

LECTURE 5: LANGUAGE

This topic is about the nature of language and how language is useful in human communication.

Learning Outcomes



1. The symbolic, person-centered nature of language.
2. Phonological, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic rules that govern language.
3. The ways in which language shapes and reflects attitudes.
4. The types of troublesome language and the skills to deal with each.
5. The gender and non-gender factors that characterize the speech of men and women.
6. The verbal styles that distinguish various cultures, and the affect that language can have on worldview.

Definition:

Language is a collection of symbols governed by rules and used to convey messages between individuals. It is estimated that human speak about 10,000 dialects, although most of these sound different from one another, all possess the same characteristics of language (Adler and Rodman, 2003 p.72). language is a whole body of words (vocabulary)and ways of combining them (grammar) that are used by a nation, people or cultural community (Burton & Dimbleby 1995) cited in (Steinberg, 2007 p.115).

The elements of a language usually have no meaning by themselves. And in many combinations they are also meaningless. But they can be combined to create symbols- representations that stand for things, objects, ideas, or activities.

The nature of Language

a. Language is symbolic

All languages contain elements which can be combined in various ways to create meaning and a number of ways to create different structures. The elements of English language for example, consist of letters of our alphabet along with punctuation marks, such as commas, periods and so on. In language of mathematics, the elements are integers zero through nine

plus other symbols such as plus, minus, multiplication signs. The Morse code has only two elements dots and dashes.

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b. Language is rule –Governed

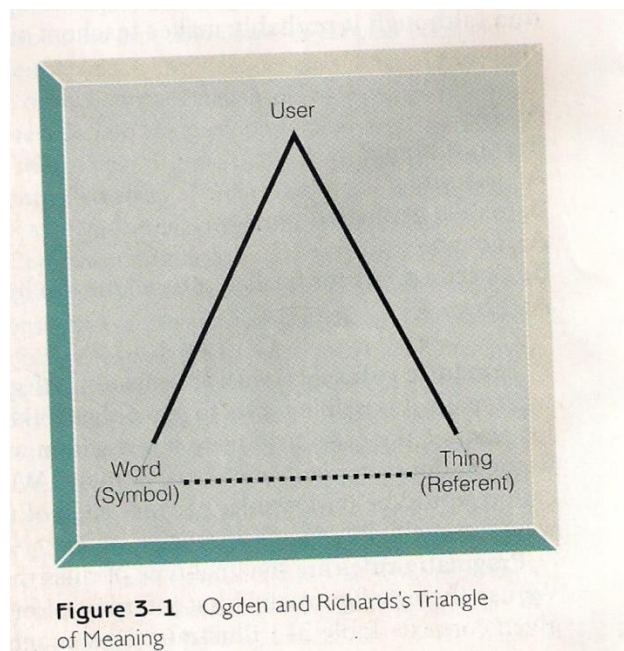
Language contains several types of rules:

- i) **Phonological rules** – govern how sounds are combined to form words. For instance the words *champagne*, *double* and *occasion* have the same meaning in French and English, but all are pronounced differently.
- ii) **Syntactic rules-** govern the way symbols can be arranged. For example correct English syntax requires that every word contains at least one vowel and prohibits sentences such as “have you the cookies brought?” which is a perfectly acceptable word order in a language such as German.
- iii) **Semantic rules-** reflect the way in which speakers of a language respond to a particular symbol. Semantic rules are what make it possible for us to agree that “bikes” are for riding and “books” are for reading; they also help us to know who we will and won’t encounter when we use rooms marked “men” or “women”. Without semantic rules, communication would be impossible, for each of us would use symbols in unique ways, unintelligible to one another.
- iv) **Pragmatic rules-**they help communicators to make a sense of message and how the same statement can have quite different meaning meanings when communicators use different pragmatic rules. For example “You look very pretty today” is clear enough, yet the statement could be taken in several ways.

c. Meanings are in People not in words

Words can be interpreted in many different ways and this is a basis for misunderstandings. Show a dozen people the same symbol and ask them what it means and you are likely to get twelve different answers. Words don’t mean; people do- and often in widely different ways.

Linguistic theorists C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards illustrated in their “triangle of meaning,” that meaning are social constructions. This model shows that there is only an indirect relationship- indicated by a broken line- between a word and the thing it claim to represent. Some of these things or referents do not exist in the physical world. For instance some referents are mythical such as the Unicorns, Pans and Ogres; some are no longer tangible such as Elvis, Marley; and others are abstract ideas such as love, hate, admire etc.



The Language of Misunderstanding/ Troublesome Language

The most obvious kind of language problems are semantics: most misunderstandings arise from some common problems that are easily remedied- once you recognize them.

1. Equivocal language

They have more than one dictionary definition. Equivocal misunderstandings can have serious consequences. Communication researcher Michael Motley and Heidi Reeder suggest that equivocation at least partially explains why men may sometimes persist in attempts to become physically intimate when women have expressed unwillingness to do so. Most of the time women use indirect statements as equivalent to saying “no,” men are likely to interpret them as less clear-cut request to stop.

2. Relative words

Relative words gain their meaning by comparison. Relative words like fast, and slow, smart and stupid, short and long or tall, depend for their meaning upon what they are compared to. Using relative terms without explaining them can lead to communication problems. For example you have been disappointed to learn that classes you have heard were “easy” turned to be hard, that journey you were told would be “short” were long.

3. Slang

Slang is a language used by a group of people who belong to a similar co-culture or other group. Some slang consists of regionalism, terms understood by people who live in one geographic area but incomprehensible to outsiders.

4. Jargon

Jargon is a specialized vocabulary that functions as a kind of short hand for people with common backgrounds and experiences. For example WYSIWYG means what you see is what you get a term used in Desktop Publishing. URLs usually pronounced as “earls” is used to refer to the addresses of site on the World Wide Web or WWW.

5. Overly Abstract Language

Most objects, events and ideas can be described with varying degree of specificity. For example a reading material; one could call it a book or text book or communication or by title- “ Understanding Human Communication or even Chapter three of Understanding Human Communication or even page 86 of chapter 3 of Understanding Human Communication.

Semanticist S.I. Hayakawa created an abstraction ladder to describe this process. Lower items focus specifically on person, object, or event, or event, while higher terms are generalizations that include the subject as a member of a larger class. For example it is faster, easier and more useful to talk about Africa than to list all countries on the continent. Therefore abstract languages can lead to stereotyping and confusing others, for example “men don’t care about relationships,” “the police forces are a bunch of goons (criminals who are paid to frighten or injure people/ stupid or silly people)

6. Disruptive language

Not all linguistic problems come for misunderstandings. Sometimes people understand one another perfectly and still end up in conflict. Consider the following:

- a. **Confusing facts and opinions-** Factual statements are claims that we can be verified as true or false. By contrast, opinion statements are based on speaker’s beliefs. Unlike matters of fact, they can never be proved or disapproved. In everyday conversations, we often present our opinions as if they are facts and in doing so we invite an unnecessary argument.
- b. **Confusing facts and inferences-**difficulties arise when we confuse factual statements with inferential statements that are conclusions arrived at from an interpretation of evidence.
- c. **Emotive language-** contains words that sound as if they are describing something when they are really announcing the speaker’s attitude towards something. Emotive words may sound like statements of facts but are always opinions. Barbra Streisand pointed out how some people use emotive language to stigmatize behavior in women that they admire in men:
A man is commanding- a woman is demanding.

A man is forceful-a woman is pushy. He is committed- she is obsessed etc.

7. Evasive language

- a. **Euphemisms** is a Greek word meaning “to use words of good omen”. A **euphemism** is a pleasant term substituted for a more direct but potentially less

pleasant one. We are using euphemisms when we say “restroom” instead of “toilet” or “plump” instead of “fat” or “overweight.” It could be face saving to people for example instead of calling someone *a liar* use the word “statistical misrepresentation” or “senior citizens” than using “old”.

- b. **Equivocation** is a deliberate vague statement that can be interpreted in more than one way. It is usually an *intentionally ambiguous speech* that is used to avoid lying on one hand and telling a painful truth on the other. The advantages of using them are that they spare the receiver from the embarrassment that might come from a complete truthful answer, and it can be easier for the sender to equivocate than to suffer the discomfort of being honest.

Gender and Language

Content – certain subjects are common to both sexes: work, movies, and television. The differences between men and women are more striking than similarities. Female friends spent much more time discussing personal and domestic subjects, relationship problems, family, health and reproductive matters, weight, food and clothing.

Reasons for communicating- men value talks with friends for their freedom, playfulness, and camaraderie. Women on the other hand look for a feeling or understanding- ‘to know you are not alone’. More women call their friends at least once a week, whereas very few men do so.

Conversational style – men and women behave differently in certain conversation settings. For example in a mixed sex dyads men talk longer than women, while in same sex situations women speak for a longer time. In larger groups, men talk more; while in smaller settings women do more of the speaking. Cross- sex conversations run smoothly because women accommodate to topics men raise. Both men and women regard topics introduced by women as tentative, whereas topics that men bring up are more likely to be pursued.

Non-Gender variables studies have found no significant difference between male and female speech in areas such as use of profanity, qualifiers such as “I guess” or “This is just my opinion”, tag questions, and vocal fluency. As the balance of power grows more equal between men and women, we can expect many linguistic differences to shrink.

Sex roles are the social orientation that governs behavior, rather than the biological gender. Researchers have identified three sex roles: Masculine, feminine and androgynous. These sex types don’t always line up neatly with gender. There are “masculine” females, “feminine” males, and androgynous communicators who combine traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics. Masculine sex-type communicators- whether male or female- use more dominant language than either feminine or androgynous speakers. Feminine communicators have the most submissive speaking style, androgynous speakers fall between these extremes.

Question



ASSIGNMENT:

Write your own reflection on this topic on language: use your own discretion to determine number of pages you want to use.

Further Reading



CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

Anyone who has tried to translate ideas from one language to another knows that communication across cultures can be a challenge. Sometimes the results of a bungled translation can be amusing. For example, the American manufacturers of Pet condensed milk unknowingly introduced their product in French-speaking markets without realizing that the word *pet* in French means “to break wind.”

Likewise, the naive English-speaking representative of a U.S. soft drink manufacturer drew laughs from Mexican customers when she offered free samples of Fresca soda pop. In Mexican slang, the word *fresco* means “lesbian.” Even choosing the right words during translation won’t guarantee that nonnative speakers will use an unfamiliar language correctly. For example, Japanese insurance companies warn their policyholders who are visiting the United States to avoid their cultural tendency to say “excuse me” or “I’m sorry” if they are involved in a traffic accident. In Japan, apologizing is a traditional way to express goodwill and maintain social harmony, even if the person offering the apology is not at fault. But in the United States, an apology can be taken as an admission of guilt and may result in Japanese tourists’ are being held accountable for accidents for which they may not be responsible.

Difficult as it may be, translation is only a small part of the communication challenges facing members of different cultures. Differences in the way language is used and the very worldview that a language creates make communicating across cultures a challenging task.

Verbal Communication Styles

Using language is more than just choosing a particular group of words to convey an idea. Each language has its own unique style that distinguishes it from others. And when a communicator tries to use the verbal style from one culture in a different one, problems

are likely to arise.

ELABORATE–SUCCINCT Another way in which language styles can vary across cultures is in terms of whether they are *elaborate* or *succinct*. Speakers of Arabic, for instance, commonly use language that is much more rich and expressive than most communicators who use English. Strong assertions and exaggerations that would sound ridiculous in English are a common feature of Arabic. This contrast in linguistic style can lead to misunderstandings between people from different backgrounds.

FORMAL–INFORMAL Along with differences such as directness-indirectness and elaborate-succinct styles, a third way languages differ from one culture to another involves *formality* and *informality*. The informal approach that characterizes relationships in countries like the United States, Canada, and Australia is quite different from the great concern for using proper speech in many parts of Asia and Africa. Formality isn't so much a matter of using correct grammar as of defining social position. In Korea, for example, the language reflects the Confucian system of relational hierarchies. It has special vocabularies for different sexes, for different levels of social status, for different degrees of intimacy, and for different types of social occasions. For example, there are different degrees of formality for speaking with old friends, non-acquaintances whose background one knows, and complete strangers.

Language and Worldview

Different linguistic styles are important, but there may be even more fundamental differences that separate speakers of various languages. For almost 150 years, some theorists have put forth the notion of **linguistic determinism**: the notion that the worldview of a culture is shaped and reflected by the language its members speak. The best-known example of linguistic determinism is the notion that Eskimos have a large number of words (estimated from seventeen to one hundred) for what we simply call "snow." Different terms are used to describe conditions like a driving blizzard, crusty ice, and light powder. This example suggests how linguistic determinism operates.

Source:

<http://staff.neu.edu.tr/~soznur/Understanding%20Human%20Communication.pdf>

 Summary

- I. The complexity of *language* is a tool to more skillfully improve everyday interaction.
 - A. Language is defined as a collection of *symbols* governed by rules and used to convey messages between individuals.
 - B. Arbitrary constructions representing thoughts are given meaning by people
 - C. Language contains *phonological, syntactic, semantic,* and pragmatic rules.
- II. The way we use language influences others and reflects our attitudes.
 - A. Language shapes our ideas of others by means of naming, as well as by showing (or not) credibility, status, sexism, racism, vulgarity, and labeling.
 - B. Language reflects our own attitudes through power, affiliation of *convergence or divergence,* attraction and interest, and responsibility.
 - C. Responsibility is accepted or rejected with "it" versus "I" statements, "you" versus "I" statements, "but" statements, or by asking a question rather than making a declaration.
- III. Most linguistic misunderstandings arise from some common problems easily remedied.
 1. The use of *equivocal words, relative words, slang, jargon,* and overly *abstract language* causes confusion and misunderstanding.
 2. Disruptive language such as confusing *factual statements* with *opinion statements,* or confusing facts with *inferential statements,* or using *emotive language* to announce an attitude can be troublesome.
 3. Some *euphemisms* are pretentious and confusing, while *equivocation* can be interpreted as deliberately ambiguous.

There are significant differences between the way men and women speak.

- . Content of conversations, reasons for communicating, the style of presentation, and social philosophy affect communication.
- A. Social orientation, the *sex role* of the communicator, governs behavior; Masculinity and femininity are culturally recognized, however; they are not biological traits.

Differences in the way language is used across cultures makes communication a challenging task.

- . *Low-context* and *high-context* cultures vary in the use of verbal communication styles.
- A. Low- and high-context cultures also vary in terms of whether they are seen as elaborate or succinct.
- B. A third way languages differ from one culture to another involves formality and informality.
- C. Linguistic relativism is the notion of a worldview of a culture being shaped and reflected by the language its members speak.

Reference

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