

# Language, Speech or Writing: Which is Primary ?

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## Language for Communication

Language and society are so closely related that one has no existence without the other. That is why Bloch and Trager (1942) define language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a society co-operates. It is clear from the above definition that language has both form and function. It has been pointed out that the form of language is, its sounds. The sounds of a language have symbolic functions. This is the reason for the linguists to consider language as a system of vocal symbols. Language is used for the members of social group to co-operate i.e., it is language that is used by the members to exchange information to request, to order, to love, to quarrel etc. We do not mean that the members of a social group do not employ other than language for the purpose of communication. One can use signs, pictures, bodily gestures, etc., as modes of communications. However, language is a significant mode of communications that a society possesses.

## Language as a product of society

Similarly language is intimately related with the culture of a society. One can attempt to understand the structure of a society through its language also. A change in the social structure may be seen reflected in the language. Language may be looked at from different angles. The one we are describing here is society based. From this angle, language is perceived as a product of society. The structure of vocabulary reflects both the structure and change of a society. It is more sensitive to the change of a society. This is the main reason for the Anthropologists to show interest to understand the structure of language. Sensitivity of the structure of vocabulary to the social change was witnessed during the period of industrial revolution. Language is expected to fulfil the demands of new society. The new society demands the language to perform certain new functions. In other words, the domains of language use could be expanded to meet the new needs of the society.

## Language and other communication systems

The Medium, each communication system takes is different in nature. Some system may be visual as in the case of bees dance and olfactory as in the case of ants. There are systems of animal communication that takes the form of audio. For example, the communication of monkeys is audio i.e., they use certain number of calls for their communications. We do not

mean here that the communication system of monkeys uses only one medium, of course the positions of the body or the bodily movements also accompany with the calls of monkeys. The message conveyed through facial expression is termed as non-verbal communications. But the sound medium may be the primary means of communications in the case of monkeys. When we talk of natural language, sound is its medium. Human language as a system of communications has distinct qualities when it is compared with the systems of Communications of animals.

The difference between human language and animal communication is of qualitative in nature. Linguists like Hockett (1958:574) have identified seven traits that distinguish human language from animal communication of which `Duality` is an important trait from the view point of this paper.

The trait of duality is abstract in animal communication. By the term `duality` we mean that language has both phonological (sound) structure and grammatical structure. The term `Phoneme` is an important concept used in the description of phonological structure of a language. On the basis of the principles of contrast and complementary distribution of sounds, phonemes of a language are determined. A Phoneme may have one or more phones as its members. If it has two or more phones, their distributions may be predicted in a systematic way. Phonemes have differential functions for example, *il*, *il* and *iz* in Tamil are treated as phonemes because they differentiate meaning in the following words.

vaal tail kal Stone  
vaal sword kal toddy  
vaaz to live vali Pain  
vazi Path

But a phoneme has no meaning in isolation. One or more phonemes as a sequence when it refers to a meaning is called a morpheme, another significant unit at the grammatical level. Morpheme is thus defined as a minimum meaningful unit. It is composed out of phonemes.

### Speech is primary and writing Secondary

The fundamental substance out of which expression is built, is the sounds of language. It is therefore, speech is primary and writing is secondary. Spoken language is given primary importance because we do not know any society that does not have a language which is spoken. Writing occupies a secondary position in the history of language. There are many societies in the world with languages but without any writing system i.e., there are many preliterate societies around the world not possessing any writing system. But on the contrary, nobody has ever reported that there are societies having writing systems without a spoken language. Historically speaking, spoken language is prior to written language. As Lyons (1968:38) puts it, writing is essentially a means of representing speech in another medium. The history of writing does not go beyond some six or seven thousand years. But speech goes back even to the origins of human society. All systems of writing are based upon units of spoken language i.e., the symbols in a writing system stand for the sound units of that language. In other words, writing system reflects the sound systems of spoken language in the beginning.

Language is often confused with the variety that is used in writing. Since literature has more prestige among the members of a speech community, the variety used in literature also gains the same prestige.

Grammars of both traditional and modern describe the nature of sounds and the patterns of structure employed in the formation of words, phrases and sentences. In the Ezhuttiyal part of both Tolkappiyam and Nannul one can witness the description of sounds i.e., each sound is described as to how it is produced in terms of articulatory phonetics. Since one could easily observe what parts of the vocal organs are involved in the production of sounds, the traditional grammarians resorted to the use of articulatory phonetics. Much of the space of the traditional grammars, in the description of Ezhuttiyal has been occupied by the study of speech sounds. The grammars describe the constraints on the initial, medial and final occurrence of phonemes. All the phonemes in a language do not occur in all positions. For example we say that the stop phonemes in Tamil (phonemes of vallinam in traditional classification) do not occur in word final positions in native words. That is why we do not have native words with ik, ich, it, ith, ip etc. in the word final position. Similar is the case with the traditional grammars when they deal with the combinations of phonemes in all three positions. Certain combinations of phonemes are permitted whereas Certain other combinations of phonemes are not permitted. Even permitted combinations do not occur in all positions. Restrictions are not only on possible combinations but also of possible positions in a word.

Combinations of letters do not figure out in the description of ezhuttiyal. There is nothing inherent in the letters such as ith and ich to prevent their combination in Tamil. The letters are nothing but secondary symbols to represent speech sounds. Writing may be viewed as a process of symbolisation of vocal symbols. So the primary symbols are speech sounds and the alphabet is a secondary symbol. Language is primarily spoken and writing is to represent its values. Speech is essentially linear in its nature i.e., distinct elements are arranged in linear fashion. The values of elements are partly determined as to what elements follow what elements and similarly what elements precede what elements. Value or relationship of an element is decided not in isolation but taking into considerations the preceding and following elements in a linear sequence.

Though alphabet of a language is a cultural identity marker of a speech community, it is not inherent property of language. In the history of a language, it is not a surprising fact for one to observe different scripts used at different times. For example in the South of Tamilnadu, from 8th century to 18th century AD Tamil was written in Inscriptions and copper plates in a particular writing system called VATTEZHUTTHU with graphemic variation period after period. Even synchronically one could see the use of two different writing systems for the same language. For example a language called Santhali in India is written in Bengali Script by people who speak the language in West Bengal, Oriya script by people who speak it in Orissa and Devanagari Script by people who speak the same language in Bihar in addition to the indigenous system of writing called Olchuki and Roman. In other words the same language is written using 5 different kinds of writing systems. Therefore, writing is a visual representation of spoken language.

In spite of the attempts made to keep an ideal one-to-one relationship between a letter and phoneme, there are instances in which one-to-many or many-to-one correspondences between a phoneme and a letter are found. In Tamil the alveolar nasal n is represented by both ind and in

ind  
n  
In

Similarly the alveolar stop ra and the flap trill ra are represented by the above letters with the exception of Kanyakumari dialect, most of the dialects in Tamil don't distinguish these phonemes in their pronunciation

ir  
r  
ir

on the contrary in many dialects, we have nasalised vowels in words like avan `he, paiyyan `boy, tangam `gold, etc. In writing, there are no separate symbols to denote these sounds. There is no way to distinguish the nasal vowels from the oral vowels. Similar is the case when we consider the suprasegmental features found in spoken Tamil. The features such as stress, tone, intonations, etc. are not marked by any devices in the writing system of Tamil. Of course, one may come across with the punctuation marks such as .,!? in our writing system and this is due to the impact of West.

Bloomfield (1933) states that writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks. Indian traditional grammarians had taken a good amount of pain in describing the details of sounds of language. Both Sanskrit and Tamil traditional grammars show remarkable stage of attainment in the description of the nature of sounds. Lyons (1968 : 20) is of the opinion that Indian linguistic work may be held superior to western traditional grammars: first in phonetics and second in the study of the internal structure of words. As we know well, phonetics deals mainly with the speech sounds of a language. Since the concept of purity was attached with the proper and accurate pronunciation of Vedas, emphasis was laid on the ways and proper training of learners in pronunciation. Faulty and incorrect pronunciation might lead one to misunderstand the Vedas. Therefore one of the aims of grammar is to train learners to have good and standard pronunciation of the words in a language.

The differences in the phonemic shapes of morphemes are described with the help of Sandhi rules. The concern of Sandhi section is with the system of speech sounds and not with the writing systems of language. The rules in Sandhi are in a way dealing with the phonotactics of words and not with the letters of language. It is, therefore, claimed that the main concern of traditional grammars is speech and not writing in Ezhuttial.

The languages of India have been grouped under four families of languages on the basis of their phonological, morphological and syntactic structure of these languages. They are : ( i ) Indo Aryan ; ( ii ) Dravidian ; ( iii ) Tibeto-Burman and (iv ) Austro-Asiatic language. Languages of each family share certain common structural properties at all levels among

themselves. Classification of language family is mainly based on the sounds and their formation of words. Writing system is not based on the history of family of languages. History of writing for a language may be different from the history and development of that language. For example, Tamil belongs to the family of Dravidian languages. But its script is traced to the version of Southern Brahmi. Scholars even go to the extent of tracing all the scripts of Indian languages >from Brahmi. A similar attempt to trace all the Indian languages from a common source failed to meet the methodological requirements of the historical and comparative linguistics. In terms of structure they belong to different families of languages, though the history of scripts is different. Therefore, language is different from the systems of writing. Writing is a secondary visual representation of language and therefore speech (representation of sounds ) is the primary form of language. That is why language is characterised as the means to relate sound and meaning.

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