

Philosophical Perspective on Language, Meaning and Social Identity

Olusegun Akintayo Ojelakin, PhD

Abstract

The concept of language, as well as meaning, is complex and has been a subject matter for significant attention to philosophers, linguists and anthropologists alike. Among the earliest known views on language expressed in the West are the ones found in the work of Plato and Aristotle in the 4th Century BC. While Plato considers the physical objects as passing representations of eternal ideas, Aristotle views that the relationship between words and objects consist of resemblance and convention. Aristotle states that words represent objects and there is a convention about which word represents which object. The views of other philosophers, on language and meaning, from Augustine in the 4th Century CE, to the mediaeval philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas and Ockham and the 20th Century materialists, revolve round the rationalist view of Plato and the empirical view of Aristotle. Contemporary scholars have shown interests in language and the complexities of grammar in human communication. In order to elicit more understanding of language and meaning, this essay analyses language as a tool of communication. The nature, characteristics and dynamism of language, meaning and translation, are critically examined. It therefore concludes that in spite of the challenges of adequate communication within a culture and across cultures. An individual could find his social identity through the background knowledge of the culture within that society.

Keywords: Language, Meaning, Communication, Culture, Social Identity

Language as Communication

One of the facts of existence is that, human beings are capable of interacting with each other and one another through communication. This gives them the privilege to exchange beliefs, opinions and knowledge. It also enables them to express wishes, appreciations and emotional feelings. These they are able to do through the use of language. This composition of language involves the set of guidelines (grammar) that link symbols and meanings to enable us communicate with each other. We need to differentiate between 'language' and 'a language'. The term 'language' is used to designate the common faculty that makes it possible for human beings to participate in the vocal exchange of information to discuss with each other or one another.¹The sharing of information may be achieved through speech, writing or signing. The exchange may also take place in any of the globally identified languages. Verbal and writing are two ways of the expression side of a language.

Speech or verbal is the most important medium of expression.²The capability to speak is acquired first, before we are taught to write. All human languages are orally or verbally expressed, but it is not all spoken ones that have written form.³

Language makes it possible to share comprehensible messages with other fellow human beings within the group through discourses and texts. These discussions and texts are structured in such a way to follow the laid down principles and conventions peculiar to that language that we share with other people. The use of language for communication can be referred to as ‘linguistic communication’.⁴ There are other means of communication such as laughing, smiling, frowning, and clenching of fist and so on, which are non-linguistic activities. Language and other activities related to it may be the most important exclusive privilege setting humans apart from other creatures. It is a major tool that conveys the values and tradition peculiar to a group, which gives them a unique identity.⁵

However, language could be used other than for communication. It could also be used for internal monologue, soliloquy and so on. When a civilization is destroyed, so also is its language, this is the more reason why when a people are colonised; there is imposition of the colonialist’s language. As new ideas or concepts are learnt, so also, are new words needed to describe them. It is possible to recall some occasions when one had had a thought or meaning in one’s mind. This thought might have been as clear as crystal. Yet one might not have been able to formulate the linguistic expression (word or string of words) necessary to convey the idea or message in the mind to an interlocutor.

The difficulty of generating the linguistic expression may be temporary. It may be as a result of what is referred to as, ‘tie-of-the tongue’ phenomenon. This is a situation in which one knows what one wants to say, but the word to express it is elusive, exhibiting a kind of barrier in the connection between thought (word meaning) and language (word form). This occurrence can also be permanent. This is evident when one has never learnt the expression for a specific idea or concept. It even possible that the language itself does not make available the necessary materials for discussing the idea one wishes to express. More often than not, it is the language itself that is restricted, rather than the knowledge of vocabulary of an individual speaker.⁶A language technically consists of several parts of speech. These include; nouns, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, articles, tenses, adjectives, and so on. A lexical term could be associated with a concept. Some scholars of language have distinguished the difference between three parts of language or the manner in which it is used. These are: syntax, semantics and pragmatics.

Syntax

Syntax studies the way in which words and other elements are weaved collectively to make a grammatical unit, without putting the meaning of the sentence into consideration.⁷Syntax

is a creative invention that made it possible for human beings to be able to talk about everything imaginable to them⁸. Since the languages of human beings are made up of an infinite number of sentences, new sentences are constructed out of simpler ones indefinitely. For example;

Look at the garage that John constructed.

Look at the car that is parked in the garage that John constructed.

Look at the book that is put in the car that is parked in the garage that John constructed.

Look at the boy that tore the book that is put in the car that is parked in the garage that John constructed.

There is always the possibility of making any simple sentence in a language longer.⁹This is made possible through syntax. It is quite difficult, if not impossible, for a speaker to have merely engaged in memorising all the existing phrases, expressions and sentences available in a given language.¹⁰ Therefore, it is impossible, in principle, to memorise in its entirety the list of all the sentences of one's native language. Though any specific sentence is limited in length, yet sentences that are present in any language is infinite.

As an indigenous speaker of a language, even if one has never come across a sentence in the preceding linguistic experience, one, however, is able to comprehend it in as much as one recognised common units (words that one knows), brought together in a novel but suitable way. A native language's speaker is competent to generate and understand an infinite number of statements, together with many others that are new and unfamiliar.¹¹In a similar manner, people are able to recognize some certain expressions as not being acceptable and that they simply do not feel right in their language. This knowledge is regularly called 'linguistic competence'¹². Speakers of a language are over and over again, substantially innovative in their invention of novel sentences, they do not just utter the same sentences repeatedly all the time.¹³ Syntax therefore, enables a person to speak and comprehend infinite number of sentences made from a finite number of small units, which serves as the foundation for understanding language.

Semantics

This is an aspect of language that makes an inquiry about the meaning of words and sentences. Meaning is believed to be the relationship that exists between the words and the world. Two principal concepts used in semantics are 'reference' and 'truth'. What connects a word and a thing cannot be a thing in itself, because if it is, it will need another thing to connect itself. This will eventually lead to a vicious circle.¹⁴While language represents the world; Semantics represents the relation between language and the world. The determination of what this relationship is has been a subject of debate among scholars.

Pragmatics

This studies how language is used. It encompasses social language skill that is used in daily interaction with others. This includes what we say, the way we say it, our body language and its appropriateness to the specific situation. This is crucial to communicating personal thoughts, ideas and emotions. It studies how context contributes to meaning. The absence of pragmatic skill in an individual could lead to misinterpretation of the communicative intent of others and difficulty in giving appropriate response either in oral communication or written. The study of pragmatics became important in the early 1950's and became prominent till the early 1980s. An individual can use language to make statements, to express belief, opinion, promises, command and so on. The interaction between the speaker and the hearer is a focus of pragmatics.

These three aspects of language are believed to enhance communication. Communication can be defined as the transmission of information, from one creature to the other, through the use of signals. It requires at least four elements: transmitter, signal, channel/ medium, and receiver. Verbal communication involves the utilisation of sounds and language to send a message. It functions as a means of articulating needs, ideas and desires. It is very paramount to the progression of learning and teaching. Non-verbal communication has to do with transmission of information through other means apart from spoken, written or other coded form of language. Communication is not only verbal exchange; it also takes place in writing. Writing, even though, is a relatively more recent development than oral communication, yet it has a vital significance for a language. Language is triggered by the need to communicate among people within a social community.

Language and communication are two aspects of a culture. One aspect cannot be separated from the other. Language is, without doubt, the most essential device for communication that an individual has at his disposal. The purpose of acquiring language, as established by Chomsky,¹⁵ is mainly to communicate. The other systems of communication have numerous weaknesses; hence, the language of the human being is the best means of communication. A distinct language, which is understood only by some people, is often the determining factor in casting these people into distinct groups as a people, state or nation. Communication is 'transactional' in the sense that the source and the receiver are both always having an influence on each other, through symbolic behaviour. Communication then becomes 'instrumental' when we use it as we often do, as a device to modify our environment and to have effect or impact on other people.¹⁶

Berth Bradley¹⁷ points out six characteristics of communication. These are:

- i. *Communication is dynamic*: Communication is not static, but dynamic. It has to do with change adjustment and effects, as the elements intermingle.

- ii. *Communication is continuous*: There is no beginning and it does not end in a person's life.
- iii. *Communication is complex*: It takes place at many stages and manifests many influences.
- iv. *Communication is not reversible*: The communication process cannot be reversed. For example, what has been said cannot be "unsaid" (withdrawn).
- v. *Communication does not follow a fixed sequence*: The elements in the communication process are arranged in a flexible manner. Which element comes on at which time and place in the process depends on situation.
- vi. *Communication is unrepeatable*: A given communication act cannot be recreated.

There are other categorisations of definition which include those that stress sharing of ideas (or 'transactional' nature of communication; those that stress intentional influence or 'instrumental' nature of communication); and those that are all inclusive.¹⁸ It is logical to consider language as majorly a system of communication, but we should not push the comparison with the other system too far. It is not all the time that language usually has a 'message' in any real sense of being a piece of information. Some of its functions are concerned with social relationship, although this is also correct of the animals communicating system too. Also, in language, the signs and the messages are themselves greatly complex and the affinity between them is even of higher complexity. Due to this fact, it has been argued that human language differs in kind, rather than degree, from other languages.¹⁹

Moreover, in language, it is very challenging if not sometimes unattainable, to state categorically what the message is. Other communication systems do not have such challenges, because the message can be autonomously verified in relations to a specific language. For language in general, we do not have such an easy way out, for meaning (the message) cannot be defined independently of the language. One can only state a set of meanings in terms of another set, which only explain language in terms of language.²⁰

Language and Culture

William Raymond²¹ describes 'culture' as one of the most complex words in the English Language. There is still; nonetheless, no single broadly agreed definition of it today. The term is not only difficult to pin down, but downrightly controversial. Three main perspectives of culture have been identified by scholars, these are: Received views of culture, Post modern view and Cultural studies views of culture.

Received View of Culture

This is described as a common-sense idea which perceives the world as partitioned into a variety of distinct organisations, with each society having its peculiar culture.²² This view conflates large political groupings such as nation, states and ethnic communities and with their shared belief, point of view and behavior, overlooking the disintegrating effect of immigration, social class and cultural diffusion.²³

Post Modern View

This emphasises change, disruption, discontinuity, inequality, movement, hybridity and difference.²⁴ This directly addresses the unanticipated interesting and disorganised integration, combining and cultural synergies that international movement of humans and ideas have brought about in the last half century.

Cultural Studies View of Culture

Cultural studies view approaches contemporary culture from an ideological point of view. Even though there has been no view of culture which is universally accepted, a version which seems to have the most influence in the language studies regards 'culture' as a historically transmitted and systematic network of meanings which enable us to understand, develop and communicate our knowledge and beliefs about the world²⁵. These show that cultural factors help mould our background understandings or schemas of knowledge. These are likely to have a serious impact on what we write and how what we write are organised. It also influences our response to different communication contexts. Culture is seen as being so interwoven with language in such a way that one cannot be isolated from the other. Factors that are pertained to culture have the prospect of influencing perception, language learning and communication.

Perhaps one of the most scrutinised influences of culture in language is the conflicting expectations that people have about the logical organisation of written texts and the effect this may have in trans-cultural translation. What is seen and counted as logical, engaging, relevant, accurate, concise, coherent and well organised texts are all said to differ across cultures.²⁶ Two individuals cannot speak and write a language in exactly the same way. Everyone is an individual when it comes to language. An individual's language is called his/her 'idiolect'. 'Idio' is derived from the Greek word for 'private' and 'lect' is derived from the Greek word for 'language'.²⁷ There are several factors that have impact on the manner an individual uses language. These include; social factors, that is, the social group in which a person is brought up; the geographical factors, where a person comes from or has lived during the childhood, adolescence or adulthood; and the psychological factors, which have to do with individual history as language users. There are also extraneous factors relating to the purpose of the discourse or texts.²⁸

Language and culture cannot be disentangled; they are both tied to each other. Both impact immeasurably on each other. Individuals with a common culture, but who speak differing languages will view the world differently. At the same time culture is also reflected and transmitted through language from one generation to the other.²⁹ It thus implies that when an individual decides to acquire a new language, it will invariably involve the learning of a new culture. Some scholars have stated that a new child is just like any other infant until it is exposed to its surroundings where he/she is exposed to culture and language. The exposure makes him/her become an individual within his/her own cultural group. It is the cultural group that shapes the life and opinions of the individual. The group's approval or disapproval influenced the behavior and make acceptable language vary from location to location.

Language goes beyond just being a medium of communication, it has influence on both the culture and thought processes. A person visiting another society would come along with his/her individual culture's categories and construe events and occurrences in those conditions. However, there will not be adequate comprehension of the thoughts and utterances of the people in the society being visited. The person could, however, put aside his/her own culture's viewpoint and study the categories of reality in the other society. Through this, a much deeper insightful understanding of the other culture is gained.

Byriam M. defined culture as 'shared beliefs, values and behaviours of a social group'.³⁰ Kramsch defines language as both an instrument for sharing information and also a symbolic system with the ability to produce and modify symbolic realities, such as values, perception and identities, through discourse.³¹ Language usually forms a foundation for ethnic, national, regional or international identity. Contacts of an indigenous culture with a foreign culture, such as religious and political culture often create new concepts, terms or word in a language. For instance, in Yoruba language terms like, 'Satani' (Satan) "Asitani" Angeli, Malaika (Angel) and many others came into being due to the contact made with the new religious concepts of the West. Also, in politics, concepts like democracy, capitalism and government, have been accommodated by the indigenous language.

The development in technology has resulted in the need to create new words to describe computers, laptops, anti-virus, Central Processing Unit (C P U), Monitor, and some other characteristically similar words. Language also helps in formulating cultural values, norms and taboos. It expresses the approval and prohibitions of the society. The destruction of a culture, would therefore lead to the destruction of a language and vice versa. Individuals in a culture are members of a society, which means that their cognitive functions and structures mirror those of their social knowledge system within the social community.

Individuals continue to extend the range of meaning and knowledge available to them. This is done through the participation in social interactions and by assimilating new information in problem solving and decision-making. In doing this, they develop understanding of acquisition of learning styles and strategies of communication within the social group. This leads the individuals within the community to use socially acceptable standards for the categorisation of circumstances, people, emotions, knowledge and entities.

Individuals' understanding of culture is influenced by the social identity. This is the sum of the numerous social sub-groups, which include; sex, age, profession, religion and other factors, to which an individual belongs and of which he or she is a recognised and competent member. Individuals acquire world-views, that is, sets of ideas, beliefs, representation, values and attitude which then form the interpretative repertoire they rely on to organise and make sense of their experience. The individual acquires the linguistic, communication and cultural competence, including both forms and norms. The parameters, skills and practices acquired during childhood interpersonal communication, provide the resources for the interpersonal dialogue which is the primary identity formation process.

Despite the opportunity available to acquire knowledge and communication skill, yet, not all individuals within a culture in a given society have the same culture. That is, they may not know all and the same things, because their involvement in the society varies. Individuals construct their worldviews and languages on the basis of materials available to them. Culture therefore has to do with all the necessary habits that a person need to acquire to operate in a way that is acceptable to the general members of the society. It is what a person has to learn, different from the biological inheritance.³² The linguistic system of a society has to be learnt and transmitted to others within the culture. A theory of culture is therefore, of necessity, a theory of communication.

According to Riley, there are three broad categories of cultural knowledge: 'know- that', 'know-of' and 'know how'. 'Know-that' consists of what individuals believe to be true, their political and religious 'philosophy' and values, their 'theories' of disease, physics, child-rearing, hunting, history and geography. This is said to form what might be called 'relatively permanent background knowledge'. This is the version of each individual of 'how the world works'. 'Know-of' consists of present issues and preoccupations. This has to do with the day-to-day information about events and people. 'Know-how' comprises of the personal skill, capacities and competencies of the individuals, their efficient acquisition of reasoning, behaving and speaking in acceptable ways. That is, understanding how to go about and speak in the way things should be said and done.³³

Culture, language and individual identity are interwoven. It may then be claimed that since a language itself is a system of culture, all words are culturally inclined, however, some

words could be more cultural than others. Individuals within a culture are expected to attain a level of linguistic competence, socio-cultural competence and communication competence. Linguistic competence is the term used by Chomsky³⁴ for the capability of an indigenous speaker to construct or recognise correct sentences in a language. Communicative proficiency could be described as the capacity to adapt one's expressions to the circumstances. Communicative competence needs knowledge of the socio-linguistic standards governing variations and makes it possible for the speakers to speak in situations appropriately. The learner is considered in this perspective as a language user.

The Socio-cultural competence pulls together the individual's knowledge of language with his/her understanding of the world, the society, situations and culture of which he/she is a member. The socio-cultural competence could also be described as learning competence.

Each society has its vision and standard of a competent adult, concept of personhood, and aims to produce individuals who will fit into the social frame. Linguistic competence denotes being a grammarian, communicative competence means being an adequate speaker and socio-cultural competence stand for being an acceptable member of the society.³⁵

Conclusion

Any competent member of a society must therefore understand the background meaning of words, concepts and expressions being used across the socio-linguistic community for effective integration into the society.

References

1. Das, L. (2006). *Lectures notes on language and communication*. Guwahati: Indian Institute of Technology.
2. Shanna, M. O. (2011). *Language and communication, A. B. English language*: LinkedIn Corporation.
3. Howard, J. & Stockwell, P. (2011). *An introduction to the nature and functions of language, 2nd edition*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
4. Howard, J. & Stockwell, P. (2011). *An introduction to the nature and functions of language*.
5. Sirbu, A. (2015). The significance of language as a tool of communication. *Naval Academy Scientific Bulletin* xviii, 405 - 406.
6. Hall, C. J. (2005). *An introduction to language and linguistics, breaking the language spell*. London: Biddles Ltd.
7. Martinich A. P. (1997). Language and its uses. *Routledge history of philosophy vol. x. philosophy of meaning, knowledge and value in the 20th century*.

8. Peterson, P. L. (1984). Semantic indeterminacy and scientific underdetermination. *Philosophy of Science* 51.3: 471.
9. Cantlon, J. & Piantadosi, S (2024). Uniquely human intelligence arose from expanded information capacity. *Nature Review Psychology* 3, 275–293.
10. Akmajian, A. (2012). et al. *Linguistics, an introduction to language and communication*. New Delhi: PHI Learning Private Limited.
11. Carnie, A. (2007). *Syntax, a generative introduction, second edition*. Malden, M. A: Blackwell.
12. Grady, W. O. et al. (2011). *Contemporary linguistics, an introduction*. London: Pearson Education Limited.
13. Akmajian, A. et.al. (2012). *Linguistics, an introduction to language and communication*. New Delhi: PHI Learning Private Limited. 149.
14. Martinich A. P. (1997). Philosophy and its uses. *Routledge history of philosophy* vol. x: 1.
15. Andrew C. (2007). *Syntax, a generative introduction, second edition*.
16. Folarin B. (1998). *Theories of mass communication, an introductory text*. Ibadan: Stirling- Horden Publishers (Nig) Ltd.
17. Bradley, B. 1984. *Speech communication, the credibility of ideas*. Dubuque Iowa: Wm Brown Publishers.
18. Bradley, B. 1984. *Speech communication, the credibility of ideas*.
19. Palmer, F. R. (1996). *Semantics, 2nd edition*. London: Cambridge University Press.
20. Palmer, F. R. (1996). *Semantics, second edition*.
21. Williams, R. (1983). *Keywords, a vocabulary of culture and society*. New York: Oxford University Press.
22. Gupta, A. and Ferguson J. (1997). Culture, power, place, ethnography at the end of an era. *Culture, power, exploitations in critical anthropology*. A. Gupta and J. Ferguson. Eds. Durham, N. C: Duke University Press.
23. Hyland, K. (2005). *Metadiscourse*. Bodmin Cornwall: MPC Books Ltd.
24. Appedura, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
25. Hyland, K: (2005). *Metadiscourse*. Bodin Cornwall: M. P. C. Books Ltd. 114 making reference to Lantolf, J. P. (1999). *Second culture in second language teaching and learning*. Cambridge: C. U.P. 28 - 46.
26. Howard. J. and Etienne Z. (2007). *Words, meaning and vocabulary, an introduction to modern English lexicology*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
27. Howard, J. & Stockwell, P. (2011). *An introduction to the nature and functions of language*.

28. Emmett, M. & Pollock J. (1997). *Language and learning: an introduction for teaching, second edition*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
29. Byram, M. (2008). *From foreign language education to education for intercultural citizenship*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matter.
30. Riley, P. (2008). *Language, culture and identity, an ethno - linguistic perspective*. London: Athenaeum press Ltd.
31. Cerri-Long, E. L. Ed. (1999). *Anthropological theory in North America*. Westport: C. T. Bergin and Carvey.
32. Riley P. (2008). *Language, culture and identity, an ethno - linguistic perspective*.
33. Mehrpour, S & Ali F. (2015). Theories of first language acquisition. *Journal of language, linguistic and literature* 1. 2: 32.
34. Rabiah, S. (2018). Language as a tool for communication and cultural reality discloser. INA-Rxiv Papers. <https://doi.org/10.31227/osf.io/nw94m>.