

CHAPTER-VII
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The compositional feature of language distinguishes human language from animal language which in other respect shows signs of apparent intelligence. Communication signals of animals are usually highly stereotyped.

Halliday and Slater says,

In Many cases one of the most important pieces of information that they transmit is the species of the signaller. This is crucial, for example, when an animal is advertising for a mate. Such signals have to conform to precise rules absolutely common throughout the species. Any individual that diverges from these rules will be best rejected by members of the opposite sex as possibly belonging to another species with which hybridisation would be disadvantageous.¹

When animals communicate with each other information of various different sorts passes between them a signal may indicate details of the species, age, sex of the signaller. The signal may transmit information about

¹ T.R.Halliday and P.J.B. Slater, Animal Behaviour, Vol.2, Blackwell Scientific publications, 1983, p.2.

the outside world, as the bees communicate information concerning the location of nectarbearing flowers to other members of the hive. They communicate by their specific dance. The dance indicates the direction, distance and the nature of the food. Bees have two specific dances, the round dance and the waggle dance. The round dance is used generally when the food is less than 50 metres from the hive. For food sources at greater distances the waggle dance is performed. The essence of animal communication is that one animal influences another in some way. But can the bee dance be made in the absence of these state of affairs? Or can it refer to a potential state of affairs? No animal language, not only the bee dance, can be made in the absence of state of affairs or it can not refer to a potential state of affairs. S.K.Langer remarks,

Of all born creatures, man is the only one that cannot live by bread alone. He lives ... always between fact and fiction. For he sees not only actualities but meanings... By the agency of symbols - marks, words, mental images, and icon of all sorts - he can hold his ideas for contemplation long after their original causes have passed away... By associating symbols in his mind he combines things and events that were never together in the real world.¹

1 Susanne K.Langer, "From 'The Lord of Creation'", in Logic and Rhetoric, edited by James William Johnson, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1968, pp.286-87.

There is no evidence that animals are able to project their language into nonimmediate situations, which is a characteristic of all human speech, be they oral or written, gestural or symbolic. This makes us question whether the animal communicative process meets the criteria of language. According to S.K.Langer, those who maintain that animal possesses language, makes a mistake - mistake in making no difference between signs and symbols. All intelligent animals use signs, not symbols. And "the essence of language is symbolic, not signfic"¹ says Langer. The difference between a sign and a symbol is that a sign always refers to existing reality but a symbol may be divorced from the reality altogether. Or in other words we can represent a reality only symbolically. As a result we find the complex symbolic structure of poetry, literature which is only the product of human mind and is altogether absent in animal communicative process.

Another feature which makes us doubtful whether animal communicative process meets the criteria of language is that animal never commit mistakes in their communication. They can only show some deficiency or slip due to their unfitness of speech organ. As the supposed signal of subhuman species are highly stereotyped and has a distinctive mark, their process of communication are never wrong. Each of the signals produced by any animal seems to be the

1 Ibid., p.294.

response to a definite and distinct set of stimuli given in the environment outside him. Their behaviour is mostly determined by the environment. So there is no freedom in their communicative system. As there is no freedom of expression there is no scope of being wrong or make a mistake in their communication. They cannot use unlearned expressions. But language is a spontaneous process. It should not be externally guided. The freedom of expression which we enjoy in a given language entails the freedom of being wrong or incorrect in our usage of it, may be it is grammatically, semantically or contingently wrong.

Concepts like 'mistake', 'wrong', 'incorrect', 'irrelevant', 'absurd', 'meaningless' are inherent or implicit in human language, whether they are deliberate, pathological, or due to some confusion. For human language is creative in nature. And this 'creative aspect of language use', the distinctively human ability to express new thoughts and to understand completely new expressions which he never heard before is the striking property of human language. It may be said that this ability, the ability to express new thoughts and to understand completely new expressions, cannot be detected in an animal which in other respects shows signs of apparent intelligence exceeding those of a human, even though such an organism or machine might be as fully endowed as a human with the physiological organs

necessary to produce speech. Systems of animal communication are mostly closed. They send only a finite number of messages with definite meaning. Although the intensity of the body movements of bees are subject to infinite variation it can not be said creative. By 'creativity' we mean ability to construct new combinations of discrete units and not the continuous variation of a definite signalling system. And this creative process is explicitly found in human language, specially in natural language, language which is used in ordinary discourse, in friendly dialogue, in gossiping and so on. Naturally the question arises : Is this creative aspect of language absent in artificial or formal languages ? What is the distinction between natural or formal language ? Is there no rules or conventions in natural language ? All these questions have important bearings upon the problem of the distinction between meaningfulness and meaninglessness. I shall discuss these issues later.

Democritus, Epicurus, Rousseau were the creators of the biological theories of the origin of language. According to them social fact of speech has its general biological cause. Democritus first expounded the thesis that human speech originates in certain sounds of a merely emotional character and are not a specific property of man. We find this emotional behaviour in animal world also. But the structure of human language makes a radical problem in

accepting the thesis that human speech originates in certain sounds of a merely emotional nature. The structure of human language reveals the difference between emotional and propositional language. Mr. and Mrs. Yerks suggests,

Although evidence of use of the voice and of definite word - like sounds to symbolize feelings, and possibly also ideas, becomes increasingly abundant from lemur to ape, no one of the infra-human primates exhibits a systematization of vocal symbols which may approximately be described as speech.¹

On the other hand there is no evidence that man even in the lowest stages of his culture possessed merely emotional language or the language of gestures. The language of the primitive culture was agrammatical as the modern languages of civilized culture.

From the above discussion it may be said that animal communicate but they can not be said to have a language. Language and communication are not identical. The word 'communication' has a number of different meanings. Communication can be taken to mean the sharing of anything. Animal communication can be defined as the transmission of a signal from one animal to another such that the sender

1 R.M.Yerks and A.W.Yerks, The Great Apes, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1929, p. 569.

benefits generally from the response of the recipient. Communication is one of the possible uses of language. Language can be used for soliquizing also which is completely absent in animal world.

I have mentioned that human language is creative in nature and that this creative use is explicitly present in natural language and almost absent in formal language. Why this is so can be made explicit by making a distinction between artificial language and natural language. Artificial language is variously called formal language, logical language, ideal language and so on.

According to some linguists and logicians formal languages are the ideal or proper manifestation of the language. Paul Ziff says,

Characteristically a formal language is constituted by a precisely specifiable set of expressions and various perfect rules for their manipulation, combination and interpretation. In consequence, in contrast with any natural language, a formal logic and formal languages in general appear to have the undeniable virtues of precision and clarity.¹

1 Paul Ziff, "Natural and Formal Languages", in Language and Philosophy, edited by S. Hook, New York University Press, 1969, p. 223.

In contrast, natural language is full of ambiguities. The ambiguity of natural language, it can be said is its merit. And these ambiguities are generally resolved by nonlinguistic means. The context of the utterance may resolve the ambiguity involved in the utterance. In most contexts someone who knows English will have no trouble resolving the ambiguity involved in the utterances. "Now I can see what you are talking about" which is ambiguous between

(i) "Now I understand what you were talking about"

(ii) "Now I have caught sight of what you were talking about."

Sometimes a sentence may be ambiguous because of its grammatical structure. For example, "Flying planes can be dangerous" is ambiguous between

(i) "Flying planes are sometimes dangerous"

(ii) "It can be dangerous to fly a plane".

We can disambiguate these ambiguous sentences by attending to the immediate linguistic context of utterance. Formal languages ignore the realities of the context. It is true that vagueness or ambiguity are sometimes disadvantageous in the situation where clarity and precision are the guiding interests. But in many situations clarity and precision is not enough. We require vague, ambiguous and suggestive

language in order to cope with the diverse complex intention.

A great difference between a formal language and a natural language can be traced in the respect of vocabularies of each language and their word-senses.

Paul Ziff says,

A vocabulary may be thought of as constituted by a finite explicit store of words together with a set (possibly null) of morphologically productive devices. Consider a formal language, the words of which are 'x', 'x'', 'x''',... , thus an infinite number of words. The vocabulary of this language is then constituted by an explicit store of one word, 'x', and a recursive device for the further production of infinitely many words.¹

The vocabulary of the natural languages, in contrast, whether it be English, Bengali or German, are not specifiable in this manner. Every natural language is the production of infinite combination of infinite explicit and implicit vocabularies. Moreover, the words of the natural languages have different senses. Polysemy (several senses of a single word) is an essential feature of any natural language. "That dog is

1 Paul Ziff, Ibid., p.230.

devoted to his master", "This painting is the work of a master hand", "She is a master of arts", "Master Arindam is a good actor" in the above four expressions the word "master" is used in four different senses. In the first expression it is used in the sense of male owner of a dog. "Master" is used in the second sentence in the sense of superior or skilful artist, in the third sentence it is used in the holder of the second University degree and in the fourth sentence "master" is used as a title used for boys too young to be called Mr. The expressions of a formal language are generally required to be monosemous because its ultimate aim is the precision, clarity and consistency. The semantic rules of the formal language specify what meaning or denotation is to be attached to certain elements of the vocabulary. So there is no scope of expression's being vague, ambiguous or imprecise. And there is only the limited scope of expressions being erroneous or meaningless in formal languages where the speaker or writer is ignorant about the rules of formal languages or where his memory fails. Let us take an example. There are distinctive rules for the proof of this argument :

1. (x) (Hx \supset \sim Px)
2. (x) (Gx \supset Hx) / \therefore (Gx \supset \sim Px)
3. (Hy \supset \sim Py) 1, UI
4. (Gy \supset Hy) 2, UI

5. $(Gy \supset \sim Py)$ 4.3, Hypothetical syllogism.
 6. (x) $(Gx \supset \sim Px)$ UG Q.E.D.

If someone writes the conclusion of the argument as (x) $(Gx Px \supset \sim)$ due to ignorance or memory failure then the conclusion will be absurd or meaningless. But this meaningless expression may generate from some slip or it may produce to make a contrast between meaningful and meaningless expression. But this is not the result of some linguistic error or illusion. In natural language also there are cases of meaningless expression which are produced artificially, for example, "Socrates is a prime number", "Saturday drinks soda water" and so on. But we are not very much interested about such cases of meaningless expressions. We are very much interested about such meaningless expressions which are the result of some linguistic illusion or error. And this illusion arises from the richness of natural language. Natural languages, are by nature fluid and open to unforeseen possibilities of vagueness. Even in complex semantic situations, where more than one meaning is connected with the same word, the ambiguity which results is often used for stylistic purposes. So there is enormous possibility of expressions being erroneous or meaningless. The hearer or reader may be ignorant about the different sense of the same word, he may have a poor linguistic imagination. As a result the expressions resulting from creativity may seem to him nothing but nonsense

or meaningless. The expression "She runs along with the shore of night" may seem non-sense to someone who does not know what the phrase "shore of night" may suggest to mean.

There are, of course, some philosophers and linguists who do not maintain that there are two distinct kinds of language. Donald Davidson says :

It would be misleading, however to conclude that there are two kinds of language, natural and artificial. The contrast is better drawn in terms of guiding interests. We can ask for a description of the structure of a natural language the answer must be an empirical theory, open to test and subject to error, and doomed to be some extent incomplete and schematic. Or we can ask about the formal properties of the structures we thus abstract. The difference is like that between applied and pure geometry.¹

Frege has an opposite view. Frege was sceptical about the application of formal language procedure to natural language. One reason for such scepticism may be that the fundamental logical connectives of formal language are not enough similar in meaning to their natural language counterparts. Moreover, formalisation implies confining oneself to stating facts or making assertions. Ideal languages are capable of

1 Donald Davidson, "Semantics for natural languages" in On Noam Chomsky : Critical Essays, edited by Gilbert Harman Anchor books, Anchor Press, New York, 1974, p.247.

expressing anything which is cognitively meaningful. Some attempts have been made recently, of course, for constructing the formal logic of imperatives and question to which I do not want to enter.

From the above discussion it may be said that the concept of meaninglessness is totally absent in animal communication system because the signals they used to communicate with each other for specific purposes are highly stereotyped. It can be regarded only as a stimulus - response process. The concept of meaninglessness is most apparent in human language where linguistic creativity is somehow involved. This linguistic creativity, however, does not exist equally to natural and artificial form of human language. The scope of creativity is very limited in artificial language while the natural language possesses this creativity in high degree. Naturally the possibility of an expression's being meaningless is in high degree in natural language than it is in artificial or logical language.