

Unit 4

Language as a Set of Systems

Instructional Objectives

Upon completion of this unit, you are supposed to be able to:

1. understand that languages consist of a complex set of systems.
2. understand the elements those systems.

PRELIMINARY ISSUES

Prior to the discussion on language as a set of systems, it is important to review what has been discussed in previous units. First of all, it is arguably true that the relationship between the sounds of the words and their meanings is **arbitrary**; it is not logical in any way. *Woman*, for instance, does not sound, look or feel like the physical thing this word represents. In other words, there is no reason why a particular word is used to mean what it does. By looking at the very different words in different languages which represent the same thing, the arbitrariness of language is evidently justified.

Secondly, the sounds which represent the words of language are referred to as **vocal symbols**. For example, there are three sounds in the word *sit*: / s /, / i / and / t/. The sounds that make up a word are a set of symbols for the thing it means.

Meanwhile, the function of language is for **communication** of which the success is very much determined by mutual understanding between the message sender and receiver. In other words, it is a matter of intelligibility.

Finally, it is also evident that people use gestures, which include facial expression and body movements in addition to written symbols to represent the vocal sounds. Thus, language can be verbal and non-verbal depending on the required functions in context.

The preliminary issues described above are in accordance with the definition of language as 'a learned, shared and arbitrary system of vocal symbols through which human being in the same speech community ... communicate.'¹

LANGUAGE SYSTEMS

It has been theorized that language has three main components or systems, namely:

¹ H.L. Smith, Jr. *Language and total system of communication* [publication details unknown]

- sounds (phonology)
- meanings (semantics)
- rules (grammar)

Task 4-1

On the left column are six important terms; and on the right column are definitions. Write a letter indicating the definition after the number indicating the term. No. 1 has been done for you as an example.

| Technical term | Answer | Definition |
|----------------|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Morpheme | 1 = C | A. The branch of linguistics dealing with how meanings are assigned to words, phrases, and sentences. |
| 2. Phoneme | 2 = | B. The study of how sounds are organized and used in natural languages |
| 3. Semantics | 3 = | C. the smallest meaningful unit in the grammar of a language |
| 4. Phonology | 4 = | D. The study of the rules that govern the ways in which words combine to form phrases, clauses, and sentences. |
| 5. Syntax | 5 = | E. The smallest element that may be uttered in isolation with semantic or pragmatic content |
| 6. Word | 6 = | F. the smallest contrastive unit in the sound system of a language |

The Sound System

Dealt with in this unit is a general overview of the sound system without going into detailed descriptions as they will be discussed in Unit 5 (phonetics) and Unit 6 (phonology). To describe the speech sounds, we will use International Phonetic Symbols.

Despite the fact that sounds are the smallest parts of language, only some combinations of sounds can make up words. Others remain meaningless. For example, there are sounds, such as /æ/, /b/, /t/, and /s/, how many English words can be made up out of those three sounds?

Task 4-2

Put a tick in the box labeled as 'Word' if it corresponds to an English word, that is an acceptable combination of sounds; and put a tick in the box labeled 'non-

word' if it does not correspond to English word, that is an unacceptable combination of sounds.

| No. | Combination of Sounds | Word | Non-word |
|-----|-----------------------|------|----------|
| 1 | Stab /stæb/ | | |
| 2 | Bast /bæst/ | | |
| 3 | Tasb /tæsb/ | | |
| 4 | Bats /bæts/ | | |
| 5 | Sabt /sæbt/ | | |

Sounds and letters should be differentiated from each other. It is important to remember that 'sounds' (as in **phonemes**) and letters (as in alphabet). Letters simply try to represent sounds in some sort of written system, but not always in the most logical way—which is why some of the students may have problems with spelling. One sound /k/ in English for example is represented in several different letters as in **can** (represented by a letter 'c'), **keep** (represented by a letter 'k') and **chemical** (represented by a combination of letters 'ch'). Meanwhile one letter 'a' may represent more than one sound as in **ago** representing / /, **man** representing /æ/, **car** representing /a:/. Therefore again, the students may make mistakes in spelling and pronunciation. At times, a letter does not represent a sound, such as the letter 'b' in the word 'doubt' because it is pronounced as /daʊt/.

At the level of sounds, we are still nowhere near **language**. Although a few isolated sounds, such as *Mmmm, Ah, Er..* have interpersonal meanings, sounds normally do not constitute meaning on their own. Usually, sounds are combined to make **morpheme**, the smallest meaningful units in a language.

Morpheme

Full details of the language system of morphemes will later be discussed in Unit 7. Here is a brief introduction. A **morpheme** is defined as the smallest meaningful units in a language. But, what is a unit? How many morphemes (units) are there in the word 'dogs'? There are two: *dog* and *-s*. These morphemes are also examples of two different kinds of morphemes:

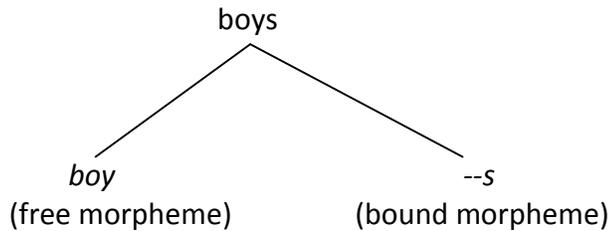
- *dog* is a **free morpheme**—it is a meaningful unit of its own; and
- *-s* is a **bound morpheme**—it is a 'plural marker' that has to be bound, or tied, to another morpheme to become meaningful.

In some languages, words change in form when there is a change in the situation where they are used. In English, for example, *-s* is added to the word 'banana' when more than one banana is referred to. A difference also exists in form and meaning, between *I pick bananas* and *I picked bananas*. This second example, the difference is in tense.

The *-s* and the *-ed* are very important morphemes as they tell us something about an action involved, such as in *She gives millions of kisses.*, and *She asked for millions of kisses.* One is singular, possibly habitual action, whereas the other happened in the past. So the *-s* and the *-ed* contribute part of the meaning of the words.

Task 4-3

Analyze each of the following words into a free morpheme and a bound morpheme. One word has been analyzed as an example.



- | | | |
|--------|--------|---------|
| came | chairs | teaches |
| looked | helped | thought |
| shakes | rose | balls |
| tables | sends | lent |
| laps | nouns | men |

(Note: the past tense marker is always *-ed* , and the plural marker is always *-s*).

Words

From the afore-going discussion, **words** come somewhere between:

- *morpheme*, which makes up words; and
- *syntax*, which concerns putting words into certain order.

Normally, more than one word may be used at a time when speaking or writing, and there are rules about how words are combined into sentences or part of sentences. This is the system of syntax.

Syntax

The term **syntax** might be new to you; perhaps you are more familiar with **grammar**? **Syntax** is used here because it applies specifically to the way that words combine to form sentences in a language, whereas **grammar** includes morphology. Some other linguists call morphology as the grammar of words, and syntax is the grammar of phrases and sentences.

The main issue of syntax at the moment is **word order**, namely in what order words are located in a phrase or sentence.

Task 4-4

Below are six words from which several sentences which can be correctly or wrongly ordered. Put a tick (✓) in the box that corresponds to the correct order, and put an asterisk (*) in the box that corresponds to the wrong order. One has been done for you.

| | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| * | Day wakes every Nadia up early. |
| | Early every day Nadia wakes up. |
| | Every day Nadia wakes up early. |
| | Nadia wakes up early every day. |
| | Nadia every day early wakes up. |

(Unit 9 will deal *syntax* more thoroughly).

Meaning

A language can be viewed from the **meaning** system. The linguistic term for this system is **semantics**. It has been theorized that words are linked with things (such as *mango*), with ideas (such as *cooperation*), with feeling (such as *happiness*), and many other categories. What is this link? Is it something logical or is it arbitrary? Is it the same for every person? Is it different in different languages? When we try to translate one language to another, we soon find out that there are important differences

Meanings of words are related to one another in many ways of which two are words in sentences (context) and the vocabulary system. The meaning of a word can be affected by the context in a sentence. Look at the word *well*, compare its meanings in the following sentences:

- *Sarah played well.*
- *Rosida was not feeling well.*

It is obvious that the word *well* means differently in the above two different sentence. Such a difference is caused by the different context in which the word *well* is used.

In vocabulary systems, different languages have very different groupings of words. The words for family relations form a particularly interesting system. This system tells us a great deal about different culture.

Non-Verbal Systems

All the systems above have mainly dealt with the **verbal** systems of language. The word *verbal*, as it is probably known, means 'of, relating to, or using words. It is

a loan word, coming from Latin *verbum*, meaning *word* (the word *verb* has the same origin). However, language has **non-verbal** aspects.

Non-verbal aspects of language often facilitate the process of communication, and can, therefore, be used in addition to or instead of words. Like words, they are systematic in the sense that there are rules which determine when and how they are used to convey particular meanings. Forms of non-verbal expression include:

- the many different **facial expressions** and **gestures** that people use when they speak (e.g. raising eyebrows, smiling, frowning, waving fist, or pointing); and
- aspects of language built into or onto the words we use, such as **stress** and **intonation** (stress is the emphasis on certain words in an utterance; intonation is the ‘music’ of voice, the way it changes tone).

This system is called **paralanguage**. Despite the fact that *para* means beyond, and thus *beyond language*, the system is also very much part of language. Even, at times, paralanguage cannot be separated from language.

Task 4-5

Match the gesture in the left column with the descriptions in the right column. One item has been done as an example.

| Gesture | Meaning |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| nodding the head (up and down) | Worry |
| shaking the head (from side to side) | I don't care or I don't know. |
| lowering the head | It's our secret. |
| winking (i.e. closing one eye) | Yes |
| closing both eyes (briefly) | No |
| shrugging the shoulders | Look at him / her |
| pointing (at a person) | Come here and let me hold you. |
| holding out both arms | I am ashamed. |

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Being aware that language is a set of systems is very useful for language students. With this, students can understand their difficulties in learning how to use the target language. What do you think of this statement?
- It is not wrong to concentrate on learning grammar, but it should be noted that there are a lot more to language systems than simply learning the grammar of the language. You, of course, need to learn all about the systems

within a language. Can you please put rank (if possible) the degree of importance in learning the language systems?

- It should be borne in mind that 'sounds' (as in phonemes) and 'letters' (as in alphabets) are not the same. Therefore spelling is a problem. One letter may represent more than one sound; and conversely, one sound can be represented by more than one letter. Justify this statement.
- The systems for 'plural', part of speech, and tense are different in different language. Unfortunately, rules are always followed by exceptions. Can you please formulate one rule and its exceptions?
- Meaning is not anything that can be translated from one language to another. It is context-based. What is meant by "context-based"? Give examples.