

# **INTRODUCTION TO LINGUISTICS**

**ENG: 101**

## **LECTURE NOTE**

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Linguistics can be defined as the scientific study of language. A scientific approach to the study of language involves a critical and inquiring attitude, and refusal to accept uncritically, on faith, or an authority, ideas or ways of thinking about language. Linguistics is thus descriptive rather than prescriptive. Its primary goal is to describe languages as they are actually spoken, indicating what they are like and how they are used, rather than prescribe how they ought to be spoken. The human side of linguistics is as central as its scientific face. Language is a human attribute and many types of linguistics research involve interaction between the linguist and other human beings, speakers of languages. Linguistics is in principle concerned with all aspects of language.

### **FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS**

The sign is a fundamental unit used in the representation and conveyance of information. The sign involves a pairing of a form (something perceivable) and a meaning (a mental notion or idea) examples of written (or graphic) signs are E, meaning “euro” and ₦, meaning naira.

### **ICONIC SIGNS**

An iconic sign or icon is a sign that has a form resembling its meaning in some way: the form shows some characteristics of the corresponding concept. Different forms can iconically represent the same concept by selecting different features of the concept.

### **SYMBOLIC SIGNS**

A symbolic sign or symbol is a sign the form and meaning of which are related purely by convention, being established and acquired through repeated instances of use in communication. The sign and symbol are similar because its meaning varies from one person to another.

### **LANGUAGE AS A SIGN SYSTEM**

This entails that human language is made up of signs and that the signs interrelate and form a system, they do not exist in isolation from one another.

### **SYMBOLIC SIGNS IN LANGUAGE**

The word “tree” is a sign, being constituted in speech. The same goes for the meaning tree in another language. It is important to note the most words in human languages are symbols.

Speech is the primary medium of human language. It is historically prior to writing, which is a recent invention, dating back only a few thousand years. An alternative medium for

the representation of languages is gesture, and in many deaf communities sign languages are used in which words are represented by gestures.

## **DESIGN FEATURES OF HUMAN LANGUAGE**

Many animals use signs to communicate with other members of their species. Human beings, however, are obsessed with signs. Dress is a sign system which is evident in the costumes of Ninjas, Catholic Priests, and Buddhist Monks. Charles Hockett proposed a set of design features of human language, a set of features satisfied by all human languages that distinguishes them from other sign systems. Below are six most important features of human language.

### **ARBITRARINESS**

It is a matter of degree and ranges from highly iconic and motivated, to purely symbolic. In some cases the signs are quite iconic the dance of some bee species ironically represents the direction to nectar source by one of the axes of their figure eight dance.

### **DISPLACEMENT**

It entails the description of things that may be entirely imaginary, like unicorns, dragons, time travel and angels. Animal communication systems sometime allow limited displacement, for signally things that aren't physically present and perceivable. The bees dance can signal presence of nectar at a distance of some kilometers from the hive.

### **CULTURAL TRANSMISSION**

Children learn to speak the language of languages used in the environment in which they are raised, they do not inherit their language via parental genes, in the way they inherit hair and skin colour. Languages are passed on by cultural transmission. Many of the world's languages are endangered due partly to interruptions in transmission across the generations. Although the language a person speaks is culturally transmitted, the ability to speak is a genetic predisposition.

### **DUALITY**

It means that human languages are patterned simultaneously on two levels, the level of form and the level of meaning. Duality of patterning permits a large number of different words to be made up from a small number of meaningless elements that are put together in various ways.

### **PRODUCTIVITY**

Productivity or creativity is the characteristic whereby speakers can make new meaning by producing new expressions and utterance. Linguistic signs can be put together to form sequence that may never have been produced before, speakers can invent new words to express new ideas and new objects and events that they encounter. Think of the number of new English words that have been invented in recent years to facilitate talking about computers and the internet.

### **REFLEXIVITY**

Reflexivity entails that human languages are often used for conveying information about themselves. Traffic lights do not allow for messages about themselves and nor do gestures or facial expressions.

## **SPEECH, WRITING AND SIGNING**

Speech is the primary medium for language, with the exception of sign language and some dead languages; most natural human languages are spoken most of the time. A good number of the world's languages have no tradition of writing and are exclusively spoken. Most people produce and hear more words in speech than in writing and spend more time talking than reading or writing. In fact, writing is a recent invention and if you were able to travel back in time just 7,000 years you would find all languages were exclusively spoken as they had been for tens of millennia previously.

Writing is a system of representing the words of a language visually; certain visual forms and combinations of forms represent words. Writing must be distinguished from other systems of visual representations (like paintings and carvings) which do not represent, at least sometimes, aspects of the sound of the spoken word. Languages written with alphabetic scripts ideally represent words by their sounds. Some do this reasonably well and you can make a good guess at the pronunciation of a word from its written form, if you know the correspondences between letters and sounds.

Some languages employ logographic writing systems, in which each symbol or character represents at least ideally, a word or meaningful unit. Mandarin Chinese writing system is a logographic system. Over 90 percent of the modern characters are combinations of components indicating something about the meaning and pronunciation of the word. Writing is derivative from speech, and secondary to it. Speech is historically prior, and is represented in some form or another in all true writing system. Human beings are born to speak; the normal child cannot help mastering in a matter of a few years or so the languages spoken around it. We are not born to write; writing is usually explicitly taught and few children acquire it through mere exposure.

Linguists are generally more interested in speech than in writing, although both are appropriate topics for linguists to study.

## **SIGN LANGUAGES**

Languages of deaf communities in many parts of the world today use the medium of signing, visible bodily movements made mainly by the hands, face and head.

These systems of sign languages are natural languages that developed spontaneously in deaf communities, and are not the same thing as invented systems based on spoken languages. The manual signs of sign languages are analyzable as combinations of meaningless features of hand shape, locator and movement.

## **SCOPE OF MODERN LINGUISTICS**

Contemporary linguistics is a richly diversified field, with many specializations that no scholar can cover them all. The majority of the almost 7,000 languages spoken in the world today and in the recent past have yet to be adequately documented and described. Many linguists are engaged in gathering data on the poorly documented languages, normally by doing fieldwork in remote locations. Speakers of poorly documented languages are increasingly playing prominent roles, both as gatekeepers determining access to speech communities. Like other sciences, linguistics has applications, including to language learning, literacy and transition. In

fact, many branches of the linguistics have contributed to applied linguistics, the field concerned with the applications to maintaining and strengthening endangered languages. With the advent of computers, the learning of new languages is made easy; this can be achieved through translation of various languages and pronunciation of various words. E.g. English to French Language.

## **LEXICON**

Lexicon is the vocabulary of a person, language or branch of knowledge. The lexicon of a language is not fixed; it does not remain constant forever. Indeed lexicons change quite rapidly. New words come into use and old ones become less popular and are eventually forgotten. Some changes are due to social and technological changes, new terms are required for new items and old words are forgotten as the items go out of uses. Over long periods of time, new words created often out of existing lexical items and old ones wear out so today and disappear from use. For instance words like Soothsayer (Prophet), thwart (prevent, hinder), behold (see), Coz (Cousin).

## **PARTS OF SPEECH**

Parts of speech or word classes entails that the words in the lexicon of a language can be put into different classes. Below is a list of some of the main parts of speech.

### **NOUNS**

They are words that typically specify things or entities such as people animals, objects, places and abstract ideas.

### **ADJECTIVES**

They indicate qualities or properties of things such as age, color, size, shape and speed e.g. tall, fat, short, slim, etc.

### **PRONOUNS**

They are words used instead of nouns to refer to persons and things. Some examples are I, He, She and They.

### **VERBS**

They are words that indicate events such as actions, happenings, mental and bodily activities. Examples include think, walk, talk, love etc.

## **ADVERBS**

They indicate qualities and properties of events (e.g. quickly, happily, specifying the manner of performance) or indicate intensity of a quality (very slow train)

## **PREPOSITION**

Are words that are used in locating events in space or time and they include words like at, by, in and under.

## **CONJUNCTIONS**

They are words which are used to joining words or groups of words together. Bisi and Ola are my friends.

## **WORD FORMATION**

The English lexicon is expanded by the formation of new words forms, occasionally to express new meaning, sometimes to express existing meaning. Below are ways in which existing forms can be used to making new lexical signs expressing new meaning.

### **CLIPPING**

Clipping is the shortening of an existing word of more than one syllable, generally to a single syllable. Overtime, clipping may become more frequent than the longer forms. Common examples, are pub (from public house) fan (from fantastic) fax (from Facsimile) ad (from advertisement) and flu (from Influenza)

### **ACRONYMING**

Acronyms are words formed from the first letters of a string of words. There are two types of acronym: words acronym and spelling acronyms.

Words acronym are pronounced as single words, following the spelling pronunciation. Examples are RAM ( Random Access Memory) ROM ( Read Only Memory ) UNESCO (United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization). Acronyms are often written with capital letters.

Spelling acronyms are pronounced as sequences of the names of the letters used rather than as words. Examples EU ( European Union), PR (Public Relations) and CD ( Compact Disc). Acronym is a popular way of forming new terms in modern English and many other languages.

### **BLENDING**

Blends involve the combination of parts of two separate words to form a single word. Usually it is the first part (often syllable) of one word together with the second part of the other word which occurs in that sequence. The word motel is a blending of motor and hotel, smog is a blending of smoke and fog.

## **BORROWING**

Borrowing is the process of incorporating into one language words from another language. It is perhaps the most common source of new words as pizza, and pasta.

## **COINAGE**

Coinages are creative invention of new words, the degree of creativity of new words is limited and speakers exploit exciting words and word patterns. Examples, naff (unfashionable, worthless), pot (Indian herb).

## **IDIOMS**

Idioms are more or less fixed expressions like kick the bucket (die), the meaning of which is not predictable from the component words or grammar. Although the meaning of an idiom is not predictable from the words that make it up, in many cases, it is possible to guess some motivations for it. E.g. (1) To bury the hatchet. (2) To build a castle in the air.

## **TABOO WORDS**

Taboo words are expressions that are prohibited by social and religious conventions. Certain words with religious connotations are also tabooed in many cultures when used outside of appropriate religious context. For instance, words like God and Christ should not be used in vain. Words have particularly strong affective values, for example, shit, fuck and cunt are among some examples of taboo words. They are often called dirty words or filthy words, although there is nothing intrinsically dirty about them and there is nothing at all unpleasant about them. In addition, many words relating to sexual activity, the genitals and some bodily functions and are taboo words.

## **LANGUAGE SHIFT AND ENDANGERMENT**

Languages do not remain constant for long, indeed they change rapidly. Societies change and languages are out to new uses. New styles of speech or writing emerge for use in new social interactions and purposes. New dialects emerge as populations move into new regions and countries (English in Nigeria) and in some circumstances new languages eventually emerge. Moreover, overtime people change their habits of choosing between the languages and varieties at their disposal in the speech community and thus the social value associated with these change.

When change in habit of language use become particularly pronounced and one language or language variety comes to be used in significantly smaller or wider range of circumstances in a speech community, we speak of languages shift. In extreme cases, what was once the major language of a community the language used as the primary vehicle of communication and the mother tongue of most community members, maybe replaced by another language.

### **CAUSES OF LANGUAGE SHIFT**

Disruption of the speech community, physical or social separation of speaks so that there are fewer opportunities for interaction among them is a factor in language shift. A typical example is the Trans-Atlantic slave trade which forbids slaves to speak in their mother tongues. This can come about in many different ways; decimation of the speech community; enforced resettlement together with others who do not share the same language; widespread dispersal of the community for employment and other reasons, influx of significant numbers of immigrants and separation of children from the adults. Some languages have survived for a long time without large speech communities, while others appear vulnerable even with many thousands of speakers. Speakers might shift their speech habits in favor of a language enjoying higher status, especially if it is politically advantageous to do so. For instance, some minority ethnic groups in the northern part of Nigeria prefer to speak Hausa Language.

The language of the colonizer is associated with the modern world and desirable commodities, while the traditional language might be associated with the old ways of life.

### **DEGREES OF LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT**

<b>S/N</b>	<b>DEGREE OF ENDANGERMENT</b>	<b>OF INTERGENERATIONAL LANGUAGE TRANSMISSION</b>
1	Safe	Language is Spoken by all generations, intergenerational transmission is interrupted
2	Vulnerable	Most children speak the language but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g. home)
3	Definitely Endangered	Children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home
4	Severely Endangered	Language is spoken by grandparents and older generations, while the parents may understand it, they do not speak it to children among themselves
5	Critically Endangered	The youngest speakers are grandparents and older and they speak the language partially and infrequently
6	Extinct	There are no speakers left

In conclusion, effort should be made in order to ensure language maintenance and revival across Nigeria and the rest of the world. In a number of cases communities have exposed determination that their traditional language survive or that a previous spoken language be reintroduced.

## **LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

Language acquisition is the processes by which children learn to speak the language of the community they are born into. While there is considerably individual variation in the acquisition process, this variation falls within limits and acquisition follows regular patterns. Normal children in all societies acquire within the space of a few years, fluent control of a language, sometimes two or more. By the time they are five years old, they know several thousand words, have acquired the major phonological and grammatical systems of their languages as well as the fundamentals of semantics.

The languages habitually spoken around them, by the parents and other community members, including other children they interact with acquisition of all languages is believed to proceed through similar developmental stages.

### **BASIC SCHEDULE OF ACQUISITION**

#### **PRE-LANGUAGE STAGES**

At around two months, the child typically begins to produce vocalizations called cooing. Their vocalizations consist of syllables, often repeated, and made up of a velar consonant plus a back vowel. In the babbling stage, the child produces word-like utterances and later the babbling becomes more controlled and different intonation patterns may be used.

#### **ONE-WORD STAGE**

At around 12 to 18 months, children produce their first recognizable words. These words occur alone, in single unit utterances and thus the term one-word stage. A one-word utterance can be given different intonation express different speech acts. The first words are lexical rather than grammatical and generally label concrete objects or individuals that the child interacts with like mummy and daddy

#### **THE TWO-WORD STAGE**

By 18-20 months or so the child typically has an active vocabulary of some 50 words; this increases dramatically over the next few months, so that by two years of age the child's vocabulary will normally increase to around two to three hundred. New kinds of meaning begin to appear later in this stage, including actor-action as in (mummy eat, daddy see)

## **TELEGRAPHIC SPEECH**

Multiple word utterances usually make their first appearance sometime during the third year of life. In this stage function words and morphemes such as preposition begin to appear.

## **BASIC MASTERY**

By four or five years of age, most children have acquired a basic mastery of their language. Their vocabulary will stand at well over 1000 items, and the basic systems of phonology, morphology and syntax will be in place.

## **CONTINUED ACQUISITION**

Language acquisition continues throughout life. This is especially true a lexical items, which continue to be acquired in adulthood, although at a much slower rate than for the two year old child. In addition, some aspects of grammar take a longer time than other for children to acquire.

## **LANGUAGE IN ITS BIOLOGICAL CONTEXT**

The human language cannot be learnt by any other species that is why newborn babies can learn their native languages easily. A baby's brain is able to learn and adapt to his/her mother's tongue easily. It is also important to note that the human language is unique in a way which entails that man can acquire and animals do not have the ability to speak even after extensive training in various laboratories across the continents. Animal communication defers from human method of communication. A child by the age of five is expected to have acquired a particular language especially his mother tongue and should have a mastery of a language or more. Deformity or down syndrome and other forms of genetic disorder can affect a child's ability to speak a particular language effectively. Animals communicate but do not make use of language. According to Chomsky, "Communication refers to an effort to get people to understand what one means". In conclusion, it is only humans that make use of language to communicate.

## **PRIMARY SOURCE**

- (1) William B. McGregor. *Linguistics: An Introduction*. London, Continuum International Publishing Group. 2009.