**Lecture Two: Characteristics of Language**

Language is a part of our life and society. We cannot separate ourselves from it, nor can we live without it. This living organism (language) is different from all other means of communication and has many characteristics including the following:

* **Arbitrariness**: language is arbitrary. The word is composed of ***form*** and ***meaning***. This characteristic of language has to do with the relation between the form of the word and its meaning; there exists no connection between the form and the meaning of the word, for example, there is ***no reason*** why *a table* is called *a table*. This means that we cannot predict the meaning of the word from its form, nor can we predict the form of the word from its meaning. The relation between the form and the meaning is arbitrary i.e. ***based on chance***. Widdowson (1996) explains this characteristic:

The forms of linguistic signs bear no natural resemblance to their meaning. The link between them is a matter of convention, and conventions differ radically across languages. Thus the English word ʻdog’ happens to denote a particular four-footed domesticated creature, the same creature which is denoted in French by the completely different form *chien.* (p.4)

* **Productivity (creativity)**: language is productive (creative) in the sense that language users can produce an infinite number of utterances and sentences. In other words, language is composed of elements which can be combined together to make new utterances. These utterances can be understood by the listeners and its number is ***infinite.***
* **Systematicity**: language is systematic. This means that the symbols of language are arranged in ***a particular system***, and each language has its special system. Language is composed of branches: grammar, phonology and semantics. And each of these branches has further ***sub-systems***. Grammar, for instance, has two sub-systems: morphology and syntax. To exemplify, morphology is the study of word formation i.e. how to form words and how to divide words into their constituent elements which are called morphemes. So, all the elements of language function according to the rules of its systems and sub-systems.
* **Duality**: language is dual i.e. it has two levels of structure. Meaningless ***secondary*** elements (m, s, a, l, l) are combined together to make arbitrary ***primary*** units (small, malls). These different meaningful units are further combined to make longer utterances and sentences.
* **Flexibility**: language is flexible. Human language has the ability to suit all new and changing situations of life. In other words, it can be adapted to any condition whatever. Language can be used for a considerable number of ***purposes*** including: expressing feeling and emotions, asking and answering questions, greeting and apologizing, etc. Moreover, it can refer to any ***place*** and ***time***: past, present, and future.

**References**

Widdowson, H.G. (1996). *Linguistics*. Oxford University Press.