**Lecture Four: Languages**

1. **Definition**

A language is set of sounds, words, signs, body movements, gestures, facial expressions and interjections used by a specific group of people for the sake of communication. It is a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group/ culture, transmit their thoughts and express themselves. Language is viewed as a complex communication system, henceforth, besides its communicative uses, language has many social and cultural uses and the use of any language is deeply rooted in its speakers’ culture. In other words, language use may imply the speaker’s identity, social class, social status…

A great deal of the twentieth-century and the twenty-first-century philosophy has been devoted to the analysis of languages. The study of languages is central to the humanities, yet the scientific study of language, known as linguistics, is generally considered a social science.

1. **Views on the Nature of Language**

To study language, linguists suggested different levels of analysis including: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, lexis, pragmatics, and discourse. However, boundaries between these levels are not always clear when it comes to theories of language learning/ acquisition.

Moreover, language is traditionally divided into *competence/ performance* (Chomsky, 1957). Chomsky claimed that competence is the abstract and hidden representation of language knowledge held inside our minds. Having this language system and knowledge in the brain enables speakers of a particular language to create and understand original and unlimited number of utterances in that language. Performance refers to the actualization of this hidden knowledge in everyday communication and interactions. However, this split between competence and performance has never been accepted by all linguists; linguists such as Firth and Halliday argued that such dualism is 'a quite unnecessary nuisance' (Firth, 1957, p. 2n, quoted in Stubbs, 1996, p. 44); rather linguists should study language in use.

1. **The Language Learning Process**
   1. **Nature and Nurture Controversy**

Does the knowledge of language come from innate predispositions, that is, some form of genetic pre-programming, or does it develop from social and cultural experiences that individuals/ children encounter while growing up?

The behaviourist psychologist B. F. Skinner, together with others, argued that language in all its essentials could be taught to the young child following the same mechanisms (e.g. repetition, imitation, rewards and punishment) that accounted for other types of learning.

Chomsky, on the other hand, has argued that human language is too complex to be learnt in its entirety from the performance data actually available to the child. He argued for the existence of an innate predisposition. For example, all natural languages have word classes, such as Noun and Verb, and grammar rules that apply to these word classes. It is this type of information which Chomsky doubts children could discover from scratch, in the speech they hear around them. Instead, he argued that there must be some innate core of abstract knowledge about language form, which pre-specifies a framework for all natural human languages. This core of knowledge is known as Universal Grammar.

* 1. **Modularity**

Should the human mind be viewed as a single, flexible organism, with one general set of procedures for learning and storing different kinds of knowledge and skills? Or, is it more helpfully understood as a bundle of modules, with distinctive mechanisms relevant to different types of knowledge?

The child development psychologist Jean Piaget argued that language is simply one manifestation of the more general skill of symbolic representation, acquired as a stage in general cognitive development; no special mechanism was therefore required to account for first language acquisition.

Chomsky opposed this view claiming that language is too complex to be learnt from environmental exposure (his criticism of Skinner), it is also too distinctive in its structure to be 'learnable' by general cognitive means. There are many linguists today who support the concept of a distinctive language module in the mind, there are also those who argued that language competence itself is modular, with different aspects of language knowledge being stored and accessed in distinctive ways. However, there is still no general agreement on the number and nature of such modules, or how they relate to other aspects of cognition.

**Reference**

Mitchell, R. & Myles,F. (2004). *Second language learning theories (2nd ed.).* Hodder Arnold.