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Characteristics of Human Language

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

(يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ)

صدق الله العظيم

(المجادلة: 11)

Dedication

To our prophet Mohammed(peace be upon him).

To our parents.

To our teachers and everyone who supports us.

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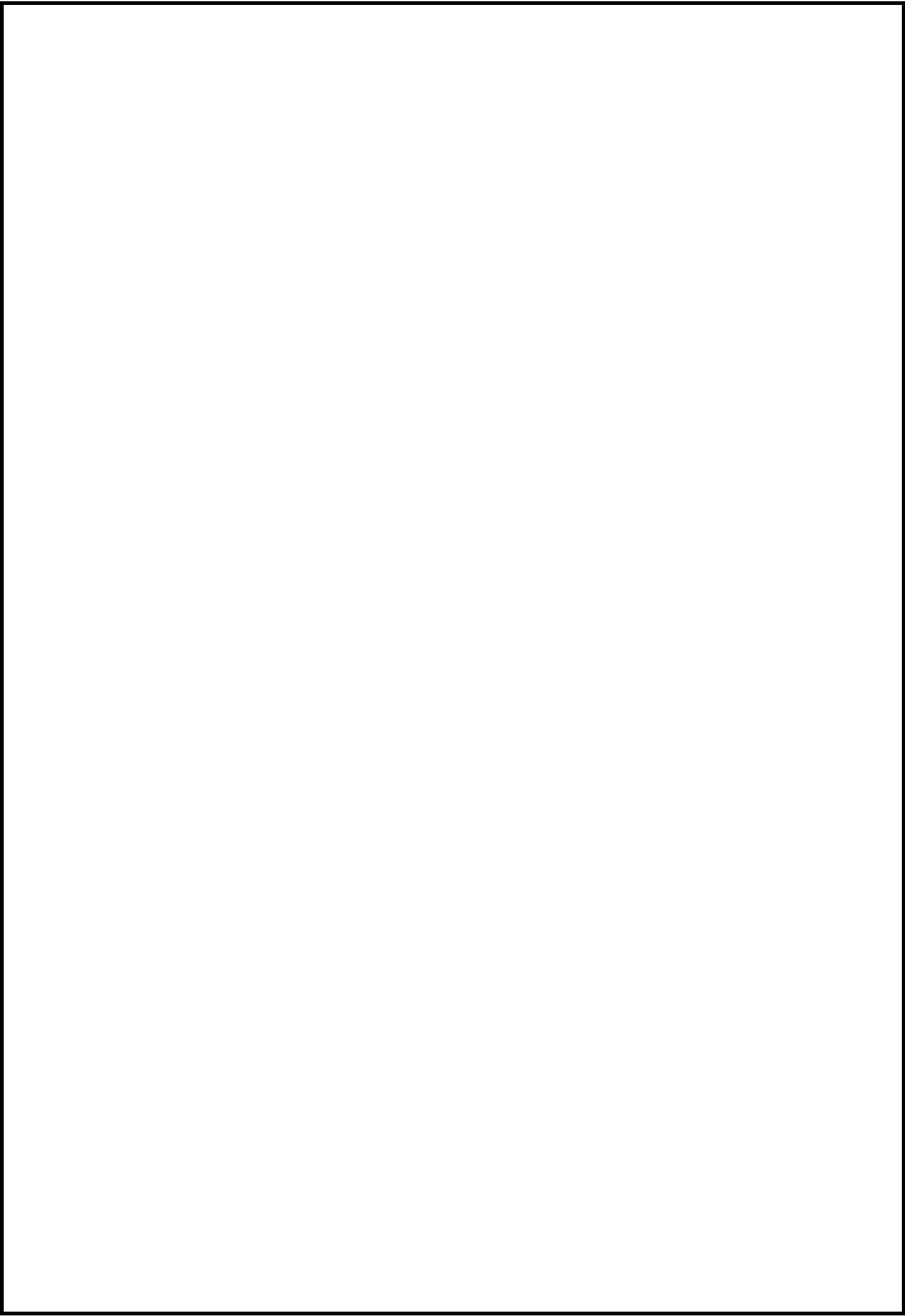
Introduction

As a means of communication for humans , it is Language , that is considered as the best way for expressing what one feels , what one wants and what one is trying to do . Thus, many linguists tries to figure out how this means works by showing its characteristics. This study deals with characteristics of language.

This paper consists of two main sections. The first main section shows some definitions of language. The second main section deals with characteristics of language . It consists of seven subsections . Each subsection introduces a characteristic of language which are Productivity , Discreteness , Duality , Displacement , Arbitrariness , variability, Cultural transmission. Finally , the conclusion sums up the findings of the study .

Contents

1. Some Definitions of Language	1
2. Characteristics of Human Language	3
2.1 Productivity	3
2.2 Discreteness	5
2.3 Duality	6
2.4 Displacement	9
2.5 Arbitrariness	11
2.6 Variability	14
2.7 Cultural Transmission	16
Conclusion	18
Bibliography	19



1. Some Definition of “Language

All the definitions in this section come from classic works by well-known linguists . Taken together, they will provide some preliminary indication of the properties that linguists at least tend to think of as being essential to language . According to Sapir (1921 : 8) , “language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas , emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols .” This definition has several defects . However , one can not communicate with idea , ‘emotion’ and ‘desire’ ,it seems clear that there is much that is communicated by language which is not preserved by any of them and the word ‘idea’ especially is inherently imprecise . On the other hand , there are many systems of voluntarily produced symbols that one only count as language in what one feels to be expanded or metaphorical sense of the word ‘language’. (Lyons , 1981 : 1)

Bloch & Trager (1942 : 5) state that “ a language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates “ . This definition differs from Sapir’s in that it emphasizes the social function of language . The Bloch & Trager definition also differs from Sapir’s in that it brings in the property of arbitrariness and explicitly restricts language to spoken language . (ibid)

Hall (1968 : 158) states that language is “ the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols “. Both communication and interaction are introduced into the definition. The term ‘oral-auditory’ can be taken to be almost equal to ‘vocal’ , differing from it only in the hearer and speaker and the receiver as well as the sender of the vocal signals that one identifies as language-utterances). Hall ,(ibid.) like Sapir, treats language as a purely human institution. The term ‘institution’ makes explicit the view that the language that is used by a particular society is part of that society’s culture.(ibid.)

Chomsky (1957 : 13) considers language “to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences . Each sentence is finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements “. Unlike other definitions , it is meant to cover much else besides natural languages. But, according to Chomsky, all natural languages, in either their spoken or their written form, are languages in the sense of his definition: since (a) each natural language has a finite number of sounds in it (and a finite number of letters in its alphabet-on presumption that it has an alphabetic writing system); and (b) although there may be infinitely many distinct sentences in the language, each sentences can be represented as a finite sequence of these sounds (or letters) . (ibid.)

These four definitions of ‘language’ cited and briefly discussed above have served to introduce some of the characteristics which some linguists have taken to be essential features of languages . Most of them have taken the view that languages are systems of symbols designed for the purpose of communication .(ibid. 21)

2. Characteristics of Language

It is generally believed that human beings are the sole species capable of developing language thanks to their intelligence and appropriate structure of the vocal tract. It is clear, however, that animals are also capable of communicating in their own way. Numerous features common to all natural human languages have been proposed, nevertheless linguists seem not to be unanimous on ascribing certain properties only to human beings. (Wiśniewski, 2007)

2.1 Productivity

The productivity of communication-system is a feature which makes possible the construction and interpretation of new signals that have not been already faced and are not to be found on some list-however-large that list might be-of prefabricated signals, to which the user has access. The importance of productivity has been showed in the recent linguistic literature, especially by Chomsky , with mostly reference to the problem of accounting for the conquest of language by children. The fact that children , at their early age , are able to make utterances that they never heard before is a proof that language is not learned only by means of stimulation and memorization . (Lyons, 1981 : 22)

When people hear a word for the first time , they often ask , "Is that a word? ." If they ask a linguist , the answer will be "It is now". If the novel word is made according to the

morphological and phonological rules of its language and it is comprehensible in context, it is well-formed word, even if it's not found in a dictionary. The productivity of language comes from more than just the ability of speakers to form new words. (Fasold and Connor-Linton, 1981 : 4)

Sentences can become indefinitely long, by adding modifiers (A great big huge beautifully designed, skillfully constructed, well-located new building ...) or by including one sentence in another, over and over again (He said that she said that I said that they believe that you told us that ...). Since languages place no limits on the use of these recursive process, all languages are potentially infinitely productive. (Fasold and Connor-Linton, 1981 : 4)

2.2 Discreteness

It is reluctant to continuity, or continuous variation . In the case of language , discreteness is a property of the secondary elements . To illustrate: the two words 'bit' and 'bet' differ in form , in both the written and the spoken language . It is widely possible to produce a vowel-sound that is half-away between the vowels that normally occur in the pronunciation of these two words . But if one substitutes this intermediate sound for the vowel of 'bit' or 'bet' in the same context , one shall not that way have pronounced some third words different from either or sharing the characteristics of both . one shall have pronounce something that is not recognized as a word at all or, instead of that , something that is identified as a mispronounced version of one or the other . (Lyons, 1981 : 20)

Though discreteness is not logically dependent upon arbitrariness , it interacts with it to increase the flexibility and efficiency of language-system . For example, it would be possible in principle for two words differing minimum , but discretely , in form to be very similar in meaning . Generally speaking , this does not happen : The words 'bet' and 'bit' are no more similar in meaning than are any randomly selected pairs of English words . The fact that words differing minimally in form will usually differ considerably ,

more than minimally , in meaning has the effect of enhancing the discreteness , of the formal difference between them .
(Lyons, 1981 : 20)

2.3 Duality

Duality (or double articulation) means the property of consisting two levels of structure, such as that units of the primary level are included in elements of the secondary level and each of the two levels has its own principles of organization. A terminological difference between 'element' and 'unit' that has introduced will be noticed , but this not a standard terminological difference of linguistic . (Lyons, 1981 : 21)

The sounds do not convey meaning by themselves. Their sole function is to combine with one another to make units which do have a particular meaning. It is because the smaller, lower-level elements are meaningless while the larger, higher-level, unit in general, if not invariably , have a distinct and identifiable meaning that the elements are described as secondary and the units as primary.

Such primary units found in all communication-systems, but it is not necessarily these unit are made up of elements. Only if a system has both units and elements that it has the property of duality. Apparently most animals

communication-systems do not; and those that do are such that the units are not combined with one another in ways that words are combined with one another to form sentences and phrases in all human languages.(Lyons, 1981: 21)

The advantage of duality is obvious : a small number of elements can form a large number of different units-many thousands of words. For instance, out of thirty or forty sounds. If these primary units can be combined systematically in different ways the number of various signals that can be transmitted-and consequently the number of various messages – is increased enormously there is no end to the number of distinct language-signals that can be constructed in particular language. (Lyons , 1981:21)

Language is organized at two levels or layers simultaneously. There is the physical level in the term of speech production. In this level one can produce individual sounds, like /n/, / b/ and /I/, as individual sounds, None of these separate forms has any actual meaning . When one produces those , these separate forms has any actual meaning. When one produces those sounds in a certain combination, as in bin, one has another level producing a meaning which is different from the meaning of the combination in nib, so, at one level, one has different meanings, and one has different sounds at another level. In fact, this duality of levels is one of the most economical characteristic of human language because one is capable of producing a very large number of sound combinations (e.g.

words) which are different in meaning with only a limited set of different sounds.(Yule ,1985;25)

The languages of human being have two levels: minimal units the phonemes for speech and alphabet for writing—which do not have a meaning on their own, and the level where the meaning emerges as a result of combination of the units from level one. the fact that It is emphasized with a limited set of letters in the alphabet an unlimited number of words and expressions may be produced.
(Wiśniewski,2007)

2.4 Displacement

Displacement is one of features of language that refers to the capability to speak not only about things that happened at the time and place of talking, but also about other situation, real or unreal, past or future. Human can talk about electronic parts catalog while playing cards without saying one. As far as one knows, most of animals unable to do that, nonetheless as the research suggest that bee can direct other bees to a food source. although in some limited fashion this might mean that bees' communication system also have this property.(Wiśniewski,2007)

When one's dog says GRRR, it could mean GRRR, right now, it does not appear capable of communicating GRRR, last night in the park .The users of human language are perfectly able of producing messages equivalent to GRRR, last night in the park, and can say, "I'll be going back tomorrow" for some more. Human language users can refer to past and future time and other locations. This characteristic of human language is called displacement. It allows the users of language to talk about events and things which do not exist in the immediate environment. Generally animal communication lacks this characteristic. However, bee communication has been suggested to have the feature of displacement. For example, when a worker bee finds a source of nectar. Locations of this nectar can be found by performing a complex dance routine. Depending on the type

of dance (tail-wagging dance, with variable tempo, for further away and how far and round dance for nearby). The other bees can work out where this recently discovered feast can be found. This ability of bee to indicate a location some distance away must mean that bee communication has at least some degree of displacement as a property. Bee communication has displacement in an exceedingly limited form. Certainly, the bee can lead other bees to a food source. But, it must be the most recent food source. (Yule,1985:20,21)

The factors involved in the property of displacement, as it is manifested in human language, are much more comprehensive than the communication of one location. It enables one to talk about places and things whose existence one cannot even be sure of. Human being can refer to mythical creatures, fairies, demons, Santa Claus, angels and lately invented characters like superman. Unlike other creatures, the feature of displacement allows human to create fiction and to describe possible future worlds. (idid)

2.5 Arbitrariness :

It is one of basic features of language. Words have no principles and systematic connections with what they mean. The first three numbers in English are one, two, three,- but in Chinese they are yi, er, san. Neither language has the "right" word for the numerals or anything else, because there is no such thing (Bolton, 1982: 5). Even onomatopoeic words for sounds, like ding-dong and click, that are supposed to sound like the noise they name, actually vary from language to language. (Falsold, Conner-linton, 2006;5)

Even the speech sounds of a language are arbitrary. English is spoken using 36 different sounds (a few less or more, depending on how the English sound system is analyzed). But, the sounds that are employed in English are not all the same as the sounds needed to speak other language, nor they are put together in the same way. These 36 sounds represented by 26 letters are in turn arbitrarily. Some of them represent two or more sounds (like g in gin and gimp) while other sounds are spelled in two or more different ways (for example, c in "center" and s in "sender" or c in "cup", k in "kelp", and qu in "quiche"). The patterns are also arbitrary in which words and sounds are arranged. Perfectly well, one knows what tax means but any English speaker without a doubt knows that there is no such word like xat. In English adjectives go before nouns, such as, fat man; nouns occur before adjectives in French, it become

home gros. Arbitrariness is a characteristic of a sign languages as well as spoken language. In sign languages some visual signs are iconic - they look like what they – but most signs give not the slightest clue to their meaning. (Fasold,Connor-linton,2006:5)

It is generally the case that there is no "natural" connection between a linguistic form and its meaning. From word, one cannot look at ,كلب the shape of the Arabic word and determine it has a natural meaning, any more than you can with its English translation form dog. The form of linguistic has no natural or 'iconic' relationship with that four-legged barking object out in the world. Recognizing this general fact about language leads us to conclude that a feature of linguistic signs is their arbitrary relationship with the objects they are used to indicate. Human language form show a feature called arbitrariness.

In language there are some words that have sounds in which they seemed to 'echo' the sounds of objects or activities. Examples of English might be cuckoo, crash, whirr, slurp or squelch, which are onomatopoeic. However, in most languages these onomatopoeic words are comparatively rare, the wide majority of linguistic expressions are in fact arbitrary. Most of animal signals, there does a connection between the conveyed message and the signal used to convey it, it appear clearly. one has this impression of the non-arbitrariness of animal signaling may be closely connected with the fact that, for any

animals, the set of signals used in communication is finite.
(Yule,1985:21,22)

The word or sound and the thing it denote has no natural connection, which means one cannot inform what is the meaning of a word simply by looking at it. The German word 'handyspiele' inform us nothing that it means the same as the English word 'handball' or polish word 'piłka ręczna'. Although this rule applies to the most of human language there are some exceptions. One has to know a specific language in order to understand the arbitrary word, though in every language there are a number of iconic symbols that can be understood without having to know the entire language system. Onomatopoeias – words which simulate sounds – are present in the most of modern languages. (Wiśniewski,2007)

Often there is a strong recognizable link between the actual signal and the message an animal wishes to convey. An animal may imitate an attacking behavior who wishes to warn off an opponent. For example, a cat will arch its back, spit and appear ready to attack.

In human language, the opposite is true. In the most cases, there is no link in whatsoever between the signal and the message. The symbols used are arbitrary. there is no real connection, for example, between the word elephant and

the animal it symbolizes. Nor the phrase 'these bananas are bad' really connected with food. Onomatopoeic words for example quack quack and bang are exceptions – but compared with the number of words these are comparatively few. (Aitchison,1972:12).

2.6 Variability

Variability is one of the most important and admirable properties of language. The language that people use varies depending on who's speaking and the situation in which they are speaking. Variation is the gist of information which is also known as difference and diversity. Without variation in sound and frequencies, there would be no language. Language variability allows people to communicate far more than the semantic content of the sentences and words they utter. The variability of language is indexical. Speakers vary the language they use to define the immediate speech situation, also to signal their social identities (social status, geographical, ethnicity, and even gender).

By the variety of language, people let the world know who they are. After saying just a few words, people reveal their geographical and social status origins. To signal membership, people also use their variety of language in a range of

overlapping social groups as male or female, as a teenage or an adult, as a member of a particular ethnic group.

Language variation is also used by people to communicate the situation and purpose in which they are talking. A priest uses different language forms through a sermon than through the social hour after a church service, playing different roles at work. People speak differently to inferiors than to superiors, and differently through meetings than in coffee breaks. Parents speak to their children and even to other people's children in a different way to adults. The language which is used in writing is different from that used in speaking, reflecting and communicating the different conditions under which language is produced and its various purposes.

Through the medium of language variation a large number of a speech community's culture is dealt with, Norms of appropriate language use help speakers to construct and negotiate relations to each other. The rules that applied unconsciously and unwritten for the different forms and uses of language can vary from one culture milieu to another, within and between societies, and even between genders. This raises the risk of misunderstanding when speakers are behaving unknowingly according to different culture norms, but enriches one's ways of seeing the word when those differences are understood. (Fasold, Connor-Linton, 2006: 6-7).

2.7 Cultural Transmission

cultural transmission (sometimes referred to as 'cultural learning') is the process of learning new information through socialization and engagement with those around one. The cultural transmission of knowledge is a broad concept, and it refers to knowledge that is gained through non-biological means.

While cultural transmission is a broad concept, it is not a catch-all for all knowledge acquired through a person's lifetime. In fact, some of the knowledge that one possesses is gained through experience - like a kind of trial-and-error process. For example, no one needs to tell a person not to stand outside and spend hours staring directly into the sun because one would probably learn fairly quickly that this is not a good idea. This trial-and-error process is what is known as experiential learning. Unlike experiential learning, the theoretical basis of cultural transmission is that throughout one's development, one acquires a considerable amount of knowledge simply by being present in our culture. For example, if one lives in the United States, one knows that spooky decorations during October are one of the ways that people celebrate Halloween. Likewise, you probably also know that there are certain conservative religions that discourage these decorations or celebrating the holiday in general.

For someone who is not from a Western culture or familiar with such traditions, these Halloween decorations might seem like a strange custom because that person was not enculturated in Western society and therefore does not possess this cultural information. Similarly, the fact that some people would object to decorating for or celebrating Halloween might seem strange for that same reason . As a means of sharing concepts or information, cultural transmission is heavily influenced by, among other things, the environment, social structure, or political systems. If one lives in a country where there was a national religion, for example, this would affect the way that one receives information about other religions and would likely also affect the amount of information that one is given. (White, 2017:2)

Conclusions

Some of the linguistics who know the language are:

1. According Sapir, "language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas , emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols ."
2. According Bloch & Trager, " a language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates " .
3. For Hall, language is " the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols ".
4. For Chomsky, language is " a set (finite or infinite) of sentences . Each sentence is finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements ".

As for the characteristics of language , we chose the seven most important ones, which are as follows :

1. Productivity
2. Discreteness
3. Duality
4. Displacement
5. Arbitrariness
6. Variability
7. Cultural Transmissio

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