

# Communicative functions of language

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# At a societal level

- Language serves many functions. Language selection often relates to political goals:
  - It functions to create or reinforce boundaries in order to unify speakers as members of a single speech community. It can **act as a cement which binds people together** and helps in the reinforcement of a certain community as one social unity
  - It also functions to exclude outsiders from intragroup communication. It can constitute a boundary used to show that a group of people does not belong to a certain community.

# Language as a unifying force

- The use of a given language is driven by the political urge **to unify a certain society**.
- By this the use of a given language serves some political objectives.  
(Standard Arabic as an example)

- Many social situations display **language which unites rather than informs**:
  - The chanting of a crowd in **a football match**, the shouting of names or slogans at public meeting. (Crystal : The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language.
  - The crowd attending **President Reagan's** pre-election meetings in 1984 repeatedly shouted in unison 'four more years' !'

# Language as an exclusionary tool

- Language can be used to exclude people.
- A case in point is the example of **Mexican settlers** who intently **excluded indigenous people** by means of language.

- The refusal of early **Spanish settlers in Mexico** to teach the Castilian language to the indigenous population was **exclusionary**.
- Language is used to mark indigenous people off as being a separate social group from the Spanish.
- Language here serves as **a means of exclusion**, a boundary separating communities as opposed to cementing social groups to make them one social block.
- **The Spanish conquest of Mexico** is generally understood to be the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire (1519–21) which was the base for later conquests of other regions.

- Members of a community may also **reinforce their boundaries by discouraging prospective second language learners**, by holding and conveying the attitude that their language is too difficult – or inappropriate – for others to use.
- Many languages are also made to serve a **social identification function** within a society by providing linguistic indicators which may be used **to reinforce social stratification**, or to maintain differential power relationships between groups.

- The functions which language differences in a society are assigned may also include the maintenance and manipulation of individual social relationships and networks, and various means of effecting social control.
- **Divergence**, which is the opposite of **speech accommodation or convergence**, can serve this function.
- Divergence takes place when people wish to emphasize their personal, social, religious, or other identity.
- There may be quite elementary reasons for divergence, such as the dislike of the listener's appearance or behavior.



- Linguistic features are often employed by people, consciously or unconsciously, to identify themselves and others, and thus serve to mark and maintain various social categories and divisions.
- The potential use of language to create and maintain power is part of a central topic among ethnographers of communication and other sociolinguists concerned with language-related inequities

# At the level of individuals

- The functions of communication are directly related **to the participants' purposes and needs** (Hymes 1961; 1972c cited in Saville-Troike 2003 ). These include such categories of functions as:
  - **Expressive** (conveying feelings or emotions)
  - **directive** (requesting or demanding),
  - **referential** (true or false propositional content, communicating ideas)
  - **poetic** (aesthetic)
  - **phatic** (empathy and solidarity)
  - **metalinguistic** (reference to language itself)

- **Phatic communication** is **verbal** or **non-verbal communication** that has a **social function**, such as to start a conversation, greet someone, or say goodbye, rather than **an informative function**.

Example:

**Waving hello** is non-verbal phatic communication and **saying 'How's it going?'** is verbal.

- Learners sometimes find it difficult to recognise phatic communication.
- For example, **a learner** may interpret the American English phatic structure 'What's up?' as a question that needs an answer.

- The list is similar to **Searle's (1977a) classes of illocutionary acts (representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, declarations)**, but there are differences in perspective and scope which separate the fields of ethnography of communication and speech act theory.

- **Representatives** : Acts in which words state what the speaker believes to be the case, such as describing, 'claiming', 'hypothesising', 'insisting'.
- **Directives** : Acts in which words are aimed at making the hearer do something, such as 'commanding', 'requesting', 'inviting'
- 'Good Lord, deliver us'

- **Commissives** : Acts in which the words commit the speaker to future action, such as 'promising', 'offering', 'threatening', 'refusing'
- **Expressives** : Acts in which the words state what the speaker feels, such as 'apologising', 'praising', 'congratulating', 'deploring'
- **Declarations** : Words and expressions that change the world by their very utterance, such as 'I bet', 'I declare', 'I resign'

'I baptise this boy John Smith.'

# Ethnography of communication and speech act theory

- Speech act theory's primary focus is **on form**, with the speech act almost always **coterminous with sentences** in analysis.
- For **ethnographers**, the **functional perspective has priority in description**, and while function may coincide with a single grammatical sentence, it often does not, or a single sentence may serve several functions simultaneously.



- while speech act theorists generally exclude the metaphorical and phatic uses of language from basic consideration, these constitute a major focus for ethnographic description.
- Phatic communication conveys a message, but has **no referential meaning**. The meaning is in the act of communication itself. Much of ritual interaction is included in this category, and not accounting for such functions of communication is ignoring much of language as it is actually used.

# References

- Fasold, Ralph. 1990. Sociolinguistics of Language. Blackwell : Oxford UK and Cambridge USA.
- Saville-Troike, Muriel. 2003. The Ethnography of Communication : An Introduction. Blackwell Publishing