

Chapter 1

Invitations to Linguistics





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1.1 What is Language?

“Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.”

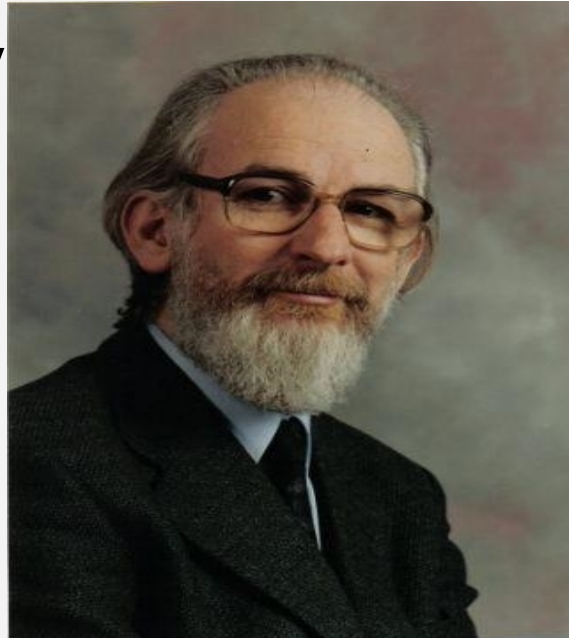
--**Edward Sapir (1884-1939):**
Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech (1921)





“Language is the systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression.”

(David Cry





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”.

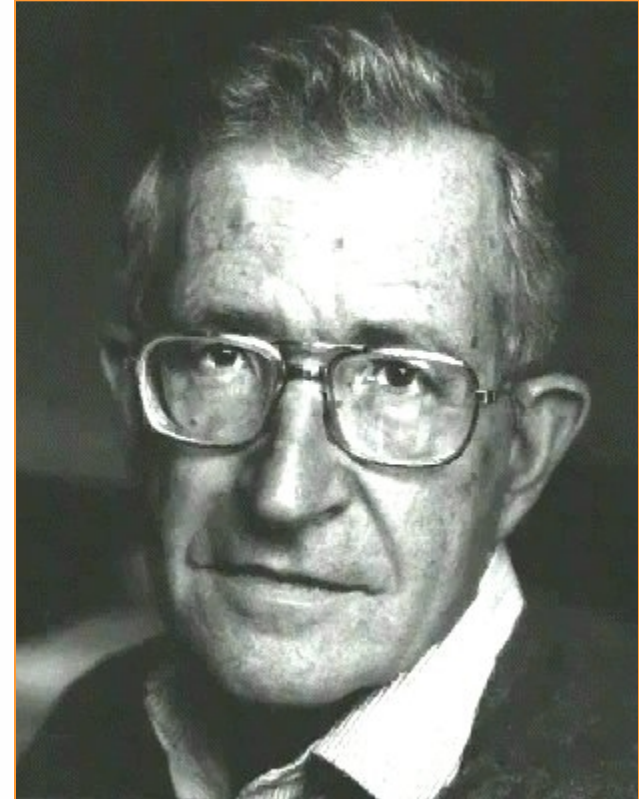
**--Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913):
Course in General Linguistics (1916)**





“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.”

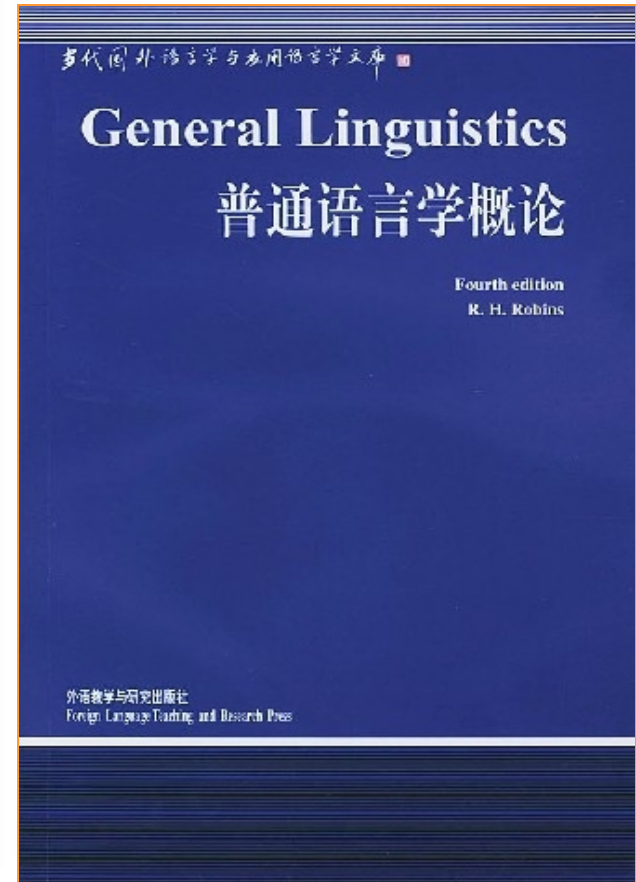
**-- Noam Chomsky (1928-):
Syntactic Structures (1957)**





“... 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.”

**-- R. H. Robins (1921-2000):
General Linguistics (1989)**

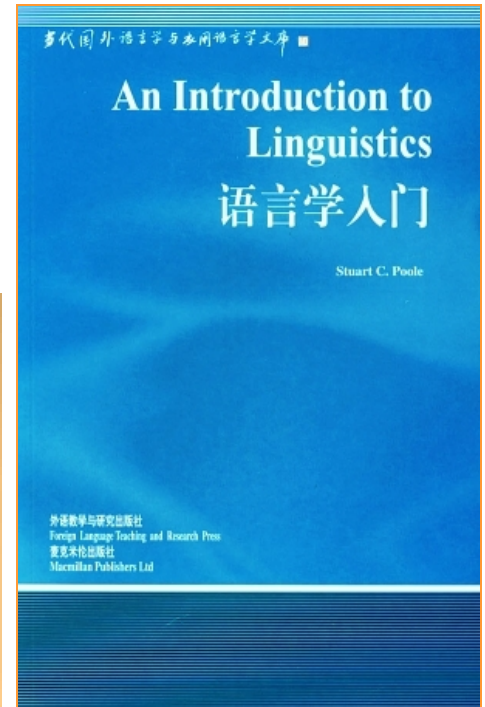




“Language is a form of human communication by means of a system of symbols principally transmitted by vocal sounds.”

-- Stuart C. Poole:

An Introduction to Linguistics (1999)

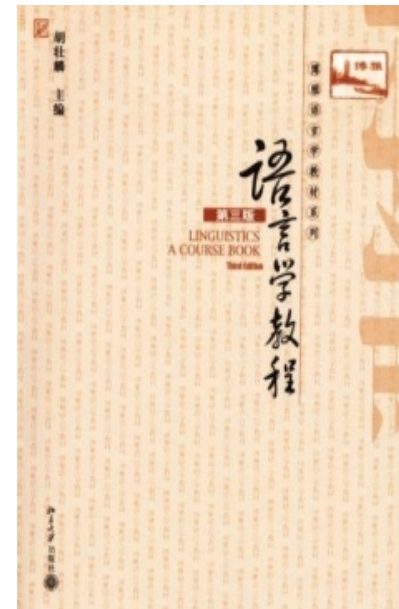




“Language is a means of verbal communication.”

- 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)





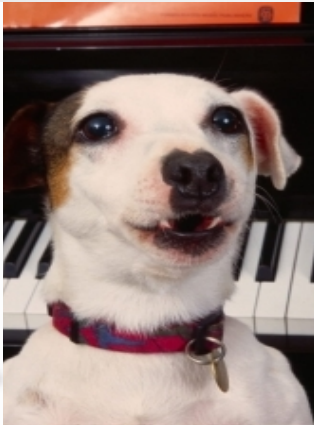
Generally accepted definition:

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



1.2 Design Features of Language

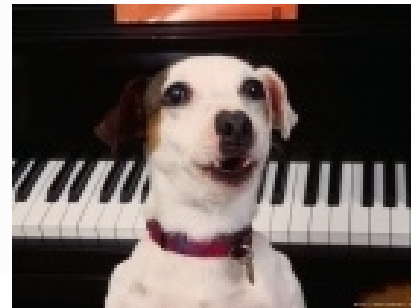
- ❖ **Language distinguishes human beings from animals in that it is far more sophisticated than any animal communication system.**





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* in English but “汪汪” in Chinese.**





- ❖ **Arbitrariness at the syntactic level: language is not arbitrary at the syntactic level.**
 - **He came in and sat down.**
 - **He sat down and came in.**
 - **He sat down after he came in.**

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



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).**



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** ...**



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.**





- ❖ **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.**



Cultural Transmission

Cultural transmission: Language is culturally transmitted. A language is taught and learned within a particular cultural background.





Interchangeability

Interchangeability: Any human being can be both a producer and receiver of messages.





1.3 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.**

Jakobson's Theory

- ❖ **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.**



Roman Jakobson



- ❖ 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*, *addresser*, *addressee*, *contact* and *code* respectively.
- ❖ Jakobson's views of the functions of language are still of great importance.

Context
REFERENTIAL

Addresser
EMOTIVE
(e.g. intonation
showing anger)

Message
POETIC
(e.g. poetry)

Addressee
CONATIVE
(e.g. imperatives and
vocatives)

Contact
PHATIC
(e.g. Good morning!)

Code
METALINGUAL
(e.g. Hello, do you hear me?)



Halliday's Theory

❖ 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.



Major Functions of Language

- ❖ **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. The informative function is indeed a crucial function of language.
 - It is also called ideational function in the framework of functional grammar.



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, the *interpersonal* function is concerned with interaction between the addresser and addressee in the discourse situation and the addresser'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.





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.**

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