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# **BLOCK INTRODUCTION**

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In this the first block, we start at the beginning by describing the nature of language, its salient characteristics and how it is different from other forms of communication, especially animal communication (Unit 1). In Units 2 and 3 of this block, we historically trace the ways linguists and grammarians have viewed the data that they are describing. We concentrate on the twentieth century, where we were a witness to two major ways of viewing language - i.e. The Structuralist - behaviourist and Generative - mentalist.

In Unit 4, we examine the relationship between language and thought: Are language and thought two independent entities? Or Is all thought language - dependent?

The title of the four units are as follows:

1. The Nature of Language
2. Looking at Data - 1
3. Looking at Data - 2
4. Language and Thought

Hope you enjoyed reading the units

# **INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE**

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So far you have read and enjoyed only our literature courses. But, as you are aware, to really appreciate literature, you need to understand the medium in which it is written, i.e. **language**. This course - **Aspects of Language** - gives you a bird's eye view of the nature of language, its characteristics and functions, its relationship with thought, the dimensions of power or lack of it that it controls. The course also engages you with the major ways of looking at language which emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. the Structuralist - Behaviourist and the Generative - Mentalist.

In Block 2 of the Course, we touch upon the origin and the formation of the English Language. Speakers of a language have an illusion of the changelessness of language. But language, like the human body is changing all the time, although we may not be aware of it. In this Block we look at the development of the English language in terms of its structure - sounds, words and its grammar.

In a later block, we describe the origin and development of the English language in terms of the historical of sociolinguistic factors which have contributed to its making and proliferation. We also introduce you to the notion of Standard English, and examine in some detail the question of Indian English.

In Block 3, we describe the sounds of English and the different ways they are patterned. We also touch upon word accent, stress and rhythm in connected speech and intonation of English. You will realize that English follows a different rhythm from your native languages.

In Block 4 we help you understand something about how words are formed in English. We show you the processes of word-formation which have contributed to word-creation and the enrichment of English.

In Block 5 we study the structure of English sentences (Syntax). The study of syntax acquired a special significance from the mid-fifties with the advent of Chomsky. While the Structural linguists merely described the structure of the language, the Generativist (following Chomsky) considered explanation as the primary goal, and attempted to relate it to the human mind.

In the next two blocks, we look at the relationship between language and society from the point of view of class structures, bilingualism, language planning, ways of conversing and so on.

In the last block we bring about a marriage between language and literature through the discipline of stylistics.

In order to get the best out of this Course you need to read it through. Read it like a story on the history and development of English.

Good luck and happy reading!

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# UNIT 1 THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 What is language?
- 1.3 How and why did language originate?
- 1.4 Characteristics of human language
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Key Words
- 1.7 Suggested Readings
- 1.8 Questions

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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The aim of this unit is to understand the nature of human language, to examine the various theories dealing with its origin, and to examine in what ways human language is different from other animal systems of communication.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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According to Hockett (1958), language is "the most valuable single possession of the human race". Each one of us makes use of language in virtually everything we do. The use of language is an integral part of being human. Humboldt has even gone to the extent of saying that "man is man through the use of language alone". Yet, the use of language is so spontaneous and natural that we pay no more attention to it than we do to our breathing or to the beating of our hearts. We take language too much for granted. Just for a brief while, try and imagine what our life would be like without language. Extremely difficult, if not impossible ! What then is this unique thing called language which is so important, yet so little thought of?

It is not easy to define language. Most common people define it as a means of communication. For the professional grammarian, language is the pairing of a lexicon and a set of rules of syntax. But, as we will see in this block, language is far more complex and we need to make a sustained effort to explore its nature and structure.

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## 1.2 DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE

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The term language has been defined differently by different people. Let us look at some of these definitions to understand what language is :

'Language is that system by which sounds and meanings are related' (Fromkin and Rodman, 1974)

'Language is the most sophisticated and versatile means available to human beings for the communication of meaning' (Brown, 1984)

'Language is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. (Sapir 1921).

'Language is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols.' (Hall, 1964)

'A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which the members of a society interact in terms of their total culture'(Trager, 1949)

Language is a 'System of sounds, words, patterns, etc. used by humans to communicate thoughts and feelings.' (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 1989)

'Language is a patterned system of arbitrary sound signals, characterised by structure dependence, creativity, displacement, duality, and cultural transmission.' (Aitchison, 1987) (we discuss some of these features in later sections)

One of the best ways to understand human language is to compare it with animal communication, and to see where the similarities and differences lie. We will do that in a while, but, before that, let us try to understand how and why language originated.

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### **1.3 HOW AND WHY DID LANGUAGE ORIGINATE?**

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No one knows exactly how language originated. And because of this, there is no dearth of speculations about the origins of human speech. Let us briefly consider some of these.

**The Divine Source Theory :** According to one view, God created Adam and "whatsoever Adam called every living creature that was the name thereof" (Genesis, 2:19). According to Hindu tradition, language came from goddess Saraswati. In most religions, there appears to be a divine source that provided humans with language. Generally, every society has a divine story to tell about the origins of its language. We also notice that the alphabetical symbols or ideographs used in writing are often associated with divine images.

**The Natural Sound Source Theory :** Another view of the origin of human speech is based on the concept of natural sounds. The theory suggests that first words were imitations of the natural sounds which early men and women heard around them. The fact that all languages have some words which seem to echo naturally occurring sounds could have led to this theory. "Cuckoo", "bang", "buzz", "hiss", "bow-wow", etc., are some examples from English. In fact, this type of view has been called the "bow-wow theory" of language origin.

Although it is true that a number of words in every language are echoic or onomatopoeic, it is difficult to understand how the abstract ideas and emotions could have been referred to in a language that simply echoed natural sounds. Another argument against this theory is that our language also seems to influence the way we hear and imitate the sounds of nature, e.g., the roasters crow 'cock-a-doodle-doo' in English; 'kuk-ru-ka-roo' in Hindi and 'kikeriki' in German !

**The Pooh-Pooh Theory :** In 1871, in his *Descent of Man*, Darwin proposed that like man himself, his language also developed from a more primitive form, probably from expressions of emotions. For example, a feeling of contempt is accompanied by the action of puffing of air out through the nostrils or the mouth and this action makes sounds like "pooh" or "pish" . The critics of Darwin's theory scornfully named it as the Pooh-pooh theory.

**The Ding-Dong Theory :** Muller, a contemporary of Darwin, proposed the ding-dong theory of the origin of language. According to this theory, there was a mystic

relationship between sound and meaning. There was an instinct in the primitive human being, by which every impression from without received a vocal expression from within. Just as a particular sound is produced when any object is struck by a solid body, similarly human being's mind gave a particular response to every impact the world made upon it. For example, the sight of a snake rang a bell and the primitive human instinctively said "snake".

As is clear from the above discussion, it is a big puzzle as to how language began. But, why language began seems to be rather clear. Language must have evolved because humans needed it for the following purposes :

To give factual information and to convey commands. This is also called information talking.

To convey emotions and feelings.

To maintain social contact on a friendly level. This is also called phatic communication or language of social chitchat or small talk.

For aesthetic reasons like poetry.

To relieve nervous tension.

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## 1.4 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMAN LANGUAGE

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As mentioned earlier, one of the best ways to understand what human language is, is to compare it with other systems of animal communication and try to understand the similarities and differences between the two. This is precisely what we will do in this section.

### Use of sound signals

The use of sound signals is perhaps the most obvious characteristic of human language. But this feature is neither unique to human beings nor all-important. It is not unique to humans as a lot of other animals also use sounds for communication. And it is not all-important because human beings can transfer language to visual symbols (as in the case of sign language, or writing) and to tactile symbols (as in the case of Braille). So, this characteristic is of little use in distinguishing human communication from animal communication.

### Arbitrariness

In the case of animals there is generally an apparent relation between the signal and the message the animal wishes to convey. For example, an animal who wishes to warn off an opponent will generally simulate an attacking attitude. A cat, for example, will arch its back, spit and appear ready to pounce.

On the other hand, if we look at human language carefully, we see that except in the case of onomatopoeic words or expressions, there is no logical relationship between the signal and the message. The symbols used by human beings are arbitrary. For example, there is no logical relationship between the word 'water' and the thing it symbolises. Had there been an intrinsic or logical relationship between the two, then why would the same thing be called 'pani' in Hindi? It is all the more interesting to note that in Hindi itself there is another word for water, i.e., 'jal'.

It appears that the role played by 'learning' in animal communication is very little. Their language is more or less genetically inbuilt. For example, bee-dancing, which is used by the bees to convey information about the source of nectar, is quite the same in bee colonies all over the world. And since, we do not expect the bees all over the world to be holding international conferences, we have to agree with the hypothesis that they are born with this language.

Another interesting thing to notice is that if a human child is brought up in isolation, (s)he does not acquire language, whereas birds reared in isolation sing songs that are recognisable. Human beings require a long exposure to language in order to acquire it. This does not mean that human language is totally conditioned by the environment. According to Chomsky, human beings are born with an innate 'language acquisition device' (LAD), but environment plays an important role in triggering this innate ability. We should note that every normal child learns an extremely complex grammatical system before s/he is 3 years old. It is certainly one of the greatest wonders of human societies, it cannot be accomplished unless we were endowed with an innate language faculty.

So we can say that although both humans and other animals seem to be genetically predisposed to acquire language, it seems in humans, this latent potentiality can only be activated by long exposure to language, which requires careful learning.

### **Displacement**

Most animals can communicate about things in the immediate environment only. A bird utters its cry of danger when danger is present. It cannot give information about a danger which is removed in time and place.

Human language, on the other hand, can communicate about things that are absent as easily as about things that are present. This phenomenon, is known as **displacement**. It occasionally occurs in the animal world, for example, in the communication 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 inform each other only about nectar. Human language can cope with any subject whatever, and it does not matter how far away the topic of conversation is in time and space.

### **Creativity**

Most animals have a fixed number of messages which are sent in clearly definable circumstances. For example, a North American cicada can give only four messages and a male grasshopper has a choice of six. Research conducted on dolphins, birds and bees has also shown that they are unable to say anything new.

Human beings, on the other hand, can talk about anything they like. They can produce and understand utterances which they have never produced or heard before. It is also not necessary that the same situation would make them utter the same thing each time.

So we can say that **creativity** is an important characteristic which distinguishes human communication from animal communication.

### **Duality or double articulation**

Animals who use sound signals for communicating have a finite set of basic sounds. The number of basic sounds varies from species to species. Cows, for example, have less than ten, whereas foxes have over thirty. Most animals use each

basic sound only once, or occasionally few simple combinations of these basic sounds. This means that the number of messages that an animal can convey is almost limited to the number of basic sounds that that animal possesses.

In contrast, human language works very differently. Every language has a set of thirty to forty basic sounds which are called phonemes. These phonemes are generally meaningless in isolation. Imagine a person uttering the basic sounds 'a..k..u..t..v..r..l..j..h... Do you think it would be possible for this person to convey any meaning? These basic sounds or phonemes become meaningful only when they combine with each other in accordance with the rules of a language. So we can say that human language is organised into two levels or layers, i.e., a layer of individual sounds which combine with each other to form the second layer of bigger units like words. This kind of organisation into two layers is called **duality or double articulation**.

At one time, it was thought that duality was a characteristic unique to human language. But now some people claim Duality is also not unique to humans as it is present in bird song where each individual note is meaningless. It is the combination of notes which conveys meaningful messages. However, the complex ways in which words are combined to create an infinite number of sentences may indeed be unique to humans.

### **Patterning**

Close to the phenomena of duality is patterning. As you are aware most animal systems of communication comprise simple list of sounds. There does not seem to be any internal organisation within the system.

Human language, on the other hand, has well defined internal patterns. There are firm restrictions on which elements (sounds, words, etc.) can occur together, and in which order. For example, take the sounds 'o', 'p', 't', 's' in English. These sounds can be arranged in the following six ways only: 'spot', 'stop', 'pot', 'pots', 'top' and 'tops'. Other possibilities like 'tsop', 'ptos', 'opst', are not possible because the rules of English do not allow these.

Similar kind of patterns are followed when words are combined to form sentences.

### **Structure dependence**

Human beings instinctively understand the patterned nature of language, and manipulate 'structured chunks' of language, e.g., they understand that a group of words can be, at times, the structural equivalent of one word. Consider the following sentences:

The boy who proposed to me gave me a bouquet of flowers He gave me a really beautiful bouquet of flowers.

This chunk can be rearranged according to the rules of the language, for example, the rule of passivization:

A bouquet of flowers was given to me by the boy who proposed to me.

This kind of a thing does not seem to be present in any other animal system of communication.

### **Other characteristics**

Human language has many more characteristics besides the ones discussed above. These are generally not unique to humans. Some of these are:



**Reciprocity or interchangeability** : any speaker/sender of a linguistic signal can also be a listener/receiver.

**Rapid fading** : auditory signals are transitory. They disappear quickly.

**Spontaneous usage** : speaking is not something which humans do under any compulsion. They speak spontaneously and out of their own will.

**Turn-taking** : humans take turns while talking.

**Specialisation** : vocal signals are used for conveying meaning only. They do not normally serve any other type of purpose, such as breathing or feeding.

**Complete feedback** : speakers of a vocal signal receive the message themselves also.

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## 1.5 USING LANGUAGE

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We have so far discussed 'what is human language?' and how it differs from other forms of communication, especially animal communication. Now we shall briefly study some of the ways in which human beings use language and the disciplines which study this.

For instance, you must have noticed that human beings speak the same language with each other, but there could be perceptible differences in their speech. These differences are due to a number of factors such as social class, region, caste, ethnic group, age, sex and so on. The differences could also be due to the subject matter and the relationship between the participants in the speech act. For instance one would be **formal** with one's boss and **informal** with a colleague and intimate with one's husband.

The disciplines which studies the role of language in society is known as **sociolinguistics**. Then there are **general principles** followed by human beings when they communicate with one another. **Pragmatics** is the branch of linguistics which studies this aspect of language use.

Another dimension, which we wish to bring to your notice is the relationship between **language and power**. Most people generally associate power with money, property, status, etc. believing that language belongs as much to the poor as to the rich. Unfortunately, it is not true. Like money, land, property and status, language is also used to acquire, exercise, consolidate and maintain power. Everybody speaks language and everybody uses it to 'mean something' in a given context but it is only a select few whose language is regarded as pure and standard. This so-called standard language is used as an extremely effective and powerful asset in the unholy appropriation of the surplus produced by the poor people who are constantly denied any access to the standard variety. What is more important, the standard language is used as a legitimizing tool for perpetuating the status quo. Knowledge statures encoded in the standard language are the only ones that receives social approval: local literacies are dismissed as sub-standard or as dialects and pidgins.

We hope that after reading this unit, you will begin to look at language differently. You will begin to examine what's written between the lines and what lies hidden on the margins. Texts are not innocent and neutral social constructs, they are often carefully crafted to sustain power.

In this unit we have seen that one of the most important possessions of mankind is language.

We have tried to understand the nature of human language by comparing it with other animal systems of communication.

We have also made an attempt to see how and why language originated.

Then we have mentioned other dimensions of language such as language in society and language and power.

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## 1.7 KEY WORDS

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<b>arbitrariness:</b>	The property of human language which relates to the fact that there is no logical relationship between the signal and the message.
<b>creativity:</b>	Refers to the ability of human beings to produce and understand utterances which they have never uttered or heard before.
<b>displacement:</b>	Refers to the ability of human beings to talk about things which are not present at that place or that time.
<b>duality or double articulation:</b>	Refers to the fact that human language is organised at two levels: level of articulation of sounds and level of words.
<b>information talking:</b>	language used for the purpose of imparting factual information and conveying essential commands
<b>language acquisition device</b>	A hypothetical construct referring to the innate ability of human beings to acquire language.
<b>onomatopoeic or echoic words:</b>	words or group of words that imitate the echoic natural sounds, e.g., 'bow-wow' in English.
<b>patterning:</b>	human language combines sounds into words and words into sentences according to certain rules or patterns.
<b>phatic communion:</b>	language used for maintaining social contact on a friendly level
<b>phoneme:</b>	the smallest unit in the sound system of a language which can bring about a difference in meaning.

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## 1.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Aitchison, J. 1978. *Linguistics*. London: Hodder and Stroughton.

Fromkin, V. and Rodman, R. 3rd Ed. 1983. *An Introduction to Language*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Hockett, C.F. 1958. *A Course in Modern Linguistics*. Macmillan.

Lyons, J. 1981. *Language and Linguistics*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Yule, G. 1985. *The Study of Language*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

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## 1.9 QUESTIONS

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1. You have read how different people have defined human language. Now try to define language in your own words.
2. In section 1.2 we have read how language has been defined in the Oxford *Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Look at the definition of language in two more dictionaries. Discuss the similarities and differences between these definitions.
3. You have read different theories about the origin of language. Which one of these theories do you agree with? Give reasons for your answer. If none of these theories seems convincing to you, then discuss how, in your opinion, language might have originated.
4. What, according to you, is the most important function of language? Give reasons for your answer.
5. What is the meaning of onomatopoeic expressions? Give three examples of onomatopoeic expressions from your language.
6. What are the characteristics of human communication that seem to be completely absent in other animal systems of communication?
7. What is meant by the terms duality and displacement as they are used to describe properties of human communication?
8. What is the nature of the relationship between the words used in a human language and their meanings? Are there any exceptions to this kind of a relationship? Give examples from English.