UNIT 1: NATURE OF LANGUAGE

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1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to -
- conceptualize the nature of language;
- describe how form, meaning and context govern a language;
- analyze the relationship between language and society;
- discuss language and education issues in Assam.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

Human language is an exclusive form of communication. It is unique in nature compared to other forms of communication, such as animal language. We can produce unlimited set of utterances from a limited set of rules. The complex structures have a wide range of functions. On the contrary, communication systems used by animals are limited and the signs and functions of animal systems are inborn.
Moreover, a human language is culturally acquired which can be learnt through social interaction. Each language has its own concepts and sound images. This makes language arbitrary. As a common progression, a language is first spoken and then its written form develops.

There are two basic meanings to the word ‘language’; one as a general concept and the other as a specific language (like English or Assamese).

1.3 NATURE OF LANGUAGE

*Language is a mental faculty*: Language can be said to be a unique development of the human brain which enables us to learn languages and generate and understand utterances. Thus, language is universal to all humans and we have an inborn capacity for language acquisition. Children acquire language to which they are exposed through similar stages of language development.

*Language is a symbolic system*: Language can also be defined as a formal system of signs governed by grammatical rules which communicate meaning. In other words, human languages have set rules that associate particular signs to particular meanings. This view of language was introduced in France by Ferdinand de Saussure. Noam Chomsky further enumerated language as a particular set of sentences that can be generated from a particular set of rules.

*Language is arbitrary.*

Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure termed language to be arbitrary. He stated that a sign has two parts,

1)  *Signifier* - which is the form which a sign takes (commonly the word or the sound)
2)  *Signified* – the concept it represents

For example, the concept of a tree (the signified) is represented by the sound (signifier) ‘tree’ in English or ‘gos’ in Assamese. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary.
Language is a tool for communication: We use language to express ourselves. Language is any form of communication which we use to converse with one another. Moreover, language is a system of communication which has social functions. The grammar of any language is influenced by communicative needs of its users. Therefore, grammar is a dynamic phenomenon and its structures are always in the process of change as employed by their speakers.

Language is dynamic: Since languages are influenced by their speakers, they change with time. Language change is a continuous process with new terminologies being added or, sometimes leading to entirely new varieties of speech. Languages wither and die as well.

Language is creative and infinite: We can produce and understand novel sentences.

Design Features of Language

American linguist Charles Hockett in 1960s stated that human language consists of 16 features that distinguished human communication. These features are known as the Design Features of Language.

1. Vocal auditory channels – Spoken language is produced in the vocal tract and is perceived as sound. This is known as the vocal-auditory channel. Exception to this feature is the sign language which uses the manual – visual channel.

2. Broadcast transmission and directional reception – This means that the audible sound spreads in a wave form in all directions, however, listeners will interpret the sound as coming from one specific direction. We hear sounds coming from the front better than from behind.

3. Rapid fading – The sound made by speech fades away quickly after
being released. They cannot be heard at a later time. It is only with the help of writing and audio recordings that we are able to record language which can be recreated at a later time either in written or audio recorded form.

4. **Interchangeability** – The speaker is able to both speak (send) and hear (receive) the same message. Human language is interchangeable.

5. **Total feedback** – The speaker can hear himself speak and internalize the language performance.

6. **Semanticity** – Speech sounds can be linked to specific meanings. That is, specific signals can be matched with specific meanings. For example, *table* refers to a specific object.

7. **Arbitrariness** – There is no necessary connection between the form of the signal and the object it refers to. For example, there is no reason why a woody plant that has many secondary branches is called ‘tree’ in English. Similarly, we do not know why an object as long as a ‘train’ is referred by such a short word.

8. **Discreteness** – The basic unit of speech (phoneme) can be distinctly separated into categories. For example, /p/ and /b/ are two distinct speech sounds.

9. **Specialization** – The organs of speech are specially designed to produce speech. The speech apparatus like the tongue, lips, throat etc. have specialized mechanism for speech.

10. **Displacement** – The speaker can talk about things that are not physically present. A speaker can refer to the past and the future, he may talk about far away things (like other countries, the sun etc.). One may also speak of imaginary things or events.

11. **Productivity** – A speaker can produce utterances that he has never heard before. Language enables us to create new messages from existing signs.

12. **Traditional transmission** – A speaker must learn or acquire his native language from other speakers of the language. Language learning is a traditional transmission which occurs in social groups.
13. **Duality of patterning** – Phonemes, which are meaningless, are combined to make meaningful words, which in turn are combined again to make sentences.

14. **Prevarication** – The ability to make false statements.

15. **Reflexiveness** – Language can be used to refer to (i.e., describe) itself.

16. **Learnability** – Speakers of one language can learn to speak another language.

### 1.4 RULE GOVERNED SYSTEM AND LANGUAGE

Language is a complex system. It comprises smaller units which are related to each other and they perform certain functions. Each unit is organized in set rules which make language a rule-governed system.

A language system is shared by its speakers. The rules of a language are learned as the speaker acquires the language. The native speaker has implicit knowledge of his language and is called his *competence*. However, the speaker’s actual use of the language, that is, his utterances, is called his *performance*.

### 1.4.1 Rule Governed System and Language

The scientific study of language is known as Linguistics. The formal study of language in India began with Panini in the 5th Century BC. The grammarian formulated four thousand sutras or rules in Sanskrit called the *Ashtadhyayi*. The grammatical principles used by Panini based on non-redundancy, brevity and technical excellence has influenced modern linguistics. PāGinian grammar has a universal applicability and the systematic classification can be used for non-Sanskrit languages as well. Modern linguistics began to develop in the 18th century.

Though Linguistics has a number of disciplines, in this segment we will focus on three areas, that is, language form, language meaning, and language in context.
Language form

Language form describes the structure of language or what is commonly known as grammar. Grammar describes how meaningful elements in a language are governed by various rules. These grammatical categories are mostly universal. The rules which govern a language and covers morphology (study of rules for formation of words), syntax (study of rules for formation of phrases and sentences) and phonology (study of rules for formation of sound system).

- **Morphology**

  Morphology studies the identification, analysis and description of linguistic units such as morphemes, words, affixes, parts of speech. For example, we know that the English word *tree* and *trees* are closely related with the plurality morpheme /s/ differentiating them. Thus morphology studies the internal structure of words. Words are categorized into word classes like nouns, verbs, adjectives etc. These word classes perform different functions in the grammar of a language.

- **Syntax**

  Syntax studies the principles and rules that govern the construction of phrases and sentences in languages. It studies the sentence structure of a language. The parts of speech are organized in a language according to their functions and relative positions to other parts.

- **Phonetics and Phonology**

  Languages use sounds to form meaning. Phonology studies the rules for the formation of sound system in a particular language. The phonological rules determine how the basic sounds are organized and how do they function in a language. Phonology also describes how sounds can be arranged in distinctive units within a language.

  On the other hand, phonetics studies how speech sounds are produced and perceived. It describes the physical properties of
speech sounds, their physiological production and acoustic properties.

The human vocal apparatus can produce only a limited number distinct sounds and a language uses a small set of those sounds to form meaning by the native speaker.

### 1.4.2 Language Meaning & Language in Context

Language meaning describes how meaning is assigned to words, phrases and sentences in a language. In other words, language meaning enumerates the relation between signs and the things to which they refer to in the real world. Language in context looks into the context in which the word or phrase is uttered. Context influences the interpretation of meaning. These relationships are covered in **semantics** (the study of meaning) and **pragmatics** (how meaning is inferred from context).

Let us discuss those two terms:

- **Semantics**
  
  It is the study of meaning as encoded at the levels of words, phrases and sentences. It studies the relationship between words and meaning. Semantics also looks into meaning in terms of word and sentence relationships. For example, relationship between words can be seen in synonyms (similar meanings), antonyms (opposite meanings), simile (direct comparison using *like* or *as*).

- **Pragmatics**
  
  Pragmatics studies the contextual meaning which involves how speakers use language influenced by the surrounding social interactions. Meaning is not merely dependent on linguistic features but also on the context in which they are expressed. It looks into communication features that are dependent on the speaker, addressee and their goals. In other words, it defines intended meaning through verbal and non-verbal means. The main components of pragmatics are deixis, speech acts, discourse
Understanding Language and Early Literacy

1.5 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY: IDENTITY, POWER AND DISCRIMINATION

David Crystal defined language as “the systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs, or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression.” He emphasized on the fact that language is socially determined and its use is governed by social conventions.

Language cannot be limited as just a means of communication. Language plays a crucial role in our social lives. It influences our thought process and is visible in our culture. Sociolinguistics studies the relationship between language and society.

Linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf proposed the hypothesis, known as Sapir–Whorf hypothesis which stated that the structure of a language affects the ways in which its speakers are able to conceptualize their world, i.e. their world view.

Language is, in fact, referred to as the set of speech norms of a particular community. Our interactions with one another enable us to create systems for communication. Speakers are not merely dependent on the rules of language but they are also largely influenced by social context.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, a well-known German scholar wrote in 1820s, “The spiritual traits and the structure of the language of a people are so intimately blended that, given either of the two, one should be able to derive the other from it to the fullest extent.... Language is the outward manifestation of the spirit of people: their language is their spirit, and their spirit is their
language; it is difficult to imagine any two things more identical." For example, different societies have different systems of ‘social deixis’. These deixis encode social information such as honorifics and formalities. For example, English respect in not embedded in ‘you’, it is rather marked in the way one addresses the name where ‘Mr.’, ‘Your Majesty’ marks high respect and calling by the first name encodes a less formal relation. Whereas in Assamese (and in many other Indian languages), the respect marker is encoded in the pronoun ‘you’ – /toi/ (informal), /tumi/ (formal) and /aapuni/ (highly formal respect marker). They mark the relationship and social position of the speaker and addressee.

Thus, language and society are interdependent where Society influences the linguistic phenomenon and the Linguistic phenomenon, in turn, influences the society. Some major features of their relationship are:

Language creates society: Language forms a connect between people and it keeps them together. It precedes society.

Language incorporates social values: Language converts meaning into values found in the society through the speaker’s contact with the society. On the other hand, these values are useful to the society as they enable social learning and conditioning.

Social change creates language change: Since society is subject to change, it in turn creates language change. As new social norms come into being, language incorporates them.

Now we are going to discuss **Identity, Power, and Discrimination**

**(a)** **Language and Society : Identity** Language is used as a sign of identity with a social group and this identity differentiates one group from other groups. Language becomes a crucial means for self-identification so much so that language becomes a marker for ethnic identity.

**(b)** **Language and Society : Power** Since language is a fundamental aspect of human behaviour, it influences all spheres of our interaction, be it social, political or economic. This sets in language as a tool to exercise power.

People speaking the standard form of a language tend to have more advantage as opposed to the people speaking its dialect. Most speakers
adopt the standard form for certain domains like employment, mass media, education and use the native dialect for some other domains like family life, religion or community life.

All Nations have adopted a standard form of language (one or in some cases more than one) to carry out their official work. The adaptation of a standard language requires the selection of certain languages or dialects over others. The adaptation is reinforced in schools and newspapers. Thus, a standard language confers power and prestige to its speaker.

In the international scenario, languages compete for prominence in wide range of economic, scientific, academic fields. A common international language like English makes interaction between different groups convenient. This gives a language global power and the speakers of the language (native and non-native) are conferred more power and prestige.

**Language and Society: Discrimination**

The complex web of language and power sometimes leads to discrimination on the basis of Language discrimination issues come under the language rights, a concept which originated in the west in the 18th and 19th Centuries when the local population of a foreign Empire were given the right to conduct schools in their native languages. In the 1948, language rights were given full recognition in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations which states the following:

“Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status.” - Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations, 1948.

### 1.6 NATURE OF MULTILINGUALISM IN ASSAM

When a speaker or a community uses multiple languages, it is known as Multilingualism. Due to globalization and cultural interaction, today multilingualism has become a common social phenomenon.

In India, multilingualism is a predominant linguistic feature and it is home to
four language families with more than 1500 languages and dialects. Cultural intermingling has laid the foundation for multilingualism since ancient time. Assamese belongs to the Indo-Aryan language family. Assamese is the dominant language and is recognized by the Indian Constitution as one of the Official languages. In Assam too, multilingualism is a widespread occurrence. For example, an Assamese child speaks Assamese at home and English in school; he learns Hindi and a second language in school and communicates with the domestic help in Bengali.

The multilingual nature of Assam is described below:

- **Major languages**: The major languages that exist in the multilingual orbit of the state are: Assamese, Bangali, Bodo, Karbi, Mishing, Rabha, Dimasha, Kochh, Kachhari, Deuri, Vishnupriya, Mechh, Lalung, Garo, Maar, Hindi.

- **Geographical location enhances multilingualism**: Assam’s geographical location makes it a rich potpourri of multi-linguistic diversity. It is bordered by the other North Eastern States, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Maghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura and also West Bengal. It shares international boundary with Bhutan, Bangladesh. Assamese has been influenced by Tibeto-Burman dialects which can be seen in its vocabulary, phonetics, and structure. The geographical intermixing has also resulted in languages like Nagamese, a creole language form of Assamese and local Naga dialects. Assamese also has three allied languages which are Hajong, Bishnupriya and Chakma.

- **Encouraging multilingualism in schools and higher education**: Multilinguality has been the aim in English medium as well as regional medium schools and colleges in the state. In the educational system, especially in urban areas, students are exposed to three-language formula system.

- **Bodo - Assertive Language Maintenance**: Bodo language belongs to the Tibeto-Burmeser language family and is a major linguistic group in Assam after Assamese. In the 1950s, the Bodos launched a socio-political movement for linguistic rights in the Bodo dominated areas of
Subsequently, Bodo language was given the status a scheduled language in the Indian Constitution in 2003. The language has also been introduced as a medium of instruction in schools. This is an example of Assertive Language Maintenance which has been reflected in movement for linguistic rights of the minority linguistic group.

The tribal multilingualism. There are 22 tribes in Assam with a notable 60 mother tongues grouped in 40 languages (E. Annamalai). The tribes have picked up the dominant language with which they are in contact. For example, the Kurukh speakers were migrated to the tea plantations during the colonial period. However, complexity arises when there are inter-tribal marriages leading to bilingualism at homes or in the case when the geographical area of a tribal community has more than one dominant language. This leads to a heterogeneous linguistic form of the tribes.

1.7 STATE POLICIES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

The State Government has been introducing many innovative education policies, especially in the recent years. The Government has taken initiatives for the requirement, improvement and expansion of education in the state.

The education system can be categorized into school and college or university education. Though the Government of Assam manages the major educational system, some private initiatives have also contributed to educational development in the state.

Some of the educational policies followed by the state are:


National Level Programmes like the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) by NCERT have been adopted.

The University Grants Commission and National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) play a major role in ensuring quality education. Education Development of Assam under different Directorates caters to all aspects of education covering Elementary, Secondary, Higher, Adult,
The sound educational policies are seen to have been followed in Assam. As per the census, 2011, the state’s literacy rate is 73.18% with the urban areas showing a rate of 88.88% and rural areas with 70.44%. Moreover, urban females have a literacy rate of 67.27% as against the national rate of 65.46%.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: How many notable mother tongues are there of the 22 tribes of Assam?

Q 5: Write whether the following statements are True or False

(i) Geographical location enhances multilingualism. (True/False)
(ii) Semantics is the study of meaning as encoded at the levels of words, phrases and sentences. (True/False)

1.8 LET US SUM UP

- Human language is an exclusive form of communication. It is unique in nature compared to other forms of communication, such as animal language.

**Nature of Language**

*Language is a mental faculty*

*Language is a symbolic system*

*Language is arbitrary*

*Language is a tool for communication*

*Language is dynamic*

*Language is creative and infinite*

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initiatives for the requirement, improvement and expansion of education in the state.

1.9 FURTHER READINGS


1.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Language is an exclusive form of communication. The nature of Language are-
- Language is a mental faculty
- Language is a symbolic system
- Language is arbitrary
- Language is a tool for communication
- Language is dynamic
- Language is creative and infinite

Ans to Q No 2: Dynamic

Ans to Q No 3: Panini
Ans to Q No 4: True
Ans to Q No 5: True

1.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

(A) Very Short Questions
Q 1: How is human language different from animal language?
Q 2: What is meant by (a) Signified (b) Signifier.
Q 3: State what you know about Vocal auditory channels.

(B) Short Questions (Answer each question in about 150 words)
Q 1: What is language form?
Q 2: Briefly state the relationship between language and society in terms of power.
Q 3: Define multilingualism.

(C) Long Questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)
Q 1: What is Design Features of Language?
Q 2: Language is a rule- governed system. Explain.
Q 3: What is the relation between Language and Society?

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