



# 1.1 What is Language?

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# What is Language?

- ▶ The ability to use language, perhaps more than any other attribute, distinguishes humans from other animals
- ▶ But what is language? What does it mean to know a language?
- ▶ “Language as a tool for communication” ([Nunan, 2007](#))
- ▶ “Language is foremost a means of communication, and communication almost always takes place within some sort of social context”; “language is a rule-based system of signs” ([Amberg & Vause, 2009: 2](#))
- ▶ <https://www.languageeducatorsassemble.com/5-definitions-of-language/>
- ▶ Henry Sweet, an English phonetician and language scholar, stated: **“Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words.** Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts.”



# Linguistic Knowledge

- ▶ When you know a language, you can speak (or sign) and be understood by others who know that language
- ▶ Five-year-olds already know their first language(s)
- ▶ The ability to use a language requires profound knowledge that most speakers don't know that they know

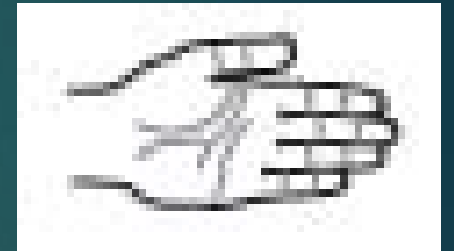
Can't help but use language!

## ▶ Knowledge of the Sound System

- ▶ When we know a language, we know what sounds (or signs) are used in the language and which sounds (or signs) are not

## ▶ Knowledge of Words

- ▶ Knowing a language also means identifying certain strings of sounds as meaningful words
- ▶ Most words in all languages are arbitrary connections of sound to meaning



## ▶ Knowledge of Sentences and Non-sentences

- ▶ Language is more than a set of words because words must be ordered in certain ways to create sentences
- ▶ Our knowledge of language allows us to separate possible sentences from non-sentences

# The “Standard” and Dialects

- ▶ The “Standard” is the dominant (or **prestige**) dialect. When a standard is the dialect of the wealthy and powerful, people may be required to speak that dialect in order to get ahead.
- ▶ A dialect is a form of a language that is spoken in a particular area/ by a certain group of people.

# Language and Thought

- ▶ **Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis**: the theory that the structure of a language influences how its speakers perceive the world around them
- ▶ **Linguistic determinism**: the strongest form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which claims that the language we speak *determines* how we perceive the world
- ▶ Whorf claimed that the Hopi people do not perceive time in the same way as speakers of European languages because Hopi uses words for days of the week, parts of the day, etc. to express tense rather than using word endings like English

# Mother tongue & second language

- ▶ “Why would I need to learn my first language better? I’m a native speaker of it!” Even so, there’s always more to learn.
- ▶ Learning another language can open your eyes to how language works on a deeper level.
- ▶ You could know your own language only if you compared it with other languages.
- ▶ 只有将本族语同其他语言进行比较，才能真正懂得自己的语言。

-- Engels 恩格斯

- ▶ **A first language** is the mother tongue or native language of a person while **a second language** is a language a person learns in order to communicate with the native speaker of that language.
- ▶ The first language acquisition is always **natural** and there is no need for instruction in acquiring it. But a second language learning is not natural and it needs continuous guidance and instruction.
- ▶ The first language is the **mother tongue** of a person. **The second language learning depends a lot on the structures of the first language.**
- ▶ If the structure of the first language is similar to the second language, it will be easy and fast for the learners to internalize it. For instance, an English native speaker will find Dutch easier to learn than Hindi as a second language.
- ▶ [Difference between a First Language & a Second Language \(basic-concept.com\)](https://basic-concept.com/difference-between-a-first-language-and-a-second-language/)
- ▶ **How about Chinese and English?**



If you talk to a man in  
a language he  
understands, that  
goes to his head. If  
you talk to him in his  
language, that  
goes to his heart.

— Nelson Mandela

# Introduction to Chinese and English

- ▶ **Chinese languages**, principal language group of eastern Asia, belonging to the **Sino-Tibetan language family**.
- ▶ Chinese exists in a number of varieties that are popularly called dialects but that are usually classified as separate languages by scholars.
- ▶ More people speak a variety of Chinese as a native language than any other language in the world, and **Modern Standard Chinese** is one of the six official languages of the United Nations.
- ▶ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chinese-languages>

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- ▶ **English language**, West Germanic language of the **Indo-European language family** that is closely related to German and Dutch languages.
  - ▶ English originated in England and is the dominant language of the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, and various island nations in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. It is also an official language of India, the Philippines, Singapore, and many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including South Africa.
  - ▶ English is the first choice of foreign language in most other countries of the world, and it is that status that has given it the position of a global lingua franca.
  - ▶ It is estimated that about **a third of the world's population**, some two billion persons, now use English.
  - ▶ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/English-language>