



Figure 1.4 Jakobson's model of the multifunctionality of language.

Source: Thomas A. Sebeok, *Style in Language*, pp. 150, 154, 350–377, © 1960 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of The MIT Press.

Multifunctionality

In the mainstream view of language that is very common in the United States, language is thought to be a way to describe events or to label objects or concepts. Language is much more than this, however – people accomplish many things with words. Linguistic anthropologists use the term “multifunctional” to refer to all the different kinds of work that language does. One of the first scholars to analyze the various functions of language was Roman Jakobson, a Russian linguist who helped form what became known as the “Prague School” of linguistic theory. Jakobson (1960) identifies six “constitutive factors” in any speech event, and then attaches a corresponding function to each of these constitutive factors. All functions are always present in each speech event, Jakobson argues, but in certain cases, one function may predominate over the others. Figure 1.4 is a slightly modified version of Jakobson's own model (1960:150, 154).

Jakobson's multifunctional model can be understood in the following way:

- 1 If an utterance (or what Jakobson calls the “message”) is primarily oriented toward the speaker, the predominant function is *expressive*. Examples include “Ouch!” when someone stubs a toe, or “I feel so embarrassed!” Of course, these kinds of speech events also function in other ways, but to the degree that they mainly express the speaker's feelings or opinions, Jakobson considers the predominant function to be expressive.

- 2 If an utterance is primarily oriented toward the addressee, Jakobson states that the predominant function is *conative*, an uncommon word Jakobson used to denote “addressee-oriented.” Examples in which this function is the principal one would be questions or commands, as they are focused mainly on the addressee, or vocatives (“Hey, Susie!”).
- 3 When the utterance is oriented largely toward a third person, toward the context, or toward events, Jakobson states that the primary function is *referential*. Examples include, “The Dow Jones plummeted 500 points today,” or, “Nepal is sandwiched between India and China.” These types of utterances form the core of the folk model of language mentioned at the outset of this section; for many people, the referential function is the assumed main or even sole function of language. Jakobson argues, however, that referentiality is but one of six functions of language, and other scholars (e.g., Rosaldo 1982) have shown that it is not even considered to be the default mode of communication in some cultures.
- 4 When the utterance is oriented primarily toward itself – when it somehow calls attention to the very sounds and patterns that are used in its articulation – this makes the *poetic* function predominate, Jakobson asserts. By “poetic,” Jakobson does not mean poetry per se; instead, he is referring to occurrences in everyday speech that involve rhyme, alliteration, repetition, parallelism, or other sorts of playing around with the sound or structure of words. Examples of the poetic function being evident outside of poetry include political slogans such as, “I like Ike” (i.e., Eisenhower), and grammatical parallelism such as that which occurs in a statement such as, “I don't want to hear you, I don't want to see you, and I don't want to know you!” Jakobson has a great deal more to say about the poetic function, but this will have to suffice for our purposes.
- 5 If the utterance is oriented primarily toward the channel that carries it, whether the channel is social or physical, the associated function is *phatic*, according to Jakobson. An example of this type of utterance would be, “Testing, 1, 2, 3...,” as it focuses mainly on the physical channel or mode of contact (a microphone) between the

speaker and the addressee(s). When the channel is a more abstractly conceived social connection rather than a physical one – a relationship of friendship or kinship, for example – an utterance that orients itself primarily to this connection would also be considered mainly phatic in function. An example of this would be the common exchange, “Hi – how are you?” and the reply, “Fine, thanks.” In most instances, the main function of this question and its answer is to draw attention to (and thereby reinforce) the social connection between the two speakers. Sometimes the predominant function of entire conversations can be said to be phatic – that is, mainly serving the function of maintaining or solidifying a social connection.

- 6 If the utterance is oriented primarily toward language itself, the predominant function is *metalinguistic*. Examples include, “Do you understand what I just said?”, “How do you spell ‘relief’?”, or, “‘Metalinguistic’ means ‘language that is about language.’” Some metalinguistic comments can be about language use (what Silverstein [1993] calls “metapragmatic” discourse) rather than language structure, as in “It’s never appropriate to tell a joke on the first date.” Many of these kinds of utterances are also examples of language ideologies, which will be discussed further below. For some linguistic anthropologists, the metalinguistic function of language represents the quintessentially human ability to be reflexive about one’s own language use – in other words, the ability to use language in reported speech or to reflect upon linguistic practice, structures, and contexts of use (cf. Agha 2007; Lucy 1993).

So, language is multifunctional; it accomplishes much more than simply referring to or labeling items or events. Through language, people convey nuanced emotions, display or hide judgmental attitudes about others, reinforce or sever social bonds, and talk about language itself. It is to this latter function of language that we now turn.