

An Introduction to Language

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Title	Page
Introduction	7
Chapter 1: Characteristics of Language	17
Definition of Language	19
Historical Attitudes to Ward Language	22
Ways of Studying Language	28
Phonetics and Phonology	28
Grammar	33
Semantics	37
Language Variants	37
Dialects	38
Jargon	38
Pidgins and Creoles	41
Nonverbal Language	42
Physiological and Physical Basis of Speech	44
Speech Production	46
Language Acquisition	50
Meaning and Style in Language	54
Chapter 2: Types of Meaning	55
Structural, or Grammatical, Meaning	57
Lexical Meaning	59
Semantic Flexibility	62
General and Specific Designations	62
Neologisms	65
Language and Conceptualization	68
Style	61
Language and Culture	76
Transmission of Language and Culture	78
Language and Social Differentiation and Assimilation	80
Chapter 3: The Control of Language for Cultural Ends	85
Second – Language Learning	87
Nationalistic Influences on Language	88
Translation	90
Massages and Codes	93
Language Learning	94

Bilingualism	97
Becoming Multilingual	99
Language and Thought Processes	101
Literacy	105
Written Language	107
Evolution of Writing Systems	107
Spelling	108
Written Versus Spoken Languages	111
Linguistic Change	113
Chapter 4: Diversification of Languages	115
Changes Through Time	117
Changes Through Geographical Movement	120
Tendencies Against Change	122
Language Typology	124
Additional Reading	128
Resources	131

Introduction

Language is a symbolic system of communication in form of conventional spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture communicate. In other words, language is a symbolic, rule-driven system of conventional signs employed by humans for a variety of purposes including communication; definition of the world and reality; storage and transmission of knowledge; thinking and manipulation of concepts; representation or misrepresentation of specific realities; self-expression and definition of personal identity; definition of individual and group identity; definition of individual and group otherness; establishing and maintaining of social relations; incorporation, socialization of new members into existing group identities; marking boundaries with or exclusion of individual and group others; lying, exaggeration, or distortion of otherwise defined facts and ideas; fantasizing, wishful-thinking, or imagining of a better life; as well as engaging in the creative and recreative, playful or serious, transformation of the conventionally defined world and its realities.

Language structures and informs the way in which speakers of that language understand the world. People's sense of reality is embedded and embodied in the language which they speak. Rather than describing the objective, external world, language creates a subjective perception of it which is specific to that language and shared by its speakers. Linguistic ability is located in the brain and is a function of the complex interaction of different neuronal networks, some of them resident in specific areas of the brain.

Damage to certain areas of the left hemisphere of the brain can lead to the inability to articulate or comprehend speech. Damage to right-hemisphere of

brain can lead to inability to comprehend emotional aspects of speech. Damage to the basal ganglia of the brain can also result in severe impairment of linguistic abilities, even the complete loss of language.

Linguists estimate that there are about 6,000-7,000 different languages spoken in the world today. The imprecision in this estimate is largely due to the fact that some dialects are in the process of diverging and it is not clear that they have reached the stage of being separate languages. If two people find each other's speech unintelligible, they are usually thought to be speaking different languages rather than dialects.

There are about 200 languages that have a million or more native speakers. Mandarin Chinese is the most common, being spoken by around 874,000,000 people as a native language. English is a distant third with approximately 341,000,000 native speakers.

The Most Common Languages in the World

LANGUAGE	APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF NATIVE SPEAKERS (in the year 2000)	COUNTRIES WITH SUBSTANTIAL NUMBERS OF NATIVE SPEAKERS
1. Mandarin Chinese	874,000,000	16
2. Hindi (India)	366,000,000	17
3. English	341,000,000	104
4. Spanish	322-358,000,000	43
5. Bengali (India and Bangladesh)	207,000,000	9
6. Portuguese	176,000,000	33

7.	Russian	167,000,000	30
8.	Japanese	125,000,000	26
9.	German (standard)	100,000,000	40
10.	Korean	78,000,000	31
11.	French	77,000,000	53
12.	Wu Chinese	77,000,000	1
13.	Javanese	75,000,000	4
14.	Yue Chinese	71,000,000	20
15.	Telugu (India)	69,000,000	1

Note: If the 15 major variants of Arabic are considered one language, Arabic is the 6th most common language in the world having 198-201,000,000 native speakers with substantial numbers in at least 40 countries. English is far more world wide in its distribution than all other spoken languages. It is an official language in 52 countries as well as many small colonies and territories. In addition, 1/4 to 1/3 of the people in the world understand and speaks English to some degree. It has become the most useful language to learn for international travel and is now the *de facto* language of diplomacy. In 2001, the 189 member countries in the United Nations were asked what language they wish to use for communication with embassies from other countries. More than 120 chose English, 40 selected French, and 20 wanted to use Spanish. Those who wanted English to be the common language included all of the former Soviet republics, Viet Nam, and most of the Arab world. English is also the dominant language in electronic communication, particularly on the

Internet. However, the percentage of Internet users who are not native English speakers is increasing rapidly, especially in Asia. In fact, China estimated in 2008 that there are now more people who have online access in their country than in the U.S., which had been the global leader in Internet access.

In reality, the distribution of languages globally is very complex and difficult to easily describe. Numerous migrations of people over the last several centuries have resulted in largest nations now having many different languages. There are at least 165 languages spoken in the United States today. Consequently, it is somewhat misleading to describe the U.S. as being an English speaking country. The same caution applies to other multicultural nations as well.

Some parts of the world have unusually high concentrations of different languages. There are around 900 native languages spoken by the 5-10 million people of New Guinea and its neighboring islands. That is roughly 1/6 of all languages being spoken by far less than 1% of the world's people. Other language high density areas have been native California and the Caucasus Mountains north of Turkey and Iran.

The majority of the languages in the world are unwritten and many of them are disappearing. About 1/2 of the world's languages are no longer spoken by children. This is the first step in the extinction of a language. About 2,000 languages now have less than 1,000 speakers. The most threatened are the indigenous languages of Australia and the Americas. By the end of the 20th century, about 200 Australian languages survived, but more than 1/2 had less than 10 speakers. Two dozen had a single elderly speaker. Young Aborigines now predominantly speak English, especially in urban areas. There has been a similar pattern in

California where Indian languages disappeared at the rate of nearly one a year during the late 20th century. Globally, the rate of language loss now is one every two weeks. The areas where indigenous languages are being lost the most rapidly are central South America, Oklahoma and the American Southwest, the Northwest coastal region of the U. S. and Canada, eastern Siberia, and northern Australia.

There are no "primitive" languages. All languages have a system of sounds, words, and sentences that can adequately communicate the content of culture. The languages of the so-called "primitive" peoples are often very complex in their grammatical structures. There seems to be no correlation between a language's grammatical complexity and the technological level of a society or other aspects of culture. However, cultures that have more complex, diverse economies and advanced technologies have larger vocabularies. For instance, English has roughly 515,000 non-technical words. If slang and specialized technical words are added, English has more than 2,000,000 words and is growing at a rate of hundreds to thousands every year. By comparison, German has about 185,000 non-technical words, French may have less than 100,000, and Spanish even fewer. The major reason that English has so many more non-technical words is the fact that as it evolved from its Germanic roots, it acquired words from more than 240 other languages. However, it is unlikely that any one individual knows the meaning of all English words. Most Americans only use 800-1,000 words in everyday conversation. A typical American college student knows 20,000-30,000 words by the time he or she graduates. While this is 20-37 times more than the average person who has not gone to college, it is still less than 2% of all English words.