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- 5.2.2 Views of Noam Chomsky and Language Acquisition**

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5.3 Let Us Sum Up**5.4 Key Words****5.5 Books Suggested****Answers**

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall

- Discuss the characteristics of Language and its various definitions given by the scholars and linguistics.
- Understand the meaning and difference of Language Acquisition and Language Learning
- See some theories of language acquisition and language learning introduced by the scholars

On completing the unit, you should be able to understand

- the characteristics of Language
- Difference between Language Acquisition and Language Learning
- Some theories of language acquisition and language learning

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Amongst all, Language is considered to be the most creative and versatile invention of human mind. It is not only difficult but almost impossible to imagine a world we live in today without the growth and development of language(s) by human kind. Had language not existed, all that surrounds us might not exist too. Language is therefore considered to be the fastest vehicle of ideas. If science is the one side of the coin, language is certainly the other one. Amongst all other features, language is on the top which separates humans from animals. And that is why language has always been the subject of research for the truth finders.

For centuries, countless scientists, grammarians, linguists, researchers, poets and philosophers have been giving the definitions of language and it keeps on changing with time by time. In the present era of rapid technology, the definition of language is becoming more complex; because with the new invention of technical gadgets, we have been introduced altogether a new version of language! For example, computer, engineering, robotics and other digital objects now also have their own version of language and they work on it. Therefore, for the students of (English) language, it is inevitable to systematically study the role and significance of language in present world. Beyond this, teachers of ELT must ponder over the future of Language Teaching. The generations to come will certainly have the more advanced version of technology and technological gadgets and it will not be a matter to surprise that they would scarcely believe the past of language without technology too existed.

5.2 WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

In words of C L Wrenn, LANGUAGE is the expression of human personality in words, whether written or spoken.(1) Language is like our skin which can never be separated from us. However language is treated quite loosely and carelessly in many ways – be it pragmatically, technically, scientifically or psychologically. As Socrates said, “Beginning of the wisdom is definition of term.”, let us see how different scholars define Language.

Definitions of Language:

- Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts.

Henry Sweet, an English phonetician and language scholar

- A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates.

The American linguists Bernard Bloch and George L. Trager

- Language is a symbol system based on pure or arbitrary conventions... infinitely extendable and modifiable according to the changing need and conditions of the speakers.
Robins (1985)
- Language is a storehouse filled by the members of a given community through their active use of speaking, a grammatical system that has a potential existence in each brain, or, more specifically, in the brains of a group of individuals.
Saussure (1916)
- Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols.
Sapir (1921)
- Language is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols.
Hall (1969)
- A language is a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.
Noam Chomsky (1957)
- A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbol used for human communication.
Wardough (1972)
- A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates.
Bloch and Trager (1942)
- Language is undoubtedly a kind of means of communication among human beings. It consists primary of vocal sounds. It is articulatory systematic, symbolic and arbitrary.
Derbyshire (1967)
- Language is a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, communicate.
Encyclopaedia Britannica
- Language are the principal systems of communication used by particular groups of human beings within the particular society (linguistic community) of which they are members.
Lyons (1970)
- Language is one attribute that sets humans apart from all other creatures and binds humans together across all geographic barriers. A word can cause to sink into the deepest despair or lift us to inspired action. Language can be the tool for great achievement in any discipline. Good understanding of the capabilities and needs of the individual child and a sound knowledge and belief in the goals of language acts programme are vital factors in successful individualisation of instruction.

Dr. Baiju.K.Nath
Assistant Professor in Education, Department of Education, University of
Calicut

- Language has a very important social purpose, because it is mainly used for linguistic communication...
- ... A language can be used in two ways for the purpose of communication. It can be *spoken* or *written*. In other words, we can communicate using same language, using the spoken, *medium* or the written *medium*.

T. Balasubramanian (1981)

It is clearly evident from all these definitions, none of which completely defines the term 'language', that it is not possible to have a single definition that brings out of all the properties of language. On the basis of these definitions, one can, however, list out the various characteristics of language. It would, therefore, be better to list these characteristics and discuss them in detail.

(Syal and Jindal 2016)

Syal and Jindal in their combined book entitled *An Introduction to Linguistics Language Grammar and Semantics* mention some characteristics of Language as below:

- I. Language is a means of Communication
- II. Language is Arbitrary
- III. Language is a System of Systems
- IV. Language is Primary Vocal
- V. Language Differs from Animal Communication in Several Ways
- VI. Language is a Form of Social Behaviour
- VII. Language is a Symbol System
- VIII. Productivity
- IX. Interchangeability

All the above characteristics mentioned by Syal and Jindal are not sufficient. Language has differently been defined and looked at by countless scholars and thinkers; and therefore as many characteristics can be added as many one can yet it is important to note that Language has categorically differed human beings from other animals. Having said this, the very second question that arises is: how ultimately do we (human beings) become able to speak Language? Do we have to learn it? Or do we acquire it? Is there any difference in learning Language and acquiring Language? Let's us churn these questions.

Check Your Progress 1

1. What is Language in words of Robins?

2. What do Bernard Bloch and George L. Trager say about Language?

3. How does Encyclopaedia Britannica define Language?

4. What is Language in words of C L Wrenn?

5. Write any five characteristics of Language out of the list Syal and Jindal give.

5.2.1 What is Language Acquisition/Language Learning?

It is interesting to know how a child starts speaking the language s/he listens frequently. Does it happen scientifically? Or is Language instinctive? Moreover, it is worth exploring how people fluently and effortlessly can speak their first language; at the same time they have to give lot of efforts and time in leaning second language(s). For example, for every average Indian, English happens to be the second language which is, in many ways, different from other Indian languages in grammar, culture and articulation. Learning second language always differs from learning first language. The extraction which comes out at the end of this churning is this that a person always acquires his/her first

language which happens effortlessly just by frequent and natural listening; whereas the second language something which one has to learn with lot of effort and practice. Language Learning/Acquisition means an ability to receive, comprehend and produce the Language.

For linguists, psychologists and most all for all English teachers worldwide, it has become inevitable to know how learning second language falls different from learning first language. Let us remember some important points in this difference.

Learning First Language	Learning Second Language
Human being learns first language as a child; this learning happens quite naturally and unintentionally.	Normally a person learns second language as an adult. This learning happens quite mechanically and consciously.
There is no interference of writing and reading skills while learning first language.	Second language is not learnt in isolation. Writing and reading skill are always taught with the skill of speaking the second language.
A person learns his/her first language as a child without any institutional monitoring or fear of getting and losing marks.	Second language is taught in a school or academy where the learners remains under the supervision and target of getting good scores.
The main purpose of learning first language is nothing other than oral communication.	Learning second language is inclusive. A learner learns / has to learn all the four skills. (LSRW)
The person gets to listen the target language quite regularly.	In most cases, the learners get to listen the target language only in the class room.
While learning the first language, the person does not have to worry about the grammar, syntax, structure, vocabulary or any such technical components.	The learners who are learning second language have to always learn the grammatical and structural components in a systematic way.
Learning first language is free from fear of committing errors or losing marks.	Learning second language is bound to trial and error methods depending on various assessment processes.
While learning first language, a person is only a natural learner and not an enrolled student or learner. The learner gets to learn the first language through social context.	Learning second language remains less social and natural compared first language learning.

• **Check Your Progress 2**

1. What is Language Acquisition/Learning?

2. How does a human learn Language?
3. What is the difference between first language and second language learning? Discuss any two.

5.2.2 Views of Noam Chomsky and Language Acquisition

Avram Noam Chomsky (December 7, 1928)

This is perhaps the name which represents the modern linguistics. Noam Chomsky is not only known as an American Linguist but also as a philosopher, cognitive scientist, historian, political activist, and social critic. He is better known as ‘the father of modern linguistics’. He has penned a big pile of more than 100 books on topics such as linguistics, war, politics, and mass media and much more. Chomsky is also known as the booster of “cognitive revolution”.

Basically, Chomsky propounded the theory which was based on bio-linguistics that claimed that structure of language is biologically determined in the human mind and therefore can be genetically transmitted. According to Chomsky, all human beings share common linguistic structure which is unaffected by socio-cultural contexts. However, for Chomsky’s present claim, he has been widely and bitterly criticised and misunderstood too.

Dr. Baiju.K.Nath notes,

For Chomsky, the focus of linguistic theory was to characterise the abstract abilities speakers possess that enable them to produce grammatically correct sentences in a language. Chomsky considered language as a highly abstract generative phenomenon. He asserted that human beings are born biologically equipped to learn a language and proposed his theory of a language Acquisition Device (LAD) – an inborn mechanism or process that facilitates the learning of a language.

Chomsky’s idea of Universal Grammar:

In Chomsky’s opinion syntactic knowledge is an inborn property to imply that kids merely need to learn few cloistral qualities of the respective native language. He, based on his acute observation, strongly argues about human language acquisition and states that there is a big difference between the linguistic stimulation which the kids are introduced to and the linguistic cognition which they gain later. Moreover, Chomsky springs a very novel ideology of his time in the field of linguistics which doubtfully anyone before his had ever thought of and that is the concept of *Universal Grammar*. He, in order to introduce this concept, gives an example of an ability of the human kids to understand and produce an infinite number of sentences which include a big group of such sentences also which they have never heard before. Interestingly, both human baby and kitten are able of inductive reasoning if both the trained for exactly the same linguistic data; but the major difference which will always remain is of Language Acquisition Data. (LAD). He

talks of something which is universally found common in all the human beings and he calls it as Universal Grammar. That is the reason why all the human kids quite easily learn their respective native language easily and speak effortlessly.

H. Douglas Brown in his book *Principles of Language Earning And Teaching* mentions,

In the decade of the 1960s, **generative-transformational linguistics** emerged through the influence of Noam Chomsky and a number of his followers. Chomsky was trying to show that human language cannot be scrutinized simply in terms of observable stimuli and responses or the volumes of raw data gathered by Held linguists. The generative linguist was interested not only in describing language (achieving the level of **descriptive adequacy**) but also in arriving at an **explanatory** level of adequacy in the study of language, that is, a "principled basis, independent of any particular language, for the selection of the descriptively adequate grammar of each language" (Chomsky, 1964, p. 63).

• **Check Your Progress 3**

1. Introduce Noam Chomsky in brief

2. What does Dr. Baiju. K. Nath note about Chomsky?

3. What does H. Douglas Brown mention about Chomsky in his book *Principles of Language Earning And Teaching*?

4. What is the Chomsky's concept of Universal Grammar?

5.3 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you learnt,

- Definitions and characteristics of Language
- Language Acquisition/Language Learning
- Difference between learning first language and second language
- Views of Noam Chomsky and Language Acquisition

5.4 KEY WORDS

- Language
- Language Acquisition/Learning
- FLA : First Language Acquisition
- SLA : Second Language Acquisition
- LAD : Language Acquisition Device
- UG : Universal Grammar

5.5 BOOKS SUGGESTED

- C L Wrenn : *The English Language*
- Pushpinder Syal and D. V. Jindal : *An Introduction to Linguistics: Language Grammar and Semantics*
- T. Balasubramanian : *A Textbook of English Phonetics for Indian Students*

Answers:

Check Your Progress 1

A.1 In words of Robins, Language is a symbol system based on pure or arbitrary conventions... infinitely extendable and modifiable according to the changing need and conditions of the speakers.

A.2 Bernard Bloch and George L. Trager say about Language, “A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates.”

A.3 Encyclopaedia Britannica defines Language as,

Language is a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, communicate.

A.4 In words of C L Wrenn, LANGUAGE is the expression of human personality in words, whether written or spoken.

A.5 Language is a means of Communication

- I. Language is Arbitrary
- II. Language is a System of Systems
- III. Language is Primary Vocal
- IV. Language Differs from Animal Communication in Several Ways
- V. Language Differs from Animal Communication in Several Ways

Check Your Progress 2

A.1 Language Learning/Acquisition means an ability to receive, comprehend and produce the Language.

A.2 Human being learns first language as a child; this learning happens quite naturally and unintentionally.

A.3 Difference between Learning First and Second Language.

Learning First Language	Learning Second Language
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A person learns his/her first language as a child without any institutional monitoring or fear of getting and losing marks.	Second language is taught in a school or academy where the learners remains under the supervision and target of getting good scores.

Check Your Progress 3

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A.3 H. Douglas Brown in his book *Principles of Language Earning And Teaching* mentions, “In the decade of the 1960s, **generative-transformational linguistics** emerged through the influence of Noam Chomsky and a number of his followers. Chomsky was trying to show that human language cannot be scrutinized simply in terms of observable stimuli and responses or the volumes of raw data gathered by Held linguists.

A.4 Chomsky springs a very novel ideology of his time in the field of linguistics which doubtfully anyone before his had ever thought of and that is the concept of *Universal Grammar*. He, in order to introduce this concept, gives an example of an ability of the human kids to understand and produce an infinite number of sentences which include a big group of

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