

Language

Identifying how we say what we mean, and considering what others might hear



Languages

by Carl Sandburg

*“THERE are no handles upon a language
Whereby men take hold of it
And mark it with signs for its
remembrance.*

*It is a river, this language,
Once in a thousand years
Breaking a new course
Changing its way to the ocean.
It is mountain effluvia
Moving to valleys
And from nation to nation
Crossing borders and mixing.
Languages die like rivers.*

*Words wrapped round your tongue today
And broken to shape of thought
Between your teeth and lips speaking
Now and today
Shall be faded hieroglyphics
Ten thousand years from now.
Sing—and singing—remember
Your song dies and changes
And is not here to-morrow
Any more than the wind
Blowing ten thousand years ago.”*

Agenda

What is language?

01

Language – overt and covert production of meaning

02

Exercise 1:

03

**Power – dictating/responding to the terms of the interaction
- speakers, readers, writers**

04

Exercise 2:

**FILE
05**

First a disclaimer...

If you take away only one thing? It's this.



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What is Language?



What is (Human) Language?

Any independent communication system created by humans that allows people to convey information, feelings, and thoughts.

How do we define it?

- Primary way of communication
- Written, Spoken, Sign, and Computer
- Languages follow rules and structure, grammar and vocabulary, but those rules and structure vary
- Shared or not shared?

Consider other interpretive elements...

- Different modes and channels—accent, *body language*, *facial expression*, *tone of voice*, *volume*—these add to the meaning as well as confusion as they are both part of what is producing meaning and what is interpreted
- Socially, Culturally, & Historically mediated

What Does Language Include?

Languages are constructed of:

- **Structure/grammar:** Rules of use that dictate how relationships between signs are conveyed.
 - Example in English: “I give the book to you,” vs. “You book I give”
- **Vocabulary:** the range of individual signs (spoken, written or manual) that indicate specific objects, feelings, concepts and their relationships
- **Mediums:** how the ideas are communicated (i.e. speech phonemes and tones, written characters, or manual signs)
- **Contexts:** the situations in which the language arose, developed, changed, and is used - or, what lies beneath

What is (Human) Language?

Any independent communication system created by humans that allows people to convey information, feelings, and thoughts.

Structure/Grammar

Vocabulary/Morphology

Medium (i.e. speech and writing)

Meaning (semantics)

Although all languages are constructed of four or five characteristics, each language is unique. Both the characteristics themselves and their relationships to each other are specific to the language they make up.

Languages exist to describe concepts and ideas. While some of those concepts are objective/tangible (i.e., objects like a bowl), most terms for and descriptions of them are unique and relative to the specific language – and thus to the people who use it!

Languages are not neutral because they produce and/or reproduce meaning. They are developed by people within specific cultural contexts and reflect the ideas, opinions, and needs of those people and cultures..

How is meaning produced?

What is conveyed beyond literal meanings? How?



Intention and Interpretation

What did the speaker/signer/writer intend? What did the recipient understand?

Our language choices and interpretations are influenced by our previous experiences. Have we had positive or negative experiences with specific language? How do we interpret language use when we don't know the broader context? Does it remind us of something the speaker may or may not be intending to communicate?

Explicit and Implicit Biases

Language can replicate and enforce biases, hierarchies, structures, and beliefs explicitly or implicitly. For example, one may use explicitly gendered language or implicitly talk about genders differently.

Examples:

Differences over time

Nice

- meant naive/simple

Villain

- meant a villa worker

Happy

- meant fortunate/lucky

Gay

- meant joyous

Differences by field/discipline

Taxonomy

- Scientific vs. web vs. Blooms

Diagonal

- Mathematics vs. horseback riding

Realism

- Art History vs. Political Science

Rationalism

- Economy vs. philosophy

Differences by location (US and UK)

- Fries vs chips and crisps
- Cookies vs. biscuits
- Trunk vs. boot
- Solicitor vs. attorney

“Two Nations divided by a common language”

– Not Winston Churchill

Consider: How do we place value on or judge what was said (or how it was said) in the past?

What is (Human) Language?

Any independent communication system created by humans that allows people to convey information, direction, feelings, and thoughts. **And**, they “play an active pragmatic part in human behavior.”

In summary, languages:

- Include speech, writing, signs, words, and grammar
- Are continually changing
- Are developed by the users according to their needs
- Are specific to geographic regions, time periods, and social contexts, as well as individual users
- Are human and culture/biased, not inherently neutral
- Have a real impact on people’s experiences, perceptions, and actions.

Language production and interpretation may include

- tone, body language, gestures, non-manual markers, expressions, and more



Gary Larson:
<https://desertdemocrat.wordpress.com/2015/03/25/blah-blah-blah-blah-ginger/>

Real world example: Context - allegory and metaphor



Exercise 1

Exercise: Come up with examples for the following



Small Groups. 10 minutes.

- Ways you think language is clear (*perhaps objective*)
- Vagaries of meaning in language (*homonyms, polysemy, ...*)
- An example of miscommunication (*perhaps funny*)
- Can a word or statement be neutral?
- What are problems in language?
- Consider your Museum work, think of specific examples of:
 - Challenges in understanding the data/information
 - Communicating what you know to other people—both in your field of work and outside of it

Power: Dictating and responding to the terms of interaction (mutually constructed)



The Power of Language

“Language is a virus”
-William S. Burroughs

- Language may not be inherently neutral
 - Implied disbelief in cognitive reliability of language
- Language can be crafted to manipulate, control, and evoke actions and feelings
 - Powerful in both **positive** and **negative** ways.

Power and Language?

Any independent communication system created by humans that allows people to convey information, feelings, and thoughts

Languages affect their users just as we affect them!

- Because languages allow people to convey ideas, language can be used to suppress or manipulate ideas.
- Although one obvious example is propaganda, all language plays a role in framing the ideas it describes.
- This can be positive (helping people stay on the same page) or negative (causing miscommunication, confusion, or intentional misinformation and manipulation).



“That is the way with people ... If they do you wrong, they invent a bad name for you, a good name for their acts and then destroy you in the name of virtue.”

Zora Neale Hurston

The Power of Language

Questions to consider:

- How do stark definitions compare to those with nuance?
 - What agency do we have when using definitions?
 - What's the impact?

- Why is it important to think more deeply about language?
 - How does the meaning of “repatriation” or “restitution” differ from country to country?
 - Physical remains of humans are not specimens or objects ... the words we use are important and meaningful.

Language Problems...



What are some problems with language?

- Paradox – language can clarify as well as obfuscate (sometimes simultaneously)
- Same statements can have multiple meanings (*intended or not*)
- Can be interpreted in many ways

Exercise 2

Exercise: Define and compare and contrast



Small Groups. 10 min

Select one of the following open-ended terms and create a definition for it: Or pick your own -

- Diversity
- Equality
- Community
- Science
- Pipeline

Compare the concepts of Cultural Sensitivity and DEAI (Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, Inclusion).

- What are they?
- What are their similarities?
- What are their differences?
- What do people hear when someone says...?
- When might you use each?

Praxis: What We Say and What We Do



Thinking more broadly: Theory and Practice

Praxis: “In Kant, praxis is the application of a theory to cases encountered in experience, but is also ethically significant thought...”
[definition](#)

Questions to consider:

- What should/can you change when you learn new information or hear from a new perspective?
- Do current systems you're part of have consequences you weren't previously aware of?
- Who is impacted by your actions? Will that impact be positive or negative?
- Do the people affected have a say in the system or a way to give feedback to you?

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