

INTRODUCTION TO LINGUISTICS

LESSON TWO

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

Introduction:

We probably take the ability to use language for granted. But even the imagination of its absence, in our everyday life, could be frightening. In fact, language is fundamental to what it means to be human. Some of us might think that an answer to “what language is” would be clear, simple, and straightforward, but it is difficult to say exactly what a language is.

Therefore, some of the language scientists (linguists) have come up with different definitions for language, each one of them set a specific feature that characterize human language from other means of communication used by other species especially animals.

Characteristics of Human Language:

1. Edward Sapir 1921:

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

According to this definition, the main characteristics of the human language are:

- a) Language is unique to humans.
- b) Language is produced voluntarily.
- c) Language is made of symbols.

2. Block and Trager 1942:

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

In their definition of language, the two scholars pointed at the following:

- a) Language is structured, which means that it is made up of rules concerning its pronunciation, grammar, and meaning.
- b) Language is limited only to its spoken form.
- c) In addition to the fact that language is used as social product not only to fulfil the function of communication, but also the notion of co-operation.
- d) This definition brings in the property of arbitrariness.

3. Noam Chomsky 1957:

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

According to Chomsky, both languages, the spoken and the written ones are natural languages.

- a) Each natural language has a finite number of sounds.
- b) And an infinite number of sentences, are produced using these finite number of sounds.

4. Hall 1968:

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

Hall is clearly stated that:

- a) Language use requires more than one user.
- b) Language involves the sender and the receiver of spoken form of language.
- c) Language is a social arbitrary product.
- d) Language enables interaction.

5. Robins 1979:

He did not define language, he rightly pointed out that such definitions “*tend to be trivial and uninformative, unless they presuppose...some general theory of language and of linguistic analysis.*” But he only listed and discussed certain salient characteristics of the language “*that must be taken into account in any seriously intended theory of language.*”

The most important characteristics of language mentioned by Robins are the following:

- a) **Extensibility:** it is a property of language which enables language users to add other words to their linguistic repertoire. The language is extensible in a way that we may call for new expressions to fit our communicative needs.
- b) **Modifiability:** language has an impact on its users, sometimes we feel the need to adapt ourselves as the language requires; for example, when hearing a bad news makes us showing a state of sadness, or empathy.

Conclusion:

Although, we have not yet found a single definition of language that have completely explained the phenomenon in question, but the linguists mentioned above provided some of its valuable characteristics.