech of men differs from that of women. In some conservative societies this can be due to segregation of the sexes. But what about societies where men and women communicate freely with one another? Why, then do such differences arise? Labov (1966) and Trudgill (1.972, 1974) have looked at western societies of America and England, respectively. They have demonstrated through several examples, that women used linguistic forms associated with the prestigious standard more frequently than men, and suggested that personal insecurity and social expectations can be some of the reasons for it. Trudgill (1974) argued that women are socially and economically less secure than men, and tend to compensate for it linguistically. Since society expects women to be more correct, discreet, quiet and polite, it increases the pressure on them to use more `correct' and prestigious linguistic forms than men.

With regard to Indian languages, not many studies have been conducted. There was one study by Mukherjee (1980) who worked on the assimilation of Hindi speech by Bengalis and Panjabis living in Delhi. She too found that females of these communities showed a higher percentage of assimilation of linguistic features associated with Hindi, than males. She also attributed this phenomenon to social insecurity.

5.4.5 The Standard

In the previous sections, terms such as `prestigious standard', `standard variety', and so on are used. What do these terms imply? The standard variety is usually that



variety which is used in print, and is normally taught in schools and to foreigners learning the language. It is a variety that is codified i.e., grammar books and dictionaries are written on the basis of this variety. Moreover, it is used in news broadcasts, and spoken by the educated people. Many people consider this variety as the 'real language', and those that differ from it as dialects. However, this is only one variety amongst many, and its importance lies in the fact that it has attained a certain prestige.

But how does one dialect become so prestigious? One reason can be that the dialect is spoken in the political and cultural centres of the country and gains importance. The dominance in France of the Parisian dialect, and in England, of the London dialect, is attributable to this course.

However, we must be very clear about one point. A standard dialect may have several functions. It may bind people together, or provide a common written form for multidialectal speakers. But, it is neither more expressive, nor more logical, nor more complex than any other dialect. There are no scientific or linguistic reasons to consider it superior to any other dialect.

Self Check Exercise

- 4) What are the reasons for people speaking differently from one another?
- 5) What is a standard dialect? How did it attain prestige? Is it scientifically superior to the other dialects?

Note:

- i) Write your answers in the space given below.
- ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of this Unit.

5.5 DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SPOKEN AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

There are basically two ways in which we communicate with each other - through writing as well as verbally. Of course speech is primary, and is acquired spontaneously in early infancy through exposure. Writing is learned much later. Also the written language cannot be seen in isolation from the spoken language. In general, our understanding of written language depends on our knowledge of the corresponding

spoken language, and on our linguistic competence in general. Of course, there may be some cases, where a person may be able to read and write a language like Sanskrit, but not be able to converse in it. Language as a Medium for Communication of thought



In libraries, the readers communicate with the authors through their books which are in the written mode. In this section, we look at some of the similarities and differences between the two modes of communication - spoken and written.

- i) Speaking is commonly performed in face to face interaction and occurs as part of a dialogue, i.e., there is a reciprocal exchange in which both reception and production play a part. And any misunderstanding which may arise can be cleared up in the process of interaction, in the form of a feedback provided by the participants. This means that speakers can afford to be imprecise and inexplicit, and they can clarify and modify their meanings as they go along according to how they are received. A good deal of written language is non-reciprocal and non-interactive, in that the reader and writer are not visible to each other. The writer is not sure who her/his audience is going to be. It normally is an ill-defined group, although, specialized writing would be written for a well-defined homogeneous group of fellow professionals. Also, some forms of written discourse are reciprocal and interactive - for example, exchange of letters and notes to colleagues. But the vast bulk of printed material has no well-defined addressee.
- ii) Therefore, since most written language is public (i.e., published) the language is planned, edited, redrafted before it appears in print. Spoken language, on the other hand, is composed spontaneously as it is spoken, and is mostly unplanned and relatively unpredictable.
- iii) It follows that the written medium is permanent, as it is published. We, therefore, do not have to be understand a written text at the first reading. It can be re-read, skimmed through, sections can be omitted and referred to later. This is very different from spoken language, which has to be processed in real time, in lock-step with the speaker. Also since written language is permanent, it can be transmitted across time and space. This cannot happen in the case of spoken language, apart from recorded radio talks and lectures.
- iv) The written language reflects, to a large extent, the elements and rules that together constitute the grammar of the language. Written language is more conservative than the spoken language. When we write something, particularly in a formal style, we are more apt to obey the "prescriptive rules" taught in school. Spoken language is much less structured than written language. It contains many incomplete sentences, often simply sequences of phrases which are connected by *and, but, then*, etc. There is more repetition of syntactic forms, also a great deal of rather generalized vocabulary, such as *a lot of got to do, this thing, nice stuff, things like that*, etc. A large number of 'fillers' are also used: *well, erm, I think, you know, if you see what I mean*, and so on.
- v) However, both spoken and written language show stylistic variation from formal to informal style. Spoken language shows more variation than written language. It ranges from the formal language of lectures and speeches to casual and intimate conversation between individuals who know each other well, and share a similar background. Written language shows relatively less stylistic variation and more homogeneity, since it is used mostly for formal purposes. Written language in casual style such as for personal letters, is used much less, compared to the massive amount of formally published material that characterizes modern industrial societies.
- vi) Another feature of written language is that it is decontextualized, i.e., it has to stand on its own. Writers are uncertain what they can assume their readers know, and readers are usually unable to ask the writer for clarification. Spoken language, on the other hand, is context dependent.
- vii) All written language is on the standard language side of the scale. Instance of non-standard written language (dialect poetry for example) is the exception rather than the rule. And often when non-standard language is written in novels, it is in quotation marks, as the written representation of spoken language. Or it may be used for stylistic purposes. In fact, there is a special relationship between writing and the standardization of language. This is because standardization implies codification and planning of the language by dictionary makers, grammar book writers, and so on.
- viii) Finally, in libraries, one of the most important functions of written language depends on its ability to create durable and accurate records for reference in



the present and the future. And this storage function of written language has to be learned by ordinary people. It is a common complaint made by teachers and libraries that students often have no idea how to exploit the information storage potential of libraries. They need to know the different systems of cataloguing and indexing, systems of abstracting services, and computer-assisted search systems. By familiarizing themselves with the storage function of written language as well, students can make best use of libraries.

Self Check Exercise

6) Go through the previous section again. Then write 4 differences between spoken and written communication, in short, in the form of a table.

Note:

- i) Write your answer in the space given above.
- ii) Check your answer with the answers given at the end of this unit.

Spoken Communication	Written Communication
i)	
ii)	
iii)	
iv)	

5.6 SUMMARY

A library is primarily made up of books, and any person working in a library is surrounded by books. In this Unit, we made you aware of the crucial aspect of any book, i.e., *Language*- which an author uses to communicate her/his thoughts and ideas.

Language is defined in terms of its main functions and chief characteristics. Reasons for language variation, as well as language standardization are discussed. Finally, since the medium that the librarians are most exposed to in the course of their professional duties is the written language, differences between written and spoken language are discussed.

5.7 ANSWERS TO SELF CHECK EXERCISES

- 1) One of the main functions of language is to convey information. We use language for several reasons. It is used to communicate feelings and emotions. In addition, there is the language of social talk known as *phatic communion*, and this helps to establish and maintain social relationships. Language can also be an indirect means of conveying information about a speaker, i.e., what region a person comes from, her/his social status, occupation, etc. Finally, language is also used for aesthetic purposes like writing a poem or a novel.
- 2)
 - i. Creativity
 - ii. Structure Dependence
 - iii. Arbitrariness.
- 3) Creativity : This refers to the capacity of human beings to produce and understand large number of sentences, most of which they might not have heard or used before.



There is another dimension to creativity of human communication, and this we may call *functional creativity*. This basically refers to the ability of human beings to evolve more complex communicative systems, as the complexity of their life increases. For instance, a person living in a complex urban society is required to have command of more than one language and several registers as well.

- 4) There are several reasons why people speak differently from one another. One reason may be that they belong to different regions. Another can be that they belong to a higher or lower social strata. Moreover, the age and sex of a person also cause differences in speech. Finally, there are personality differences; a person may be a 'purist' and insists on speaking what she/he considers a pure form of a language.
- 5) A standard variety is a dialect which has gained prestige in a speech community. It cuts across regional differences, and, therefore, provides a uniform means of communication. It is a variety that is codified, i.e., dictionaries and grammar books are written on the basis of this variety. Moreover, this is the variety used in mass media and education. One reason why dialect attains prestige and becomes the standard is that it is spoken in political and cultural centres of the country, and gains in importance because of that.
No, there is no scientific reason for its superiority.
- 6)

Spoken Communication

- i) knows one's audience reciprocal
- ii) exchange
- iii) spontaneous and unpredictable
- iv) not permanent
more informal more stylistic
variation

Written Communication

- audience often unknown non-reciprocal
and non-interactive edited
permanent - records can be kept.
more formal less stylistic variation

5.8 KEY WORDS

- Accent** : Features of a person's pronunciation which help us identify where he is from, i.e., from a certain region or social strata,
- Arbitrariness** : One of the properties which defines human language as distinct from animal communication, whereby 'Linguistic Forms' lack any physical correspondence with the entities in the world to which they refer.
- Creativity** : Refers to the capacity of human beings to produce and understand an indefinitely large number of sentences, most of which they might not have heard or used before.
- Cultural Transmission** : Property of human 'Language' whereby the ability to speak a language is transmitted from generation to generation by a process of learning, and not genetically.
- Displacement** : A defining property of human language, whereby language can be used to communicate about events removed in time and space. This property occurs very rarely in animal communication.
- Duality of Structure** : Property of human 'Language', which sees language as being structurally organised in terms of two levels - level of sounds and level of words.
- Idiolect** : The linguistic system of an individual speaker, i.e., her/his personal dialect.



- Language Variation** : Difference in linguistic behaviour because of differences in region, social class, occupation, sex, etc.
- Phatic Communication** : Refers to language used for establishing or maintaining social contact, rather than for exchanging information or ideas.
- Perspective** : Characterises any approach which attempts to lay down rules of correctness as to how language should be used, with an aim to preserve imagined standards.
- Purist** : One who insists on preserving what she/he considers the 'correct' form of language, and is against language variation and language change.
- Register** : Variety of languages defined according to their use in situations, e.g., a register of scientific, religious, formal English.
- Standard Variety** : A prestige variety of language used within a community. Standard/languages/dialects/ varieties cut across regional differences, providing a unified means of communication, and thus creating an institutionalized norm, which can be used in mass media, in education, and so on.
- Stylistic Differentiation** : Refers to the level of formality which speakers adopt in situations, i.e., formal, colloquial, casual, informal style.

5.9 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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