
UNIT 32 USING LANGUAGE FOR COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS

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32.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall talk about some of the many communicative functions for which we make use of language.

From the discussion, examples and exercises, you will be able to see that

- a single form can be used for a number of different functions;
- a single function can be expressed in different forms;
- form and function interrelate both directly and indirectly;
- speakers choose an appropriate form for efficient communication.

32.1 INTRODUCTION

We mentioned briefly in Unit 31 that in learning a language we can focus both on language form and on language function. We considered a number of examples both of form and of function. In this unit we shall draw your attention pointedly to language functions in some greater detail.

The idea of a language function is that it describes what we *do* with language. Just as we can do a number of things with our hands or feet, for example kick a ball or lift a weight, so we can do a number of different things by means of language. For example, we can make use of language for such functions as *advising* or *criticising*. Consider the following:

(E1) 'Oh, Elmer, you can't bet on a certainty', said Mrs. Ramsay. She had a little smile on her lips and her tone was gently deprecating.

(W.S. Maugham: 'Mr Know-All')

Glossary

deprecating: showing disapproval

In the excerpt above Mrs. Ramsay is responding to a suggestion made during the conversation on board the ship between her husband, Elmer, and a fellow passenger called Mr. Kelada and nicknamed Mr. Know-All. Mr. Kelada admired the string of

pearls Mrs. Ramsay was wearing and said that it was of genuine pearls and was as fine a string for its size as he had ever seen. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, maintained that it was of cheap, cultured pearls and cost her merely \$18. Elmer felt his wife was right and said that he would bet Mr. Kelada \$ 100 that it was imitation and not real.

Mrs. Ramsay, however, advises her husband not to bet on a thing that is 'a certainty'. In E 1 above she makes use of language for *advising*. Elmer disagrees with her. He makes use of language for *disagreeing*:

(E2) 'Can't I? If I get a chance of easy money like that I should be all sorts of a fool not to take it'.

(Mr. Know-All')

Mrs. Ramsay feels uneasy about the bet and uses language to dissuade her husband from making it:

(E3) 'But how can it be proved?' she continued. 'It's only my word against Mr. Kelada's'.

(Mr. Know-All')

In the three excerpts above, we note that Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay use the language for such functions as *advising*, *disagreeing* and *dissuading*.

Similarly, you can do many other things with language. You can *complain*, *greet*, *request*, *apologise*, *invite*, *express pleasure and displeasure*, *make* and *reject suggestions*. In other words, you can make language express many different communicative functions. If you look at language this way, you can see what the speaker is doing with the language in the following:

(E4) 'Do you mind just throwing them out of the porthole?'

(Mr. Know-All')

Glossary

'porthole: a small usually circular window in the side of a ship or aircraft

Mr. Kelada uses the interrogative form but he uses it to communicate a *request*. In the following, the speaker uses the question form to express a *complaint*:

(E5) 'What is the use of a statue if it cannot keep the rain off?' he said; 'I must look for a good chimney pot', and he determined to fly away.

(Oscar Wilde: 'The Happy Prince')

If you like, you can draw up a list to show what people can make language do for them. They can, for example, use language

- to ask for information
- to give information
- to express want
- to express surprise
- to express preference
- to express dissatisfaction
- to express intention
- to identify
- to report
- to greet

- to clarify
- to invite

The list can be very long. The focus in the units in this Block is not on the list of functions but on how we use language to perform many of these functions. If there are so many functions a language can do, can we talk about all of them in this course? We can't, and there is no need to discuss all of them. The important thing is that as users of language we should be able to *do* things with language appropriately. As the need arises, we should be able to make use of language in such a way that it expresses, for example, *regret* or *agreement* or whatever else we wish it to do for us.

32.2 RELATIONSHIP OF LANGUAGE FORM AND FUNCTION

If we focus on a sentence form and one of its usual functions, we can arrive at a simple relationship between them. For example, we can say that people ask questions because they want some *information*. Consider the following:

- (1) When did he leave?
- (2) How many units have you completed?
- (3) Where are you going?
- (4) Whom are you expecting?

The questions above are aimed at asking for information. In many home assignments or classroom exercises you do, the communicative intent of the questions is to ask you for relevant information. So, after reading you a story, the teacher may, for example, ask you the following to test your comprehension:

- (5) What is the title of the story?
- (6) What's the name of its author?
- (7) Where does the action of the story take place?
- (8) When did the murder happen?
- (9) What was the weapon that the murderer used?
- (10) Did the victim anticipate the attack?

From such examples it is not unreasonable to infer that we make use of questions in English for 'inquiry'. This relationship between the question form and its function is rather simplistic. The question form in English can perform a number of other functions.

32.2.1 One Language Form Expressing a Number of Functions

The question form can be made to do a lot of work in the English language. In certain situations, the question form can be used

- (a) when *requesting*:
- (E4) 'Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow, will you not bring her the ruby out of my sword hilt? My feet are fastened to this pedestal and I cannot move.'
(*'The Happy Prince'*)
- (E5) 'Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow,' said the Prince, 'will you not stay with me for one night and be my messenger? The boy is so thirsty, and the mother so sad.'
(*'The Happy Prince'*)

- (E6) Aksionov answered him fully, and said, 'Won't you have some tea with me?'
(Leo Tolstoy: 'God Sees The Truth But Waits')

In other situations, the question form can be used

- (b) when *sympathizing*:

- (E7) 'Tired, darling?'
'Yes, a little.'
'That woman has worn you out with talking. She oughtn't to talk so much.'
(Dorothy L. Sayers: 'Suspicion')

- (E8) He crept quietly to his bedroom. Ethel's voice greeted him on the threshold.
'How late you are, Harold. Naughty old boy; had a good time?'
'Not bad. You all right, darling?'
'Quite all right'

('Suspicion')

Glossary

had a good time? : enjoyed yourself?

In many other situations, the question form can be used

- (c) when *offering*:

- (E9) 'Shall I take him another ruby?'
(The Happy Prince)

- (E10) 'Would you be requiring anything tonight, sir, before I go up?'
(Suspicion)

- (E11) 'Will you be taking tea or can I clear away?'
(Suspicion)

The question form can also be used

- (d) when *asking permission*:

- (E12) 'Please don't talk that way. Couldn't I read to you?'
(Ernest Hemingway: 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro')

- (E13) In the evening, Oscar Cresswell did not come, but Bassett sent a message, saying could he come up for one moment, just one moment? Paul's mother was very angry at the intrusion, but on second thought she agreed.
(D.H. Lawrence: 'The Rocking Horse Winner')

- (E14) Jody ran into the kitchen where his mother was wiping the last of the breakfast dishes. 'Can I have a lemon to make a lemonade for Grandfather?'
(John Steinbeck: 'The Leader of the People')

The examples above illustrate some of the ways in which questions can be used in English.

32.2.2 One Language Function Having Different Forms

Just as a single form can be used to express a number of different functions (as we saw in sub-section 32.2.1), so a single function can be expressed in a number of forms. For example, in English a *request* can be made in the form of a statement, or a question, or an imperative:

- (11) I wonder whether you can post this letter for me on your way to the office.
- (12) Can you post this letter for me on your way to the office?
- (13) Post this letter for me on your way to the office, won't you?
- (14) Post this letter for me on your way to the office.

As you go through these examples, you may ask a very natural question: Why do people need to change the language form for the same function? A full answer to this question will be spread over a number of units of this Block. At this point it may be useful to note that speakers select their language to match it with the situation in which they use it. The word 'situation' needs explaining.

A Situation may include the mode of conversation – face to face, telephone, in writing etc. It may also include time and place of conversation. But many of these considerations are subsumed under the degree of formality/informality between speaker – hearer.

A situation also means the relationship between the speaker and the hearer. For example, whether they are friends; whether one has authority over the others; whether they are only acquaintances. Even among friends, there can be considerations such as whether the action asked for will cause inconvenience or whether it can be done routinely. A 'situation' also means whether the speaker is afraid of losing his face if the action he asks for is refused. It also means whether the language used is in the spoken mode or the written mode. One, or some, or all of these considerations will call for a careful choice of language. Take a situation in which speaker A is making a request to speaker B but speaker B is in authority. For example a student (A) wishes to ask his teacher after class to explain a difficult point to him. Speaker A may put the request as follows:

- (15) Could you possibly spare some free time for me?

On the other hand, to a friend A may simply say:

- (16) Do you have some free time? /Can you spare some free time for me?

They may be friends but if A perceives that his request means a lot of inconvenience to his hearer, he may opt for the following :

- (17) Do you think you can spare some free time for me?

In other words, a particular function may be expressed in a certain way depending on the factors in focus in the communicative 'situation'.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1 Read the following excerpts taken from D.H. Lawrence's story 'The Last Laugh'. The sentences in the excerpts have been numbered for convenience of reference.

Excerpt 1

(1) At that very moment he gave a wild lurch on the slippery snow, but managed to save himself from falling. (2) She watched him, on tiptoes of alertness. (3) His bowler hat bounced away in the thin snow. (4) They were under a lamp near the curve. (5) As he ducked for his hat he showed a bald spot, just like a tonsure, among his dark, thin, rather curly hair....

- (6) 'Did you hurt yourself?' she asked, in her quick, cool, unemotional way.
- (7) 'No!' he shouted derisively.
- (8) 'Give me the machine, won't you?' she said, holding out her woolly hand.
- (9) 'I believe I'm safer.'

- (10) 'Do you want it?' he shouted.
(11) 'Yes, I'm sure I'm safer.'

Excerpt 2

- (1) 'James,' he said loudly to her, leaning towards her ear. (2) 'Do you hear somebody laughing?'
(3) 'Laughing?' she retorted quickly. (4) 'Who's laughing?'
(5) 'I don't know. (6) Somebody!' he shouted, showing his teeth at her in a very odd way.
(7) 'No, I hear nobody,' she announced.
(8) 'But it's most extraordinary!' he cried, his voice slurring up and down. (9) Put on your machine.'
(10) 'Put it on?' she retorted. (11) 'What for?'
(12) 'To see if you can hear it,' he cried.
(13) 'Hear what?'
(14) 'The laughing. (15) Somebody laughing. (16) It's most extraordinary.'
(17) She gave her odd little chuckle and handed him her machine.

In both the excerpts the two people in conversation use the question form frequently. Say what function each question form performs in the communication. The answer for the question at 1.6 (that is excerpt 1, sentence 6) has been given to you as a lead.

Question at 1.6; function: sympathising

- " " 1.8; function: _____
" " 1.10; function: _____
" " 2.2; function: _____
" " 2.3; function: _____
" " 2.4; function: _____
" " 2.10; function: _____
" " 2.11; function: _____

2 Read the situations given below and write what you would say to make a request in each case. Use the words given in brackets. One example has been done for you.

1 You want to borrow your friends' bicycle. What do you say to him/her? (Could I...?)

Could I borrow your bicycle?

2 You want to leave school early because you have to meet your uncle at the station. What do you ask your teacher? (May I...?)

3 The boys in the next room have some music on very loud. How do you ask them politely to turn it down? (Do you think you...?)

4 You have to move some heavy furniture to the assembly hall. Ask someone to help you. (Do you think you...?)

- 5 You're in the post office. You want a stamp for an air mail letter to America. What do you say to a person standing in the queue? (Would you mind... ?)
-
-

- 6 You've got a fifty-rupee note but you need some change. You ask somebody to help you. (Can you change. ...?)
-
-

32.2.3 Form and Function Interrelate both Directly and Indirectly

In this section we shall consider the question of relationship between language form and language function. Two possibilities are considered:

- i) a form and its function may be directly related, and
- ii) a form and its function may be indirectly related.

When they are directly related, no further knowledge of context is required; when they are indirectly related, it is impossible to say what the form is *doing* without further knowledge of context.

We begin with the possibility of a direct relationship between a form and its function. Consider the following exchange between A and B (The examples of exchanges are marked serially as (a), (b), (c), etc.)

- (a) A: I'm sorry I was late.
B: It's all right.

The apology expressed by A is in a form that is directly related to apologizing. It is possible to add words to make the apology stronger:

I'm *really* sorry./I'm *terribly* sorry .

It is also possible to add an explanation for the inconvenience caused :

I'm really sorry I was late—I overslept.

Does a language form always reflect its communicative function so directly? For example, can you say without any knowledge of the context what the speaker is *doing* when he says the following:

- (18) Where did you buy this necklace from?

If you say he is asking for information, your interpretation will be wrong in such exchanges as the following:

- (b) A: Where did you buy this necklace from?
B: Why? Is the design outdated?
(c) A: Where did you buy this necklace from?
B: It's pretty, isn't it? I'm glad you like it.

In (b), A's utterance is a criticism of B's taste. B gives the answer taking note of the criticism. But in (c), A's utterance is intended as a praise, and B responds to it in that light. In (d), the same utterance as given in (b) and (c) does the work of asking for information:

- (d) A: Where did you buy this necklace from?
B: Ramsons. The shop next to Rivoli, you know.

The exchanges in (b), (c) and (d) clearly show that an utterance can have different functional interpretations in different contexts. Indeed, the functional interpretation we place on almost any utterance depends upon the 'situation'. Although the function of A's utterance in exchange (a) may be directly related to apologizing, a similar one-to-one relationship does not obtain between one common utterance in (b), (c) and (d) and its functions. In such examples of use it is impossible to decide which function is being expressed without a proper knowledge of the context.

Let us consider some more examples of direct and indirect relationship between form and function.

- (18) How are you?
(19) Trespassers will be prosecuted.
(20) You are a swine.
(21) He will be fined Rs. 100.

All these utterances can be related directly to the function they perform: inquiry after one's health, warning, insult and threat. We do not necessarily need any further knowledge of context to understand them.

A lot of language in use cannot however be interpreted so directly. In order to understand what an utterance means we need further knowledge of the context/situation in which it occurs. As explained above, a 'situation' means a number of things: the role of participants, the language used earlier in the communication, the various purposes of the speakers so far, cultural knowledge, and knowledge of the world. Consider the following utterances:

- (22) What about Ravi?
(23) We are thinking of going to Agra this weekend.
(24) How about going to Agra this weekend?

There is no one-to-one relationship between these utterances and the functions they perform. For example, is (22) an inquiry about where Ravi is? Or is it an inquiry after his health? Or is it suggested to have him in the group? Or is the meaning not clear to the hearer? Depending on the context, (22) can be interpreted in quite different ways:

- (e) A: What about Ravi?
B: He's at school.
(f) A: What about Ravi?
B: He's also down with malaria.
(g) A: What about Ravi?
B: It's no use asking him to join us.
(h) A: What about Ravi?
B: What about him?

Similarly, are (23) and (24) suggestions or invitations? Without further knowledge of the context, it is difficult to decide which function is being expressed.

If you have taken in the point made in this section, your use of language and your interpretation of it will not be controlled by a one-to-one simplistic relationship of

language form and function. Consider the two questions in the following excerpt (they are italicized to draw your attention to them):

(E15) 'I dreamed that I was dead,' Francis said.

'What was it like?' Peter asked with curiosity.

'I can't remember,' Francis said, and his eyes turned with relief to the silver of day, as he allowed the fragmentary memories to fade.

'You dreamed of a big bird.'

'Did I?' Francis accepted his brother's knowledge without question, and for a little the two lay silent in bed facing each other, the same green eyes, the same nose tilting at the tip, the same firm lips parted, and the same firm lips parted, and the same premature modeling of the chin.

(Graham Greene: 'The End of the party')

If you note that the first question begins with a 'wh-word' and the second with the past form of 'do', you have not gone very far in understanding what these questions *do* in the communication between the two brothers, who are twins. Now, the first question is an inquiry but how will you interpret the second? The second question is Francis's reply to what his brother said. In English, we often let short questions perform such a function as *giving a reply* to show interest, concern, anger or other reaction. These questions contain just an auxiliary verb or a form of the verb *be*, and a personal pronoun. These questions, call them 'reply questions' if you like, do not ask for information; they are replies to statements typically suggesting that we are listening. Consider some more examples:

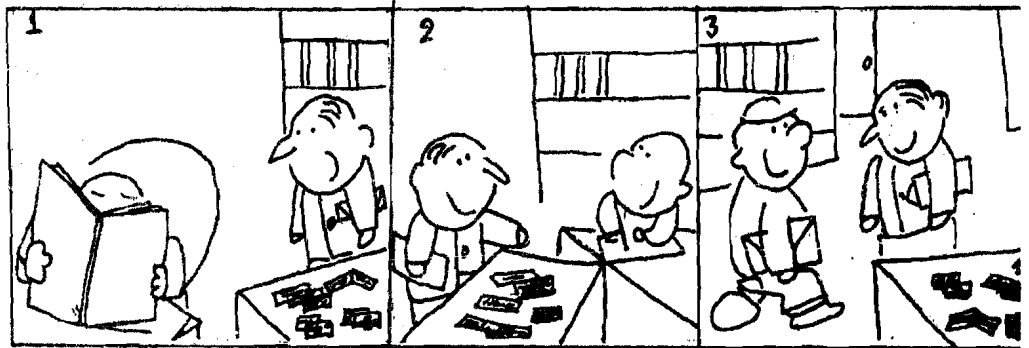
- (i) A: We had a lovely picnic.
B: Did you?
A: Yes, we went to Tughlaqabad Fort.
- (j) A: I have sprained my ankle.
B: Have you? Can I help?
- (k) A: He likes to play cricket.
B: Does he?
- (l) A: It wasn't an interesting book.
B: Wasn't it? That's a pity.

32.3 THE CHOICE OF AN APPROPRIATE FORM FOR A COMMUNICATIVE SITUATION

In 32.2.2 we noted that a single function could be expressed in quite different ways. In this section we shall look at this language variety again but relate it to specific communicative situations. When we put language to use in a particular communicative situation, we generally choose one most appropriate form out of the many different ways of expressing the function concerned. A particular choice is taken because of the factors in focus in the communicative situation. We shall consider different communicative situations, and in each the speaker has to make an appropriate choice of language form to perform the function intended.

- (a) The first communicative situation under consideration is that speaker A wishes to make a request to B. Let us take note of two factors in the situation:

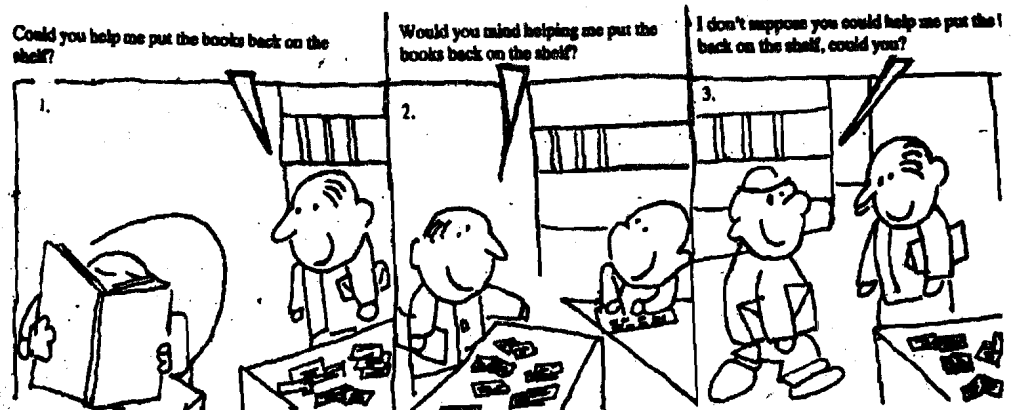
(a) Who is speaking to whom and (b) when? A is making a request to his room-mate B; in other words the status of their relationship is constant. The 'when' in the situation however varies from occasion to occasion. This variation is shown in the picture strip below:



As the picture strip shows, on one occasion the request is made when B is reading a newspaper (picture 1). On another occasion, the request is made when B is writing a letter (picture 2). On the third occasion, the request is made when B is about to dress to go to his office (picture 3). How does A make the request in question on each occasion? Can he, for example, make the language do his work on each occasion by any of these utterances:

- 1 Can you help me put the books back on the shelf?
 or
- 2 Could you help me put the books back on the shelf?
 or
- 3 Would you mind helping me put the books back on the shelf?
 or
- 4 I don't suppose you could help me put the books back on the shelf, could you?

You can immediately recognize that sentences 1-4 are all requests. A however chooses 2 on the first occasion, 3 on the second one, and 4 on the third one.



In picture 1, A feels that he is putting B to some degree of inconvenience so he prefers the form with 'could' which is more polite than the form with 'can'. In picture 2, A feels that he is putting B to a greater degree of inconvenience, that is, pulling him away from writing an important letter, and so he prefers using an even more polite form, 'Would you mind...'. In picture 3, A feels that he is putting B to a very great degree of inconvenience, that is, expecting him to squeeze time out of the little time he has to dress to go to the office, and so he prefers using the most polite form.

You can see that he begins his request with a statement in a negative form, that is almost with little expectation, 'I don't suppose...'

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(b) The second communicative situation is when A wishes to make a request to a number of different people. Let us again take note of the two factors we considered in the first communicative situation: (a) Who is speaking to whom and (b) when. In this situation both the 'when' and the 'whom' are changing. The 'when' however is not changing in any important way; the relationship between A and his hearer, on the other hand, changes very significantly on each different occasion. On the first occasion he is asking a classmate to explain a point that he didn't understand during a lecture by his Chemistry teacher. On the second occasion he is asking his teacher to explain the point to him again. On the third occasion he is asking a student from a senior class, whom he knows only by sight, to explain the point to him. Can he, for example, make the language do his work on each occasion by any of these utterances, which are all requests :

- 1 I want you to explain an important point I didn't understand during the lecture.
- or
- 2 Could you explain an important point I didn't understand during the lecture?
- or
- 3 Could you possibly explain an important point I didn't understand during the lecture?
- or
- 4 I was wondering if you could explain an important point I didn't understand during the lecture.

On the first occasion, A chooses 2, which is a polite form. Although the request is made to a classmate, from a friend to a friend, A's choice is determined by the fact that a function such as a request calls for politeness. On the second occasion A makes the request to his teacher, who is in a position of authority in the given relationship, so he decides to make his request more polite by using 'possibly'. On the third occasion, the request is rather unusual, particularly because the hearer is hardly connected with the situation; so A prefers using 4 because it is an indirect way of requesting and therefore most polite.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1 Read the following examples in which the speaker concerned is making a request. There are three situations given in brackets for each request. Tick the most appropriate situation in which the request in question would be made. One example is done for you.
 - 1 I want you to stop making a noise. ((a) Teacher to teachers; (b) Teacher to class (c) Teacher to an audience of invited guests)
 - 2 Give me a hand with my homework. ((a) Friend to friend (b) Son to father (c) Pupil to teacher).
 - 3 Could you possibly wire them the message? ((a) Colleague to colleague (b) Employee to boss (c) Employer to employee).
 - 4 Do you think you could possibly drive her to the station? ((a) Boss to driver (b) Driver to boss (c) Husband to wife).
 - 5 I was wondering whether you would be able to spare some time to look into these papers. (a) Friend to friend (b) Subordinate to boss (c) Colleague to colleague).

2 Consider the following two-line sequences in which the question in each sequence is the same but the answer is different each time:

- 1 A: How did you arrive at this result?
B: Well, I added x and y together.....
- 2 A: How did you arrive at this result?
B: Oh! It's quite easy.
- 3 A: How did you arrive at this result?
B: Why? Have I made a serious mistake?

Tick the inference(s) you draw from the above sequences.

- (a) The speaker is asking for information in 1, 2 and 3.
- (b) The speaker is asking for information in 1, is complementing in 2, and is criticising in 3.
- (c) The question form is not always directly related to asking for information. In a number of situations, what the speaker is doing with the question form has to be inferred from the context in which it is used.

32.4 LET US SUM UP

The example and the discussion above highlighted some very useful points about language use. We emphasised the fact that a single form could be used for many different functions. To illustrate the point, we took the example of the question form in English. We noted that we could use the question form when asking for information, when criticising, when complaining, when sympathising, or when offering. Similarly, we noted that a single function could be realised by a number of forms. We noted, for example, that a request could be made either in the form of a statement or in the form of a question or in the form of an imperative. Finally, we noted that in a given communicative situation, we opted for a particular form by taking note of certain important factors in that situation. For example, if a request is to be made to a person to whom it is going to cause considerable inconvenience, then the request has to be made in a very polite form.

32.5 KEY WORDS

Language Function: A language function describes what language users *do* with language. For example, when we invite, we use the language of *inviting*; when we advise, we use the language of *advising*. To *invite*, to *advise*, to *accept*, to *reject*, to *agree*, to *disagree*, are among the many functions that language can perform for us.

Form and function interrelate directly: In a number of communicative situations, we use language which reflects the function very directly. For example, we can easily say what the following samples of language are doing: (a) How do you do? (greeting); (b) I'm sorry (apologising); (c) Thank you very much (thanking someone).

Form and function interrelate indirectly: In many communicative situations, what a particular language does depends on our knowledge of context. In other words, the form has no predetermined function. For example, consider the following exchanges 1) and 2) between A and B:

- 1 A: Do you have a watch on you?
B: It's five o'clock.
- 2 A: Do you have a watch on you?
B: I'm afraid I'm not wearing mine today.

The same form is interpreted in two different ways because of the variable context.

Language in Use: In talking about language, we can cite examples of language forms without any context. Consider the following:

- 1 She is my neighbour. (statement)
2 What is her name? (question)
3 Sit down. (imperative)

What a statement, a question or an imperative does will depend on their use in communication, that is on language in use. Consider the following:

- 1 A: Why are you standing? *Sit down.*
B: Thank you.
- 2 A: Why are you standing? *Sit down.*
B: Hang yourself.

In the contexts of 'Sit down', the expression is interpreted differently by B.

ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1 1.8 function: request
1.10 function: to elicit confirmation
2.2 function: inquiry (asking for information)
2.3 function: echo question; echoing what the speaker had said, i.e. (Did you say) laughing?
2.4 function: inquiry (asking for information)
2.10 function: echo question; echoing what the speaker has said: (Did you say) Put it (the machine) on?
2.11 function: asking for clarification.
- 2 2 May I leave school early today because I have to meet my uncle at the station?
3 Do you think you could turn the volume down?
4 Do you think you could give me a hand with the furniture?
5 Would you mind buying me a stamp for an airmail letter to America?
6 Can you change a fifty-rupee note for me?

Check Your Progress 2

- 1 2(a); 3(a); 4(c); 5(b)
2 (b) and (c)