# ENG124: Language and Society

Lecture Notes-II

What is Language?

# Introducing the term *Language*

- **Language** vs. **A language**: A systematic ambiguity

  - An abstraction vs. a language out there or languages out there (e.g., Hindi/Punjabi/Urdu/Maithili)

  - A faculty of the mind vs. an entity which is spoken and heard

  - A species-specific potential vs. an instantiation of the potential

  - A cognitive construct vs. a geopolitical construct

# Metaphorical extensions
of the term *Language*

- Language: A *metaphor* for communication in any form

  - Language of music, dance, cinema, ritual, architecture…

    - An extension of the term 'language' to domains other than verbal communication

    - A metaphorical use of the term

# Other *language*-like behaviours

- Language is for communication.
- Humans can also communicate through various other signaling mechanisms
  - Facial expressions
    - E.g., smile in affiliative situations is common across cultures, and is present in blind newborns, has parallels in many primates; laughter, tears
  - Manual gestures (as distinct from sign language)
    - Culture specificity of gestures

# Ways to define language

- The cognitive ability to learn and use complex systems of symbols

- The set of rules that makes up these systems

- The set of utterances that can be produced from those rules.

# Defining Language

- Language relies on the process of *semiosis* to relate signs to particular meanings.

- A narrower notion of language:
  - A species-specific ability to use a symbolic system which evolved naturally and is acquired spontaneously by the human child…

# Modalities of language

- Oral-auditory and visual-motor modalities

- Spoken and signed language

- Sign language as a visuo-motor linguistic system

- Naturally evolving and spontaneously acquired by the Deaf

- Sign vs. gesture

- Gesture is a supplementary language.

# Modalities of Language

- Language and writing?
  - Primacy of speech/sign
  - Writing an accessory, a tool
- Anatomical architecture of language
  - Phonetics and Phonology: sound structure of language
  - International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)
- Neural architecture of language
  - Neurolinguistics
  - Areas in the brain which are specialised for language

# Writing Systems

- Two aspects of language: Oracy and Literacy
- Several different ways of representing language in writing
- Writing – a representational visual symbol system which stands for oral symbols by convention.
- E.g., it is conventional for the nasal sounds in Hindi to be represented in writing by [ङ], [ञ], [ण], [न] and [म], whereas in English the corresponding sounds are represented by [ng/nk], [ny], [0], [n] and [m].

# Writing Systems

- Primacy of speech over writing – de Saussure:

  "Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first."

- All writing goes via speech.

- Are there any instances of writing that are direct?

- The authors cite the example of mathematical notation

- But even this notation is first translated into speech.

- A fictional language where writing does not go via speech.

# Writing Vs. Speech

1. Writing is permanent, while speech is evanescent.

2. Writing is independent of the discourse context, while speech is not.

3. Writing is typically monologic and speech dialogic, since writing often leaves less room for the writer to further explain his intentions or even to discover whether he has been understood, and less room for the reader to inquire about the intentions of the writer.

4. Since a written text may always be re-read, while a spoken text is located in time, writing reduces the need for memorization, while spoken language relies on a wide variety of techniques and formulae for memorization.

# Writing Vs. Speech

5. Due to the longer time available to both writer and reader, writing allows for greater grammatical complexity as well as abstract conceptualization than speech (speak like a book).

6. Through intonation, voice quality and similar paralinguistic means, speech allows for a more nuanced expression of emotional states than writing, which has fewer expressive tools of this type (not any more, in the age of emoticons).

7. Writing allows a higher degree of fossilization of norms and conventions while speech is often more flexible.

# Types of writing systems

- Writing systems are classified according to what kind of linguistic unit their signs represent.

- **Logographic** and **Phonographic** writing systems

- In **logographic writing,** each sign represents a *meaningful element* like a word or a morpheme.

- In **phonographic writing,** each sign represents a phonetic element with no reference to meaning.

- Most modern writing systems are phonographic, Chinese writing being the most prominent example of logographic writing.

# Types of writing systems

- **Phonographic** writing systems may be **syllabic** or **phonemic,** according to whether each sign represents a syllable or a phoneme.

- Japanese Hiragana and Katakana are examples of syllabic systems, while the Latin alphabet and Korean Hangul are examples of phonemic writing.

- Very broadly speaking, therefore, there are three basic types of writing:

  > **logographic**, **syllabic** and **phonemic** (also called alphabetical)

# Types of writing systems

- In the **phonemic** category, there is a standard set of letters (basic written symbols or graphemes) of consonants and vowels that encode based on the general principle that the letters (or letter pair/groups) represent speech sounds.

- In a **syllabic**, each symbol correlates to a syllable or mora.

- In a **logography**, each character represents a word, or other semantic units.

# Phonemic writing system

- Letters (or letter pairs/groups) represent speech sounds

- Correspondences between the graphemes and phonemes in the phonemic system range from partial (as in English) to near total (as in Hindi).

- "Scientific" scripts and defective alphabetic systems

# Logographic script

- The most important (and, the only surviving) modern logographic writing system is the Chinese one, whose characters have been used with varying degrees of modification in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and other East Asian languages.

- Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and the Mayan writing system are also systems with certain logographic features, although they have marked phonetic features as well and are no longer in current use.

- Logograms in English: The ampersand &, used for *and*, the at sign @, used for *at*, the percent sign % and the many signs representing units of currency ($, £, ¥ and so on.)

# Syllabic Script

- *A syllabary* is a set of written symbols that represent (or approximate) syllables, which make up words.

- A symbol in a syllabary typically represents a consonant sound followed by a vowel sound, or just a vowel alone.

- Native American languages such as Cherokee. Several languages of the Ancient Near East used forms of cuneiform, which is a syllabary with some non-syllabic elements.

- Phonemic writing systems typically use a set of 20-35 symbols to fully express a language, whereas syllabaries can have 80-100, and logographies can have several hundreds of symbols.

# What is a syllable?

- A **syllable** is a unit of organization for a sequence of speech sounds. For example, the word *water* is composed of two syllables: *wa* and *ter*. A syllable is typically made up of a syllable nucleus (most often a vowel) with optional initial and final margins (typically, consonants).

- Syllables are often considered the phonological "building blocks" of words. They can influence the rhythm of a language, its prosody, its poetic meter and its stress patterns.

- [Any particular writing system can have attributes of more than one category.]

# Chinese Writing System

Chinese character for 'sun' or 'day'

日

# History of Writing

- In the history of representation of language through visual means in different human civilizations, more complete writing systems were preceded by *proto-writing* systems of ideographic and mnemonic symbols.

- In *True writing* the content of a linguistic utterance is fully encoded so that a reader can accurately reconstruct the exact utterance. It is a later development.

# History of Writing

- *Proto-writing* typically avoids encoding grammatical words and affixes, making it more difficult or impossible to reconstruct the exact meaning intended by the writer unless a great deal of context is already known in advance.

- One of the earliest forms of written expression is cuneiform.

# Early Writing Systems: Cuneiform
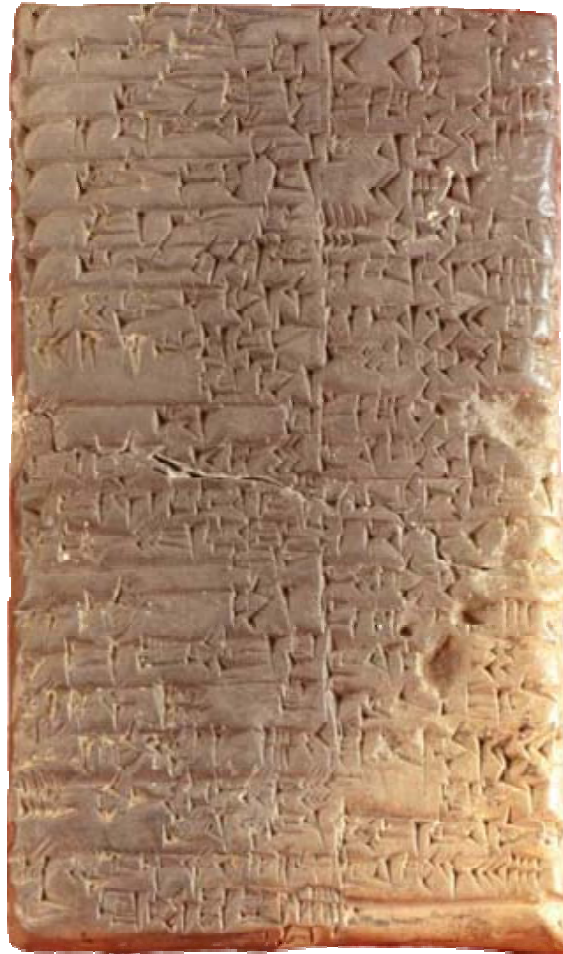
# History of Writing

- *True writing* of language is believed to have been invented independently in at least three centres of human civilisation around 3000 BC:
    - Mesopotamia** (Language: Sumerian)
    - Egypt
    - India (Language: Unknown)
    - **Modern-day Iraq, Kuwait, the northeastern section of Syria, as well as parts of southeastern Turkey and of southwestern Iran
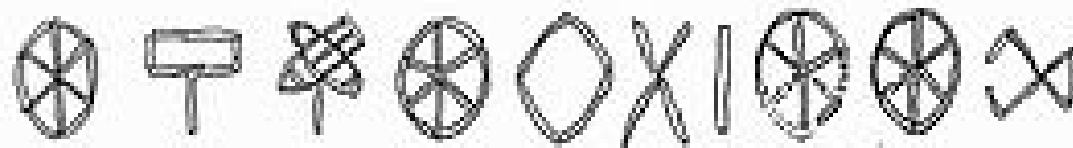
# Sumerian Writing

# Egyptian Hieroglyphs

# Indus Valley Sign Board: Dholavira

# Writing systems: Developmental stages

- *Picture writing system*: hieroglyphs (simplified pictures) directly represent objects and concepts. The following substages may be distinguished:
  - Mnemonic: glyphs primarily a reminder;
  - Pictographic: glyphs directly represent an object or a concept;
  - Ideographic: graphemes are abstract symbols which represent an idea or concept as encoded in language.

# Developmental stages

- *Logographic system*: grapheme (logogram) represents a whole word

- *Phonographic system*: graphemes refer to sounds or spoken symbols, and the form of the grapheme is not related to its meanings. This resolves itself into two substages:
  - Syllabic: grapheme represents a syllable;
  - Alphabetic: grapheme represents an elementary sound.

# Northern Brahmic scripts

- Gupta script: 5th century AD

- Sharada: 8th century AD

- Nagari: 8th century AD

- Odia:10th century AD

- Landa: 10th century AD

- Bengali: 11th century AD

- Assamese: 13th century AD

- Gurmukhi: 14th century AD

# Primacy of Speech

- Arguments supporting primacy of speech:
  - Evolutionary evidence
  - Historical evidence
  - Developmental evidence
  - Evidence from literacy
  - Innovations such as shorthand, texting: ways of bringing writing into a closer or a better approximation with speech.

# Reading Assignment

1. Eifring, H and R. Theil. 2005. On Writing. Chapter 8 of Linguistics for Students of African and Asian Languages.