ENG423A:
Current Issues in Linguistics

KNOWING LANGUAGE III

How the symbolic function of language works

One of the functions of language is to represent or *symbolize* concepts.

Linguistic symbols or *symbolic assemblies* enable this by serving as *prompts* for invoking much richer conceptualizations.

The interactive function of language

Pairing of forms and meanings are not sufficient for the languaging potential.

These form-meaning pairings must be recognized by, and be accessible to, others in the community - the public face of language.

The interactive function of language

The interactive function involves the following:
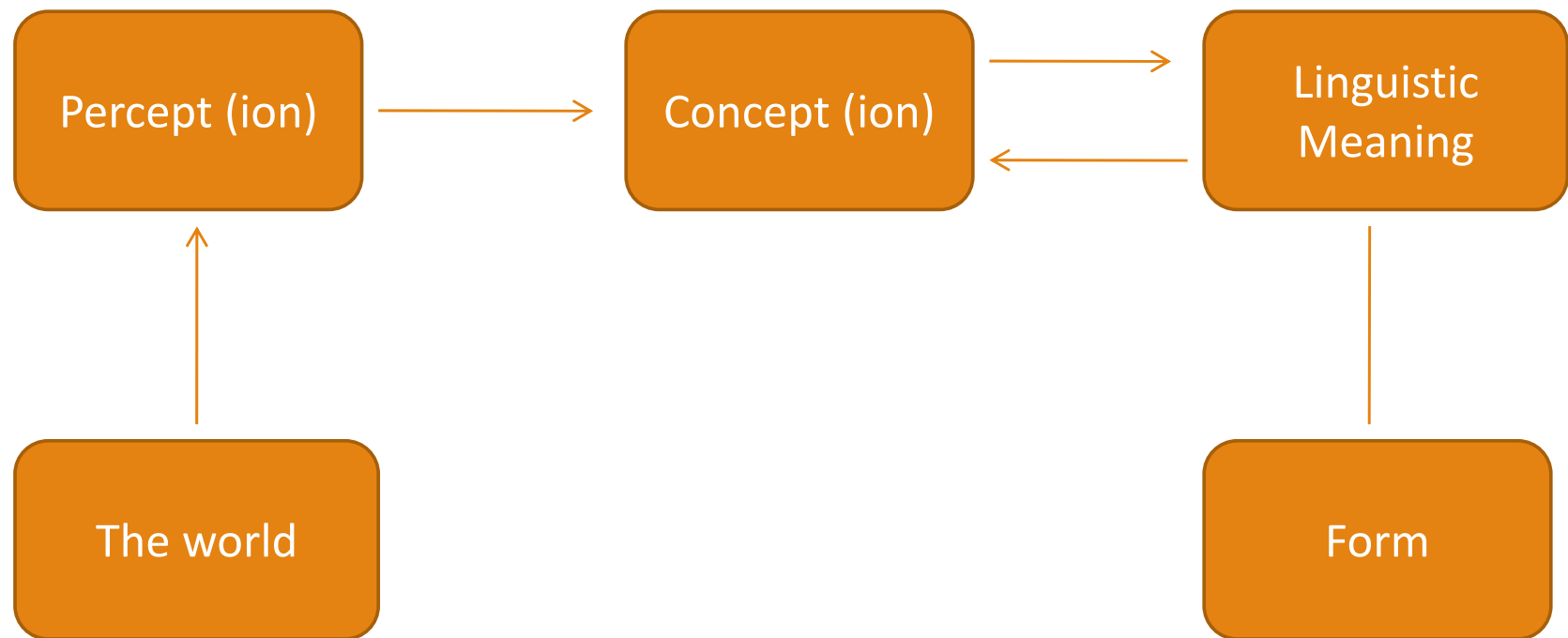
A) a process of encoding by the speaker, and

B) decoding and interpretation by the hearer.

These are processes that involve construction and activation of rich conceptualizations from the point of view of both encoder and decoder.

Symbolic function for the decoder

Percept (ion) → Concept (ion) ⇄ Linguistic Meaning

The world → Percept (ion)

Form → Linguistic Meaning

Language informs.

Informatives: the bare minimal that language does is to inform.

- We have our synchronous classes at 11:00am on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays.

Information about the state of affairs.

Performatives: Language acts.

The messages we choose to communicate can perform various social functions.

I sentence you to five years of life in prison.

The utterance has the effect of changing the world if spoken by a suitably qualified person (a judge) in a suitable setting (the court) to a suitable person (an accused).

Performatives: Language acts.

The messages we choose to communicate can perform various social functions.

I pronounce you man and wife.

The utterance has the effect of changing the world if spoken by a suitably qualified person (a clergy) in a suitable setting (the church) to two suitable persons (a couple).

Performatives: Language acts.

I declare/announce that we have our synchronous classes at 11:00am on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays.

Performatives: Language acts.

Austin divided words into two categories: constatives (words that   describe a situation) and performatives (words that incite action).

A constative is and a performative does.

Informatives are either true or false. Performatives are actions.

Felicity conditions under which performatives can have the force of an action.

The participants and circumstances must be appropriate.

The performative must invoke a recognized convention that preexists the performative utterance.

Typical Performative Verbs

name	command
promise	advise
accept	forbid
reject	deny
guarantee	object
admit	warn
confess	quit
regret	refuse
order	

Affects:
Language encodes and transmits emotional states.

Language plays a role in how we express ourselves, and how we make others feel by our choice of words.

That is, language can provide information about **affect:**

    a. Shut up!

    b. I'm terribly sorry to interrupt you, but . . .

    c. Err...May I...

These examples also illustrate the way in which we present our public selves through language.

Expressives: Language is loaded.

a.   The eminent scientist
b.   The old hag

(a) focuses on the profession of the individual and the relative standing of the individual in that profession.

(b) focuses on her physical appearance.

Although both these expressions can relate to a female scientist, the person's gender cannot be inferred from the expression in (a) while it can, from the expression in (b).

Normative patterns of linguistic behaviour and social stereotyping:

We typically use the expression *old hag* to describe the physical attributes of women rather than of men.

Language names.

Language does more than what we ordinarily suspect.

It not merely describes but creates, enacts and brings forth reality.

Naming is an act of creating a reality.

Jeremy Bentham: "Whenever a man sees a NAME, he is led to figure to himself a corresponding object, or the reality of which the name is accepted by him… in the character of a Certificate."

Manipulative potential of language

Bentham's axiom: Language certifies the reality

Reification - Materialising of the abstract

Mythological entities (goblins, satyrs, mermaids, raakshasa, asura, narsingha, viraath, vikraal)

Literary Creations (Utopia, dystopia, lilliputians, brobdingnag, etc.)

Religion and Folklore create their own reality.

By denying it a name you can deny the existence of a reality.

And by assigning it a name you can also articulate your prejudices regarding the reality.

Non-neutrality of language – a weaker version of Linguistic Determinism.

Ascription through language

Language is an act of naming:

giving names to things, people, actions, states, attributes, (qualifiers and modifiers), relations, beliefs, assertions, negations, interrogations and so on.

Language is both descriptive and ascriptive.

Euphemism-dysphemism

Euphemism-dysphemism and shades of evasion in between

barefaced lie:
plain unvarnished lie

a fib:
A lighthearted lie told in jest

white lie:
no harm intended

terminological inexactitude:
to spare a parliamentary colleague

dancing on the edge of truth:
lying for a dramatic effect

plausible denial:
Lying for reasons of the state

Prevaricate:
quibble or equivocate

to stretch the truth:
lying while still on the side of truth

Euphemistic language

Potential to hide bias under the cover of words:

- Killing a man to punish him -- *retribution*

Euphemisms are most apt to be noticed when they are new:

- farmers -- *agriculturists*
- undertaker—*funeral director*
- money lender—*financier*
- second hand — *preowned*

Depiction of Nuclear Weaponry

The effect is that of anaesthetizing one to the full reality being referred to:

mount a strike: attack (and destroy); a surgical strike: destroying an individual target ;

a preemptive strike: destroying the enemy to prevent his destroying you;

strategic nuclear weapon: a 'large' nuclear bomb with immense destructive power;

tactical nuclear weapon: 'small' nuclear bomb with immense destructive potential;

Depiction of Nuclear Weaponry

demographic targetting/collateral damage :

- killing civilian population

flexible response

- the capacity to deliver all types of strike; and rationalization for more, and more varied, nuclear weaponry.

Together they have the effect of making the reality look less threatening.

Euphemistic and dysphemistic language

An ex soldier being tried for having deserted the army:

- *"I am not a deserter; I deserted."*

An LGBT friend:

- *"I am not a gay, I am gay."*

In summary…

Language not only encodes particular meanings through its symbolic function, but also…

…serves **an interactive function**, facilitating and enriching communication in a variety of ways.

By way of information, action, affect, expressivity, and ascription.