Chapter One
Invitations to Linguistics (1)

1. Why Study Language?

1.1 Some myths about language
- Language is only a means of communication.
- Language has a form-meaning correspondence.
- The function of language is to exchange information.
- English is more difficult to learn than Chinese.
- Black English is not standard and should be reformed.

1.2 Some fundamental views about L
- Children learn their native language swiftly, efficiently and without instruction.
- Language operates by rules.
- All languages have three major components: a sound system, a system of lexicogrammar and a system of semantics.
- Everyone speaks a dialect.

2. What is Language?
Language “is not to be confused with human speech, of which it is only a definite part, though certainly an essential one. It is both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty”.
“Language is a purely human and non-instantive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.”

--Edward Sapir (1884-1939):
*Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (1921)

“A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates.”


“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.”

--George Trager: *The Field of Linguistics* (1949)

“From now on I will consider language to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.”

--Noam Chomsky (1928-): *Syntactic Structures* (1957)

Language is “the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols.”


“Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication.”

--Ronald Wardhaugh: *Introduction to Linguistics* (1977)
"The question 'What is language?' is comparable with -- and, some would say, hardly less profound than -- 'What is life?', the presuppositions of which circumscribe and unify the biological sciences... it is not so much the question itself as the particular interpretation that the biologist puts upon it and the unravelling of its more detailed implications within some currently accepted theoretical framework that nourish the biologist's day-to-day speculations and research. So it is for the linguist in relation to the question 'What is language?'"


"... in a sense all definitions [of language] are, by themselves, inadequate, since, if they are to be more than trivial and uninformative, they must presuppose ... some general theory of language and of linguistic analysis."


"Language is a form of human communication by means of a system of symbols principally transmitted by vocal sounds."

--Stuart C. Poole: *An Introduction to Linguistics* (1999)

"Language is a means of verbal communication."

- It is instrumental in that communicating by speaking or writing is a purposeful act.
- It is social and conventional in that language is a social semiotic and communication can only take place effectively if all the users share a broad understanding of human interaction including such associated factors as nonverbal cues, motivation, and socio-cultural roles.

-- Our textbook (2006)

3. Design Features of Language

- Language distinguishes human beings from animals in that it is far more sophisticated than any animal communication system.
- 4 major design features to make human language ‘unique’: arbitrariness, duality, creativity, and displacement.

3.1 Arbitrariness

- Saussure: the forms of linguistic signs bear no natural relationship to their meaning
- Arbitrary relationship between the sound of a morpheme and its meaning, even with onomatopoeic words:
- The dog barks *wow* *wow* *wow* *wow* in English but "汪汪汪汪" in Chinese.
Arbitrariness at the syntactic level: language is not arbitrary at the syntactic level.
- (a) He came in and sat down.
- (b) He sat down and came in.
- (c) He sat down after he came in.

The link between a linguistic sign and its meaning is a matter of convention.

3.2 Duality
- The property of having two levels of structures, such that units of the primary level are composed of elements of the secondary level and each of the two levels has its own principles of organization.
- Primary units ‘words’ (meaningful) consist of secondary units ‘sounds’ (meaningless).

Hierarchy of language: stratification as ‘the infinite use of finite means’.
- Sounds > syllables > morphemes > words > phrases > clauses > sentences/utterances > texts/discourses

3.3 Creativity
- Language is resourceful because of its duality and its recursiveness. We can use it to create new meanings.
- Words can be used in new ways to mean new things, and can be instantly understood by people who have never come across that usage before.

Birds, bees, crabs, spiders, and most other creatures communicate in some way, but the information imparted is severely limited and confined to a small set of messages.
- Because of duality the human speaker is able to combine the basic linguistic units to form an infinite set of sentences, most of which are never before produced or heard.

The recursive nature of language provides a potential to create an infinite number of sentences. For instance:
- He bought a book which was written by a teacher who taught in a school which was known for its graduates who ...
3.4 Displacement

- Human languages enable their users to symbolize objects, events and concepts which are not present (in time and space) at the moment of communication.
- Thus, we can refer to Confucius, or the North Pole, even though the first has been dead for over 2550 years and the second is situated far away from us.

Animal communication is normally under “immediate stimulus control”. For instance, a warning cry of a bird instantly announces danger.

- Human language is stimulus-free. What we are talking about need not be triggered by any external stimulus in the world or any internal state.

The honeybee's dance exhibits displacement a little bit: he can refer to a source of food, which is remote in time and space when he reports on it.

- A dog cannot tell people that its master will be home in a few days.
- Our language enables us to communicate about things that do not exist or do not yet exist.

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4. Origin of language

- The ‘Divine’ origin:
  - “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (Gospel, John 1:1)
  - “And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.” (Genesis, 11:6)

4.1 The “bow-wow” theory

- In primitive times people imitated the sounds of the animal calls in the wild environment they lived and speech developed from that.
- Onomatopoeic words seem to be a convenient evidence for this theory. But they are very different in the degree of resemblance they express with the natural sounds.
- This theory lacks supportive evidence.
4.2 The “pooh-pooh” theory
- In the hard life of our primitive ancestors, they utter instinctive sounds of pain, anger and joy. As for evidence, we can only cite the universal use of sounds as interjections.
- What makes the theory problematic is that there is only a limited number of interjections in almost all languages.
- Besides, interjections such as *Oh, Ah, Oops* bear little relationship with the sound system of a language and therefore are not good evidence.

4.3 The “yo-he-ho” theory
- As primitive people worked together, they produced some rhythmic grunts which gradually developed into chants and then into language.
- We do have prosodic use of rhythms in languages, but rhythmic grunts are far different from language in its present sense. The theory is again at most a speculation.

5. Functions of language
- Linguists talk about the functions of language in an abstract sense, that is, not in terms of using language to chat, to think, to buy and sell, to read and write, to greet, praise and condemn people, etc.
- They summarize these practical functions and attempt some broad classifications of the basic functions of language.

- The by-now fruitless search for the origin of languages reflects people's concern with the origin of humanity and may come up with enlightening findings in future.
- One thing we can say for certain is that language evolves within specific historical, social and cultural contexts.

- For Jakobson, language is above all for communication.
- While for many people, the purpose of communication is referential, for him (and the Prague school structuralists), reference is not the only, not even the primary goal of communication.

- In his famous article, *Linguistics and Poetics*, he defined six primary factors of any speech event, namely:
  - *speaker, addressee, context, message, code, contact.*
- In conjunction with these, Jakobson established a well-known framework of language functions based on the six key elements of communication, namely:
- referential (to convey message and information),
- poetic (to indulge in language for its own sake),
- emotive (to express attitudes, feelings and emotions),
- conative (to persuade and influence others through commands and requests),
- phatic (to establish communion with others)
- metalingual (to clear up intentions and meanings).

They correspond to such communication elements as context, message, addressee, addresser, contact and code respectively.

Jakobson's views of the functions of language are still of great importance.

Halliday proposes a theory of metafunctions of language, that is, language has ideational, interpersonal and textual functions.

Ideational function constructs a model of experience as well as logical relations, interpersonal function enacts social relationships and textual function creates relevance to context.

In his earlier works, Halliday proposed seven categories of language functions by observing child language development:
- Instrumental
- Regulatory
- Representational
- Interactional
- Personal
- Heuristic
- Imaginative

Still other classifications employ different categories and use different terms, but all share a lot in common about the basic functions of language.

Our list below is a summary for the convenience of presentation. The categories can still be somewhat overlapping.
5.1 Informative function

- Language is the instrument of thought and people often feel need to speak their thoughts aloud. The use of language to record the facts is a prerequisite of social development. This is indeed a crucial function of language.
- It is also called ideational function in the framework of functional grammar.

- Halliday notes that “Language serves for the expression of ‘content’: that is, of the speaker’s experience of the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness. ... In serving this function, language also gives structure to experience, and helps to determine our way of looking at things, so that it requires some intellectual effort to see them in any other way than that which our language suggests to us”.

5.2 Interpersonal function

- By far the most important sociological use of language, and by which people establish and maintain their status in a society.
- In the framework of functional grammar, it is concerned with interaction between the addressee and addressee in the discourse situation and the addressee’s attitude toward what he speaks or writes about.

- For example, the ways in which people address others and refer to themselves (e.g. Dear Sir, Dear Professor, Johnny, yours, your obedient servant) indicate the various grades of interpersonal relations.

- Attached to the interpersonal function is its function of expressing identity. For example, the chanting of a crowd at a football match, the shouting of names or slogans at public meetings, the stage-managed audience reactions to TV game shows all signal who we are and where we belong.

- Language marks our identity, physically in terms of age, sex, and voiceprints; psychologically in terms of language, personality and intelligence; geographically in terms of accents and dialects; ethnically and socially in terms of social stratification, class, status, role, solidarity and distance.
The interpersonal function is such a broad category that it is often discussed under various other terms as in the following performative, emotive, expressive and phatic function of language. They seem to emphasize different aspects of the interpersonal function.

5.3 Performative function
- This concept originates from the philosophical study of language represented by Austin and Searle, whose theory now forms the back-bone of pragmatics. (Chapter 8)
- For example, *I now declare the meeting open, I bet you two pounds it will rain tomorrow.*

The performative function of language is primarily to change the social status of persons, as in marriage ceremonies, the sentencing of criminals, the blessing of children, the naming of a ship at a launching ceremony, and the cursing of enemies.

The kind of language employed in performative verbal acts is usually quite formal and even ritualized.

The performative function can extend to the control of reality as on some magical or religious occasions.
- For example, in Chinese when someone breaks a bowl or a plate the host or the people present are likely to say *岁岁平安* as a means of controlling the invisible forces which the believers feel might affect their lives adversely.

5.4 Emotive function
- The emotive function of language is one of the most powerful uses of language because it is crucial in changing the emotional status of an audience for or against someone or something.
- It is a means of getting rid of our nervous energy when we are under stress, e.g. swear words, obscenities, involuntary verbal reactions to a piece of art or scenery; conventional words/phrases, e.g. *God, My, Damn it, What a sight, Wow, Ugh, Oh.*

It is also discussed under the term expressive function. The expressive function can often be entirely personal and totally without any implication of communication to others.
- For example, a man may say *Ouch!* after striking a fingernail with a hammer, or he may mutter *Damn* when realizing that he has forgotten an appointment.
Exclamations such as *Man! Oh boy!* and *Hurrah!* are usually uttered without any purpose of communicating to others, but as essentially a verbal response to a person's own feelings. Such expressive utterances can also be a communal response of a group of people who reinforce one another’s expressive use of language to show their solidarity.

5.5 Phatic communion
- It refers to the social interaction of language, originating from Malinowski's study of the functions of language performed by Trobriand Islanders. For example, *Mrs. P sneezes violently.*
- Mrs. Q: Bless you.
- Mrs. P: Thank you.

We all use such small, seemingly meaningless expressions to maintain a comfortable relationship between people without involving any factual content. Ritual exchanges about health or weather such as *Good morning, God bless you, Nice day* often state the obvious. Yet they indicate that a channel of communication is open if it should be needed.

Different cultures have different topics of phatic communion.
- According to Crystal, the weather is not a universal conversation filler as the English might like to think.
- Rundi women (in Burundi, Central Africa), upon taking leave, routinely and politely say “I must go home now, or my husband will beat me.”

Broadly speaking, this function refers to expressions that help define and maintain interpersonal relations, such as slang, jokes, jargons, ritualistic exchanges, switches to social and regional dialects. We have to learn a large repertoire of such usages if we are to interact comfortably with different people.

5.6 Recreational function
- The recreational function of a language is often overlooked because it seems so restrictive in purpose and supposedly so limited in usefulness.
- However, no one will deny the use of language for the sheer joy of using it, such as a baby's babbling or a chanter's chanting.
In the Latin and Islamic worlds as well as in some areas of China, there is widespread use of verbal dueling, in which one singer begins a song of usually few lines and challenges his opponent to continue the content or provide a rejoinder in a similar rhythm and rhyme scheme. Such verbal duels may last for a few hours and is performed for the sheer joy of playing on language.

To take one example, the well-known movie 《刘三姐》 features a scene of “对歌” (song dueling) mostly for the sheer joy of playing on language.

If you observe a children’s play, you will find the power of sound. Sometimes even nonsensical lyrics perform a recreational function in the game: the repetitive rhythms help to control the game, and the children plainly take great delight in it. Adults also have their way to appreciate language for its own sake.

For instance, poetry writing gives them the pleasure of using language for its sheer beauty.

We are getting very close here to Jakobson's poetic function.

5.7 Metalingual function

- Our language can be used to talk about itself.
- To organize any written text into a coherent whole, writers employ certain expressions to keep their readers informed about where they are and where they are going.

For instance, instead of saying

*The lion chased the unicorn all round the town,*

they say

*All around the town the lion chased the unicorn.*

This is the metalingual function of language and meshes with the thematic function of language in functional grammar.

- It makes the language infinitely self-reflexive: We human beings can talk about talk and think about thinking, and thus only humans can ask what it means to communicate, to think, to be human.