Module: Linguistics

Level: L1- FILA

Time Allotted: 90 min

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Lecture 5: What is Language?

1. **Introduction**

Language is first and foremost the basic means of human communication. This aspect of human behaviour is illustrated by the well-known definition put forward by the American anthropolinguist, Edward Sapir (1884-1939):***“Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols”*** This definition focuses on a set of fundamental aspects of language, namely:

\*language is human-specific, i.e., it is used solely by human beings living within a speech community. Animals do have a communication system but it is not a developed system.

\*language is not instinctive, I.e., it is normally acquired from infancy as a system of arbitrary meaningful conventional symbols. Such symbols are primarily speech sounds produced by the organs of speech and are complemented by secondary symbols, mainly the writing system.

**2. Linguistic Definitions of Language**

Language has been defined differently by linguists according to the general framework of their theory. For instance, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) considers language as a set of general patterns in the speech of a community (langue) and as the speaking act of an individual in a particular situation (parole).

Likewise, the American linguist Noam Chomsky (1929-) views language as the innate capability of native speakers to understand and produce an infinite number of correct grammatical sentences (competence) and their actual realization in concrete situations (performance).

“A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which themembers of a society interact in terms of their total culture” (G. Trager, 1949)

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

1. **Dictionary Definitions of Language**

Most dictionaries define language in its most general sense: a system of communication, taking into accounts both the spoken and written forms. Here are some definitions given by Longman New Universal Dictionary: 1 ….those words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used by a particular people, nation, etc.

2 …a systematic means of communicating using conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks.

1. **Features Common to All Languages**

Throughout time and for several centuries, humans inquired about language. Some of these inquiries were scientific and some were not. However, no consistent answer was provided, because of the lack of evidence about the history of humanity. Among the frequent asked questions is about the features that all-natural human languages have in common. The American linguist Charles Hockett has pointed out a number of such properties among which we state the following:

a. All languages have vowels and consonants;

b. All languages have words;

c. All languages can create new words when required and modify their meanings;

d. All languages are open-ended in the sense that they can produce totally new utterances which are understood by the users of the language;

e. All languages can form questions.

f. In all languages it is possible to talk about things and situations that are removed from the immediate situation of the speaker (this is called displacement).

g. In all languages we can use hypothetical, unreal, and fictional utterances.

1. **Universal Properties of Language**

Language is that capacity to use a complex system of symbols to communicate. Human language is distinguished from animal communication in a number of ways:

**\*Duality:** it is an important distinctive quality. It has been called “double articulation” by Martinet (1966). A stretch of speech can be cut up into units. E.g. my brother’s car is green. The first articulation: each of these words can be used in other utterances. The second articulation: the word itself can be split upto further units. I.e. soundsand then these very sounds (e.g. k, a:, r in the word car) can be used to construct other words in English. Duality is a system which allows the production of an unlimited number of utterances with relatively few sounds.

Thus, language operates on two levels of structure: meaningless elements which are speech sounds and meaningful elements which are words. Speech sounds combine to make up words which in turn can be used to form utterances, sentences, clauses… and this provides us with an enormous productive power.

**\* Creativity:** this characteristic enables us to understand and construct (to perceive and produce) an infinite number of sentences including those that have never been heard or produced. Chomsky gave an example to clarify this characteristic: ‘colourless green ideas/slept furiously’

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**\*Arbitrariness:** this simply means that there is primarily no connection between the sound and the meaning or the form of the word and the object that it represents. In other words, there is no connection between the linguistic sign and the meaning. De Saussure split the linguistic sign into two parts: signifier and signified, and thus, there is no connection between them. It is a matter of convention. The only exception to arbitrariness is the existence of onomatopoeias which are words usually inspired from sounds made in nature such as bomb, crash, splash.

**\*Displacement:** it enables the language to be used at times and in places where/when the context referred to is not present, for instance, a bottle of milk. In addition, this feature allows humans to mention past events as well as future events.

\* **Cultural Transmission:** human language differs basically from animal language in the characteristic of cultural transmission. Human languages are passed down from one generation to another within a speech community. Thus, the transmission of language through culture is a characteristic of human languages.