Unit 2 Functions of language

Overview

To further explore the nature of language, we naturally come to the question of what language is for. This unit deepens our understanding of the basics of language by offering refreshing ideas about language functions, which pave the way for the investigation of language in use, language evolution, language acquisition, and other important issues in linguistics.

Text A
Language is used for so many purposes (e.g., expressing feelings, providing information, and conducting social talking, to name just a few) that it is difficult for us to identify which one is its most basic (perhaps also its) original use. However, a careful examination of what language is good/bad at today can hopefully provide some useful clues to its basic function(s). Contrary to the mainstream assumptions, it has been observed that among its multiple purposes, language is good at interaction and persuasion but poor at information exchange.

Text B
The hammer (with an iron head and a handle) is shaped to fulfill its functions of pounding nails into and removing them out of wood. Likewise, the form of language is also motivated by its basic functions. As a form-function composite, a linguistic unit consists of two parts, the signifier and the signified. The bond between the two parts is both arbitrary and motivated. It is arbitrary because there is no inherent connection between the form of a sign and its meaning; it is motivated in the sense that the bond between the signifier and the signified is intentional instead of rigid or random.

The two texts approach the same issue from different perspectives. Text A discusses how the basic functions of a language can be traced in the development of language, while Text B focuses on the intriguing relationship between the form and the functions of language.

Teaching objectives

This unit is designed to help students develop their reading skills, communicative competence, critical thinking, intercultural competence and abilities of autonomous learning in the following aspects.

Reading skills:
Distinguish between general and specific statements
Scan for a global understanding of the text

Read charts, graphs and tables to organize and interpret information

Communicative competence:
Illustrate your points with appropriate examples
Use figures of speech to help Illustrate your points
Differentiate informative and affective uses of language

Critical thinking:
Evaluate the logical strengths of the author's evidence and support
Organize and present your reasoning using diagrams
Identify and critique assumptions behind statements

Intercultural competence
Appreciate linguistic and cultural diversity
Interpret language differences culturally
Have curiosity in and be ready to explore other languages and cultures

Teaching strategies

The functions of language are an interesting yet rather difficult topic. To arouse students' interest, the teacher can start with a direct question "What do you think is the function of language?" or a more interesting one "In what way is language similar to a hammer?"

The questions in **Critical reading** and **Intercultural reflection** are mostly mini-research projects. To guarantee quality answers from students and to improve the classroom efficiency, it is recommended to divide the class into groups and assign different tasks to them in advance. Each group is required to do in-depth researches on a few of the questions.

Further readings on functions of language:
Jakobson, Roman. (1960). Closing statement: linguistics and poetics. In Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.). *Style in Language*, Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press. 350-377.
Halliday, M.A.K. (1973). *Explorations in the Functions of Language*. London: Edward Arnold.
Coq, John P. (1955). The Function of Language. *The Modern Language Journal*, 39(4): 177-180.
Jackson, Howard & Peter Stockwell. (2011). *An introduction to the nature and functions of language*. London & New York : Continuum.

Preparatory work

(1) Main publications:

New media language. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

Words in the mind: An introduction to the mental lexicon. 3rd edition. Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 2003.

The Articulate Mammal: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics. 4th edition. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

The seeds of speech: Language origin and evolution. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Main research interests:

1) (Socio-)historical linguistics

The description, implementation and causation of language change, with particular reference to current changes.

2) Language and mind

Language acquisition, speech comprehension, speech production, with particular reference to lexical storage and retrieval.

3) Language and the media

The language used by the media, and the effect of the media on language, with particular reference to language change, language and power, the relationship of media language to language in literature.

(2) The whole book consists of four parts, namely, Puzzles, Origin, Evolution, and Diffusion. Text A "What is Language for" is from the first part Puzzles. The other three questions addressed in this part are: *How did language begin? Why do languages differ so much?* and *Is language an independent skill*?

Part 2, 'Origin', explores how language probably originated. Chapter 5 outlines the 'East Side story', which suggests that humans separated from apes when they were stranded on the east side of Africa, after the Great Rift Valley split the terrain. Humans were forced to live on their wits in a harsh landscape, and began to develop language. Chapter 6 examines the prerequisites for language, which are shared with our ape cousins: first, friendly involvement with others and a predisposition for grooming; second, an aptitude for tactical deception, or lying, which depends on 'a theory of mind', and an ability to understand the intentions of others. Chapter 7 considers the basic requirements for speech, many of which are also present in other primates. For example, sound-receiving mechanisms are shared with apes, yet sound-producing ones differ, perhaps because of our upright posture, which in the long run enabled humans to produce a range of finely tuned sounds. Chapter 8 notes that ontogeny, the development of the individual, only sometimes correlates with phylogeny, the development of the species. Two ways in which these coincided were the lowering of the larynx and the development of the 'naming insight', an understanding of the power of naming.

Part 3, 'Evolution', examines how language might have evolved. Chapter 9 looks at ways in which words could have been combined. At first, many sequences were possibly repetitive and inconsistent. But gradually, strong preferences may have become rules. These preferences were based on pre-linguistic 'mind-sets'. Chapter 10 looks at how language expanded and how it made use of the human body and its location in space for extending word meanings. The evolution of different parts of speech occurred probably via reanalysis: adjectives and prepositions both grew out of reinterpretation of nouns and verbs. Chapter 11 considers attachments to verbs. Verbs acquire attachments via grammaticalization, in which a full lexical item developed into a grammatical marker. Chapter 12 examines generativity, the use of finite resources to produce an infinite variety of sentences. Such structures arose from reanalysis of existing structures.

Part 4, 'Diffusion', considers the spread of language over the world, and discusses why languages have not become unlearnably different from one another. Chapter 13 outlines the route taken as humans moved out of Africa, and considered the possibility of reconstructing glimpses of language as it might have been more than 30,000 years ago. Chapter 14 examines the difficulties and frustrations of hunting for language universals. Chapter 15 points out that looking for constraints, things that languages don't do might be more enlightening. Implicational links, it notes, are important for keeping language in check. Such links are partially due to processing needs, but partly also to the overall structure of the system. Chapter 16 outlines the different components within the language system, and emphasizes that these interacted with the usage of the system in a complex way.

(3) John Locke, widely known as the Father of Classical Liberalism, was an English philosopher and physician. He was also memorized as one of the first British empiricists. His work greatly affected the development of epistemology and political philosophy. His contributions to classical republicanism and liberal theory are reflected in the United States Declaration of Independence.

Major works:
A Letter Concerning Toleration (1689)
Two Treatises of Government (1689)
An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690)
Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693)

(4) Lord Byron's (1788-1824) two best known long narrative poems are *Don Juan* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage.* His other major poems include: *Prometheus, She walks in Beauty, When we Two parted, Darkness,* and *And Thou art Dead, as Young and Fair.*

(5) Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) is remembered as the father of the functionalist

school of anthropology and for his role in developing the methods and the primacy of anthropological fieldwork as well. He first rose to prominent notice through his studies of Pacific Islanders, especially those conducted among the Trobriand Islanders whose marriage, trade and religious customs he studied extensively. His best known works include *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922),*Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (1926), *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (1929), and the posthumously published *Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays* (1948).

Malinowski helped develop the field of anthropology from a primarily evolutionary focus into sociological and psychological enquiries. Some of the noteworthy byproducts of his fieldwork in this direction include various evidence that debunked the Freudian notion of a universal Oedipal Complex and evidence that showed that so-called primitive peoples are capable of the same types and levels of cognitive reasoning as those from more "advanced" societies. Malinowski's ideas and methodologies came to be widely embraced by the Boasian school of American Anthropology, making him one of the most influential anthropologists of the 20th century.
Source: http://www.nndb.com/people/320/000099023/

For more information about Malinowski, please refer to: Murdock, George(1943). Bronislaw Malinowski. *American Anthropologist*, 45:441-451.
http://www.aaanet.org/committees/commissions/centennial/history/095malobit.pdf

Critical reading

I. Understanding the text

1. Outlining
Thesis: Among its multiple purposes, language is good at interaction and persuasion but poor at information talking.

Part	Paras	Main idea
I	1 - 5	Introducing the question: what is language for?
II	6 - 8	Multiple purposes: interpreting the question
III	9 - 20	Answering the first question: what is difficult to express?
IV	21-26	Answering the second question: what is language good at?
V	27-28	Conclusion: questions related to the functions of language

We would like to emphasize that what we have just provided is not the only answer to the outlining task. To start with, we can divide the text in different ways. For example, we can follow the traditional trichotomy and dividing it into introduction, main body and conclusion; we can also divide part III and part IV into further sections. The main idea of each part varies accordingly.

2. Comprehension check

(1) The transfer of information is not the only purpose of using language. In greetings and some pointless chitchat, communicators use language primarily, if not exclusively, for constructing or maintaining certain social relationship. Even when information is the major concern, the speaker and hearer must take into consideration some other factors, such as politeness and aesthetics (cf. Paras. 22-22).

(2) In Paragraph 6, Aitchison divides the question "what is language for" into two sub-questions: "For what purpose did language develop?" and "For what purpose is language used nowadays?" Since there are so many purposes of using language and the original one is difficult to identify, she argues in paragraph 8 that we can find clues by looking at what language is good at and what it finds difficult to express. The rest of the text (paras.9-28) provides discussion about and answers to these two questions.

(3) According to Aitchison, the list of language functions in paragraph 7 is not exhaustive, and it is not clear which one is the most basic. Aitchison discusses in some detail thefollowing four functions, providing information, expressing feelings, influencing others and social talking, which are roughly organized in the order of importance in the traditional view.

(4) Aitchison suggests that the early functions of language can be traced in the way we use language today to some extent. The assumption behind is that the origin of language is accountable in its early function(s) and that the early function(s) must be reflected in what language is good at today. In other words, if language was created to perform a particular function, it must still be good at it nowadays.

II. Evaluation and exploration
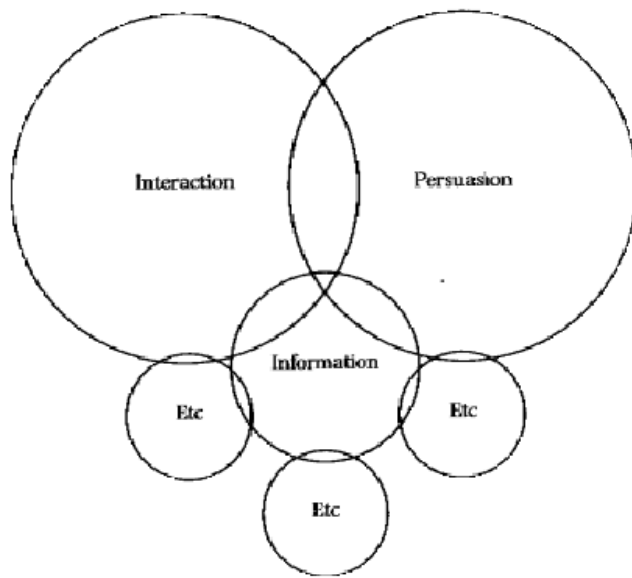
1. Evaluating the text

(1) Figure drawing

Figure 2.2 Realistic view of language functions

(2) Exemplifying

An utterance may serve more than one purpose simultaneously. *Donking* is used metalinguistically in example (6), but the whole sentence "*Donking* isn't a word" is informative. We can provide information, express our feelings and initiate social talking by asking questions or giving commands.

2. **Exploring beyond the text**

(1) Some scholars believe that language facilitates thinking and that our thinking would be impossible without an inner language. In many cultures language is also used as a symbol of magic or as something that carries mysterious power (e.g., religious Taoism, couplets for Spring Festival). Different functions of language are not equally important. For example, the functions of communicating and of facilitating thinking are more fundamental while those of religious use and word play are more derivative.

(2) Generally speaking, there are two different views on the relationship between language and thinking. Some scholars claim that language restricts thinking. According to this view, people perceive the world through the language that they speak. It follows that people speaking different languages experience different worlds, just like people seeing different things with different eyes. Others believe that language and thinking are separate and should not be equated with each other. For example, even if a language does not have the word for chartreuse, people speaking the language can still perceive this color, think about it and even talk about it,using not a single word but a kind of paraphrase.

(3) Some utterances may basically serve only one function. For example, people greet each other saying "Hi!" or "Morning!" to neighbors to maintain social connections; in

church, the priest preaches a sermon to call for piety to the Lord. But more often than not an utterance and its context produce some "side effects" and serve different functions simultaneously. In saying "It's gonna rain. You'd better take an umbrella." to a lady, the speaker not only provides information about the weather, but also shows his/her concern toward the addressee and enhances the solidarity.

(4) Language changes for different reasons, e.g., language users' aversion to cliché and preference to creativity, language contact, language planning and so on. While some changes may not be directly related to functions of language, others are indeed motivated by certain functions of language. For example, neologisms related to science and technology emerge primarily because there is a need to talk about such new things. In this case the function of providing information requires the creation of some new words.

(5) The best-known examples for "phatic communion" in traditional Chinese society are probably greetings such as "吃了吗？(have you had your meal?)" and "去哪儿啊？(where are you going?)". Neither is considered imposing or offensive because in traditional Chinese society, it is more important to show mutual concern than respect for privacy. The British follow a different tradition. Brown and Levinson (1987) recognize two sides of face, a positive one and a negative one. Positive face refers to "the desire to be appreciated and approved" and negative face "the freedom of action and freedom from imposition". For Chinese people (especially in traditional society), negative face is not as important as positive face. The British, on the other hand, value negative face more than positive face.

Language Enhancement
I. Words and phrases
1. Word formation
Part of speech:
Nouns: Taking-off, air-traffic, take-off-point, London-York, two-thirds, real-life, non-reality, self-repetition, other-repetition
Adjectives: non-existent
Adverbs: half-way

Structure:
Noun-noun: air-traffic, London-York, self-repetition, other-repetition
Adjective-noun: real-life
Cardinal-ordinal numeral: two-thirds
Prefix-noun: non-reality
Gerund-adverb: Taking-off
Verb-adverb-noun: take-off-point

2. Articles and prepositions

(1)/

(2)/

(3) a, the, with

(4) /, the

(5) /, the, the, on, a

3. Verbs and phrases

(1) convey, handle

(2) convey

(3) transfer

(4) coincide

(5) collide

(6) date back to

(7) originate from

II. Sentences and discourse

1. Paraphrasing

(1) Even when language is used simply to transfer information, the accuracy of the information transferred is still unlikely to reach 100%.

(2) Less affirmative claims about the purpose of language may be at least superficially more acceptable: when early people found that facial expressions and body movements could not fully express themselves, they invented language to communicate their thoughts.

(3) So long as the speaker is telling the truth, language is reasonably good at transferring simple pieces of factual information, such as "Bob is Petronella's cousin."

(4) Even in cultures where lying is officially discouraged, people are still unwilling to tell the whole truth. A government official invented the phrase "being economic with the truth" to deny that he was lying.

(5) According to George Orwell, political language is designed to beautify horrible things and to tell lies.

2. Translation

(1) 英国哲学家约翰 洛克在其颇有影响的著作《人类理解论》(1690)中指出，语言是一个伟大的传输渠道，人类通过这一渠道相互传达各自的发现、推理和知识。

(2) 然而"思想"是一个模糊的概念，涵盖了几乎所有话语背后的各种意图，包括命令、道歉和诗歌等。

(3)然而"善意的小谎言"（出于某种社会原因所说的无伤大雅的假话）也是正常的，尤其是在其礼貌规范要求说话者做出回答的文化中。

(4)他讲起话来有板有眼，而且有时话中有话。

(5) In every one of her pictures she conveys a sense of immediacy.

(6) We're interested in the source of these fictitious rumors.
(7) The cheers and applause mingled in a single sustained roar.

3. Paragraph structure
2-4-3-1

Intercultural Reflection

1. Belonging to two different language families, English and Chinese have many significant differences, which can be roughly categorized into five aspects.
   Alphabet: Chinese does not have an alphabet. Instead it uses a logographic system for its writing. In such a system symbols represent words themselves, whereas in an alphabetic system (such as that in English),a word is made up of a cluster of letters which together note down the sound, not the meaning, of the word.
   Phonology: The two languages have different phonological systems and some aspects of the English phonological system cause difficulties for Chinese learners. For example, some English phonemes do not exist in Chinese; and the two languages differ in their stress and intonation patterns as well.
   One of the most noticeable phonological features of Chinese is that Chinese is a tone language. This means that it uses the pitch of a phoneme to distinguish word meanings. In English, however, changes in pitch are mostly used to emphasize or express emotion, not to give a different meaning to the word.
   Grammar - Verb/Tense: In English much information is carried by auxiliaries and verb inflections, such as is/are/were, eat/eats/ate/eaten, etc. Chinese, however, is not an inflected language and conveys meaning mainly through word order, adverbials and shared understanding of the context. The concept of time, which is mainly conveyed by the use of different tenses and verb forms in English, is typically rendered by temporal adverbials and the context in Chinese. Modal verbs also differ a lot in the two languages. While in English they are commonly used to express subtle differences in meaning (think of the increasing degree of politeness in *Open the window, please.*/*Could you open the window, please?*/ *Would you mind opening the window, please?*), in Chinese their usage is often more restricted.
   Grammar - Other: Chinese does not have articles, so difficulties with their correct use in English are common in Chinese learners of English.
   Differences also exist in word order between Chinese and English. In Chinese, for example, questions are conveyed by intonation, not by inverting the subject and verb as in English. Chinese nouns cannot be post-modified as in English; and Chinese adverbials usually precede verbs while in English there is a set of complex rules governing the positions of adverbials. Interference from Chinese leads to Chinglish expressions as follows:
   When you are going home?

English is a very hard to learn language.

Vocabulary: English and Chinese have very different systems of vocabulary. Word formation, for example, reflects some of the differences. In English, there are a number of methods of word formation, such as affixation, compounding, conversion, blending, clipping, acronym, back-formation, neologism and loan words, while The presumed methods of forming Chinese characters are divided into six categories, or *liushu*（六書): pictographic characters, (*xiangxing zi* 象形字), self-explanatory characters (*zhishi zi* 指示字), associative compounds (*huiyi zi* 會意字), pictophonetic characters (*xingsheng zi* 形聲字), mutually explanatory characters (*zhuanzhu zi* 轉注字), and phonetic loan characters (*jiajie zi* 假借字).

Discourse: English is a hypotactic language while Chinese is paratactic. By hypotactic we mean that English usually adopts abundant connective words to demonstrate the relations between different clauses of a sentence. By paratactic we mean that Chinese …. In addition, English uses a great number of attributive clauses, participle phrases, and preposition phrases to indicate a "subjective + clause" relation, but Chinese has fewer such expressions, and adopts juxtaposed structure instead.

Classroom tactics:
There are different ways of categorizing the differences between two languages (e.g., their origin and development, their relation to the mother culture). This exercise is primarily designed to help students develop a critical way of thinking. Students are likely to point out some differences randomly and intuitively. The teacher's task then is to guide them to think systematically in a framework.

2. Gu Hongming (1915: 107) once claimed in *The Spirit of the Chinese People* (《春秋大义》) that Chinese is good at "expressing deep feeling in simple language", and therefore, it is "a language of the heart", "a poetical language". Following is a quotation from him:

    [Chinese] *is a language for expressing deep feeling in simple language. That is the secret of the difficulty of the Chinese language. In fact, as I have said elsewhere,* **Chinese is a language of the heart: a poetical language**. *That is the reason why even a simple letter in prose written in classical Chinese reads like poetry.*

    But Gu's view is open to criticism. Poeticity is a subjective matter (cf. Para. 29, Text A of Unit 3).Contemporary linguists are more likely to agree that all languages are equally competent in expressing subtle feelings and composing poems. In both Chinese and English, there are beautiful and imperishable poems. Yet what counts as "poetry" or "poeticity" may not be exactly the same in the two languages.

3. Languages have different grammatical systems. Chinese, for example, has no articles, case, tense marker, or subject-verb agreement as English. German and French have even more complicated grammatical systems than English. French, for example, differentiates masculine from feminine for almost all the nouns and pronouns. German has a third gender, neutral. In these two languages, the adjective modifying a noun/pronoun should be in agreement with the gender and the number of the noun or pronoun it relates to.

    But grammatical rules do not necessarily mean accuracy. Chinese and English have their own means to be precise.

    To sum up, languages are different in complexity of grammatical systems and we can use any language in accurate or loose ways. It is not justified to conclude that one language is more accurate than another. Which language is used in international affairs is more a matter of power and politics than a purely linguistic issue.