

АКТУАЛЬНІ ПРОБЛЕМИ ГЕРМАНІСТИКИ

LECTURE

LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

What is language?

First, let's take a closer look at some of the main themes and ideas we'll be dealing with. The first of these is what language actually is. There are several different ways of thinking about language; which way you think about it depends on which aspect of language you are interested in.

One of the obvious ways of thinking about language is as a systematic way of combining smaller units into larger units for the purpose of communication. For example, we combine the sounds of our language (phonemes) to form words (lexical items) according to the 'rules' of the language(s) we speak. Those lexical items can be combined to make grammatical structures, again according to the syntactic 'rules' of our language(s). Language is essentially a rule-governed system of this kind, but there are other ways of thinking about how language works and what we do with it.

For example, we usually assume that we use language to say what we mean. However, the processes by which we create 'meaning' are actually very complicated indeed, so we're going to start with what's called a 'model' of meaning. A model is a way of thinking that will help us get started on an idea but which may soon prove to be too simple to be really accurate, at which point we will have to make it more complicated!

One model for explaining meaning is to assume that every group of sounds or letters which make up a word has a one-to-one relationship with a meaning. And for every meaning you can think of, there is a corresponding group of sounds (a spoken word) and letters (a written word).

When describing this way of thinking about language, traffic lights are often used as a comparison. For the meaning stop we have a red traffic light. For the meaning go we use a green traffic light. In the UK, red and amber lights showing together mean that you should stop, but that the next signal to follow will be

green for go. An amber light on its own tells you to stop, and that the next light to show will be the red one on its own. The fact that the lights can only show in certain sequences and combinations is a bit like the syntax which governs word order in sentences, and permits the sequence:

today I went swimming

but not the following sequence (an asterisk* before a phrase denotes that the expression is not one which speakers of that language will accept as wellformed):

**went today swimming I*

There are several limitations linked to thinking about language as a system like traffic lights. First, there would only be one signal (group of letters or sounds) for every meaning. If this were the case, Peter Dawson would not be able to disagree with Ofsted about the use of satisfactory versus sound (where clearly there is some overlap in meaning). Second, there would be a limited number of meanings and signals available. Admittedly we could use a green and amber combination, but what would it mean? You would know if you had been informed already, but what would you do if you were driving along and suddenly came to a traffic light showing amber and green? You might well assume that the lights had malfunctioned, rather than that a new message was being communicated.

One of the reasons why language is actually a far more complicated entity than traffic lights is that we can use it to create new meanings. Here are some expressions which illustrate language being used creatively to express new meanings:

Over-processed hair

Doreen had an absolute mare

unleaving

Mcjobs

Sweatshirting

This ability is one of the things that sets human language apart from the kind of communication that goes on, for example, between birds, which can only convey a limited range of messages.

Another important dimension of language is the very different purposes we use language for all the time. In the course of a day you will probably use language referentially, affectively, aesthetically, and phatically. Below are some examples to illustrate these different ways of using language.

You use language referentially when you say ‘put that bunch of flowers on the table’. Your instruction is referential because it gives information about what you want placed (the flowers) and where you want them placed (on the table). This aspect of language, its ability to communicate information, is very important.

Examples of contexts where this aspect of language is very obvious are: pilots discussing flight paths with air traffic control; recipes; assembly instructions with self-assembly furniture; school textbooks; directions on how to get to a friend’s house. In all these cases, accurate, non-ambiguous information will be sought as a priority.

However, the transmission of information is certainly not the only reason we use language, and there are many linguistic choices we make every day which are not a consequence of information transmission at all.

We’re largely concerned with the first two functions of language:

its referential function and its affective impact. These two functions are the ones most clearly associated with power. The referential function is the one associated with what objects and ideas are called and how events are described (i.e. how we represent the world around us and the effects of those representations on the way we think, as the letter above about the language of Ofsted reports highlighted). The affective function of language is concerned with who is ‘allowed’ to say what to whom, which is deeply tied up with power and social status. For example, saying ‘I think it’s time you washed your hair’ would be an acceptable comment from a parent to a young child, but would not usually be acceptable from an employee to their boss!

