Unit 1

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

AREA OF STUDY 1

Nature and Functions of Language

This chapter is about the nature of human language and what distinguishes it as unique. While some animal communication systems are fairly impressive, they come nowhere near the complexity or creativity of the English language. As we will see, this creativity occurs in of the five subsystems of language: sounds (phonology), vocabulary (lexicon), meanings of words (semantics), structure of words (morphology) and structure of sentences (syntax). Before we start, think about all the sorts of things you are able to do with language — you can complain, abuse, curse, sweet-talk, deceive, wheedle, instruct, persuade, dissuade, gossip, greet, praise, delight, amuse, charm, seduce, and much, much more. In this chapter, we focus on just some of the main functions that language performs and how our language choices within these functions are shaped by different factors such as subject matter and setting.

1.0 Miracle of Language

Of all mankind"s manifold creations, language must take pride of place. Other inventions — the wheel, agriculture, sliced bread – may have transformed our material existence, but the advent of language is what made us human. [Guy Deutscher *The Unfolding of Language* 2005: 1]

Most of us take language for granted and it is impossible for us to imagine what life would have been like for someone like Helen Keller. Deaf and blind from the age of 18 months, Helen Keller was virtually isolated for the first seven years of her life. Apart from a few hand signs that she used to communicate with her family, Helen had absolutely no way of connecting with the world. All this changed when her teacher, Anne Sullivan, came into her life. Anne taught Helen to communicate by spelling words into the palm of her hand, beginning with 'w-a-t-e-r'. Eventually, Helen realized that these gestures signalled the name of different objects that were around her. In an essay *The Day Language Came into My Life*, Helen describes the situation when, as she puts it, the mystery of language was revealed to her:

> *We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As a cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten — a thrill of returning thought, and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!*

Helen Keller (left) and Anne Sullivan

There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away. [...] I learned a great many new words that day. I do not remember what they all were; but I do know that mother, father, sister, teacher were among them — words that were to make the world blossom for me, "like Aaron"s rod, with flowers." It would have been difficult to find a happier child than I was as I lay in my crib at the close of that eventful day and lived over the joys it had brought me, for the first time longed for a new day to come.

Helen went on to become a successful speaker and writer, campaigning for deaf and blind people all over the world, as well as for numerous other causes.

1.1 Functions of Language

Here is what a few famous people have said about the nature and the purpose of human language:

Language is the means of getting an idea from my brain into yours without surgery. (Mark Amidon)

Language is the dress of thought. (Samuel Johnson)

Man does not live on bread alone: his other necessity is communication. (Charles F. Hockett)

Language exists to communicate whatever it can communicate. (C.S Lewis)

Language is a social fact. (Ferdinand de Saussure)

Language is a great force of socialization, probably the greatest that exists. (Edward Sapir)

These quotations do a nice job of identifying some the main reasons that we use language. The Russian-American linguist Roman Jakobson went a few steps further and proposed a model that outlined what he saw as the six major functions of human communication. We'll briefly summarize each of these here before looking at them in more detail:

1. referential (conveys information; e.g. statements like "The train leaves at 6.00am");
2. phatic (establishes a social connection; e.g. greetings like "How are you?");
3. emotive (interprets feelings, desires etc.; e.g. interjections like "Yuck!");
4. conative (engages the addressee; e.g. commands like "Sit down!"), ;

Roman Jakobson — a pioneer of structural linguistics

5. metalinguistic (talks about language itself; e.g. "What does *phatic* mean?");
6. poetic (brings in the aesthetic dimension; e.g. metaphorical embellishments like "He's a tank").

1. Referential — language is for communicating

It is probably rather obvious that the primary function of language is to serve as a vehicle of communication. Here are some straightforward examples:

- Prices are continuing to sky-rocket.
- Fritz is enjoying his carrot.
- I'm loving this book on language functions.
- She chose the fish curry and regretted it.
- There will be further delays.
- The baggage handlers have been sacked.

As you can see, the **REFERENTIAL FUNCTION** is all about sharing information — getting across across ideas, facts, opinions and so on. When it comes to aspects of the social life of language, we need to look at other functions.

* *Referential function* is used to provide information.

2. Phatic – language is for relating socially

> *One of the things Ford Prefect had always found hardest to understand about humans was their habit of continually stating and repeating the very very obvious, as in* It's a nice day, *or* You're very tall, *or* Oh dear you seem to have fallen down a thirty-foot hole, are you all right? *At first Ford had formed a theory to account for this strange behaviour. If human beings don't keep exercising their lips, he thought, their mouths probably seize up. After a few months' consideration and observation he abandoned this theory in favour of a new one. If they don't keep exercising their lips, he thought, their brains start working.*
>
> *Douglas Adams, Chapter 5 The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

Tea — a bonding tool for people of all ages (Urban Dictionary definition)

The character described in the quotation above is Ford Prefect, the hilarious creation of Douglas Adams. Ford came from a small planet somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse, but he visted Earth in order to carry out research for an article he was writing for *the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. As Ford so astutely observes, many linguistic exchanges regularly take place without involving any transfer of information at all. A lot of the time, people don't seem to be communicating anything particularly, and much of their chit-chat involves stating the obvious — all that talk about health and the weather, and the linguistic formulae that fill up conversations (the pleases, the thank-yous, the you're-welcomes, the pleased-to-meet-yous, the have-a nice-days, the not-a-problems). They don't advance the conversation as such. So what are they doing there?

This kind of social small talk is used to establish social rapport during an encounter. Most human interaction is non-hostile. Basically we're polite whatever we might be feeling deep down and these sorts of ritual linguistic exchanges are all part of this. It's a way of signalling that there is no animosity. These sorts of verbal routines also express information to do with an individual's social characteristics, relationships and values. Mind you, not all cultures use language in this way. Not everyone speaks about the weather or their health.

Language is for relating socially. Image by Manuel Alvarez from Pixabay

* *Phatic function* establishes a social connection between people.

So, as well as communicating ideas, language is all about facilitating social cohesion – this is the **PHATIC FUNCTION** of language. In short, without language you would have no social life. Consider once more what Helen Keller's pre-language existence would have been like. In her essay, she describes her life as being "at sea in a dense fog" — "shut in by a tangible white darkness". Until the day she made that connection between water and the "w-a-t-e-r" that Ann Sullivan spelled into her hand, "there was no strong sentiment or tenderness" in her dark and still world. Communication and social contact are central to human existence, and both require language.

3. Emotive — language is for expressing emotions

Emotive function expresses an emotion or a state of mind.

Interjections belong to a minor word class involving words with emotional meaning; e.g. *Doh!*.

A major function in language is to express the feelings of the speaker or writer – namely, the **EMOTIVE FUNCTION**. An obvious illustration is swearing. Most cussing is an emotive reaction to frustration, something unexpected (and usually, but not necessarily, undesirable), or a sign of anger. This is the use of a swear word to let off steam. Imagine you've just pressed the send button and dispatched an email or text message that really should not have been sent (the "onosecond", as it's come to be known). Expletives are kinds of exclamatory **INTERJECTIONS**, and, like other interjections, they have an expressive function; cf. *Wow! Ouch! Oh dear! Gosh! Shit!* Here are some actual examples taken from an article on Australian swearing (Allan & Burridge 2009).

1. Oh damn it's you see I turned I thought I turned that one on.
2. You know I was going gosh don't you remember anybody.
3. Oh sugar. We've burnt it.

Expressions like *bollocks, damn, gosh, sugar* are different from typical expressive phrases such as greetings or apologies, for the simple reason that they are not normally addressed to anyone. There might be people standing around (overhearers or bystanders), but they're not strictly speaking addressees. Instances of expletives, and other interjections uttered without an audience, involve a release of extreme emotional energy. Of course, they can involve full-blown taboo words (*shit!*), or remodelled (more restrained) disguises (*sugar!*).

From yeet to yee-haw – interjections through the ages

One of the newer interjections is *yeet*, originating from a 2014 Vine (a short video) - in fact, Merriam Webster added it to the dictionary in 2022 (https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/yeet-meaning-and-history). The next time you are in need of a release of emotional energy, why not try some of the past interjections through the ages – *cock-a-hoop* (1568), *woo-hoo* (1697), *joy* (1719), *glory* (1816), *whizzo* (1905), *whee* (1920), *hot diggety* (1924), *yee-haw* (1941), *cowabunga* (1954) and *yay* (1963).

Of course, in our electronic age, many of these emotions are often expressed through emoji – for instance, the table flip (╯°□°)╯ ︵ ┻━┻

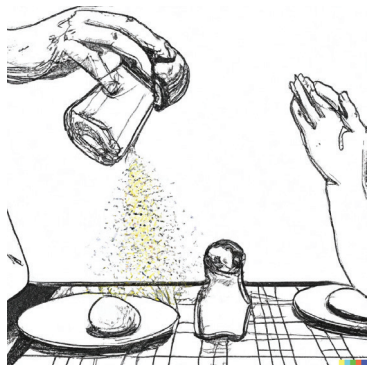
Have a look at your last five text messages – do you tend to express strong emotions through emoji or interjections?


4. Conative — language is for getting things done

The **CONATIVE FUNCTION** is basically a directive — the speaker (or writer) is trying to influence the behaviour of the person they're addressing (perhaps getting them to do something), The function is most commonly found in commands and requests. Consider the tricky business of getting someone to pass you the salt at dinner. Here is just a handful of the different ways you might do this:

* *Conative function* is used to order or request something from someone.

4. Pass the salt!
5. Please, pass the salt!
6. Can you pass the salt?
7. Would you pass the salt?
8. Would you mind passing the salt?
9. I would appreciate it if you would pass the salt.
10. This is a little bland and needs salt.



IMPERATIVE sentences like (1) and (2) are conventionally associated with commands, but in fact they are rarely used this way. Even politer versions like (2) would probably come across as a little too blunt in most everyday contexts. English speakers are much more likely to use **INTERROGATIVES** such as (3) (5) or even **DECLARATIVES** such as (6) and (7). Commands or requests framed this way (as questions or as statements) are less direct by giving, or at least appearing to give, the option of refusal — they do this by hinting or asking that the hearer do something, rather than ordering them to do it. Mind you, the hearer has to play along with this.

* *Imperatives* are sentence types used for expressing directives of some sort.

Interrogatives are sentence types used for expressing questions.

Declarative are sentence types used for expressing statements.

Perhaps you have experience of asking someone: "Could you pass the salt" and they answered "Yes" and just sat there. Of course, you wanted the salt to be passed, but were being polite and framing the directive as if it were a question. The other person misunderstood (perhaps jokingly?) and chose to interpret your words literally as a question. So much communicating goes beyond the literal meaning of an utterance. At first blush, this might seem a weakness in human language; yet it is also one of its considerable strengths.

Get off the phone! (imperative)

Stop texting, will you! (imperative)

Are you still texting? (interrogative)

Why are you still on the phone? (interrogative)

You've been on that phone a long time. (declarative)

Your thumbs must be tired. (declarative)

Photo by Thom Holmes on Unsplash

5. Metalinguistic — language is for calling attention to language.

Humans also use language to talk about language. This might be to clarify something (e,g, 'what do you mean by *metalinguistic*), to clear up ambiguity (e.g. 'Sorry, I didn't quite get that') or perhaps to describe a foreign word. For example, English doesn't have an expression to describe the satisfaction someone might get from sitting on comfortable chair but Finnish does (*hyppytyynytyydytys*) — we haven't stolen this word yet, but we sometimes talk about it. Or think of all those websites devoted to the 'most irritating words', 'favourite words', 'dead words', 'new words', 'peculiar words', 'clichés' — all are examples of language talking about itself. And of course this book you're now reading is a perfect example of the **METALINGUISTIC FUNCTION** at work.

* *Metalinguistic function* talks about language itself.

A bit on 'during COVID times'

Here's a good example of metalinguistic self-awareness. It was 2021 and the time of fresh COVID-19 outbreaks. Multiple states and territories across Australia were simultaneously entering lockdown. Dean Bilton, who was running a live blog during the afternoon, received a comment about his apparent overuse of the phrase 'there's a bit on'. He responded as follows:

> 'Q: How many times can we say *there's a bit on* in the blog today? Is there a quota we need to reach? Happy to help. – A bit on
>
> Dean: You're right, there have been a bit of 'bit ons' on today. I'll look to dial it back, but are there any other phrases that sum up the mood of "oh cool, everything is melting down all at once and we don't even have time to address another one before another one comes and melts all over us" so succinctly?' [abc.net.au, live blog, accessed June 30, 2021]

As Dean playfully suggests here, this use of *a bit* shows a distinctly Australian use, that of playing down one's troubles (in this case, NSW, the NT, Queensland and WA all entering lockdown). If the live blog is any indication, it appears that speakers of Australian English are aware not only of this newish discourse feature *a bit*, but also its frequency in the Australian community.

6. Poetic — language is about getting the message across creatively

The **POETIC FUNCTION** appeals to the aesthetic dimension of language — it goes beyond the actual message and its content to the way it is communicated. Note that this function doesn't just relate to fine literature (such as literary prose and poetry) but refers generally to people's ability to manipulate language in a creative way. For example, there is the poetic trick of three. Have you noticed how many successful expressions bunch phrases in threes — everything from a real estate cliché 'Location, location, location' and Seinfeld's "Yadda yadda yadda" to Shakespeare's "Friends, Romans and countrymen" and Abraham Lincoln's famous "We cannot dedicate – we cannot consecrate – we cannot hallow". Australia's sun protection campaign "Slip-Slop-Slap" wouldn't be nearly as effective or memorable if there were only two phrases.

* The *poetic function* appeals to the aesthetic dimension of language.

Think of something as common as everyday slang. Australian English, for example, has an impressive number of insults picking on someone's intelligence or competence. As you look through the following examples, focus on the illuminating comparisons that speakers make in the images they use to invoke someone's stupidity:

- thick as a stump
- thick as enough short planks to build the barque Endeavour
- thick as pig shit
- thick as two planks stuck together with stupid glue
- sharp as a bowling ball
- silly as a packet of crackers
- a beer short of a six-pack/a slab
- two Holdens short of a car park
- two sandwiches short of a picnic
- three Tim Tams short of a packet
- a few streets back from the main road
- behind the door when they were handing out brains
- can't knock the top off a rice custard
- couldn't find their backside with two hands
- if a tram drove up his arse he wouldn't know until the connie got out and put the pole up
- if brains were dynamite he couldn't blow himself out of a wet paper bag.
- lift doesn't go to the top
- not the brightest crayon in the box
- not the brightest knife in the biscuit tin

Humans love to play with language, and clearly there's a great deal of pleasure to be had with this function of language. Immediately striking is the poetic inventiveness of the figurative language that people have created here — it's not for nothing that slang has been described a 'people's poetry'.

Jingles and slogans

Jakobson included advertising jingles and political slogans in the mix of examples illustrating the poetic function of language. Find examples and determine what it is about the language that makes it so good (or causes it to fail) at drawing attention to itself.

1.2 Design of English

The ubiquity of complex language among human beings is a gripping discovery

Pinker 2007 31

The English that you speak has a highly organized structure, which you have internalized unconsciously (if you are a native speaker) by simply being a part of the speech community. When you know a language in this way, you automatically know the sounds, the words, and the sets of rules for their combination. We need to emphasize that these rules are very different from the sorts of rules (or codes of regulation) that are imposed from outside, such as the rules that regulate your behaviour around the school. The rules we are talking about are the principles that explain the regularity of language behaviour. In a sense, they are more like the amazing facts that account for the workings of your cardiovascular system or some other functioning part of the body. You may not be able to say what these rules are, but you do know when something goes wrong. Consider the set of sentences below.

a. Des bang hawwe, des is alles im kopp.

b. I got one mate what goes to a Catholic school.

c. What's wrong with all them 'Political Correct' people?

d. I never see no spirits.

e. Goodnight and in the pansy I can't say but into a flipdoor you can see it.

f. There's fairies at the bottom of my garden.

g. There are fairies at the bottom of my garden.

h. So the little Irish bloody pilot gets up 'n he says I'm five foot two 'n I'm sitting up the bloody front.

All of you (native and non-native speakers alike) will agree that (a) and (e) are not examples of English. If you are writing a grammar of English intended for language learners you might also want to exclude (b), (c) and (d), perhaps (f) and (h) too, even though many people who are native speakers of English would use and accept such sentences. How would you describe these sentences? Would you call them ungrammatical or dialectal? Do you think that some of them belong more to speech than writing? The sentences in (f) and (g), for example, exemplify a notorious problem in English. Which of the two sentences would you use? Which would you consider acceptable English? Many grammars would describe (f) as 'wrong' (or 'bad English') and (g) as 'correct' (or 'good English').

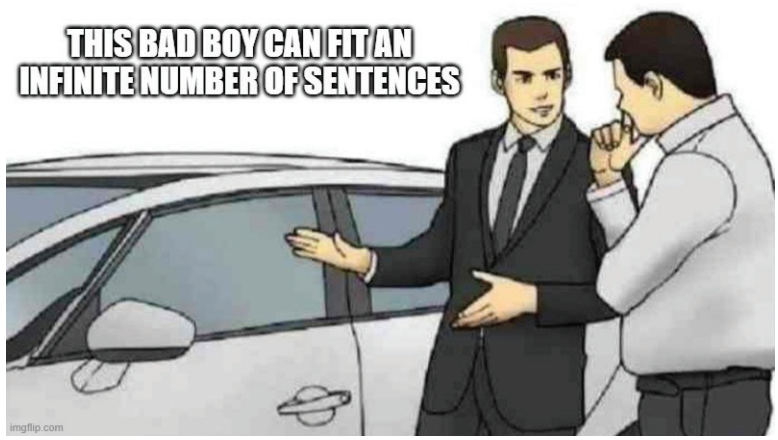
* *Standard English* is the prestige variety codified in dictionaries, style guides and grammar manuals.

Sentences like those above which people might take exception to as being 'bad English' are not really errors of English, but rather errors of **STANDARD ENGLISH**. The thing to always bear in mind is that we are all dialect speakers — everyone speaks at least one **dialect** of English, and Standard English happens to be the most important dialect in terms of the way Australian society operates. It might surprise you to call this a dialect, because people tend to talk about the **standard language**, but this is a misleading label. Standard English is one of many different dialects of English — it just happens to be the dialect that currently has the greatest clout. How it got to this elevated position is something we explore later in this book.

Here's a short transcript of a sketch in which broadcaster Stephen Fry talks to Hugh Laurie (called 'Tiger') about the remarkable flexibility of language:

> Imagine a piano keyboard, eighty-eight keys, only eighty-eight and yet, and yet, new tunes, melodies, harmonies are being composed upon hundreds of keyboards every day in Dorset alone. Our language, Tiger, our language, hundreds of thousands of available words, frillions of possible legitimate new ideas (from the TV show "A Little Bit of Fry and Laurie" broadcast in 1989)

Most of the time we speak without ever noticing the extraordinary complexity that underpins our language. Underlying every sentence we utter is a highly organized arrangement of layers. Around forty-four distinctive sounds (or 'eighty-eight keys', to use Stephen Fry's image of a piano keyboard) are organized into the syllables that combine to form hundreds of meaningful segments of words. These in turn combine to construct thousands (or "frillions") of different words that then combine and recombine into an never-ending number of possible sentences and discourses. It's the "tremendous resourcefulness" of our language (as linguist Dwight Bolinger once put it) that sets it apart from nonhuman language. Let's explore the various layers (or subsystems) that make up this intricate structure.



1.2.6. Discourse and Pragmatics — beyond the sentence

Sentences rarely appear in isolation but as part of connected speech and writing. **DISCOURSE** is language beyond the humble sentence, and discourse analysis studies how the stretches of language that make up our written texts and spoken interactions are organized. Any discourse is just like a story. Shifts in focus, changes of players, beginnings and ends of scenes, need to be signalled, and for this we have a number of special discourse strategies. These can involve all linguistic levels; for example, syntax (e.g. word order, special constructions), morphology and lexicon (e.g. special discourse particles like *yeah-no, like*), phonology (e.g. intonation, pausing).

* *Discourse* involves sequences of language that are larger than a sentence.

Important are also the **PARALINGUISTIC** elements such as vocal effects (e.g. voice quality, pitch, laughter). Just as certain types of music can profoundly affect us, these paralinguistic features can provoke strong reactions (think of your response to high-pitched voices, or perhaps breathy voices). These characteristics might be innate, or they might be the fall-out of our emotional state at the time. They may also become a part of our identity. Pitch is a good example.

* *Paralinguistics* refers to features of speech such as vocal effects and aspects of 'body language'.

Discourse and pragmatics examine how the meaning of language (including both conversation as well as non-verbal communication) is related to the context in which it occurs. It involves studying how speaker/writer intentions as well as listener/reader interpretations are based on situational and cultural contexts; for example, any shared background knowledge shared by the interlocutors, or other speech or writing.

In summary – the subsytems of language

These then are the different levels of structure that make up a language like English. At the simplest level are sounds, which occur in clumps (or syllables). These are meaningless (sound symbolism aside) until they combine to form words and parts of words (or morphemes). Above the word is the level of syntax, part of the organizational structure that gives rise to the paragraphs making up the discourses of our speech and writing. No non-human system of communication has been shown to be this ingenious and enterprising. You can read more about each of these different subsystems in Chapter 5 of this book. There you will also find some activities that will help you come to grips with what might well be a lot of bewildering new terms and concepts.

1.3 Modes and purposes of language

Language can be perceived and transmitted as speech or as writing. Though technology is blurring these two distinctions, they remain the two dominant **MODES** of communication. There are various reasons we might have for using them, and in the table below we have provided some of the most common purposes of both spoken and written language. There will be considerable overlap since many text types can involve more than one mode and more than one purpose. For example, the rules for evacuating a building in the event of a fire can comprise oral instructions and can also be posted somewhere as a set of written instructions.

* *Mode* refers to the medium of communication (i.e. spoken, written, signed).

The **PURPOSE** of a text refers quite generally to the many reasons it is created. Purpose(s) can include meeting politeness expectations, establishing expertise and authority, reinforcing social distance and hierarchies, and negotiating social taboos. Any text can have more than one purpose and there is no set list of purposes.

* *Purpose* refers to the many reasons a text is created.

Text types can have a range of different purposes. Social networking services like Twitter and Instagram are also information networks since they also make known significant events happening around the world. Telephone use can be informative (communication between service providers and clients, bush-fire alerts), social (informal chats or texts between mates), persuasive (telemarketing calls and spamming texts), entertainment (watching TikTok) and even ceremonial (there are telephone ministries that offer a 24 hour prayer service).

PURPOSE	**Text types (spoken and written)**
TO INFORM	lectures, talks, presentations, news broadcasts, media interviews, sporting commentaries insurance policies, labels, road signs, newspaper reports, tweets, blogs, catalogues, dictionaries,
TO ESTABLISH RAPPORT	social chit-chat, gossip, courtesy expressions, verbal duelling (ritual insults or friendly banter) snail mail, postcards, email messages, SMS texts, facebook (and other social networking websites)
TO INSTRUCT	fire drills, jury instructions, do-it-yourself TV shows, lectures, how-to manuals, recipes, patterns, phrase books, stage directions, questionnaires
TO PERSUADE	sermons, political speechmaking, debates, advice-giving, TV advertisements, advertising billboards, advertorials, graffiti, letters to the editor
TO ENTERTAIN	joke-telling, story-telling, chat shows, dramas, novels, poems, short stories, cartoon strips
TO HAVE FUN	tongue twisters, secret languages (Pig Latin), skipping rhymes, rhyming slang (*dead horse* = "sauce"), crosswords, hangman, anagrams, rebuses (where pictures represent syllables and words; e.g. *ICUR* "I see you are")
TO OFFICIATE	opening/closing addresses, votes of thanks, toasts, eulogies, wedding vows, memorial plaques, inscriptions, obituaries, written prayers, formulaic sections of legal contracts

You will be able to add many more to these lists. Just think of all the different ways you use English in a single day.

Assign one (or more) of Jakobson's six functions of language to each of the purposes listed above.

Sign languages

We mentioned that the two main modes we have for using language are speech and writing. Yet, Helen Keller's experience showed that this is certainly not the only way there is to communicate. As Helen describes in her essay, the day that language came into her life was the day she made the symbolic connection between what her teacher was spelling into one hand and the cool water she was feeling on the other. Even before she met her teacher, Helen used around 60 different 'home signs', or special gestures that she used to communicate with her family. This sort of gestural communication is another quite distinct mode of human language. Profoundly deaf people cannot hear – the auditory channel is not available to them. Instead, they can use sign languages, based on the visual-gestural channels of communication. In these systems, signers communicate by making signs using body parts, including the fingers, hands, arms and face, and these are seen (or felt in the case of deafblind users like Helen Keller) and understood by the people they are signing with.

The signs originally used by Helen's teacher relied on the visual alphabet of our writing system. One such system that is used today is 'finger spelling'. This encodes words letter by letter, using different hand shapes (or signs) for individual letters. It is usually thought of as an auxiliary system, useful for signing proper names or perhaps technical terms that don't have their own individual signs. Sign languages are like any other natural language – they are fully-fledged linguistic systems with the same intricate grammatical architecture that underpins any spoken language. They just happen to be manual and visual (not vocal and auditory).

1.3.1 E-communication

These days we are constantly in the midst of a linguistic revolution. The internet and the global emphais on e-communication is making even more of an impact than any of the previous technologies (from pen and ink, printing to the telephone, radio and television broadcasting). Emails, tweets, text messages and other social media are now routine aspects of most people's lives. They involve, of course, written language, but clearly they also share many of the features of speech. Special graphic devices like emoticons and emojis, for example, can add an extra semantic dimension to this written medium. These smiling, frowning, winking, crying faces try to communicate something of the same meaning conveyed by features of speech and make up for the fact that we tend not to give e-messages the careful wording we might, say, in a written letter (rare these days). Typically, we tap out the message with the speed and spontaneity of speech, but of course without the full support of the expressive devices that speech can utilise. In e-conversations, people don't observe the same politeness conventions that occur in verbal conversation. They don't undertake the same time-consuming routines that are so important when it comes to establishing social rapport (greetings and leave-takings and so on). Without this social lubricant to oil the interaction, messages can come across as more brusque and more direct than originally intended.

Even before the advent of electronic communication, some linguists preferred the labels 'planned' and 'unplanned' discourse, rather than 'speech' and 'writing'. These labels better capture the fact that examples of speech and writing will show different features depending on their degree of planning and formality. Think of a hastily scribbled note compared to a carefully worded essay; think of a regular conversation compared to a formal lecture. Either way, both sets of labels imply two polar extremes. The reality, of course, is there are many intermediate texts that exhibit features of both types of discourse to a greater or lesser extent. Emails, blogs, tweets, etc. are important

newcomers to the scene, and it is interesting to see what impact e-communication is having on the shape of the language. The straight-jacket that writing imposes on the language has been loosened, and this is something we return to in the second part of this book.

Ammit — the part lion, hippo and croc that is internet language

The electronic revolution has been both a technological revolution and a social revolution. At the same time it is also a language revolution. Internet language has been famously described as a "language centaur – part speech, part writing" (Baron's description; 2000, p. 248) — though we feel perhaps a more accurate description might be a language Ammit (part lion, hippopotamus and crocodile), since there is a third part to this hybrid beast — the various electronically mediated features that characterize different online texts. As David Crystal (2006) describes, "(e)lectronic texts, of whatever kind, are simply not the same as other kinds of texts ... they display fluidity, simultaneity ... have permeable boundaries ... one text may be integrated within others or display links to others" (p. 51-2).

~*Sarcasm*~ and being. abrupt. – punctuation on the internet

The internet has introduced many changes for punctuation marks, bestowing upon them new tasks and responsibilities. Once neutral little symbols are assuming new significance, and in some cases even a sinister new weight – younger people can often regard full stops as sounding rude (compare ***thanks*** with ***thanks***. Does the second one seem abrupt to you?). Fresh life is now breathed into commas, colons, exclamation marks, full stops, apostrophes and the interrobang (recently back from the dead!) Even the question mark (and its absence) can be used creatively, as the following tumblr post shows:

pervocracy

Part of the New Internet Grammar: using question marks not to denote questions, but upturns in voice, so that a tentative statement gets a question mark but a flatly delivered question doesn't.

argumate

why would you do this

pervocracy

It just seems right?

Creative use of punctuation abounds particularly around sarcasm, which can be conveyed with devices such as the tilde, or the asterisk paired with the tilde (~*sparkle sarcasm*~). The tilde alone can express self-deprecatory embarrassment over using ~~a particular phrase~~, and can even be used to sound 'cute' or flirtatious - compare ***hi!*** to ***hi~~~~***. And of course there's the # hashtag. Humorously described in Urban Dictionary as " invented for Twitter in 2007", it's a way for people to search for tweets that have a common topic and to begin a conversation.

1.4 Differences between speech and writing

Speech and writing are very different in nature. The features of these two modes of communication offer certain advantages and disadvantages for various tasks.

Most speech, particularly the sort of conversations that occur on a daily basis, is spontaneous and unplanned. By comparison, writing is not this sort of natural and spontaneous activity. You will probably have experienced those many (often painful) rewritings, reworkings and corrections that happen before the final written draft of an essay eventually appears. A piece of formal writing, especially for publication, involves layers of editorial involvement before it reaches a wider audience. The speed and spontaneity of speech mean that there is not the same possibility for close analysis, organization and planning as there is with writing. Misunderstandings can arise this way (yet breakdowns can be identified and repaired on the go).

Speech is also typically transient (unless you record it) and not much help if you need to keep something for future reference. By contrast, writing is permanent and for this reason is well suited for recording facts and ideas. However, the formality of writing might end up lending too much weight to the wording of a message, causing it to come across more seriously than intended. Speech is usually more informal and this could be more appropriate for, say, smoothing things over when feuding with a friend.

Speech is typically a social activity and can be more informal and intimate than writing. Often it is face-to-face and can therefore also tolerate all sorts of ambiguity and vagueness because any missing information can immediately be supplied by context. Moreover, the nature of speech means that speakers have a whole support system of oral and visual cues that are not available to writers. This support system includes spoken features such as intonation, pitch, rhythm, volume, tempo and pausing. It will also include what we earlier described as paralinguistic features. These are the characteristics of speech that are marginal to language, including vocal effects (e.g. whispers, laughter). Although these extralinguistic features might be described as marginal, they can convey subtle nuances of meaning, and without such cues a message may not convey quite the tone you intended. This is one of the main drawbacks of written language, and it becomes especially important when it involves awkward or delicate speech events, such as apologies, reprimands and expressions of sympathy.

Writers may have no idea who their readers will be, and they don't have the benefit of instant feedback. Writing also involves quite different skills. To some extent, unusual punctuation and even spellings can go some way to capturing the special meanings signalled by the nonverbal cues. The use of "scare quotes", for example, or capital letters, can show that a word has a special sense by attempting to express the intonation and emphasis of spoken language ("I REALLY don't want to do that"). However, these are quite limited compared to the complex prosodic and paralinguistic features of speech.

The following table outlines the traditional understanding of the differences between speech and writing. As you work through these, think how e-communicaation and social changes (e.g. the relative informality of modern society) have blurred these distinctions. Think of examples that contradict these differences; for example, texting is written but also highlly interactive.

SPEECH	WRITING
Less highly valued in society	More highly valued in society
Social	Solitary
Dynamic and transient	Static and permanent
Often more informal and intimate	Often more formal and remote
Typically spontaneous and unplanned	Typically planned and reworked
Typically face-to-face interaction	No visual contact and no contextual support
Immediate feedback	No immediate feedback
Supported by prosodic and paralinguistic features	No prosodic and paralinguistic support

1.5 Context and language choice

We've already seen how language varies depending on the mode of delivery, (e.g. is the text spoken or written?), the text type (e.g. is it a lecture or chat?), the function (e.g. is it to influence someone's behaviour or to establish social rapport) and purpose (e.g. is it to entertain or to officiate?). Our language choices are affected by other factors too.

One obvious one is **FIELD**, that is, the general sphere of interest or the activity where communication happens. This might include general areas such home, work, sport, religion and friendship. Even texts within the same field will vary continuously in response to a complex of other different factors. An important one is **TENOR**, which refers to the interpersonal relationship between participants, including the relative power or status and degree of intimacy (e.g. are they close friends or distant colleagues?). Tenor will be affected by such things as how well people know each other, their purpose for participation, and this is relevant to the level of formality they adopt (formal, colloquial etc.). You could think of tenor as being rather like style.

* *Field* refers to the content or subject matter.

Tenor refers to the relationships between participants.

Consider the range of address terms you might use when speaking to someone. The style of terms you choose will be shaped by the two situational factors we've just mentioned:

- Madam Chair, Mr Chairman
- Sir, Madam
- Mrs Jones, Mr Jackson
- Mary, Fred
- Jonesie, Jacko
- dude, mate

Sorry Mr Chairman — did you call me "dude"? Photo by Vlada Karpovich

Imagine the subject matter (field) being discussed is a legal case. The appropriate address term will change depending on the social distance between you and the person you're addressing and the power relationship between you both. For instance, you might be on first name terms (*Mary* or *Fred*) while having lunch together before a boardroom meeting, or you might be less formal and show solidarity by using a more intimate style (so nicknames like *Jonsie, Jacko* or even terms of friendship like *dude, mate* if this is appropriate). However, when conducting official business in that boardroom you might use formal names (Mrs Jones, Mr Jackson) or traditional titles (Madam Chair or Mr Chairman), though in an unofficial aside you could revert to using first names, even in the boardroom.

However, you might be thinking, none of this seems quite right for Australia. Historian John Hirst once wrote that "Australians of all sorts now put great store on their casualness in personal interaction, which has been carried to an extreme length" (1998). And this strong preference for informality, familiarity and friendliness, whatever the setting, has for some time been identified as a prominent feature of Australian culture; certainly it is something that is often remarked upon by overseas visitors. This culture of informality has a considerable influence on ways of naming and addressing (e.g. dislike of titles, fondness for nicknames and the reciprocal use of first names regardless of social distance and difference in relative status).

As an example, see the following extract from a real conversation between linguistics students (with pseudonyms), taken from the UWA Corpus of English in Australia.

[Alex]: I don't just watch Hornblower, I also read Hornblower.

[Jess]: You f*cking nerd.

[Alex]: Which is like, a whole extra step.

[Jess]: You giant nerd.

[Alex]: Yes! ((laughs)) But, um... yeah, no, I got nothing. I was gonna defend myself, but no, I've got nothing.

This shows normally abusive address forms uttered without animosity, and laughingly accepted. It all indicates close friendship. In fact, speakers often report that the more affectionate they feel towards someone, the more abusive the language can be towards that person. As we described earlier, context is all-important. There are two aspects to this. One is **SITUATIONAL CONTEXT**, which is the setting in which the interaction takes place. The other is **CULTURAL CONTEXT**, which refers to the values, attitudes and beliefs of the participants. Both these types of context influence how messages are packaged and received.

* *Situational context* refers to the setting in which the interaction takes place.

Cultural context refers to the values, attitudes and beliefs of the participants.

Consider how you and others in your group might use abusive words to indicate friendship and affection. Make a list of some of the expressions you use with friends and family that, to an outsider, might sound abusive.

As suggested earlier, it's both a strength and a weakness of language that it is not always precise. Not all our linguistic contributions are simple propositions that can be evaluated as true or false. Words aren't maths symbols — they don't have a fixed and constant designation. Language has to cover a huge range of social behaviour. There is so much that goes beyond the literal meaning and that is never subject to precise definition. Imagine working in a supermarket and a customer comes up to you and asks:

"Could you show me where the butter is?"

Clearly this person wants you to show them the dairy section; you would not be tempted to take this literally (in other words, as an inquiry about your theoretical ability to find the butter). As we saw earlier, the polite way to request something in ordinary interaction is to frame it as interrogative structure.

Language is full of mismatches like this between the form of a structure and its meaning. This is what enables it to cope with the complexity of human interaction, but it is what also can lead to miscommunication. Therefore, an important concept behind much of how we understand each other is the way we (as speakers / hearers and writers / readers) make reference to the context — the situation in which an interaction is taking place. Communication is always going to work the best when players recognize a shared context.

Cultural context and directives

You've already seen examples of the indirect ways English speakers issue directives (e.g. "Could you pass the salt / show me where the butter is" etc.). Linguist Anna Wierzbicka explained the rich abundance of polite directives in English ("whimperatives", as she dubbed them) as a culture-related phenomenon: specifically, the individualism of Anglo society and its emphasis on personal autonomy. Whimperatives such as "Could you show me where the butter is" or "Do you mind if I shut the window" reduce assertiveness and are more considerate of the hearer — they avoid the impression that speakers are trying to impose their will on anybody else (as would be conveyed by "Show me where the butter" or "Shut the window"). Effective communication involves much more than bundling up meaning in a sound signal and broadcasting it through space. Both the situational context and the cultural context influence language — the expressions we choose will always be shaped by on the conventions, understandings and traditions that shape and reflect our view of the world.

It is clear that none of us behaves linguistically the same way all the time. Our language varies constantly in response to a range of different factors — alter any one of these factors, and we change our language accordingly. Some might think this is being a bit phony. They might be thinking of a person who puts on a posh accent or uses big words in order to impress. We try to select the suitable language that goes well with the social purpose and the context we find ourselves in.

This man won't get anywhere with Telstra

In short, in addition to the general function of the communication (referential, phatic etc.), language will always vary according to any of the following five factors:

1. purpose — reasons a text is created
2. tenor — the relationship between particants
3. field — the subject matter
4. context — cultural and situational settings
5. mode —spoken, written, electronic or signed medium

Finally, an important type of contextually defined variation involves something called a **REGISTER**. This is basically language that is tailored to certain situations, occupations, hobbies or subjects; for example, there are registers associated with groups such as doctors, lawyers, airline pilots, advertisers, bank managers, musicians, gamers, hip-hop artists and so on. These varieties aren't tied to particular speech communities in the way that dialects are, and yet they can be just as distinct from each other, and like dialects differ across all subsystems. Descriptions of registers usually concentrate on their very distinctive vocabularies, and this is understandable — these specialist expressions name the things that are the particular focus of the domain. And it's probably also the case that unfamiliar words and phrases are more obvious (and perhaps more interesting).

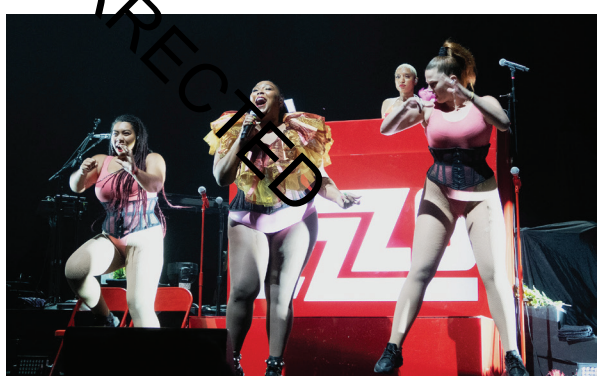
* *Register* involves socially defined variation appropriate for specific situations, occupations or subject matter.

However, as the following example illustrates, registers involve much more than simply lexical differences. In the following few lines from the Lizzo hit *Juice*, you can see how different the language is across all of the subsystems:

Mirror, mirror on the wall
Don't say it 'cause I know I'm cute (Ooh, baby)
Louis down to my drawers
LV all on my shoes (Ooh, baby)
I be drippin' so much sauce
Got a bih lookin' like RAGÚ (Ooh, baby)
Lit up like a crystal ball
That's cool, baby, so is you
That's how I roll

[Pre-Chorus]

If I'm shinin', everybody gonna shine (Yeah, I'm goals)
I was born like this, don't even gotta try (Now you know)
I'm like chardonnay, get better over time (So you know)
Heard you say I'm not the baddest, bitch, you lie (Haha)



Lizzo on stage. Photo: Flickr by davidjlee