

**TUTORIAL**  
**5.1**

# Basic Concepts

This tutorial introduces the basic concepts of linguistics. It will give brief answers to the questions: 'What is linguistics?', 'What is language?' and 'What is grammar?'

## Introduction

Before we begin to focus in on the details - let's look back and remember how the concept of language fits into God's story. Our Creator is also the creator of language, and His authority and power over that fundamental area of human existence were clearly demonstrated in a dramatic event in the history of the world.

Remember God's account of a time more than three generations after the Great Flood, when a civilization had settled in a plain of Babylonia. (Genesis 11:1-4) These people's great-grandparents had been eyewitnesses of the global destruction of the flood and had been in the boat God had used to preserve them and the animals - but already they had moved far away from an appropriate appreciation of Him as Creator. They had given up coming to Him in the way He had graciously given to humans after the fall - in faith, with the sacrifice of animals. They were arrogantly telling their own story and in their blind ambition, made a concerted effort to build a great tower for all to see. It was to reach to the sky - a monument to them - a means of physical protection and a way of preserving their reputation for generations to come. The name of the tower of course, is Babel.

God was unwilling to let them gather their strength and resources together in a concerted denial of their need for Him, their Creator. (Genesis 11:5-9) He graciously gave them the opportunity to see their foolishness, and did something to the post-flood civilization that made it impossible for them to tell their story to each other as a homogenous group. His Narrative simply says that He *confused their languages* and that this had the effect of scattering them over the world. By doing this, God effectively stopped their rebellious intentions and also forced the fulfillment of his original intention for man, which was to populate the earth. God used something He'd gifted man with in the

first place but which was now taken for granted – speech, the ability to communicate tangible facts as well as ideas and abstract concepts.

As we look into the fascinating area of language throughout the next tutorials - in its wonderful complexity and intricacy - we can also acknowledge God's amazing creative power as we investigate this gift He gave to man. We can remember that it makes sense - knowing the origin of all the world's languages - that they are amazingly complex in structure and exhibit an incredible variety, but also share many similar characteristics in spite of their variety, which point to their common origin.

In this tutorial we will be introducing some of the basic concepts in the area of *linguistics*, and in later tutorials we will be going on to look at some of those concepts in more detail. We are not setting out to study linguistics for its own sake - but because gaining a foundational understanding of *how language works* will help us to eventually become better communicators in a new context, in another language.

## What is linguistics?

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. It is about trying to explain the properties of language - not individual languages - but of *language* in general. Linguistics seeks to answer questions such as:

- What is language?
- How does language work?
- What special properties does language have?
- How is language structured?
- How do children acquire their native language?
- How do people use language?

## What is language?

All humans are born with an innate capacity for language - we were created that way. Language is something we do with our minds. It is a set of principles and building blocks we have stored in our minds.

Language *isn't* writing, and it *isn't* speech - not all human vocal sounds are language, and not all language uses sounds (sign languages are real languages too). So what is language? We can understand more clearly what language *is* by thinking about symbols and signs.

### Iconic signs and arbitrary symbols

A *sign* is something that stands for or refers to something else. Some signs have a real relationship with the thing they refer to. They are *iconic*. They are not the thing, but they are an attempt to actually represent the thing.

A *symbol* is arbitrary – there is no relationship at all between the symbol and the thing it refers to, except that we agree that it will refer to that thing.



Look at the picture of the policeman with his stop sign. The picture of the policeman is an *iconic sign*. It is not actually a policeman (it's just pixels on your screen or ink on your paper), but it is an attempt to represent a policeman. The red shape he is holding up is a *symbol* – it means “STOP”, but there is nothing about that red shape that really represents the act of stopping. We just agree this is what that particular geometric shape with a red color *means*.

It's the same in language. The group of sounds we write as *shoes* has no real relationship with the things we put on our feet. It's just a group of sounds we make with our mouths. But as speakers of English, we all agree to use that group of sounds to refer to the things we wear on our feet.

Language is a system of symbols. The relationship between meaning and linguistic form - the words used to convey meaning - is arbitrary, just like the red stop sign. The meaning of each symbol is a convention, or agreement, between speakers.

We all agree that the group of sounds we write as *cat* refers to the small furry animal. We could all agree that *cat* means something else instead, and that a different group of sounds mean the furry animal - but we would all have to agree.

This symbolic representation of meaning is a characteristic of language - not just of English, but of any language. Almost all words and all grammatical structures in all languages are arbitrary symbols that convey meaning.

There are a few examples of iconic signs in languages also - they attempt to represent the real thing - but these are the exception. Languages can have words that use onomatopoeia or sound symbolism (*bang, murmur, mumble* and *mutter*) where the actual words sound like the thing they are representing. Or, languages can use features like lengthening or repetition in an iconic way (*I waited for a loooong time* or *It happened many many many many times.*) But although true signs like these do occur in languages, they are a very insignificant part of any language – almost all words and almost all grammatical structures in any language are not iconic, but instead are arbitrary symbols. This is a defining characteristic of language.

### **System of rules**

So, language is simply a system of symbols that represent different meanings. But it is an incredibly complex system of symbols that is only manageable

because rules govern its use. In most languages, the rule systems themselves are so complex they are still not properly understood. Native speakers learn and use those rules because God gave them an inherent ability to learn and use language, not because they investigated and memorized the rules of their language.

When we say “rules” in linguistics, we don’t mean something we are told to do (like “don’t split infinitives” or “don’t end a sentence in a preposition”). We really mean *principles* that we have stored in our minds about how to use this system of symbols. Knowledge of these rule systems is unconscious – we are not aware of it and don’t have to think about it. As native speakers of our language we have this ‘unconscious knowledge’ or *linguistic competence* - an underlying knowledge of the language that gives us the ability to produce it.

Our actual use of language - what comes out of our mouths - often contains many and various mistakes; stammers, slips of the tongue and false starts when we lose our train of thought and have to start a sentence over again. These don’t reflect our actual knowledge of the language; they reflect the influence of outside factors such as sleepiness, drink, distractions, memory lapses, etc.

But it is the underlying knowledge of language that we are interested in - the native speaker’s working knowledge of the system of rules that gives him the ability to produce the right symbol at the right time to communicate clearly.

### **Finite rules - infinite output**

All languages use the same kinds of “building blocks” (such as words) and all languages organize these building blocks into grammatical structures that help listeners to understand the meaning. These grammatical structures are built up according to very strict rules.

One of the most important universal properties of language is that it is *creative*. This means that a native speaker of a language can construct and understand *novel utterances*, utterances they’ve never encountered or produced before.

All languages are *finite systems* - there’s a limited set of rules in any language. But every language allows for the production of an *infinite set of utterances* - there are an unlimited number of different sentences that you can make using those rules. As long as you “know the rules” of a language, you can create new grammatical sentences in that language. This is called *rule-governed creativity*.

I can say:

- *John walked home.*
- *John walked home and Bill caught the bus.*
- *John walked home and Bill caught the bus and Fred took a taxi.*
- etc.

Or:

- *John is tired.*
- *You know that John is tired.*
- *Tom said that you know that John is tired.*
- *I think Tom said that you know that John is tired.*
- *etc.*

I could keep on adding bits to these sentences, because there's nothing in the grammatical system that stops me from creating an infinitely long sentence. The limit is only to do with the processing power of my brain. The important point is that there is no "longest sentence" in English, or in any language. Given any sentence, however long, I can make it longer by adding *and...* or *did you know that...*

It's impossible to make a list of all the sentences of English (or of any other language). In our minds we have a *lexicon* of our language. This is a kind of word dictionary. You can't construct a "sentence dictionary" like a word dictionary, because there's not a finite set of sentences. This is true of all languages because all languages allow for the production of complex sentence patterns.

So, language is characterized by rule-governed creativity. Your knowledge of the rules of a language (your linguistic competence) makes it possible for you to produce an unlimited number of new grammatical sentences in that language. Just like a chef, who, with their knowledge of the 'rules' of how the different ingredients go together and how they should be cooked, can creatively come up with an incredible number of possible dishes.

## What is grammar?

Grammar is the unconscious knowledge of the rules of a language. What we referred to earlier as *linguistic competence* is actually grammar - how the mind processes and stores language.

But... the word 'grammar' is also used to refer to our *representations* of that unconscious knowledge of the rules - a human attempt to try to simplify and describe an incredibly complex thing that God created. So, there are different kinds of 'grammars' that you may hear about: prescriptive grammar, pedagogical (i.e. teaching) grammar, descriptive grammar, generative grammar, universal grammar. All these are just *representations*, or ways to talk about and describe the rules, not actually the rules being manifested in real life.

Grammar is how the mind processes and stores language. Grammar is also a representation of how the mind processes and stores language.

## Domains of grammar

So, grammar is a set of mental principles or rules, and also a description of those rules. Within the bigger set of rules we call grammar, there are different areas that use different *kinds* of rules - depending on the basic building blocks used to build different kinds of bigger structures. These are called *domains* or *levels* of grammar:

**Phonetics** - speech sounds

**Phonology** - organization of sounds

**Morphology** - structure of words

**Syntax** - structure of sentences

**Semantics** - meaning (of words and sentences)

We will look at each of these domains in more detail throughout this module.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

### *Basic Concepts*

1. As you think about some of the basic characteristics of language, what specific things do you see that point to a Creator, or reveal something of the character of God?
2. Do you think that it is legitimate to 'study' language in a scientific way? Why or why not?



## ACTIVITIES

### *Basic Concepts*

1. Look at each of the six signs on the next page. For each sign, note the following;
  - Whether you think the sign is iconic or symbolic - or if it has elements of both.
  - Which particular elements are symbolic, and what do you think the symbols mean?
  - How did you work out, or how do you know, what the symbols mean?

