

## Lecture 12

### ❖ What is Language?

- A number of definitions have been suggested but we will consider the following composite definition.
  1. Language is systematic.
  2. Language is a set of arbitrary symbols.
  3. Those symbols are primarily vocal, but may also be visual.
  4. The symbols have conventionalized meanings to which they refer.
  5. Language is used for communication.
  6. Language operates in a speech community or culture.
  7. Language is essentially human, although possibly not limited to humans.
  8. Language is acquired by all people in much the same way; language and language learning both have universal characteristics.

### ❖ Schools of Thought in Second Language Acquisition

- While the general definitions of language, learning, and teaching offered above might meet with the approval of most linguists, psychologists, and educators, points of disagreement become apparent after a little probing of the components of each definition.
- For example, is language primarily a “system of formal units” or a “means for social interaction”? Or for better retention, should a teacher emerge from equally knowledgeable scholars, usually over the extent to which one viewpoint or another should receive primacy.
- Yet, with all the possible disagreements among applied linguists and SLA researchers, some historical patterns emerge that highlight trends and fashions in the study of second language acquisition. These trends will be described here in the form of three different schools of thought—primarily in the fields of linguistics and psychology—that follow somewhat historically.

### ❖ Structural Linguistics and Behavioral Psychology

- In the 1940s and 1950s, the structural, or descriptive, school of linguistics, with its advocates—Leonard Bloomfield, Edward Sapir, Charles Hockett, Charles Fries, and others—prided itself in a rigorous application of scientific observations of human languages.
- Only “publicly observable responses” could be subject to investigation. The linguist’s task, according to the structuralist, was to describe human languages
- and to identify the structural characteristics of those languages. An important axiom of structural linguistics was that languages can differ from each other without limit, and that no preconceptions could apply across languages.
- Of further importance to the structural or descriptive linguist was the notion that language could be dismantled into small pieces or units and that these units could be described scientifically, contrasted, and added up again to form the whole.

- Among psychologists, a behavioral paradigm also focused on publicly observable responses—those that can be objectively perceived, recorded, and measured. The scientific method was rigorously adhered to, and therefore such concepts as consciousness and intuition were regarded as mentalistic, illegitimate domains of inquiry.
- The unreliability of observation of states of consciousness, thinking, concept formation, or the acquisition of knowledge made such topics impossible to examine in a behavioral framework.
- Typical behavioral models were classical and operant conditioning, rote verbal learning, instrumental learning, discrimination learning, and other empirical approaches to studying human behavior.
- You may be familiar with the classical experiments with Pavlov’s dog and Skinner’s boxes; these too typify the position that organisms can be conditioned to respond in desired ways, given the correct degree and scheduling of reinforcement.

### ❖ **Generative Linguistics and Cognitive Psychology**

- In the decade of the 1960s, generative transformational linguistics emerged through the influence of Noam Chomsky and a number of his followers. Chomsky was trying to show that human language cannot be scrutinized simply in terms of observable stimuli and responses or the volumes of raw data gathered by field linguists.
- The generative linguist was interested not only in describing language (achieving the level of descriptive adequacy) but also in arriving at an explanatory level of adequacy in the study of language, that is, a “principled basis, independent of any particular language, for the selection of the descriptively adequate grammar of each language” (Chomsky. 1964, p. 63).
- Similarly, cognitive psychologists asserted that meaning, understanding and knowing were significant data for psychological study. Instead of focusing rather mechanistically on stimulus-response connections, cognitivists tried to discover psychological principles of organization and functioning.
- Cognitive psychologists, like generative linguists, sought to discover underlying motivations and deeper structures of human behavior by using a rational approach. That is, they freed themselves from the strictly empirical study typical of behaviorists and employed the tools of logic, reason, extrapolation, and inference in order to derive explanations for human behavior.
- Both the structural linguist and the behavioral psychologist were interested in description, in answering what questions about human behavior: objective measurement of behavior in controlled circumstances.
- The generative linguist and cognitive psychologist were, to be sure, interested in the what question; but they were far more interested in a more ultimate question, why: what underlying factors—innate, psychological, social, or environmental circumstances—caused a particular behavior in a human being?