



ENG423A: Current Issues in Linguistics

DEFINING LANGUAGE

Language vs. A Language

To Know *Language* vs. To Know *A language*: An uncountable noun vs. a count noun

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

Humans know language.

You know a language or many languages.

A faculty of the mind vs. a phenomenon that is spoken and heard

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

A cognitive construct vs. a geopolitical construct



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

Metaphorical extensions of the term *Language*

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 the sign language of the deaf)
 - Culture specificity of gestures

Language is a sign system.

Language is a “pairing of a sign and what it stands for”.

The sign is articulatory/visuo-motor/ graphemic.

The definition needs some elaboration.

An utterance and meaning correspondence

A sign without meaning does not constitute language

Capitulituka



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.

Ways to
define
language

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.

More on Defining Language



Anatomical architecture of language

Phonetics and Phonology: sound structure of language

International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

Articulation Signs



Language and writing

Primacy of speech/sign

Writing an accessory, a tool