

# Chapter Eleven

## DEFINING LANGUAGE AND/OR COMMUNICATION

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### Abstract

*All the attempts that I have made to request some definitions of language from a few students in a lecture situation as an entry behaviour to an undergraduate introductory course on language or linguistics have met with some difficulty. This is owing to the fact that such definitions of language do not just have much in common with, but also differ from communication. Yet, there is no line of distinction, more often than not, that is drawn between the two major concepts. As a linguist and a lecturer, I have been very worried quite often concerning not just the content of what I lecture, but also how what I lecture is received and understood by students. In this paper, I examined a number of definitions of language and communication. Firstly, I made an attempt to set apart the characteristics of each of the two concepts. Secondly, and by drawing upon the individual characteristics, I drew the required differences between them. Such a necessary distinction assists the learner, pedagogically, to see each concept clearly as well as set them apart from each other.*

### Introduction

Definitions, especially advanced and academic ones are, more often than not, very difficult to produce and delimit. This is owing to the fact that, firstly, concepts are seen by different people from various perspectives. Secondly, the definitive boundaries of concepts are difficult to capture in one fell swoop. Even pure scientists have realized this difficulty such that many of them delimit many of their definitions by the addition of the expression ‘within experimental error’. In this regard, to be asked to define the concept of language may be seen as a difficult task by many students even when it is an object that every normal human being uses everyday.<sup>1</sup>

For an entry behaviour into the teaching of an introductory course in language and/or linguistics, a most probable pedagogy would take into cognizance the necessity to define the concept of language or/and linguistics. In all of the classroom situations in which I have made such an attempt, as I have observed, a very high percentage of students have had to include the concept of communication as a part of their definitions. In the discussion that normally follows such an observation, I ask such students for the definition of communication. The result creates an even more puzzling effect. There is hardly any differentiation strategy that sets the concept of language apart from communication. For a discerning lecturer, this observation is worrisome because it means that many students could hardly differentiate the two concepts.

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In this paper, I have made an attempt to examine and classify these definitions according to both concepts. In addition, I have attempted to solve the problem of the convergence of both definitions by offering, diagrammatically and explanatorily the differences between language and communication at least for pedagogical reasons. Most importantly, I offer different definitions of language and communication. Salient wordings of my definitions have been used as paradigms for the explanations of the concepts.

### Definitions

McArthur's (282-283) view of definition, from the fourteenth century French 'definitio', means 'fixing limits'. It is a statement of meaning concerning a work of reference ranging from the normal brief dictionary definition that gives the meaning of a word to a usually lengthier encyclopedic one. Definitions depend on experience that varies according to its depth by individuals and groups of people. The adequacy or otherwise of definitions depends therefore on the nature or type of experience.

One of the issues involved in definitions is because certain terms are culture-bound. This is because of the different experience offered by a culture to its people. Certain cultures do not differentiate, as an example, between *blue* and *green*<sup>2</sup>. To define *green* as the colour of foliage and *blue* as the colour of a cloudless sky may be meaningless to someone whose culture fails to distinguish or do not allow for such distinctions. A simple term such as *table* is often the most difficult to define. A *table* that may be made of very conceivable rigid material (e.g. wood, raffia palm, steel) may be almost of any shape, size, or height. Also, it (a table) may be supported by one or more legs depending on its specific use. It is, therefore, a very difficult exercise to write a definition of a table that anticipates all of these manifestations.

In any particular discipline, definitions may be sophisticated because a user is already assumed to know a term or a word. Early lexicographers solved the problem of 'obvious knowledge' by the production of the Universal Etymological Dictionary in 1721 (282). Even then, the problems of definition have not and may not be solved totally.

### Data for Present Study

The data for the present study were collected from my undergraduate students in Years II – IV. Year I students were excluded because I thought they were still fresh men in the university. Students were divided into two groups. Members of one group were given a small piece of paper each to write their definitions of language and communication on each side respectively. The second group was given the same size paper to define language only. It is a method that serves first, as a control mechanism for the first group. Second, it is also aimed not to over task the second group. Third, the first group of students might be affected with the knowledge that they were meant to produce two definitions.

**Definitions of Language and Communication**

The research problem is that whenever students are asked to define language, most of them define it in terms of communication. In fact, the commonest definition is that “language is a means of communication”. If the students are probed further and asked to define communication, there would hardly be any difference in the definitions of the two concepts. Another relevant probe that throws them off balance is “what is the difference between language and communication”? Below are some definitions that were provided by the undergraduate students of the University of Lagos.

**Text A: Definitions of Language**

1. Language is a system of communication, they are words and their use, a system used by a nation or group of people. It is a system of communication.
2. Language is the element that could be linguistic or non-linguistic.
3. Language is a medium of expression or communication.
4. Language is a system of communication.
5. Language is a particular style or way of communication.
6. Language can be defined as an act of communicating among the people of same ethnic group or society.
7. Language can simply be explained as the intricate system of codes, signs, and symbols used in human communication.
8. Language refers to that human attribute that not only aids communication vis-à-vis interaction between people, but in totality, that system of symbols that are used to express meaning.
9. Language is a means of communication among a set of people or community.
10. It is the art of communication by which a set of people interact and relate one with another within a community.
11. Language is mutually intelligible amongst a particular community e.g. Yoruba language, English language.
12. Language is the verbal symbol used as a means of communication by a speech community.
13. Language is the means by which we communicate with one another verbally or in the written form. There are different types of languages like computer language, body

language, German etc. It is a means of interaction among people of the same community, age group, culture etc.

14. The art of communicating which involves passing across information, making of different sounds. It does not necessarily mean communicating, it is when that sound is heard and understood. When particular sounds are made in particular way in which a person or an animal understands that it is called language. It is concerned with types of body computer, barking of dogs etc.
15. Language is a dynamic system by which people interact.
16. Language can be said to be a way of communicating between one or more people of the same interest with an agreed style of code.
17. Language can be seen as a system of communication in a particular community.
18. The means of human communication, consisting of the use of spoken or written forms in a structured way.
19. Language can be defined as a means or ways a group of people communicate. It could be done by writing or speaking in a particular dialect.
20. The system of communication used by a particular community or country.

### **Text B: Definitions of Communication**

1. Communication is an interaction between at least two people.
2. Communication has to do with how some people relate with one another through speaking, conversing and transmitting.
3. Communication is simply the expression of ideas between two or more parties with the resultant feedback in a way that message sent by the transmitter is that received by the receiver.
4. Communication is a means of passing across message(s) from the encoder to the decoder through sounds.
5. Communication is a means by which information is transferred to a group of people.
6. Communication is a means by which information is passed and understood. It is also a means by which people relate with one another.
7. Communication is concerned with the system whereby someone sends a message from a source to another source for the purpose of establishing an action.
8. Communication is the means by which we send out information. Communication involves relating information from one person to another. It can be verbal or non-verbal.
9. Communication is the means of putting across a message or messages to a large number of people.

10. It is the art of passing information. Deals primarily with passing and assimilation of information.
11. Communication is a means of passing information to people through the means of telecoms, verbal words, internet etc. It is also a means of receiving information.
12. It can be defined in two ways – the encoder and the decoder. By the time this information is passed communication has taken place.
13. Communication can be defined as a means of passing information from one person to the other through different mediums.
14. It is a means of interaction between two or more people or community.
15. Communication is that process cum phenomenon where human beings (and animals) express themselves, cohabit and interact, and subsequently live in unity through certain shared language channels.
16. Communication could be seen as the way in which two or more people dialogue.
17. Communication is the act of interacting, passing across information from one individual to another.
18. Communication is the process by which information or message could be passed on to another and that particular message is understood perfectly well.
19. Communication refers to the act of sending and receiving information or any form by which a message is passed.
20. Communication is a means through which a message is passed across and also received, a means through which a message can be coded and decoded.

Texts A and B above which have been rendered the way they were collected as data present some linguistic problems. One, there are significant infelicities in their constructions such as subject duplication, grammatical errors, run-on-lines, omission of objects etc (see Text A numbers 1, 4, 5, and 19 as examples). Two, some definitions appear to be a re-iteration of earlier ones (see Text A numbers 4 and 5; Text B, numbers 2 and 6, 7 and 8, 10 and 11, 4 and 12). In 4.1, communication appears in over ninety percent of the wordings and yet it is language that is being defined. Yet, directly or indirectly, language does not appear to such an extent in 4.2 which contains definitions of communication.

In an earlier paper (Daramola 51-70)<sup>3</sup>, I examined very briefly one hundred definitions of language the data of which were collected from Years II and IV students of the University of Lagos. On a scale of 1-5, I ranked the salient wordings (64-66). The most salient wording, as one of the findings, even as the current one, is communication. In Text A, words other than communication are system 1,4,7,8,15,17,20; linguistic/non-linguistic 2; medium 3; expression/express 3,8; style 5,16; ethnic group/society 6,13,19; code 7,16; sign 7; symbols 7,8; means 9, 19; human/people, 8,10,13,16,19; community/country 12,13,17,20; speech 12; verbal/non-verbal 12,13; written/writing 13,18,19; spoken/speaking 19; computer 13, 14; interaction/relate 8,10,13,15; culture 13; art 14; information 14; sounds 14; animal 14; form 18 and dialect 19. Others are, as in Text B (message 3,4,7,9,20; expression 3; information 5,6,8,10,11,12,13,17,18,19; means 6,8,20; system 7; interaction/interact/relate/cohabit

1,2,14,15,17; verbal/non-verbal 8; spoken 18; code 20; By extension, this paper contains nevertheless a focus on the differences between language and communication.

In spite of the new focus, a brief review of these definitions reveals the fact that while all of the definitions in Text A may be used to define language in one way or another, similarly, all texts in B, except 3, 8 and 11, may be used to define both concepts. Such a response reveals the fact that learners do not actually understand the difference between the two concepts. Or else, such an overlap in definitions ought not have occurred.

If and when, in a classroom situation, this correlation is brought to the knowledge of learners, they become a bit worried, facially. The question that brings some joy to many a face but which may be temporary is to ask of the difference(s) between language and communication. Responses such as in Text 3 below evolve.

### **TEXT C: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION**

1. Language is speech, communication needs both a sender and a decoder.
2. Language may not be responded to but not all communications must be responded to.
3. Communication is language and language is communication.
4. Language must have a speaker and a writer, and communication has both a speaker and a receiver.
5. For communication to occur, apart from language, there must be a sender and a receiver.

None of the following five answers actually answers the inquiry of the difference(s) between language and communication. One, in number 1, language is also about a sender and a decoder. Two, in number 2, both language and communication need respondents. Three, in number 3, language may be communication, but communication may not be language or linguistic. In numbers 4 and 5, language and communications share all the characteristics therein. So, I begin an attempt to explain the difference between language and communication by the presentation of the following diagram:



**Figure 1: Illustrating the Similarity and Difference between Language and Communication**

In order to differentiate between language and communication in a classroom situation, I present Figure 1 above to students and ask the following two basic questions:

1. By studying the above diagram for a few minutes, would you tell the class the ordinary difference between language and communication?
2. Also, would you tell the class the mathematical difference between language and communication?

The following answers to questions 1 and 2 above may be received from students:

**Text D: Answers to Questions 1 and 2 Above**

1. Gestures, formulas, signs etc. differentiate communication from language.
2. Language and communication are the same.
3. Communication extends a little bit beyond language.
4. Language is oral but Communication is written.
5. Language is spoken and written but communication is gestural, symbolic etc.

All the answers in 4.4 above do not exactly address the notion of the questions – differentiating between language and communication, ordinarily and mathematically. Occasionally, I have students who provide precise answers. Such answers are:

1. By using the above diagram on the whiteboard, ordinarily, language is smaller in scope than communication or, communication is wider in scope than language.
2. By using the above diagram on the whiteboard, mathematically, language is a subset of communication or, language is a factor of communication.<sup>4</sup>

In a simple way, it is crystal clear therefore, that language forms a part of communication. It is necessary to explain further that language may be understood basically as elements that are spoken and written.<sup>5</sup> Fundamentally, language is also COMMUNICATION (capital letters are for emphasis). Language is obviously communicative in content and intent. From the drawing, the language circle is smaller than that of communication but there is an overlap

with the bigger circle containing communication. Communication includes, therefore, what is linguistic and non-linguistic.<sup>6</sup>

As neat as the above diagram appears to be in order to show the distinction between language and communication, perhaps the only caveat is that one can put up an argument that a part of what may be totally communication may be also linguistic. Concepts such as symbols, codes, formulars are also linguistic although may be pure communication (see Moran 49; Hayakawa 19-28). The letters or alphabets, as an example, are codes or symbols that are both linguistic and communicative. Mathematical symbols of all kinds and the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) may be both linguistic and communication. Yet, the distinction being made between language and communication is viable here even if pedagogically evident.

### Discussion

The point of departure of this paper requires that cogent explanations be provided further for both language and communication. Pedagogically also, I do not subscribe to the practice whereby teachers provide just one definitions for students. This is owing to the fact that some students are tempted to memorise the only definition.<sup>7</sup> I make them understand that as language students who are specialists in the field, they should be able to provide “a thousand and one” definitions for a concept that they have purported to know. To me, language is a resource for meaning and meaning is derivable from both experience and imagination. In this regard, I define language in the following ways to them:

### My Definitions of Language

1. Language is a **PROCESS** for the production of **MEANING** by at least two **PEOPLE** which may occur either as **SPOKEN** or **WRITTEN** and which **FUNCTIONS** in **CONTEXTS** of **SITUATION** and **CULTURE**.
2. Language may be defined as a **TOOL** for the expression of **HUMAN EXPERIENCE** and **IMAGINATION** through the **SPOKEN** and **WRITTEN** media.
3. Language is the **MEDIUM** whereby all normal **HUMAN** beings concretize their **REALITY** in the worlds of **KNOWLEDGE** and **ACTION**.

All of the salient words in the three definitions above are in the uppercase letters for emphasis. In the classroom situation, such wordings attract cogent explanations for the descriptions of the definitions. In definition 5.1.1, as an example, I describe *meaning* to be the most important word because of the fact that the whole essence of language is for its expression. In other words, whenever language is being used or studied, each of the participants is expressing one kind of meaning or another. The words *people* and *human* (in 5.1.1, 5.1.2 and 5.1.3) are synonyms that set apart language as a purely human attribute in contradistinction to other mammals. For *spoken* and *written* (5.1.1) wordings, they are the basic essence of language. They set it apart from communication by considering its attributes of gestures, drawings, pictures etc. The word *function* (5.1.1) contextualises the relevance of

language to its use in the ordinary grammatical world. In the theoretical world, Hallidayan Systemic Functional Theory (SFT), for example, has explained language in terms of Ideational, Interpersonal and Textual metafunctions<sup>8</sup> *Contexts*<sup>9</sup> (5.1.1) may be explained in terms of the comprehensive nature of the procurable meaning beyond the wordings of any language. As for *situation* (5.11.), there are formal and informal modes. The differences between formal and informal situations enhance the understanding of the attributes of language. Without the attribute of *culture* (5.1.1), a language is impossible or very difficult to explain. Indeed, it is often said that language is synonymous with culture. In 5.1.2, *tool* is synonymous with *process* in 5.1.1 and *medium* in 5.1.3. The words *experience* and *imagination* are synonymous with meaning in many respects. For *reality*<sup>10</sup> (5.1.3), I explain to students that without language, no one's full potential may be realized fully. Moreover, as human beings use language, especially in interactive situations, they become conscious of their beings and relevance in life. In 5.1.3, *knowledge* may be synonymous with *experience* in 5.1.2. For *action* in 5.1.3, language is not only a resource for meaning, knowledge, experience etc., but also provides avenues for people to do things or carry out various activities through the provision of instructions, declarations orders etc.

Having discussed the main essence of language, definitions of communication are provided in 5.2. below:

### **My Definitions of Communication**

1. Communication may be defined as linguistic and non-linguistic.<sup>11</sup>
2. Communication is the process of the production of what may be described as verbalization and non-verbalization.
3. Communication is concerned mainly with the production of language and other elements that are not language such as symbols, signs, gestures and technology such as engineering and Information for Communication Technology (ICT).

It is certain that the definitions of language in 5.1. (1-3) are different from those of communication as in 5.2. (1-3). Perhaps the obvious difference is that the definitions in 5.2. (1-3) cover two basic aspects – what may be regarded as language and what may not be regarded as language. It may become interesting to learners to know that language study is relevant to engineering and ICT.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, I use Quirk's assertion below concerning communication to buttress my discussion of communication in terms of wordings:

On the semiotic side of the correlation, I said that for our purposes we were largely concerned with the English language. Before I come to consider the qualification 'largely', let me expand a little on what the English language embraces. Lexicon obviously. The effectiveness of every communication

depends on the selection of specific items from the hundreds of thousands that are available to us as speakers and writers. Our word stock can be seen as constituting a central core of general purpose items like ‘street’, ‘hand’, ‘top’, ‘arrange’, ‘fetch’, ‘heavy’, ‘bright’, ‘always’ (which are virtually indispensable, regardless of the nature of the communication), surrounded by a vast array of words with more specialized reference like ‘chromosome’, ‘appendix’, ‘instigate’, ‘affirmative’. The latter enable us to articulate communications with great precision for such purposes as legal definition and scientific description, where our reliance on the assumed shared knowledge between the relatively few competent participants is all the greater. (10-11).

Even though Quirk’s quotation is concerned mostly with the context of register in the English language as communication, one of the bedrocks of registerial discourse (e.g. legal and scientific) is the wording (i.e. lexicon) of the concept. He establishes register on the semiotic framework. According to him, effective communication depends on the choices that we make to express the required concept(s).

### Conclusion

This short work contains an examination of some definitions of language and communication<sup>13</sup> by students and the teacher. Its emphasis is also on the similarities and differences of the two concepts for pedagogical reasons. It is a pedagogical process that any teacher of English can practise in a classroom situation from the elementary to the university level with some kind of modification or another. It underscores the importance of definition in the teaching process.

### Notes

1. This is one of the major aspects of the mysteries of language. Language is perhaps the most significant attribute of man, yet man cannot claim to understand it fully.
2. Casson (88) discusses colour classification as an area in which substantive universals have been extensively studied. There are a set of eleven focal colour categories that are encoded in basic colour terms (for example, English *black, white, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, and grey*) in the languages of the world. These are ultimate prime concepts. Although languages vary in the number of colour categories they encode (from as few as two to the full set of eleven), in all cases the foci of these categories are located at the same points in the colour space (defined by the dimensions hue, brightness, and saturation).
3. My concern in the paper does not stop with what a teacher/lecturer teaches in a class but also how what is taught is taught so that learners will enjoy what they are taught.
4. The concepts of set, factors and factorization are very fundamental mathematical issues.

5. I assist my students to imagine that if they really understand all of what they are taught in the Department of English, they can reduce all the courses to spoken and written issues.
6. see 4.1.2. above
7. Apart from the fact that such a practice does not befit a university student who is being trained to know what he knows, rote-learning is often discouraged in modern pedagogy.
8. These metafunctional categories are universal and procurable in all languages and also applicable to explaining language teaching.
9. In modern linguistic explanations of language, beginning perhaps from Bronislaw Malinowski, the relevance of context has become indispensable to the provision of comprehensive meanings of language. Whatever meanings that lexical and sentential categories of language provide can still be complemented with context. Hallidayan linguistic theory of SFT provides a useful account of context in his theory.
10. see Berger, Peter and Luckmann. Teachers ought to be aware that some kind of reality is constructed in the classroom for every and all lessons.
11. see 4.1.2. again.
12. Many language students often find it difficult to believe that language is relevant to science and technology. Yet, it is very much.
13. Other than examining the difference(s) between language and communication, one may examine the difference(s) between language and knowledge as an example. Even interlinguistically or intralinguistically, each of the salient wordings may be so examined.

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*The intricate social relevance,  
deep cultural involvement, and  
human relatedness of language as the basis  
of social action could be seen in its role in  
interpersonal and inter-group  
co-operation.*