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## An Insight into the Peculiarities of Human Language

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### **Abstract**

Every individual exists within a language situation, which distinguishes man from non-human beings. We all live in a world of many languages because it is no gain saying that there is no world without language. In spite of the great importance attached to language by different people and in different situations, a definite conclusion on its nature and well defined uses remain a mirage. It is on this premise that this paper attempts an insight into the peculiarities of human language to justify its specific functions. It then concludes that language can be viewed in its psychological basis of perception, association, neuromuscular coordination and organic moments as a result of experiences in a human environment. It also has a clear cut difference from animal language.

**Keywords:** Human Language, Communication, Language Arbitrariness, Semiotics and Linguistics

### **Introduction**

#### **What is Language?**

Several fields of knowledge have been involved in the studies and workings of language. These fields include philosophy, sociology, psychology, logic and linguistics. Philosophers viewed language as an instrument of thought. Here language is seen as means of expressing thought and as thought. To the sociologists, it may be viewed as a form of social behaviour and social activity while the psychologists viewed it as a means of knowing how the mind works. To the linguists, however, language is viewed as a system of conventional and arbitrary vocal or written symbols or signs by which members of a social group communicate and interact. What is observed here is that each of the fields of knowledge has peculiar characteristics and ways of observing linguistic facts or materials. Some look at language from the point of view of content; others from the point of view of expression; some based their conception on substance while others from the point of view of form. As a system, language involves a complexity of signs and symbols patterned or structured to make meaning, e.g. "Tunde is a tall boy" Osuji et al also quoted Cashdan and Grugeon (1972:1) as defining language as "*an artificial and consciously-organised method of*

***control by the use of symbols or conventions, which involves the notion of meaning”.***

It is a fact that only human beings use language in his day-to-day activity while animals only use sound to communicate. Osuji et al's reference explains man's capability to act on his environment but not vice-versa.

Okediran (2001) concludes that:

***“To know a language, therefore, is to understand the symbols of the language and how they are put together to form meaningful sentences that are in turn, understood by everyone speaking the language”***

Okediran's conclusion is in conformity to Balogun (1998)'s submission that language consists of symbols, both verbal and non verbal, unanimously agreed upon by the people in a society. This implies a communicative function of language among the interlocutors without limitation to spoken language only. Paralanguage or body language and gestures are taken into consideration here as means of communication. Road signs, hardware, church or mosque symbols are all conventionally recognized in the society where language is used. Halliday (1978) sees language as a meaning potential or a form of human semiotic. He characterises language in terms of the part it plays in the social life of man and views linguistic system as an essential pattern of people's culture. Halliday's opinion here is that everyday language transmits the essential pattern of people's culture.

Akindele and Adegbite (1992) however view language as “a human phenomenon that has form which can be described in terms of the units of sound (phonemes), words, morphemes, phrases, sentences and paragraph or discourse’. This is to say that language is a form, which is rule-governed Adetuyi (2003) also concludes that language is the “the complex and subtle activity that human beings engage in, using the vocal cords in interactive communication or when one talks to oneself”. Here language is viewed as a tool of giving expression to our thoughts, either for them to hear and respond to, or to listen only, or to respond through paralanguage.

Abiri (1980) views language as ***“an acquired system of conventional symbols based on integrated system of mental and physical skills”*** Abiri is trying to explain the concept in its psychological basis of perception, association, neuro-muscular coordination and organic movements as a result of experiences in a human environment. It should also be emphasized here that animal communication does not show high sensibility unlike that of man. Animal

communication cannot be learned because it is specie specific and appears to be closed system. Animal communication cannot be grammatically analyzed but only a representation of language but not language.

Language is also viewed as "a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperate (Okonkwo 1980). Okonkwo here defines language by its nature or characteristics. The operative words in the definition which needs analysis are 'system', 'arbitrary', 'vocal', 'symbols' and 'cooperate'. It is a system because the sounds work according to plans and rules. There is agreement, conscious or unconscious in word order. "the boy kissed the girl" is different in meaning from "the girl kissed the boy". The words are the same but certain words swotted positions i.e. 'boy' and 'girl'. A language system obeys the rule of being 'constant'. An object, which is called 'chair' today, is not symbolized by another sound 'ball' tomorrow. The 'symbol' and referent relationship must be as far as possible, constant.

In Alo (1998)'s view on language, *"We communicate primarily in language by the manipulation of words and rules of grammar- a universal means of human communication"* Alo's definition implies that human beings mainly communicate through language (verbal and non verbal). It is another notion that makes human language distinct from animal sounds, which cannot be analysed. He even observes a range of knowledge and skills involved in language use in communication as:

- i. Knowledge of the system and workings of language at the levels of sounds, words, structure and meaning.
- ii. The basic communication skills of speaking, listening comprehension, reading and writing;
- iii. Knowledge of the world including physical environment, human behaviour and activities, social relationships, cultural norms and conventions and
- iv. Knowledge of the appropriate use of language forms and structures in a variety of human and communication situations. (Alo, 1998) it is a fact that whether we speak or write, having some knowledge or thought to express is important and that is LANGUAGE. The speaker or writer should have enough idea about his subject matter either from memory source, experience, group brain storming, reading or thinking.

### **Nature or Language**

Language has its peculiarities called characteristics or features:

#### **i). Human Language is Systematic**

Language is composed of a number of linked systems and structures at all levels.

Tinuoye rightly observes that:

***"Any language employs a selected number of vocal sounds as building bricks for its utterance. English uses forty-five basic sounds including diphthongs and long vowels. At the phonemic level, the word 'man' /maen/ is made up of three basic sounds /m/, /ae/ and /n/ which must be correctly structured to produce the desired sound effect".***

This implies that the vocal sounds produce by the vocal organs are used in various systematic and rule governed combinations. Combinations of sounds in word formation in a particular language also have a systematic selectional restriction placed on it. As analysed by Obafemi(1994), phoneme /n/ as in singing /sIn/ cannot occur at the beginning of an English word as in 'sp1' in English cluster 'splash', /gb/ can occur in Yoruba as in 'gbe' or 'gba' but not 'sg1' Stressed syllables and use of pitch as in the peak of loudness and meaning demonstrate systematicity in language. 'She's going home?' and 'She's going home' are two different utterances. The first one is a question while the other is a statement.

Morphological rules of tense and plural inflections, derivations and affixation exhibit the systematic nature of language with particular reference to English. 'pass' becomes 'passed' through tense inflection. 'chair' changes to 'chairs' through plural inflection, while 'deer' remains 'deer' through plural inflection on zero morpheme (0) and 'put' remains 'put' on tense, inflection (zero morpheme). 'Slow' becomes slowly on derivation so also in 'wonder' becoming 'wondering'; 'constitutional' changes to 'unconstitutional' through affixation. The morphological rules that occur as a result of the systematic nature of language is accountable to the analysis.

Syntactic rules of combining words into utterance also have the below:

'the good old times' not 'the old good times; as well as 'Tolu climbed the tree' not 'the tree climbed Tolu'. This buttresses the opinion of Akindele and Adebite (1992) that:

***"Human language is unique in the sense that it has its own structure, its own system of organising its component units into meaningful patterns".***

There are rules governing the arrangement of sentence and they are called rules of Tense and Concord.

Okediran's enumeration of language characteristics actually gives the clear picture of peculiarities of language as follow:

- "A structure, that is a system of organizing its component units into meaningful patterns;
- A set of arbitrary symbols that have meaning by a convention of the speakers of the particular language;
- A form which can be described in terms of sound unit, words and syntactic relations between words;
- A part of culture and an expression of aspects of cultures;
- Adequate vocabulary for the use of the speech community to which it belongs;
- A way to accommodate new changes in content and in space; and
- Functions as a medium of intra, interpersonal and cultural communication" (cullled in unoh 1985; 136-138).

The above analysis relates language with philosophical ideas on logic. It then explains language as a vehicle of thoughts. The analysis however shows language as being systematic among other features.

### 11) Human Language is Symbolic

Language has been described as arbitrary vocal symbols. The 'sound label' is not

#### Resume

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