

What is language?

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What is language? In what sense language is arbitrary?

Language is a communication system that uses symbols, sounds, or gestures to convey meaning. It is a fundamental aspect of human society. It enables people to share ideas, emotions, and information. Historically, the study of language has been a subject of interest for philosophers, linguists, and scholars. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist (1857-1913), emphasized the arbitrary nature of language.

Symbols and Sounds: In any language, words are symbols that represent objects, actions, ideas, and more. These symbols are made up of sounds or letters. The connection between a word and its meaning is not natural but agreed upon by a group. For example, there is no inherent reason why a tree is called "tree" in English; it could be any other sound or set of letters.

Different Languages: Different languages use different sounds and symbols to refer to the same things. This shows the arbitrary nature of language. For instance, the word "water" is "pani" in Bengali, "agua" in Spanish, and "eau" in French. These variations illustrate that there is no logical connection between the word's sound and its meaning.

Linguistic Signs: Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, introduced the concept of linguistic signs. He argued that each linguistic sign consists of a "signifier" (the form of a word or phrase) and a "signified" (the concept it represents). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary because there is no inherent link between them.

Language Change: Languages evolve, and new words are created while old ones become obsolete. Language changes also highlight their arbitrary nature. For example, the word "gay" used to mean "happy" but now commonly refers to someone who is homosexual.

In conclusion, language is a powerful tool for human communication. The symbols and sounds used in languages are not naturally connected to their meanings but are established through social conventions. Understanding this aspect of language helps us appreciate the diversity and complexity of human communication.