The Study of Language and its Meanings

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***Abstract*- The French word 'language' is more general than the other member of the pair, not only in that it is used to refer to language in general, but also in that it is applied to systems of communication, whether they are natural or artificial, human or non-human, for which the English word 'language' is employed in what appears to be an extended sense. The statements all come from classic works by well-known linguists. Taken together, they will serve to give some preliminary indication of the properties that linguists at least tend to think of as being essential to language. There are other systems of communication, both human and non-human, which are quite definitely natural rather than artificial, but which do not seem to be languages in the strict sense of the term, even though the word 'language' is commonly used with reference to them.**

Index Terms- language, linguistics, Syntactic, Phonetic, Pragmatic, Semantic.

INTRODUCTION

We begin our study of human language by examining one of the most fundamental units of linguistic structure: the word. Words play an integral role in the human ability to use language creatively. Far from being a static repository of memorized information, a human vocabulary is a dynamic system. We can add words at will. We can even expand their meanings into new domains. When we think about our native language, the existence of words seems obvious. After all, when we hear others speaking our native language, we hear them uttering words. In reading a printed passage, we see words on the page, neatly separated by spaces. But now imagine yourself in a situation where everyone around you is speaking a foreign language that you have just started to study. Suddenly the existence of words no longer seems obvious. While listening to a native speaker of French, or Navajo, or Japanese, all you hear is a blur of sound, as you strain to recognize words you have learned. If only the native speaker would slow down a little you would be able to divide that blur of sound into individual words. The physical reality of speech is that for the most part the signal is continuous, with no breaks at all between the words. In discussing these types of information, we will in fact be referring to each of the subfields of linguistics that a certain sequence of sounds. Phonetics and phonology are the subfields of linguistics that study the structure and systematic patterning of sounds in human language.

Lexical structure information. For every word we will be dealt with in this book:

1. Phonetic/Phonological information. For every word we know, we have learned a pronunciation. Part of knowing the word tree knows certain sounds more precisely, have learned, we intuitively know something about its internal structure. For example, our intuitions tell us that the word trees seem to be made up of two parts: the word tree plus an additional element, Morphology is the subfield of linguistics that studies the internal structure of words and the relationships among words.
2. Syntactic information. For every word we learn, we learn how it fits into the overall structure of sentences in which it can be used. For example, we know that the word reads can be used in sentences like Mark reads the book, and the word readable can be used in a sentence like The book is readable. We may not know that read is called a verb or that readable is called an adjective; but we intuitively know, as native speakers, how to use those words in different kinds of sentences. Syntax is the subfield of linguistics that studies the internal structure of sentences and the relationships among the internal parts.
3. Semantic information. For virtually every word we know, we have learned a meaning or several meanings. For example, to know the word brother is

to know that it has a certain meaning. In addition, we may, may not know certain extended meanings of the word, as in john is so friendly and helpful; he's a regular brother to me. Semantics is the subfield of linguistics that studies the nature of the meaning of individual words, and the meaning of words groups into phrases and sentences.

4. Pragmatic information. For every word we learn, we know not only its meaning or meanings but also how to use it in the context of discourse or conversation. For instance, the word brother can be used not only to refer to a male sibling but also as a conversational exclamation, as in "Oh brother! What a mess!" In some cases, words seem to have a use but no meaning as such. For example, the word hello is used to greet, but it seems to have no meaning beyond that particular use. Pragmatics is the subfield of linguistics that studies the use of words in the actual context of discourse.

Hall presumably means by language 'symbols' the vocal signals that are actually transmitted from sender to receiver in the process of communication and interaction. But it is now clear that there is no sense of the term 'habit', technical or non-technical, in which the utterances of a language are either themselves habits or constructed by means of habits. If 'symbol' is being used to refer, not to language-utterances, but to the words or phrases of which they are composed, it would still be wrong to imply that a speaker uses such and such a word, as a matter of habit, on such and such an occasion. One of the most important between facts about language is that there is, in general, no connection between words and the situations in which they are used such that occurrence of particular words is predictable, as habitual behavior is predictable, from the situations themselves. For example, we do not habitually produce an utterance containing the word 'bird' whenever we happen to find ourselves in a situation in which we see a bird; indeed, we are no more likely to use the word 'bird' in such situations than we are in all sorts of other situations. Language, as we shall see later, is stimulus free.

Chomsky's definition of 'language' has been quoted here largely for the contrast that it provides with the others, both in style ad in content. It says nothing about the communicative function of either natural or non-natural languages; it says nothing about the symbolic nature of the elements or sequences of them. Its purpose is to focus attention upon the purely structural properties of languages and to suggest that these properties ca be investigated from a mathematically precise point of view. It is Chomsky's major contribution to linguistics to have given particular emphasis to what he calls the structure-dependence of the processes whereby sentences are constructed in natural languages and to have formulated a general theory of grammar which is based upon a particular definition of this property.

Language, then, can be considered, legitimately enough, from a behavioral point of view. But language in general and particular languages can be considered from at least two other points of view. One of these is associated with the terminological distinction that Chomsky has drawn between 'competence' and 'performance'; the other, with the somewhat different distinction that Ferdinand de Saussure drew in French at the beginning of the century, between 'langue' and 'parole'.

When we say of someone that he speaks English, we can mean one of two things: either (a) that he, habitually or occasionally, engages in a particular kind of behaviour or (b) that he, has the ability to engage in this particular kind of behaviour. Referring to the former as performance and the latter as competence, we can say that performance presupposes competences, whereas competence does not presuppose performance. Put like this, the distinction between competence and performance is relatively uncontroversial. So too is Chomsky's further point that, however broadly we construe the term 'linguistic competence', we must recognize that the language-behaviour of particular persons on particular occasions is determined by many other factors over and above their linguistics competence. There is much in Chomsky's more detailed formulation of the notion of linguistic competence that is highly controversial. But this need not concern us at present. Here it is sufficient to note that, for Chomsky, what linguistics are describing when they are describing a particular language is, not the performance as such, but the competence of its speakers, in so far as it is purely linguistics, which underlies and makes possible their performance. One's linguistic competence is one's knowledge a particular language. Since linguistics is concerned with identifying and giving a satisfactory theoretical account of the determinates of linguistic competence

it is to be classified, according to Chomsky, as a branch of cognitive psychology.

The distinction between 'langue' and 'parole', as it was originally drawn by Saussure, subsumed a number of logically independent distinctions. Most important of the these were the distinction between what is potential and what is actual, on the one hand, and the distinction between what is social and what is individual, on the other. What Saussure called a 'langue' is any particular language that is common possession of all the members of a given language-community. The French term 'langue', which, as we have seen, is simply one of the ordinary words meaning "language", is usually left untranslated in English when it is being employed technically in its Saussure a sense. We will introduce the term 'language-system' in place of it; and we will contrast this with 'language-behaviour', initially at least in the way that Saussure contrasted 'langue' and 'parole'.

A language-behaviour of individual members of the language-community. Up to a point what Chomsky calls linguistic competence can be identified, readily enough, not with the language-system, but with the typical speaker's knowledge of the language-system. But Saussure gave special emphasis to the social or institutional character of language-systems. Therefore, he thought of linguistics as being closer to sociology and social psychology than it is cognitive psychology. "The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philosopher could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from a common source which, perhaps, no longer exists: there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible for supposing that both the Gothick and the Celtic, though blended with a very different idiom ,had the same origin with the Sanscrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family".

In this connection it is important to emphasize the difference between and race. Terms like 'Germanic' and Indo-European' apply primarily to language-families. They do not apply to anything that a physical anthropologist would regard as genetically distinct races. There is no such thing , and never has been, as a Germanic or Indo-European race. In so far as the use of these terms in historical linguistics implies the existence of a language community speaking Proto-Germanic or Proto-Indo-European at some time and in more place in the past, it is reasonable to assume that the members of these language-communities may have thought of themselves as belonging to the same cultural and ethnic groups. The possession of a common language is, and presumably always has been, an important mark of cultural identity and ethnicity. But there is no connection, and coincidental between race, genetically defined, and either ethnicity.

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