

# Can language be defined in terms of being a structure or a system?

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<b>Article Detail:</b>	<b>Abstract</b>
<p>Received: 20 Sep 2022; Received in revised form: 13 Oct 2022; Accepted: 18 Oct 2022; Available online: 23 Oct 2022</p> <p>©2022 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords—</b> <i>Communication, systematicity, regularity, elegance, idiosyncrasies, stimulus.</i></p>	<p><i>When it comes to the definition of language, many linguists take it for granted by assuming that the nature of language is easily perceived. Their pre-supposed understanding of language hinders them from viewing how it is constitutive of society. Is it then a system of communication? In fact, language cannot be defined in terms of being symmetrical because there are many symmetries in English and there are many aspects, which are not symmetrical in the sense that there are many phenomena in natural languages, which are predicted by regular rules and others, which are not. In terms of elegance, we can consider the perfect example of elegance that occurs between the reflexives himself and herself and the pronouns him and her, but this elegance disappears when it comes to the description of some idiosyncrasies in terms of the lexicon and how there are no specific rules for how many arguments each predicate should take. Hence, such phenomena make it so difficult to define language in terms of its systematicity, regularity or even elegance. However, we should assume that our act of communication should be meaningful in the sense that when we communicate, we communicate meaning by being free from any stimulus.</i></p>

## 1. Introduction

In trying to define the concept of language, many linguists and philosophers tend to take it for granted by assuming that the nature of language is something obvious in terms of understanding. Most of these scholars' views are based on a pre-supposed understanding of what language is. They never stop to ask how language is constitutive of society [1]. Are we then going to consider it as a system of communication as it is defined in Collins Dictionary? [2] If so, what is intended for a language to be "a system" and what does it mean to "communicate meaning"? In fact, we cannot define language in terms of being symmetrical because there are many symmetries in languages such as English where some of its aspects are symmetric, like the case of the vowels, and there are many aspects of it

which are not symmetrical such as the way we derive nouns from verbs either by cutting part of the verb like "apologize/apology", by adding a suffix as in "entail/entailment", or by changing the stress pattern like the case of "convert".

However, the fact of considering "systematicity" in the sense of "predictability" will not work as well because many things can be predicted by rules in natural languages such as the phenomenon of "flapping" in the American English, which is very regular in this sense. On the other hand, there are other rules that are not regular such as the case of "f" which becomes "v" at the end of some English words in the plural form, which does not apply to other words such as "safe". Thus, we can deduce that only some rules are predictable and only some rules are regular.

In the case where we take the word “system” in the sense of “elegance”, we can state that many aspects of language are elegant such as the elegant relationship that occurs between the reflexives “himself” and “herself” and the pronouns like “him” and “her”, which are in complementary distribution. Hence, we can notice some idiosyncrasies in terms of the lexicon. For example, there are no specific rules for how many arguments each predicate should take.

As a matter of fact, we find that some parts of the language are elegant and others are not, which makes it so difficult to define the concept of “systematicity”. We cannot define it in terms of symmetries because there are many dimensions in language that are asymmetric. We cannot define it in terms of regularity because there are many aspects of language that are not predictable. We cannot define it in terms of elegance because there are so many aspects of language that are idiosyncratic. Therefore, if we assume that language is a system of communication, we do not really know what is meant by “communication” or by “systematicity”. We should then assume that when we communicate, we communicate meaning by being free from any stimulus, but “meaning” as a social construct is taken for granted because it is an integral part of our daily life.

## **2. What is language? Can language be defined in terms of being a structure or a system?**

### **2.1. The structural definition of language**

In order to investigate the question that concerns the definition of language in terms of being a structure, Searle [1] tried to shed some light on it by stating his view in the following way:

“It seems to me that the accounts of society that I am familiar with, ranging all the way from Aristotle to Habermas, radically misconceive the role of language in that, in an important sense, they take the existence of language for granted and then ask: How does society work, how is it constructed?, and so on. When I say that they take language for granted, I mean that in accounting for the nature of society they do not ask, What is language? Rather, they simply assume the existence of language and go on from there” (pp. 4-5).

What Searle [1] implies on the basis of this passage is that the problem of many linguists and philosophers is that they tend to take the definition of

language for granted. These scholars are just assuming that the nature of language is obvious and already known for them. Their ideas are mainly based on a pre-supposed understanding of what language is. They do not stop to ask the question, what is language? in a way that would enable them to think about how exactly is language constitutive of society. This is in fact the problem of defending human language according to John Searle, whose name is related to the philosophy of language.

### **2.1.1. Collins Dictionary’s definition of language**

In Collins Dictionary [2], language is defined as a system of communication by stating that “a language is a system of communication which consists of a set of sounds and written symbols which are used by the people for a particular country or region for talking or writing”. What is not clear about this definition is that we do not know exactly what is meant by the two expressions “system” and “communication”. What does it really mean for a certain language to be “a system” and what does it mean to “communicate meaning”?

Given that language is defined as a system of communication, it is implied that it is a systematic substance that is intended to be used for communication without specifying the nature of this substance.

#### **2.1.1.1. Symmetries vs. Asymmetries**

First of all, what does the word “systematic” mean? By “systematic”, we might ultimately mean “symmetrical”. In fact, there are many symmetries in languages. For example, in the English language, we have twelve constructive cardinal vowels: five of them are front vowels, the other five are back vowels, and between the two, we have two central vowels, which are very symmetric. Hence, we deduce that some aspects of the English language are symmetric, like the case of vowels. On the other hand, many aspects of the English language are not symmetrical. Let us consider the example of how we derive nouns from verbs. If we take the verb “apologize”, we derive it by cutting part of it, which gives us the word “apology”. If we take the verb “entail”, we need to add the suffix “-ment” in such a way as to derive a noun from it, and it gives us the word “entailment”, which is not symmetrical. In order to derive a noun from the verb “work”, we do not need to make any changes. The verb and the noun keep the same form in terms of pronunciation and as graphs. In order to derive a noun from a verb such as “convert”, all what we need to do is to change the stress pattern.

Actually, most of the aspects of language are phonological aspects, and the morpho-phonemic aspects of natural languages are not symmetrical. In which sense then can we state that language is symmetrical? As a matter of fact, we cannot define language in terms of being a system because it is not very clear what is meant by “system”.

### **2.1.1.2. Predictability vs. Irregularity**

If we take the concept of “systematicity” in the sense of “predictability”, we can then say that there are so many things that we are able to predict by rules in natural languages. Let us take for example, the phenomenon of “flapping” in the American English for the word “writer”. We can pronounce it with both sounds \t\ and \d\. The rule for it is that the “t” and “d” are flapped whenever they occur inter-vocally, where the first vowel is stressed. It is very regular in this sense. In fact, there are lot of rules in the natural languages, especially on the phonological level, which are highly regular in the sense that they can be used to predict. They are not sensitive to the context. They apply even if new English words are invented. The same rule would apply to it and the same result would be achieved. However, there are many other rules that are not regular. Let us take for example the case of “f” in the English language, which becomes “v” at the end of some words such as, “thief” that becomes “thieves” in the plural form and “half” that becomes “halves”. Actually, we find that this rule does not apply to other words such as “safe”. Hence, we find that there are other rules that are not that regular. Therefore, if “systematicity” is defined to mean “regularity” or “predictability”, then we can state that only some rules are predictable and only some rules are regular.

### **2.1.1.3. Elegance vs. Idiosyncrasies**

If we consider the word “system”, which is taken in the sense of “elegance”, we can discover that many aspects of language are elegant such as the elegant relationship between the reflexives “himself” and “herself” and the pronouns like “him” and “her”, which are in complementary distribution. The pronoun is placed exactly in the position in which the reflexive is not found. Let us consider the following example for an extra illustration:

a. John loves himself.

In this sentence, there is only one possibility of interpretation, namely the one in which the reflexive pronoun “himself” picks up “John” as an antecedent.

Let us consider the second sentence:

b. John loves him.

In this sentence, the pronoun “him” can pick up any antecedent except “John”. That is why we can say that there is a perfect complementary distribution between reflexives and pronouns in the English language. It is then very elegant and systematic in this sense. Meanwhile, there are quite a lot of idiosyncrasies in terms of the lexicon. For example, there are no rules for how many arguments each predicate should take. Some weather verbs take zero arguments, like the verb to “snow” in the sentence, “It is snowing”. In this sentence, “it” refers to nothing and the verb “snow” has no argument. The pronoun “it” is inserted as an expletive just to satisfy the structure requirement that says that every verb must have a subject. Other verbs take one argument, such as the verb “to talk”. We say, “He is talking”. The only argument that is associated with the predicate to “talk” is the subject. Some predicates take two arguments such as the verb “to eat” in the sentence, “He is eating an apple”. The pronoun “he” is the first argument and “an apple” is the second argument. Other predicates can take three arguments such as the verb “to give”. In the sentence, “John is giving a book to Mary” there are three different arguments. Therefore, there is no exact rule. All that is needed is to remember the number of arguments that should go with each verb.

As we can notice, some parts of the language are elegant, but others are idiosyncratic. Hence, is it possible to define “systematicity”, and in which terms can it be defined? If it is defined in terms of symmetries, we can find many dimensions in language that are asymmetric. If it is defined in terms of regularity, we can detect many aspects of language that are not predictable and regular. If it is defined in terms of elegance, we can notice so many aspects of language that are idiosyncratic. In fact, when it is assumed that language is a system of communication, it is not really clear what is meant by “communication” as it is not clear what is meant by “systematicity”. We should then assume that there is not enough linguistic knowledge about languages that have ever existed, and we do not even know most of the languages that exist today.

### **2.1.1.4. Chomsky’s meaning of the concept of language**

In relation to the same context above, Chomsky [3] suggested the following heuristic practical procedure. While talking about John Searle’s [1] analogy in terms of the meaning of language, Chomsky [3] stated that,

“Pursuing his analogy, there is no doubt that the physiologist, studying the heart, will pay

attention to the fact that it pumps blood. But he will also study the structure of the heart and the origin of this structure in the individual and the species, making no dogmatic assumptions about the possibility of ‘explaining’ this structure in functional terms” (p. 57).

What Chomsky [3] implies is that we can make a distinction between two important issues related to the meaning of language. The first one is the function of language, and the second one is the structure of language. Chomsky [3] suggests an analogy where he compared the language structure to the human heart, highlighting the feasibility of a theoretical distinction between studying the human heart and studying the human language. The two issues that Chomsky [3] mentioned are different. It is true that we would like to study the functions of the heart as Jakobson [4] was trying to do when he identified the different functions of language, but it may be safer to start by studying the mechanisms of the heart and how it works. By so doing, we do not really need to know the functions of language in order to study its structure. What Chomsky [3] wanted to imply in his linguistic theoretical expertise is to conceptualize the human language as a mechanism that can be studied on its own totally independent from any functions and from what is done with the human language.

However, Chomsky [3] is making an analogy that we can explain in the following way. In fact, there

*Table 1: Roman Jakobson’s functional concept of language*

Classification	Strongest Factor	Function	Examples
Referential	Context	Description, Contextual, Information	Our business hours are 9:00 a.m – 5 p.m, from Monday through Friday.
Emotive	Addresser	Interjections / expressions of emotional state.	Oh, man ... Awesome! Whew!
Conative	Addressee	Concerned with commanding; vocative or imperative addressing of the receiver.	Go on, open it! Shoo. Get out of here. Check this out.
Phatic	Contact	Concerns channel of communication; performs social tasks as opposed to conveying information; to establish, prolong, or discontinue conversation.	Hey! Mmmhmmm ... How about that? Really? No way?
Metalinguistic	Code	Requires language analysis; using language to discuss language.	Noun, adjective, code-switching. Water is non-count noun, right?
Poetic / Aesthetic	Message	Involves choosing words carefully; the art of words, often self-reflective.	But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks!

Jakobson [4]: Communicational Functions.

is a fundamental problem. Let us consider that there are two hearts, a living one and a dead one. While studying a heart, we can study it when it is operating. When this heart dies, we can still study its structure. This is not the case with the human languages. When a language is used, this language is visible for everyone and we can study it. On the other hand, if it is not visible (i.e., when it is not written or spoken or no longer operational), then there is nothing to study. This is then the difference between the language and the heart in terms of study. Language is there only when it is visualized in a spoken or written form. In order to study a language, we need to listen to people when they are using it. Then we can study it. On the other hand, we can study the structure of the heart regardless of whether it is operational or not. That is then the major difference between the two things said by John Searle [1] and emphasized by Chomsky [3].

### 3. The functional definition of language

#### 3.1. Roman Jakobson’s functional concept of language

If we take this concept of communication into consideration, we will find that Jakobson [4] was the first linguist who tried to define language in terms of some communicational functions as it is summarised in Table 1.

However, Jakobson [4] stated that we could talk about the referential function when we use language to point out to things in our physical context. Language is used for emotive function when it is used to express feelings. Conative language is used when language is used to produce the figurative language like the metaphorical expressions. Language is used for phatic function when we intend to establish relationships such as the use of greetings. The metalinguistic function is expressed when we use language to talk about language, and then use it to talk about the language that we use to describe language, and so on in a transitive way. The poetic or aesthetic function is expressed when language is used to produce poetry.

### **3.2. Jakobson's communicational functions between adequacy and inadequacy**

If all the previous functions stated by Jakobson [4] are taken into consideration, we will be able to define language just in terms of these functions. Hence, are these functions enough to help us give a meaningful definition to language? It is a very good attempt from Jakobson [4] to define language in terms of communicational functions, but this attempt is not enough due to the existence of some problematic and inadequate issues about it. We can then present some of these problems in the following way:

#### **3.2.1. The complex intentions**

In fact, communication is always a term-to-term communication. For example, when the speaker points out to someone using his or her finger, then he or she is telling the hearer something. This communicative function is defined in terms of what the speaker is doing and the person he or she is addressing at that time. It is then implied that communication is about talking to someone or communicating what the speaker has in one's mind to someone else. The problem is that sometimes the communication intentions are somehow complex due to some cultural backgrounds or attitudes. For example, in a famous Moroccan context, when a husband and his wife are having a walk and at some point a certain young woman notices the husband and goes towards him to shake hands with him in the presence of his wife, the husband might feel embarrassed. In this case, the wife might be suspicious about the kind of intimacy that she might notice between her husband and that young woman. In order to save the problem, the husband might start asking the young woman about her family members to show that there is a kinship relationship between them. In this situation, he is not only trying to establish a phatic relationship between him and the young woman, but

he is also trying to communicate to his wife that she does not have to worry about this lady because she is a family member. Meanwhile, he is communicating to the young woman to be very careful because the woman who is with him is his wife. Thus, the man is not only talking to the young woman, but he is communicating something else to his wife as well. Therefore, while communicating something, the intentions might become too complex because of a social habit.

However, what makes the situation complicated while defining language in terms of communication is the kind of intentions that are underlying all the functions of this communication such as the person who is exactly being addressed in the process of communication and the type of intention that we should have. It is not an easy task as Jakobson [4] stated when he tried to define those communicational functions.

#### **3.2.2. The internal and external stimuli-free expression**

According to Fromkin [5], when we communicate, we are free from any stimulus, which "means that language use is not limited to stimulus-response behavior" (p. 9). Sometimes we start talking to ourselves in an attempt to satisfy our desire in such a way as to express our feelings. In this case, the fact of communicating using language is stimulus-free. There is no need to be motivated by something external or any intentions to push one to communicate. We just say something because we like to say it. Hence, language is stimulus-free and that is why it cannot be defined in terms of any communicational motives.

#### **3.2.3. Word meaning**

Actually, when we communicate, we communicate meaning, but what is meant by meaning? The phenomenon of meaning is taken for granted because it is an integral part of the daily life. Jakobson's [4] idea of "meaning" is based on the concept of functions, which is itself based on the concept of meaning. According to Jakobson's [4] theory, language has functions such as the phatic function, which is the production of a certain type of meaning, but what is "meaning" then? When the concept of "meaning" is unclear, any attempt to define it in terms of functions is also unclear. In fact, the whole theory of Roman Jakobson [4] is unclear because its foundation is unclear. Hence, "meaning" is a social construct. When it comes to define the closest social constructs to us such as "meaning", we fail to define them because of this proximity. In fact, the

closest is something to you, the further it becomes from you when you try to understand what it is about exactly. For instance, if one asks himself or herself about the closest thing to him or her, he or she never thinks of the usual things that one wears or has. The answer might be that it is his or her book or computer. They never think of their glasses, which they take for granted. This is exactly what happens with the definition of meaning. If we consider the meaning of the simplest word that may come to one's mind such as the meaning of the word "book", we may ask, "what is a book?". When we say for instance, "I bought a book", what we intend in this case is the physical book. When we say, "I read a book", the intended meaning is the content of the book. The meaning of "we have three copies of this book in the library" is related to what has been written in these books. If we take any simple word in English or in any other languages that we speak and reflect on its meaning, it will turn that its meaning is much more complex than how it is represented in a dictionary or how it is perceived. It is then too complicated to define language in terms of communicating meanings.

#### 3.2.4. Imperfections

In fact, grammar requirements in terms of meaning should be satisfied. This satisfaction may be used for structural or grammatical reasons such as the use of the expletives. In many languages of the world, some pronouns are used just because they are needed for some structural reasons. They may mean nothing at all. When we say for example, "It seems that John is happy today", the pronoun "it" does not refer to anything in this sentence. The only justification is that every English sentence must have a subject and that is why this pronoun is inserted at the beginning of the sentence in order to satisfy this grammatical requirement. An expletive can be an object as well. When you say, "I like it when you are talking this way". The pronoun "it" is meaningless and it is there just for structural reasons. Another phenomenon is the movement of the wh-word from its canonical position to the initial position to make a sentence. When we say, "what did you eat?" "I ate an apple". "Apple" follows the verb, but the "what" that replaces the "apple" is placed at the beginning of the sentence. It moves from its canonical position, which is the post-verbal position, to the initial position. The question is why should it move? We can imagine a language in which we say, "You ate what?" such as the Japanese language and the Egyptian language in which the wh-word is placed in its canonical position and it is not moved. Why is it the case that in some languages a constituent is moved from one position to another

position that has nothing to do with communication? This movement can be considered as a kind of imperfection that challenges us while trying to define language in terms of communication.

#### 4. Conclusion

In terms of communication, the definition of language becomes complicated especially while dealing with the kind of intentions, which are inherent, the functions of this communication such as the person to whom we speak in the process of communication and the kind of intention that we should have. In fact, it is not an easy issue as Jakobson [4] mentioned when he defined the communicational functions.

However, when one is in the process of communication, he or she is free from any stimulus. In some situations, we talk to ourselves in such a way as to satisfy our desire in expressing our feelings. Hence, the fact of using language as a communicating tool is stimulus-free. The speaker does not need any external motive or any intentions to push him or her to communicate. One just expresses his or her ideas or feelings because he or she likes to do it. Thus, language is stimulus-free a fact that prevents it from being defined in terms of any communicational motives.

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