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Defining Language: Usage, Texts, Utterances, the Language Faculty, Competence and Languages

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the article is to delimit and relate the entities mentioned in the title. Each of them is discussed, with a focus on languages or linguistic systems. Languages should be distinguished from their conventional use (usage) and its product: texts and the utterances they consist of, as well as from the users' language faculty and competence. Especially the relation between languages and usage, utterances, and competence is discussed. The author argues for a consistently usage-based view of languages, which is incompatible with Mentalism, as usage and texts consist of physical units like sounds or letters. The conclusion is that languages are social products: institutions, more precisely sign systems comprising the units of expression. The article discusses if languages are «multimodal» or independent of expression, and concludes that they are not. Spoken, written and gestural languages are different types of sign systems. Utterances are the maximal sign and define the actual language.

Index Terms: competence • conventions • faculty of language • languages • texts • usage • utterances

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Defining Language: Usage, Texts, Utterances, the Language Faculty, Competence and Languages

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to delimit and relate the entities mentioned in the title. Each of them is discussed, with a focus on languages or linguistic systems. Languages should be distinguished from their conventional use (usage) and its product: texts and the utterances they consist of, as well as from the users' language faculty and competence. Especially the relation between languages and usage, utterances, and competence is discussed. The author argues for a consistently usage-based view of languages, which is incompatible with Mentalism, as usage and texts consist of physical units like sounds or letters. The conclusion is that languages are social products: institutions, more precisely sign systems comprising the units of expression. The article discusses if languages are «multimodal» or independent of expression, and concludes that they are not. Spoken, written and gestural languages are different types of sign systems. Utterances are the maximal sign and define the actual language.

Keywords: *competence, conventions, faculty of language, languages, texts, usage, utterances*

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1 Introduction

In most sciences there is agreement about what the object is and what kind of science the actual science is. Linguistics has not yet reached this goal, although it is one of the oldest sciences, but then we have a specially diverse and complex object. According to Bickerton (2009: 4) language is «the greatest problem in science». Linguists have not been able to agree on whether language is *mental* or *social*, *cultural* or *natural*, an *action* or a *product*, an innate *faculty* or an acquired *knowledge*. Is linguistics a *psychological* science, a *biological/natural* one or a *cultural* one?

The question that has been most debated, is what kind of object language is and where it exists. There are three views on the question:

1) that it is something *mental* in the *mind* of each language user – *competence*, i.e. the *knowledge* of the user's language. This view, usually called *mentalism*, is the dominant view in both generative and cognitive linguistics, and one of the few things on which the two theories agree. In that case linguistics belongs to *psychology*, and according to generative grammar, which thinks that competence is partially *innate* in the form of a universal grammar, also *biology*, making linguistics a *natural* science (Åfarli 2000: 138–139). According to Sinha (2009: 290) language is «intrinsic to human *biology*», and Johansson (2005: 5) identifies language with «the innate language endowments of children», i.e. the *language faculty*.

2) that it is something *social*, namely *institutions* consisting of *conventions* or *norms* in a *language community*. It is especially Saussure and European structuralism that represent this view. It implies that language is a *cultural product* and linguistics a *cultural science* belonging to the Humanities, where it has traditionally been placed.

3) since it's difficult to disregard both conventions and competence, some linguists have a third view, namely that language is *both* social *and* mental (Kofoed 1971: 13, Langacker 2016: 467).

In addition to definition as a competence, a faculty and a conventional linguistic system, language is also described as a *behaviour* (e.g. Bybee 2010: 6) or an *activity* (e.g. Langacker 2010: 130), i.e. *usage*. Croft (2009) describes «language» as no less than three things: a «cognitive *ability*» (p. 397), «joint *action*» (p. 398) and «a (largely) conventional coordination *device*» (p. 403, my emphasis in all quotes). Language is even used about «...the language people actually produce and understand» (Kemmer & Barlow 2000: XV), i.e. *texts*. Calling all these things *language* can only lead to confusion and is far from satisfactory in a linguistic theory. One reason for the ambiguous use of *language* may be the word itself – that everybody speaks of *language* without articles, which makes the referent a rather abstract uncountable substance and can refer to anything linguistic. However, we are not dealing with a substance, but with *individual languages* or *linguistic systems*, e.g. English or a variety of English, e.g. Standard English or an «accent» of it, like Australian English. So I prefer to speak mostly of *languages* and *a/the* language in the singular. In my opinion, these linguistic systems, what Saussure named *langue* (i.e. language), are the only entities that deserve the name *language* or more precisely *languages*.

In everyday speech *languages* usually refer to the *national* languages used by ethnic groups (and often named after them): English, Norwegian, Finnish etc., which are usually counted as the «languages» of the world. This a *sociolinguistic* concept, defined by political criteria as well as linguistic ones. If Scandinavia had been one nation instead of three, the Scandinavian languages would just have been dialect groups. Dialects and sociolects are only *varieties* of a «language» in this sense, but they are of course languages in the basic sense of 'linguistic system'. Here *language(s)* is used only in this sense, and the purpose of the article

is to delimit linguistic systems and the other entities mentioned in the title and discuss their place in a theory of language. They should all be described and related – just distinguishing between *langue* and *parole* (Saussure) or *competence* and *performance* (Chomsky) is far from sufficient.

According to Langacker (1987: 18), these oppositions (and most other binary oppositions) are «false dichotomies». But both competence and performance are real and important linguistic entities, and so are texts, utterances, the language faculty and languages. Languages must be distinguished from what Saussure called *parole* and Chomsky *performance*, i.e. *usage*. But usage, an *action*, should be distinguished from *texts*, the *product* of the sender's action, and the *utterances* (including sentences) that texts consist of, which are the basic units of grammar (Section 2). And languages must also be distinguished from the users' language *faculty* (Section 3) and their linguistic *knowledge and skill*, i.e. *competence* (Section 4). Section 5 tries to delimit languages, especially from usage, utterances and competence, since languages are often equated with usage or competence and sometimes said to consist of utterances or sentences. The conclusion is that languages must be *collective* to function in communication and are *institutions* in language communities, more precisely *sign systems*, and these two entities are discussed.

My point of departure is a *usage-based* view of languages: that languages and usage are very close and that an account of languages, which are abstract and not directly observable, must be based on usage, texts and utterances. These are the only linguistic entities that are *observable* and therefore constitute the *data* of linguistics. I will also show that a consistent usage-based view is incompatible with mentalism, as usage consists of *physical* units like sounds or letters. If languages are usage-based, these units must also belong to the language that is used. This view does not preclude that *parts* of language are mental, namely meanings, but the units of expression are physical and cannot exist in the users' minds.

2 The use of Languages: Usage, Texts and Utterances

2.1 Usage and Texts

Usage (latin *usus*) is the traditional or conventional use of a language (Langacker 1987: 65–66), i.e. use that is governed by *conventions*. It must be *wellformed* or *grammatical*, formed according to the conventions of the actual community, and varies between communities: What is right in one community, is wrong in another. Using something is an *action*, here the *sender's* action: the production of «a symbolic expression assembled by a speaker» (Langacker 1987: 66). Like other actions, it has a *purpose*: to express a communicative act (speech act), e.g. make a statement or tell a story. In communication there is also a *receiver*, who in linguistic communication uses his/her knowledge of the conventions to *understand* the sender's usage, with a little help from the situation and the previous context.[1] But one can hardly say that receivers *use* the actual language, only their *knowledge of it* (and of the world in general). The sender is normally one person, the receiver can also be everybody – the public (as in this article).

When using spoken or written language the sender's action consists in producing a *physical product*: «a symbolic expression» or more precisely the conventional *expressions* of the «symbols» or signs of the language – a *text*, either *speech* consisting of speech sounds or *writing* consisting of letters and other characters.[2] Neither Saussure nor Chomsky nor Langacker distinguish clearly between the production and the product, what is produced, but focus on the production and hardly mention the product. For example, Saussure (1967: 30) describes *parole* as «an individual action which requires will and intelligence» – and purpose, one might add (my translation, here and in other quotes from other languages than English). And Langacker (1987: 65) describes usage as «a problem-solving activity» and does not mention the product (text is not in the index). So texts have no place in their theories. But in everyday life texts play a crucial role. We are ever more surrounded by texts on paper or screen, and many texts have had an enormous historical significance, e.g. the Bible, the Declaration of Human Rights, the Constitution or *On the Origin of Species*. Therefore texts should have a central place in linguistic theory.

The sender's usage and the resulting text are closely connected, namely as *cause and effect* – formal or obscure usage results in a formal or obscure text. Still it is important to distinguish them (Lyons 1995: 18, 22), since one is a transient *psycho-physical action* and the other a more or less durable *physical product*. Compare Lamb's (2000: 88) distinction between «The PROCESSES by which linguistic products are produced and/or interpreted» and «Actual PRODUCTIONS of speakers», or the distinction between *speak* and *speech* in English: Speech is the product of speaking. Texts can be lasting if speech is recorded or writing is hewn in stone, and can survive both usage, the user and even the language, e.g. a runic inscription or the Rosetta stone. They can therefore inform us of languages that no longer exist. If there are many texts in the actual language, the language can be at least partially *reconstructed*, as has been done with old Norse or Latin. So what we can preserve and study in practice, is texts, in speech recordings or transcriptions of them. For dead languages written texts are our only data. So in practice, therefore, it is texts rather than usage that are the data of linguistics. «Corpus linguistics», which studies languages based on large electronic collections of texts, is therefore a better basis for linguistic analysis than the traditional method: to generalise on the basis of a few, accidental examples, selfmade or literary.

Texts consist of *the expressions of signs* chosen from the language that is used. This text consists of the expressions of some signs of written English – letters and other characters, like punctuation marks. They express and are understood as *signs* of diverse types: morphemes, word forms[3] (separated by spaces), sentences (marked by punctuation marks) etc. But this is something the *receivers* contribute when they hear or read the text and try to understand it. It's when we hear or see a text in an *unknown* language that the text appears as what it objectively is: a stream of strange sounds or characters.

Also texts have a purpose and can be divided in many text types accordingly. This text is an example of *public* writing, but there are also *personal* written texts like letters or e-mail. After the invention of writing we got a series of new text types, like letters, novels and dissertations, with e-mail, cell phone messages and discussions on the internet as the newest. In speech texts are mostly *conversations*, which is the original type of texts, and still the basic one in everyday life. But there are also

[1] Receiver is not what Dixon (2010: 189) and others call *addressee*, the person(s) addressed, but the ones that actually perceive and understand usage and texts. We often hear or read utterances that were not meant for us, and in public writing the sender does not address anyone in particular, but everybody, as many as possible. Written texts get ever more receivers, long after they were produced, like the Bible or the sagas.

[2] The distinction usage/text is useful in speech and writing, but we can hardly speak of any product of the sender's actions in *gestural («sign») languages* and the few gestures we all use instead of or in addition to speech. Here we just have meaningful actions – gestures and facial expressions.

[3] Following Lyons (1981: 101), I distinguish between *words* (lexemes), which are abstract *lexical* units in the *language* (the lexicon), and *word forms*, which are the concrete *grammatical* units that occur in usage and texts, in writing separated by spaces. Inflected words have *inflectional* forms, and some words have special *unstressed* forms, often connected to other word forms, like English *it's, isn't, I'm*. Word forms are the *largest* units (the subject) of morphology and the *smallest* units (ultimate constituents) of syntax, so they are a central type of sign.

public and formal spoken texts, like speeches, lectures, poems, fairy tales, riddles etc.

Spoken texts are normally *improvised* and therefore usually quite messy, with unfinished utterances, corrections and other imperfections. Written texts are normally *edited* and mark *word forms* (with spaces) and *utterances* and their type (with capitals and punctuation marks). And they can be *divided* according to their content in paragraphs, marked by indentation, and chapters, sections and subsections with headings that suggest the content. This makes written texts far more structured than spoken ones, and makes it possible to structure large texts hierarchically, which is especially useful in science. A spoken dissertation would hardly be possible. This, in addition to permanence, is the greatest advantage of writing.

2.2 Utterances and Sentences

Grammatically, texts consist of one or many *utterances*: the smallest part of a text that is *grammatically independent* in the sense of not being a constituent in a syntagm and having a *communicative purpose* like expressing a statement, a question, an answer to a question, an exclamation, a greeting, a curse etc. Therefore an utterance can constitute a text by itself – a *minimal text* (Lyons 1995: 35) – e.g. on signposts and posters: *Don't walk on the lawn* (a prohibition), *Exit* or *Fresh tomatoes* (information). But most texts consist of many utterances which are semantically connected, making the text *coherent*. Although there are *semantic* relations between them, potentially expressed by words like *but, however, therefore*, they are *grammatically* «…in a relation of H[jelmslev] constellation only: none of them presupposes another, since each is potentially at least a self-contained unit» (Garvin 1954: 85).

In writing utterances are usually marked by capitals and «big» punctuation marks (excluding comma), which Faarlund et al. (1997: 923) use as a *definition*. Therefore they consider the sequence *Ja, det stemmer* (Yes, that's right) as one utterance. This corresponds to the definition of utterances in speech by intonation and pauses, as in Crookes (1990: 186 f). But neither intonation and pauses nor punctuation are very consistent. In speech people often make pauses in the middle of a sentence while they are planning how to finish it or searching for the right word, and in writing utterances can also be marked by comma and a corresponding intonation in speech if they are short and closely connected semantically, as in Faarlund et al.'s example. Here *Ja* is not grammatically integrated in the following sentence and functions as an utterance by itself – a confirming answer. The sequence therefore consists of *two* utterances with the same semantic function (confirming), and the last one *repeats* the content of the first. The defining quality must therefore be grammatical independence, not punctuation or intonation. At most, the *possibility* of using big punctuation marks can be used as an indicator of utterance status: The possibility of writing the example as *Ja! Det stemmer* (and pronounce it with a pause) shows that we have two utterances.

Most utterances are *sentences*, which is why sentences are such an important category in grammar. Most linguists distinguish between utterances and sentences, but in different ways. There seems to be agreement that utterances are *the largest unit of grammar* (Lyons 1968: 172), and the same goes for sentences (Garvin 1954: 84). There is also agreement that both utterances and sentences are *grammatically independent*, compare Bloomfield's (1933: 170) definition of sentences as «…an independent linguistic form, not included by virtue of any grammatical construction in any larger linguistic form». But according to Lyons (1968: 52) sentences are «units of *langue*», utterances «units of *parole*». However, also individual sentences like this one are part of *parole*, i.e. usage and texts. They are *both* utterances *and* sentences, and neither of them are part of the actual language (see Section 5.2).

Others regard sentences as *products*, utterances as *actions*, e.g. Hurford & Heasley (1983: 15): «An utterance is the USE by a particular speaker, on a particular occasion, of a piece of language…». And according to Dyvik (1998: 15) the Norwegian sentence *Det har snedd i natt* (It has been snowing tonight) uttered on two different occasions are two different utterances (but the same sentence). But as many utterances are sentences and both occur in texts, also utterances should be regarded as products, «a piece of language». Like sentences they have a certain *structure* – e.g. they can be interjections or sentences, consist of so and so many words etc. In that case Dyvik's sentence is *the same utterance* (and sentence) every time one utters it, and one can use a certain utterance many times, as we do with utterances like *Hello!* or *How are you?*

Bloomfield's sentence definition above would include units like *Hello, Yes, Wow* or *You fool*, which are usually not regarded as sentences. However, they are *utterances* – a wider category that *includes* sentences, which have a certain structure: They must contain certain *constituents*, at least a finite *verbal*, usually also a *subject* and other sentence constituents, alternatively a *subject* (NP) and a *predicate* (VP). They normally *function* as utterances and express a speech act. We have *sentence types* for the most important speech acts, such as informing, asking for information or requesting actions. However, they may be *elliptical*, especially in speech. In the sequence *What's your name? – John Smith*, the answer can be regarded as an elliptical sentence with only the new information mentioned, short for *My name is John Smith.*

Also utterances have a structure. Most of them are sentences, but they may also consist of syntagms like *You fool, Good morning, Down with X* or single words, either interjections or *yes/no* – words that function as complete utterances by themselves and cannot be used as constituents. There are «rules» or conventions also for such utterances. So utterances are the largest units of grammar, as Croft & Cruse (2004: 291) point out when they say that grammatical knowledge represents utterances. That's why we mark them in writing.

3 The Faculty of Language

3.1 Faculties, Knowledge and Skills

Language is sometimes described a knowledge and sometimes as a faculty, capacity or ability, but faculties, knowledge and abilities or skills are different things. Faculties or capacities are *innate* and *universal*, a quality of the *species*, e.g. man. The reason is that they depend on our *organs* and are *functions* of them: We have the capacity to *walk and run* because we have *legs*, but not the capacity to *fly* because we don't have *wings*. And we have all the same organs and therefore the same faculties, although in different *degrees* – som are better runners or communicators than others. Knowledge and skills are *acquired or learnt* from experience and *individual* – we don't have the same experience with and knowledge of languages and other objects. Some people have no knowledge of e.g. English while others have an almost perfect knowledge of it and are skilled users of it. But everybody has the *capacity* to speak English.

The faculty of language is the capacity to *make, learn and use languages*. Using a language requires certain organs, both the speech organs or the hands for writing and signing and a well developed brain to govern them. We must produce and perceive complex sound sequences at great speed, combine word forms hierarchically to complex utterances and interpret such utterances on the spot, as they are produced. Only man has these capacities in a sufficiently high degree, and is the only species with an *open* or *unlimited* sign system with a large lexicon, grammar and an expression system like sound systems or alphabets, making it possible to express any message. Other animals have at most small, *closed* systems of signs without grammar which can only express

certain messages, e.g. a set of warning cries for different predators among vervet monkeys (Seyfarth et al. 1980).

But we must of course distinguish our faculties from the *products* of these faculties, from languages to atomic bombs. When Bouchard (2013: 333) says that «…language is a biologically determined, species-specific, genetically transmitted capacity», he describes the language *faculty*, not languages. A language, e.g. English, is not a capacity, but a *product* of our language capacity. Unlike faculties, languages are transmitted not genetically, but *culturally*, by learning. Therefore we must distinguish, like Fitch (2010: 381), between «glossogeny» or the evolution of *languages* and «phylogeny», the evolution of *the language faculty*, which must have evolved in parallel, under mutual influence: A more complex language required a better language faculty, and a better faculty resulted in a more complex and better language, which resulted in better survival for those with the best language and language ability.

That we make, learn and use languages, shows that we have the ability to do so. What one can discuss, is what this ability consists of, and especially if it is a specifically *linguistic* ability or more *general* abilities like high intelligence and a good memory. Most likely, it is both (Lieberman 1984: 1). Using a language obviously requires high intelligence and a good memory. We must be able to *generalize* and establish *categories*, and we need both a good long time memory and a good working memory: We must remember tens of thousands of words a whole lifetime, and the beginning of a sentence until we have heard the end of it. But within certain limits the language faculty is relatively independent of general intelligence (Lenneberg 1967: 229, Bybee 1996: 38 f), and the organs we use for speech are adapted to speech (Lieberman 1984: 271). Furthermore, there is a *critical period* for language acquisition and *language centers* in the brain, usually in the left hemisphere.

This shows that using language also requires specifically linguistic faculties, e.g. for articulation and for constructing and understanding sentences. Also that our nearest relatives among the animals, the chimpanzees, have a limited language ability and hardly any speech ability at all, shows that we have developed language abilities, at least speech abilities, since we parted from them. According to Fromkin et al. (2019: 453) «…language is a separate cognitive module», but many parts of the brain contribute to the use of language, also the right hemisphere (Fromkin et al. 2019: 454, Lobben 2023: 112, 153). And according to Lieberman (2006: 374), the parts of the brain that govern language, also govern other activities, like cognition and movement. So there is no specific «language organ». But we have used speech for such a long time that we are *adapted* to speech, both physically and mentally, and therefore spoken language is the only *universal* sign system, used by all normal individuals in all communities. In addition, we use some gestural signs, like pointing or nodding, and such gestures probably always have been used in certain settings, like hunting or communicating with people with other languages. But speech evolved into a system of great complexity and expressive power. Comparable gestural languages with a grammar are a new invention. So speech most probably was our first open or general language, and the only one for a long time.

However, today we also have sign systems with others expressions, first and foremost *writing* and *gestures*. The ability to communicate by sounds can obviously be *transferred* to signs with other expressions, so we have a *general* language faculty, not limited to speech. Although Saussure himself equates language and speech, he declares (1967: 26) that Whitney is right to say that the nature of the sign is inessential and that what is specific to man is «…the ability to create a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct concepts». And Whitney *is* right. According to Fromkin et al. (2019: 453), all «modalities» are controlled by the left hemisphere and organized in the brain in the same way. Different sign systems require different abilities, but they have basic common qualities, as they all consist of signs, both minimal signs (morphemes) and complex signs like sentences, and have both a lexicon and a grammar. So we have both an innate and general *faculty* to use sign systems and special *abilities* or *skills* to use *specific* sign systems. Ability to speak doesn't entail ability to write or use gestural languages, and people may have a reduced ability to read and write (dyslexia) without effects on the ability to speak. This shows that these are distinct linguistic abilities or competences, which must be *learnt*.

4 Competence

4.1 Knowledge and Skill

That we have the *capacity* to use any language, doesn't mean that we have the *ability* (are able) to use any language. To be able to use *specific* languages, we must be *competent* in using them. We need both a theoretical *knowledge* of the language (knowing *that*) and a practical *skill* (knowing *how*) in using it rightly as sender, which requires *practice*. For example, it is not enough to know what case German prepositions govern and the case forms of all case-inflected words – one must also be able to put any noun or pronoun with potential modifiers in the right case on the spot, without reflection. So competence is partly a knowledge: a more or less complete mental model of the actual language in both senders and receivers, and partly a skill: the ability to use that knowledge to make and understand utterances in the language. And we must know both the *structural* conventions – lexical, grammatical, phonological and graphological – and the *functional*, i.e. pragmatic or communicative, conventions (see Section 5.4.3), e.g. how to speak to strangers or children, ask people to do things, tell a joke or write an article.

Some linguists, e.g. Saussure (1967: 112) and Hockett (1958: 137), describe languages as *habits*. But habits are relevant for *skills*, not languages. A convention, e.g. the English *do* construction in questions and negative statements, is not a habit, but to *use* the convention becomes a habit when one has done it a sufficient number of times. Skills are acquired by practice and must be *entrenched* – a habit. Linguistic skill is partly *automatic* – according to Lieberman (1984: 59) automatization is «one of the essential elements of human language». A clear example is *articulation*, which involves rapid, coordinated movements of several organs without any reflection or conscious effort whatever.[4]

Linguists sometimes call competence «internalized norms», e.g. Vikør (2007: 72). But competence cannot be norms because it is *individual* and governs only the usage of the actual user, not of a language community. Norms or conventions are *collective*. Competence is *knowledge* of norms, and like all other knowledge, it *varies*. It may be *incomplete*, especially in users like children or foreigners. And it may *wrong*; like all knowledge, linguistic knowledge is fallible and may not be accordance with usage, resulting in faulty use. If the sender's competence is imperfect, e.g. a word is not spelled like the sender thinks it is, his/her use of it will also be imperfect.

4.2 Active and Passive Competence

Since competence is used both to produce and to understand utterances, we have to distinguish between the *sender's* and the *receiver's* competence, or *active* and *passive* competence. It seems that active competence is more demanding than passive competence. People usually have a larger passive than active vocabulary (Lamb 2000: 112), i.e. they can understand more than they can say themselves, and one may be able to hear a phonetic difference without being able to produce it. And in language acquisition comprehension comes before production (Burling

[4]According to a phonetician quoted by Bybee (1996: 84) a simple monosyllable requires coordination of more than 70 muscles in 8–10 organs.

2000: 27, Johansson 2005: 181). Even many animals, like dogs and horses, can understand quite a few words and utterances without being able to produce them.[5]

The reason for this imbalance must be that the sender has to *plan and produce* utterances, which requires skill and practice, while the receiver merely has to *understand* them, which only requires intelligence and knowledge of the language. We learn language primarily as receivers, by observing and gradually understanding the utterances of others. Therefore, active competence *presupposes* passive competence: First one must understand what other people say, e.g. the words they use, and then one can use the words oneself, after some practice. According to Lamb (2000: 112) we should «...impart some degree of primacy to the receptive side of the linguistic system».[6] In addition, the sender goes *from meaning to expression* while the receiver goes the opposite way, and, as Lamb points out, the first is more difficult than the second. It is harder to remember how a certain meaning is expressed, i.e. to «find» or activate the expression, than to remember what an expression means. This is especially wellknown for proper names: Sometimes, we cannot remember the name of a known person, but as soon as we hear the name, we recognize it and know who it refers to. According to Jackendoff (2002: 213, note 9) the reason is that receiving just requires «recognition memory» while sending requires «the much more difficult recall memory».

4.3 Innate Competence and Universal Grammar?

According to Fromkin et al. (2019: 367) spoken and sign languages, unlike writing, are «biologically innate and need not be purposefully learned». If they are innate, why do they vary? Why can't everybody sign, and why must language acquisition «…be triggered by input from the environment» (Fromkin et al. 2019: 462)? Purposefully or not, they must all be *learnt*. The language *faculty* is innate, but not *languages* and *competence*. Conventions are man-made and must be learnt by ordinary cognitive processes like abstraction and generalization, and linguistic conventions are learnt the same way as other conventions: by observing and imitating *others* who know them and follow them, i.e. others' usage and utterances.

As we learn our first language without systematic instruction, competence in our native language is to a large degree *unconscious* or *intuitive* and inaccessible for introspection – with the exception of linguists. Every day we use words whose meaning we cannot define and follow grammatical rules that few of us can describe. This largely unconscious knowledge also makes us able to hear whether a sentence is grammatical or ungrammatical, usually without being able to explain why, which presupposes grammatical terms and concepts.

Structural conventions are learnt by observing *regularities* in the utterances, factors that *recur*. According to Langacker (2000: 30) language acquisition «...in essence [...] reduces to reinforcement of the commonalities inherent in expressions that actually occur», and Ono & Thompson (1995: 219) say that spoken utterances show that we use conventional «constructional schemas» which are «…distilled from large numbers of speech events». In other words, we construct *hypotheses* about the language on the basis of the utterances that we hear, which we *test* in our own utterances. Generalization (induction) is fallible because the data base, in this case observed utterances in the language, is small in the beginning – but it increases every day, and hypotheses that are not confirmed, can be *revised*. The method is called *trial and error*, which is the standard method of learning. It consists of both induction and deduction: One goes from incidences (tokens) to a general rule (types), and from the rule to new incidences – an inference that can give a wrong result, e.g. analogical forms like *gived* for *gave*, from the wrong hypothesis that *give* is a regular verb. This hypothesis is falsified when one has heard *gave* a sufficient number of times. But forms like *gived* show that the user has induced the rule for the past of regular verbs, even if the deduction to *gived* is wrong because the rule was applied to a verb where it doesn't apply according to the conventions of English.

Such analogical forms show that *grammar* is learnt like the rest of language. According to Fromkin et al. (2019: 385), children "…know that sentences are organized hierarchically, and this is not information that is provided in the input". But it *is* provided. As ordinary syntactic analysis show, most sentences are hierarchical, with constituents within constituents, and one cannot understand them without realizing this. To understand who went home in *The old man went home*, one must analyse *The old man* as one constituent (subject), referring to the agent.

Fromkin et al. also point out (2019: 385) that "children are not provided with information about structure dependency, constituent structure or indeed any abstract property of grammar". No, but they are provided with *intelligence* and the ability to *analyse* utterances in constituents and *discover* their structure. The authors admit (p. 386) that word (or constituent) *order* is learnt from the input, so according to them grammar is partly innate and partly learnt. But if children can learn *constituent order*, they must be able to analyse sentences in *constituents*. The authors also admit (p. 422) that children "…extract the rules […] from the language(s) spoken around them" and (p. 439 f) that listeners must determine the syntactic relations between constituents and solve syntactic ambiguities. When people can understand the difference between *They have seen you* and *You have seen them*, they must intuitively have analysed the sentences grammatically and understood that the pronouns have different syntactic functions in the sentences and different semantic functions in the propositions they express. That "the human brain is specially equipped for acquisition of human language grammars" (Fromkin et al. 2019: 386) doesn't mean that we are *born* with a grammar, just with the ability to "extract" it from utterances.

So grammar is just as conventional as the lexicon. Like words, grammar varies from language to language and must be labouriously learnt. Even closely related languages like English, German and Scandinavian have quite different grammars. There is no universal grammar, no more than a universal lexicon. Grammar and lexicon are closely related and are learnt together in the same way. Without words there would be no grammar. Grammar and lexicon overlap since there are grammatical words and word classes are regarded as grammatical organization and treated in morphology. And there are fixed expressions with a syntactic structure but a holistic meaning, e.g. *figure out* or *put up with*, which must be regarded as both grammatical and lexical units. If languages are usage-based (see Section 5.1), grammar can be induced from grammatical utterances, and there is no innate knowledge of grammar. And we hear hundreds of mostly grammatical utterances every day, so there is no «poverty of stimulus».

5 Languages

5.1 Languages and Usage

100 years after Saussure, many linguist still do not distinguish consistently between languages and the use of them, but call both language. Bickerton (1995: 11) rightly complains about «…the persistent confusion between a thing and the uses of a thing». Bybee describes «language» both as «…one of the most systematic and complex forms of human *behaviour*» (2010: 6) and as «a conventional cultural *object*» (2010: 119, my emphasis). Langacker (1987: 18) rejects the whole distinction, and

[5] According to Lieberman (2006: 36–37) a German border collie could understand more than 200 words and follow «simple verbal instructions», i.e. understand simple sentences.

[6] It's part of *competence*, not the linguistic system. The linguistic system is neutral between sending and receiving.

in Langacker (2010: 130) «language» is described both as «a structured *inventory* of conventional linguistic units» and as «a processing *activity*» (my emphasis). Also Kemmer & Barlow (2000) reject the distinction «...since performance is itself part of a speaker's competence» (p. XI) and «...the primary object of study is the language people actually produce and understand» (p. XV). But performance cannot be a part of competence since performance is an *action* while competence is *knowledge* of the system used and the *ability* to perform the action. And what people produce and understand is *texts and utterances*, which are *not* the primary object of linguistics. The primary object of *linguistics* cannot be anything else than *languages*, which are not actions but *systems* that may be *used* to produce texts and utterances in the actual language.

However, languages and usage are closely related. Cognitive linguistics is *usage-based*, which means that languages and usage are supposed to be entities of *the same kind* and influence each other: «...structure [...] is not independent of usage or radically different in nature. Rather, structure emerges from usage, is immanent in usage, and is influenced by usage on an ongoing basis» (Langacker 2010: 109). According to Bybee «...linguistic structure emerges through language use» (2010: 204), and «Usage feeds into the creation of grammar just as much as grammar determines the shape of usage» (2006: 730). Kemmer & Barlow (2000: IX) say that usage events «...both *result from*, and also *shape*, the linguistic system itself in a kind of feedback loop» (my emphasis). Saussure (1967: 37) makes the same point when he says that languages (*langue*) and usage (*parole*) *presuppose* each other and calls languages both the *instrument* in and the *product* of usage. Newmeyer (2003: 682) calls usage-based theories «anti-Saussurean», but they are definitely not. One could even call Saussure implicitly usage-based. That languages are usage-based does not mean that usage of a language *is* the language, even if some reject a sharp distinction between the two. The present author is not among them.

Usage-based means that usage *creates and defines* a language, something linguists acknowledged long ago by the proverb *Usus (est) tyrannus*, usage decides (what is right). According to Langacker (1998: 35),

> ...all structures ascribed to a linguistic system must either be directly encountered as parts of occurring expressions, or else capable of emerging from them through the basic processes of abstraction and categorization.

Compare Langacker's (1987: 53–54) «content requirement»: that the only linguistic units are «phonological, semantic, and symbolic structures that actually occur in linguistic expressions». Langacker (1991: 289–290) underlines that this excludes «arbitrary descriptive devices» that lack expression and content, and Kemmer & Barlow (2000: IX) point out that units that don't occur in usage, simply don't exist. The units of usage are the same as the units of the language: sounds or letters, morphemes, word forms, suffixes, phrases, clauses, sentences, etc., and there are no «underlying» structures and «transformations» (movements).

The only difference between a language and usage, texts and utterances in the language is that the units of a language are abstract *types* (classes) while the units of usage, texts and utterances are concrete, physical *tokens* (exemplars) or *occurrences* of those types, used for a communicative purpose. In English usage and texts there is an unlimited number of the article *the*, but they count as one in the English language. In languages the units are *potential* – possiblities that one can choose and use – in usage, texts and utterances they are *actual*, chosen or used possibilities. Therefore we can *observe* usage, texts and utterances while languages are abstract. For example, in languages sentence constituents like subjects and objects have a certain *distribution* or possible positions, in usage they have an actual *position*, one of the possible ones. And we can only know the distribution of the subject in a language from its positions in usage and texts in that language.

So the grammar of the language can only be known through the grammar of usage and texts in the language. To «characterize grammar independently of usage» (Newmeyer 2003: 702) is impossible. If we want to know how interrogative sentences are made in English, we must examine the interrogative sentences of English usage and texts to see what they have *in common* that distinguishes them from other sentence types. There is no other way, as Hjelmslev (1973: 127) points out: «...it is only through the analysis of the text that we learn to know the language». Usage, texts and utterances show what the units of the actual language are, the linguistic *system* or the *language* that is used. That's why we can *learn* a language from usage, texts and utterances, by generalizing from tokens to types. And that is why a runic inscription can tell us something about Proto-nordic, and why grammarians support their rules with *examples*. We demand examples of a category, preferably several, before we accept it. This makes linguistics an *empirical* science with an observable basis that can falsify any theory.

5.2 Languages and Utterances

Since utterances are the largest unit of grammar, some linguists regard languages as collections of utterances or sentences. Chomsky (1957: 13) defines a language as *a set of sentences*, and Croft (2000: 26) defines it as «a population of utterances in a speech community». Dyvik (1998: 14–16) rejects that a language can be a collection of *actual* utterances – that would be a *text* or a *corpus* – but accepts that it is a collection of *potential* utterances. Compare Bloomfield's (1926: 155) definition of a language as «The totality of utterances that *can be made* in a speech-community...» (my emphasis).

But as the number of possible utterances and sentences is *unlimited*, this would imply that a language is unlimited and therefore cannot be described or learnt completely, and that using a language consists of choosing suitable utterances (which then become actual). But Atkinson et al. (1991: 38) point out that it is «...conclusively demonstrated that the number of English sentences is infinite and, therefore, that English cannot be equated with any corpus no matter how large». A language is something *limited* that can be described and learnt almost completely, and most utterances are not chosen but *constructed*. It is not difficult to construct utterances which are original, like Chomsky's famous *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*. You just have to say something sufficiently strange or silly. Exceptions are fixed phrases that are used every day, like *Good morning!* or *How do you do?* Here we can speak of choosing from a collection. As Croft (2010: 328) points out: «Clearly, some utterances are computed, because they are novel. Equally clearly, many utterances, or large chunks of structure in those utterances, are simply retrieved, chiefly because they occur frequently enough to be stored autonomously». In addition, utterances are *individual* products consisting of *concrete* units (tokens) like individual sounds while languages are *collective* and consist of general *types* of units like sound types. It is exactly because languages consist of types that they are limited and can be described and learnt, in theory completely.

So a language is more abstract than a collection of potential utterances, namely the *system* or the *conventions* that the utterances realize or follow. Dyvik (1998: 16) concedes that «All sentences [that are possible in Norwegian] must be structured according to certain principles or norms for how a Norwegian sentence is composed, and there must be a limited number of such principles or norms». And the

principles we know from previous utterances that we have observed and unconsciously analysed. We don't learn utterances, but *their general structure*, i.e. *utterance types*, mostly *sentence types*, e.g. interrogative, passive or relative sentences. Interrogative sentences *in general*, as a sentence type or *construction*, are a part of English, but not the *individual* interrogative sentences in usage and texts. We have to learn grammatical units like question words and rules like *inversion* (finite verbal + subject), e.g. *(Why)* ***have you*** *done it?* and the use of *do as auxiliary* when there is no other auxiliary, e.g. *(Why)* ***did*** *you* ***do*** *it?*, with exceptions like *(Why)* ***are*** *you sick?*, but fortunately not the unlimited number of individual interrogative sentences like these examples. They are not part of English, but their structure is.

5.3 Languages and Competence

5.3.1 Individual Languages?

Mentalism equates languages and competence, which means that languages exist as linguistic *knowledge and skill* in the *brains or minds* of each user of the language: The brain is «where human language resides» (Fromkin et al. 2019: 447), «Language is an integral part of human cognition» (Langacker 1987: 12), the goal of cognitive linguistics is «to model linguistic knowledge correctly» (Langacker 2009: 251), and «...symbolic relationships between form and meaning are not to be found 'out there', but are only established in the minds of speakers» (Langacker 2010: 128). However, Langacker also underlines that languages are *conventional*: He calls language «a structured inventory of conventional linguistic units» (2013: 222) and bases linguistics on *usage*, the conventional use of languages. So cognitive linguists must be counted among those who think that languages are *both* mental *and* social.

But what exists in the brain, must be *individual*, since there are only individual brains. This way languages are reduced to individual systems or *idiolects*: «The only scientifically genuine entities are individual grammars situated in the heads of individual speakers» (Pinker and Bloom 1990: 721). As Faarlund (1990: 32) points out, this means that there are as many «languages» as there are speakers, and one cannot speak of language *varieties* like *national* languages (e.g. English), *standard* languages (e.g. Standard English), *dialects* and *sociolects*, which all are *collective* entities. Such varieties are what linguists usually are interested in and are described in dictionaries and grammars, and it is generally estimated that there are about 6 thousand (national) languages on Earth, not 8 billion. And we usually think that languages are *passed down* between generations and have a *history* of thousands of years, as Bybee (2010: 119) underlines: «...language is a conventional cultural object that has evolved over time and continues to evolve». Faarlund (1990: 32) points out that this is incompatible with a view of languages as individual knowledge, because such knowledge dies with the user and lasts only a lifetime.

To be «internalized» or «established in the minds of speakers», linguistic units must exist «out there», outside their minds. One can only «internalize» or learn something that exists *externally*, by making a mental copy of it, i.e. *knowledge*. Namely in *society* – partly as individual *tokens* (occurrences) in usage and texts and partly as the general *types* of units that usage represents. The article *the* definitely exists also in the outer world, partly as occurrences that can be observed in speech and on paper or screen, and partly as a type in the English language. It is only the expression – three letters – that the readers can see, but if they know the conventions of English writing which connect these letters to their meaning and use, they recognize the letters as the definite article. This text consists of the expressions of the signs of English writing – morphemes, word forms, sentences etc. – and readers who know English writing, will know the meanings of the signs and can hopefully infer what I mean by these expressions.

Nor can a mentalistic view of language explain *grammaticality* – that some utterances are grammatical or conventional while others are not. According to Dyvik (1998: 21) it's competence that decides what is correct usage. But competence is individual and governs only the actual user's *own* usage, not the usage of others, and it may be *incomplete* or simply *wrong*. If someone should believe that *might* in English is spelled *mite*, this does not make it right. The convention and usage of English writing is the spelling *might*, and that is an *objective fact* which is independent of what individuals think and know. The large majority of users of English have agreed on this spelling and show it by using it and accepting it in others' usage while condemning other spellings. Langacker (2000: 10) underlines that *wellformed* means the same as *conventional*, i.e. in accordance with the *collective* norms of usage, not individual competences.

If languages are *conventional*, they cannot be *individual*. There is agreement that conventions are *collective* and exist in a *group* (Itkonen 1978: 111, Dyvik 1995: 24). *Convention* means 'agreement', and one cannot agree with onseself. And nothing can be both individual and collective, so here one has to choose. The contradiction comes out clearly when Dabrowska (2015: 222) says that «...although languages live in the mind, they belong to communities, not to individuals». If languages live in the mind, they cannot belong to communities, which have no mind. What exists in the mind and what exists in society must be two different things, and only one of them can be a language. Sinha (2009: 306) underlines that «Language as a social institution has its own proper structure which necessitates, but is irreducible to, the intentionality of its users», and Geeraerts (2016: 529) says that «Language as a communicative instrument transcends the individual».

Harder (2003: 67) points out that meaning is not «private property, but something shared with others». A private language would be useless, because it could not be used for communication. To be used for communication a language must be known and used by *a group*, as Saussure pointed out (1967: 112).[7] That's why nobody can decide over a language (if you are not a dictator), but everybody have to accept it as it is, as Saussure also pointed out (1967: 101, 104), if they want to communicate. At best, one can try to change it by one's own usage. If one is wellknown and respected, one might succeed.

Especially *standard* languages pose a problem for mentalistic linguists. According to Leech (1981: 205) «...culturally institutionalized languages such as English acquire what might be called a 'corporate lexical competence', greater than the lexical competence of any one of its users». But a *language* cannot have (e.g. lexical) *competence* – that is for *language users* only. Instead it can have a greater *lexicon* than any single user of the language, and that is what we usually find in a dictionary. Hudson (1984: 31–32) thinks that language is «...a property of the *individual*», but still accepts that standard languages are collective because they are *regulated* and *codified* in dictionaries and grammars. But not all standard languages are formally regulated by a language academy, e.g. standard English. They are just accepted as they are used, with an enormous authority and prestige, and everybody try to write and even speak «correctly», according to standard usage. As to codification, all languages can be codified or described in dictionaries and grammars, and also many dialects are exhaustively described. The greater need for regulation and codification of standard languages is simply due to the fact that they are used in writing and taught in schools.

[7] The group can be quite small, however. Many families have some special words, often inspired by the children's early utterances, and families with a deaf child of hearing parents who don't know a sign language, often develop «home signs» used in the family. Raanes (2024) describes such a home sign system developed in a farm in Norway.

5.3.2 Mentalism and Usage-based

Kemmer & Barlow (2000: VIII) think that a usage-based theory is compatible with a view of language both as «...structures derived by the analyst from observation of linguistic data...» («the 'external' linguistic system») and as «...structures posited by the analyst as a claim about mental structure and operation» («the 'internal' linguistic system»), even if the last view is the usual one. But usage consists of *physical* units like sounds or letters, and if usage and language are not «radically different in nature», these units must also belong to the language that is used. If languages were mental while usage is physical, they would be radically different in nature, and usage could not be the *use* of a language. A tool does not change nature when it is used. So languages cannot be purely mental, but include the physical units of usage as types. Spoken languages include *sound types*, and they are certainly not mental objects. That is probably why phonetics often is not regarded as part of linguistics (Matthews 2001: 41).

Of course we need a mental model or representation of a sign's expression as well as its meaning (Saussure's *image acoustique*), but that is *competence*, not language. A sound picture cannot explain communication, because nobody can *hear* it. An expression must be *physical* to communicate and be learnt (Papazian 2025 b: 68). Atkinson et al. (1991: 59) rightly point out that "…if language is to have public status it must be encoded in a medium accessible to the senses". Signs and languages are *partly physical* (the expression) and *partly mental* (the meaning). The whole point of a sign must be to connect by convention ideas, which cannot be observed, to something physical, which *can* be observed. So usage-based is incompatible with mentalism, and implies that languages are *institutions*.

5.3.3 Knowledge and its Object

Harder (2015: 239) mentions «a basic theoretical lacuna in mainstream thinking about language [...]: the absence of an account of the relation between language in the mind and language in society». In his own contribution to the filling of this lacuna (Harder 2003), the conclusion (p. 66) seems to be that «…language straddles the internal/external divide», i.e. that languages are *both* internal (mental) *and* external (social), which is impossible: The same object cannot be both internal and external, so there must be *two* objects, one internal and one external. The lacuna should be filled simply by distinguishing between internal *knowledge* (in the mind) and its external *object* (in society) – what one knows, which may be a language. Knowledge always has an object and is knowledge *of* something, e.g. a language. There must be *something* to know. As Jackendoff (2002: 298, note 4) points out, the expression *knowledge of language* implies «an external entity, 'language', that is known».

When Bybee (2001: 7) says that «Mental representations of linguistic objects have the same properties as mental representations of other objects», she implies that we have to do with two things: «linguistic (and other) objects» and «mental representations» of these objects. The history of England and someone's knowledge of the history of England are two different things, and so is English and someone's knowledge of English. The first is something social, collective and objective, the second something mental, individual and subjective. When Langacker (1991: 286) says that the goal of linguistics is to describe «…those structures and abilities that constitute *a speaker's grasp* of linguistic convention» and Atkinson et al. (1991: 40) that it is to describe «...*the native speaker's knowledge* of his language» (my emphasis in both quotes), one could ask if it's not rather to describe «linguistic *convention*» and «his *language*», preferably more completely and precisely than an ordinary speaker's knowledge of these objects.

If languages are knowledge, we must ask *whose* knowledge it is, because knowledge is individual and variable. Chomsky's answer to the question (1965: 3) is that it is the competence of an "ideal" language user with "perfect" knowledge of the actual language. But no one knows a language perfectly, e.g. all the words that are used in the actual speech community. And how would we know that a user's knowledge is perfect? This presupposes a *standard* to compare the user's knowledge with, and that cannot be anything else than *usage* and the *language* itself, the object of knowledge. Knowledge is considered perfect or right if it *agrees* completely with its object and imperfect or false if it doesn't. In other words, knowledge is *true belief* of the object.[8] That it is meaningful to speak of knowledge of languages, shows that languages cannot be knowledge, but, as Dyvik (1998: 21), points out, something we can have knowledge *of* (and be right or wrong about), a possible *object* of knowledge. Namely *institutions*, more precisely *sign systems* created by our forebears that we recreate ourselves today.

5.4 Languages as Institutions

5.4.1 Conventions

Institutions exist as *conventions* in communities, in this case those that govern the usage of a language. This view has been advocated mainly by Saussure, who calls language (*langue*) «a social product of the language faculty and a collection of necessary conventions» (1967: 25), «an institution» (p. 33) and «a kind of contract between the members of society» which is «outside the individual» (p. 31), «exists completely only in the collective» (p. 30) and presupposes «a speaking group» (p. 112).[9] This means that languages are creations or *cultural products*. According to Bickerton (2009: 92), «…no serious scholars nowadays doubt that language is, at bottom, biological rather than cultural, and therefore was not created, but somehow evolved». But creation is not opposed to evolution – also cultural products and society itself evolve. Linguistic units like sounds, words and constructions don't just pop up by themselves, they must have been *created or invented* by someone who needed them. That languages are created, is especially obvious in «artificial» languages like Esperanto or Nynorsk (New Norwegian), which have been created by a single, known person. «Natural» languages have been created gradually by their users, not deliberately and consciously, but in the same way as they are *altered* or *recreated* in language change: through *usage*. We continue to create new sounds, words and constructions, i.e. new languages. So all languages are artifacts.

Conventions or norms, in everyday speech «traditions», «customs» or «rules», are *agreements* between people in an organized group. They are agreements *in practice*, manifested by *the same behaviour* or «a regularity in behavior» (Croft 2009: 401), e.g. the custom of calling a cat a *cat*. We are speaking of *collective* and not *individual* behaviour – that one person drives on the right side of the road might be a coincidence and shows nothing. But if all or most people drive on the right side, they must have agreed to do so, at least *tacitly*: People just do *like others do*, and nothing needs to be said about it. Speakers of English have agreed to call a cat a *cat* by doing so regularly.

The purpose of conventions is to *coordinate behaviour* in a certain type of situations (Lewis 1974: 5, Bartsch 1987: 174) by deciding what is *right behaviour* in these situations and making people behave in the same way. For example, it is practical to agree on driving on either the right or the left side of the road, instead of having to negotiate every time you meet somebody. Or on what a certain word means and how

[8] We can also speak of *collective* knowledge, formulated in *texts*, i.e. *science*, e.g. what is collectively known about a language, expressed in dictionaries and grammars. But even science is seldom perfect knowledge of its object. Even the largest dictionary cannot include all words that are used in the actual language community.

[9] However, Saussure is not consistent – he sometimes places language in the brains of the language users (e.g. 1967: 30, 38, 44), and the description of the sign is wholly mentalistic. He underlines (1967: 32, 98, 99) that both parts of the sign are mental, namely a *concept* and a *sound image* (*image acoustique*), and that the sound image is not the sound itself, but «the mental imprint of it».

it is pronounced and spelled. Communication is obviously a situation that calls for coordination and agreement: «...there must, of course, be agreement between producers and receivers if people are to understand each other» (Corballis 2002: 112). To communicate well we have to use the *same* linguistic units, e.g. the same words. The more similar our usage is, the better we understand each other.

Conventions may be *formulated*, usually in writing, in *laws and regulations* like the constitution, the ten commandments or traffic regulations, and there may be fixed penalties for not observing them. Regulations for language by authorities or academies usually regulate only parts of *written language*, especially the spelling of *word forms* and thereby *the inflectional system*. Spoken languages are regulated only tacitly by *the users*.[10] Such regulations are sometimes called «established norms», e.g. by Vikør (2007: 74), but if norms are regularities in behaviour, they cannot be norms, but are just *prescriptions*, trying to *establish* (or change) norms. There is agreement that norms must be *followed* and *govern usage* to be valid (Haas 1982: 5, Bartsch 1987: 177, Gullvåg 1991: 18). They must be what Dyvik (1998: 21) calls «operative» and exist «…by virtue of regulating people's usage». Prescriptions are not always followed in usage, so we can get a contrast between a language as it *should be* and as it *is*. This is often the case in a regulated standard language like Norwegian Bokmål.

So linguistic conventions exist just as usage, and languages are simply the units and rules that are *used regularly* – once or twice does not make a convention. As Bybee (2010: 214) points out, «...high frequency of usage leads to conventionalization». Croft & Cruse (2004: 292) explain this by pointing out that use of a unit *activates* connections in the brain, and frequent activation leads to «...its ultimate storage as a conventional grammatical unit». That's why frequency is important both in languages: Frequent grammatical words are usually short, often also irregular, and in language acquisition and change: Frequent words are learnt earlier and are more resistant to change. That is also why usage is important: Every time we use a language or a linguistic unit we *strengthen* not only our own competence, but also that of others, and thereby the actual language or linguistic unit. Reduced use of a language will eventually lead to its death, so usage is a question of life and death for languages.

5.4.2 Linguistic Variation

As conventions are valid in a certain community, linguistic conventions may *vary*, and usually do vary, between language communities that have little or no contact and communication. But even in the same language community there is variation and varieties. Most communities consist of local or social *subgroups* with somewhat varying languages, e.g. between older and younger members. And even in the same subgroup there is variation. We often disagree on what words mean, and we don't have exactly the same lexicon: There are technical words that only some users know, like *fricative* or *modifier*. There may even be *competing* conventions for words or grammar. An example is the many alternative word forms in the Norwegian written standards, sometimes between whole grammatical categories, such as Bokmål having either female gender with special articles (***ei*** *bok,* *bok-**a***, a/the book) or common gender with the same articles in feminines as in masculines (***en*** *bok,* *bok-**en***).[11] So collective does not mean that all members of a language community agree *completely* and that their usage is *exactly* the same, only that most of it is common. Linguistic communication can tolerate quite a bit of variation. Scandinavians can communicate fairly well by using their own languages, at least with some training.

As conventions have to be *passed on* through generations and different language communities and languages *influence* one another, conventions can be *broken* and *changed*. So we also have variation in *time* or language change if sufficiently many users break them in the same way. Boye & Harder (2012: 8) point out that linguistic conventions are «dependent on usage» and «can remain stable only if they continue to be reflected in actual usage», and may «change as a result of changes in usage». And conventions that go out of usage, also go out of the actual language: We have a «dead» convention or even a whole «dead» language. So linguistic conventions are «a plural and multiple entity» (Harder 2010: 278) and «…a natural reservoir of variation, with some features becoming less diverse and others becoming more diverse over time» (Deacon 1997: 114). This makes it difficult to *delimit* languages and e.g. say how many dialects there are in Norway or how many national languages in the world. Are Serbian and Croatian one language or two? It is social and political rather than linguistic facts that determine such questions.

5.4.3 Structural and Functional Conventions

Searle (1969: 33 f) and Dyvik (1993: 168 f) point out that there are two kinds of linguistic conventions: *constitutive or structural*, which constitute the language and are *mandatory*, and *regulative or functional*, which govern *usage* and are *optional*. Compare Vikør's (2007: 72) distinction between *grammatical norms* and *usage norms* and Dik's (1997: 3) between rules that govern «the constitution of linguistic expressions» and those that govern «the patterns of verbal interaction in which these linguistic expressions are used». We have the same distinction in chess and other games: Some rules constitute the game and must be followed, e.g. how the chess pieces can move. But where you put them, how you open the game, whether you play defensively or offensively etc., is up to you, as long as you follow the constitutive rules. One thing is to play chess *correctly*, another is to play chess *well*. The same goes for language. Some are better communicators than others, and most communities appreciate *eloquence*.

The structural conventions are the lexical, grammatical and phonological or graphological conventions that govern *utterances* in the language. They are *unmotivated* and may therefore *vary* between languages. The functional conventions concern how to *communicate well* in different situations, e.g. how to tell a joke, make a speech or write a scientific article. They are *motivated* by communicative considerations like Grice's principles, and more or less *universal*, since usage has the same goal everywhere: to be understood and listened to. One has to express oneself clearly, unambiguously and truthfully, assess the receivers' knowledge and not tell them something they know or use words they won't understand, follow politeness conventions etc.

According to Dixon (2012: 442) all languages have conventions for addressing different types of receivers – strangers, superiors, small children etc., which may require special pronouns like the German and French plurals *Sie* and *vous* to adress one person. In conversation *turntaking* is essential and it's considered impolite to interrupt others, in scientific texts one is expected to use *references* and list them at the end. There are norms for *ellipsis*, e.g. that we usually don't repeat the subject in successive sentences with the same subject: *I came, saw and won*. We are supposed to be truthful, but there are «white lies» to spare the receiver for unpleasant truths. We can be *ironic* and say the opposite of what we mean, and hope the receiver will understand. One can break every one of these conventions and still speak or write grammatically, but perhaps not very comprehensibly, sensibly or politely.

5.5 Languages as Sign Systems

[10] An exception is «the new way of counting» in Norwegian, officially introduced in 1951, with tens before units (*femti-fem*, fifty-five), as in English and Swedish, instead of units + *og* (and) + tens (*fem og femti*), as in German and Danish (which has its own way of counting tens). It still has not succeeded completely, although it is obviously superior to the old way, so now Norwegians have two ways of pronouncing such numbers.

[11] The background is the heritage from Danish, with common gender, and the Norwegianizing of the written standard in the previous century, with female gender.

5.5.1 The Primary Function of Languages

We have institutions for a reason. If languages are institutions, what is their *purpose*? That it is meaningful to speak of *use* of languages, shows that languages are *tools*, something that we use for a certain purpose. This implies a *functionalistic* view – that a language like other tools is «...determined by the functions that it is intended to perform» (Croft 1991: 1). Compare Halliday (1974: 13): «...we try to explain the nature of language, its internal organization and patterning, in terms of the functions that it has evolved to serve». The primary function of languages must be what we normally use them for: *communication*, more precisely *linguistic* communication, communication by *signs* (we also have non-linguistic communication, by both animals and people). And we communicate for many different *purposes*, compare the different «speech acts» of Austen and different uses of written language, from personal letters to scientific treatises.

This doesn't mean that communication can explain everything in languages. It can only explain *universal* traits, like sounds, morphemes, words, grammar etc., but not *which* sounds, morphemes etc. languages consist of. That is decided by convention and history, e.g. that English was influenced by French after the Norman invasion. Nor does it preclude *secondary* functions. When we speak to ourselves or swear, we don't communicate, but concentrate or give vent to feelings. Writing is indispensable as a *memory support*, as when preparing a speech, taking notes from lectures or making shopping lists. We can also *think* in language, e.g. in «imaginary conversations», and also have to think linguistically when we *plan utterances*. Language can also be used to «…store information or carry out thought processes» (Bickerton 1995: 11) and «…serves both to organize and to communicate thoughts» (Chafe 1998: 96).

Some linguists hold that language is primarily for thinking and that communication is «just one use to which language can be put» (Bickerton 1995: 40). However, we don't need languages to think, as animals and small children show. But we need them for *advanced* or *systematic* communication, as anyone knows who has been in a strange country and tried to ask people the way to the airport. Communication is clearly the *primary* purpose, but signs can also help us concentrate and clear our thoughts because they have an *expression*. For example, it is easier to remember a large number if you say it, or even think its expression.

For *systematic* or *linguistic* communication we need *signs*: conventional combinations of a mental *content* or *meaning* – conceptions or ideas – and a physical *expression* like speech sounds, written characters or gestures. We need both *minimal* signs or *morphemes* like *bird* to express single ideas and a *grammar* to make *complex* signs expressing complex ideas by combining morphemes into complex words like *blackbird* and word forms like *birds* (morphology), and word forms into syntagms like *a/the bird* (syntax). And as signs need an expression, we also need an *expression system* that may be independent of the sign system, e.g. a sound system or an alphabet – *double articulation* (Martinet 1965: 2) or *duality* of patterning (Hockett 1960: 90). However, there is no independent meaning system – meanings are just *part of signs*, from morphemes to sentences (Papazian 2025 a: 13). So languages are *sign systems* consisting of subsystems: a lexicon, a grammar and a sound or writing or gestural system.

5.5.2 One or Several Sign Systems?

One of Saussures bestknown claims is that language is «form» (1967: 157), i.e. *relations or functions*, not «substance» or *objects with qualities*, and that in language «there are only differences without positive terms» (1967: 166). The expression is «not constituted by its material substance, but only by the difference between it and other sound images» (1967: 164). None the less he insisted that languages are *spoken* and described the expression of signs as a «*sound* image» (*image acoustique*). So signs have (phonic) qualities after all. As Vachek (1989: 106) points out, there is a contradiction here.

But Hjelmslev (1966: 93) took the consequence of Saussure's claim by saying that the expression is neither phonic nor graphic (nor has any other material substance), but may be realized in any substance. Also Uldall (1995: 214) sees speech and writing as «expressions of one and the same language». This view seems to be quite widespread today, and many include gestural languages. According to Bickerton (2009: 3), «Speech is simply one vehicle for language. Another is manual sign». Also Bolhuis et al. (2014) regard speech and gesture as different «externalizations» of «language». According to Bouchard (2013: 146), the sign is «modality-independent», and Hurford (2014: 106) says that «…underlying the medium in which language is expressed, whether signed or spoken, is a system which is independent of the medium».

Here spoken, written and gestural usage are just «modalities» or expressions of the *same* language, which is neither spoken nor written nor gestural. In other words we have an *abstract* language, consisting of signs with an abstract expression. However, the claim that languages consist of differences and do not have any qualities, is untenable. Nothing can consist of functions or relations without qualities – there must be *something*, with specific qualities, that *has* a function and relations *between entities* with specific qualities. *Differences* can only mean 'different *qualities*', and relations presuppose entities with qualities, as Harder (1996: 26) points out (Hjelmslev's view is critized also in Garvin 1954: 91 f, Eco 1984: 23 and Vachek 1989: 109).

The multimodal view also implies a favouring of the *content*: It is the content which is constant and defines the sign and the language, while the expression varies. According to Uldall (1995: 215), the fact that the pronunciation and the spelling of a word have the same meaning «…proves that they are expressions of the same language». But the same meaning does not imply the same sign: There are *synonymous* expressions, either in different languages, like German *Ochs* and French *bœuf*, or in the same language, like English *ox* and *bull*. Synonyms are different words though they have the same meaning, and signs are defined by *both* expression *and* content. They have a *specific* expression as well as a specific content – not any expression.

If so, also signs with different *types* of expression, like speech, writing or gestures, must be different signs. That gestural languages are sign systems of their own, may be obvious, but «verbal», i.e. spoken and written, languages, are *parallel* systems and therefore more easily seen as the same system. Lexico-grammatically, standard, orthographic writing and standard speech are close to identical, and grapho-phonologically they *correspond* more or less closely. The reason is that speech has been the *model* for writing, lexico-grammatically and in alphabetic writing also grapho-phonologically, with alphabets copying sound systems. And speech and writing have *influenced* each other, especially in *standard* speech and writing.

However, there are written signs that have no correspondence in speech and cannot be pronounced, like parentheses or quotes, and signs that are independent of speech and can be pronounced in any spoken language, like *%, 9* or *1984*. The alternative to Hjelmslev's view, which especially Vachek (1989) has argued for (see also Coulmas 2003: 16–18), is to regard spoken and written languages as different sign systems. This means that to read aloud a written text or write down a spoken one is a *translation*, as Haas (1970) underlines. Although we have a general *language faculty*, there is no general *language*, only *specific* languages with different types of expression.

5.5.3 Utterances as the Maximal Sign and Data for Linguistics and Language Acquisition

Utterances, including sentences, must be regarded as *the maximal sign* of language because there are mandatory (constitutive) conventions for their structure: They must have a certain structure and may be *(un)grammatical*, (not) in accordance with the structural conventions of the language. According to Trager (1974: 84), «…linguistic analysis in the strict sense stops at the sentence boundary», and Crystal (2007: 249) defines *sentence* as «...the largest unit to which syntactic rules apply». Knowing a language means knowing how to make grammatical utterances in the language. For *larger* texts there are no constitutive norms; they are governed only by *functional* – pragmatic and rhetorical – norms. Compare Matthews (2001: 28): «Within sentences relations are part of the language system. Across sentences they are not». Such texts cannot be ungrammatical, but only *semantically* inadequate – incoherent, incomprehensible, boring, silly, false etc., and are not conventional signs.

The structural conventions govern utterances by defining the structure of utterance *types* or *constructions*, e.g. interrogative sentences. Thereby they make an unlimited number of utterances – examples of the constructions – possible or grammatical. When we know them, we can decide if an utterance is grammatical, in accordance with the conventions, i.e. if it is a possible utterance in the actual language. Therefore, utterances are the decisive *data* of linguistics, showing what the constitutive norms of the actual language are: «Any sound linguistic theory must be based on concrete utterances of speech» (Vachek 1989: 2). They are also data for those who are trying to *learn* the language. In addition, there are dictionaries and grammars, and teaching of language in schools. But when we learn our first language, we have no other data than others' utterances, and have to generalize from them to the structural conventions that the utterances follow and the constructions they are examples of.

But as individual products utterances may be *ungrammatical*, either because the sender has made a slip or because (s)he has imperfect competence in the actual language. This is especially the case in speech, which is usually improvised and full of unfinished utterances, repetitions, corrections or plain mistakes, e.g. by foreigners or children. Therefore we must restrict ourselves to grammatical utterances: «The corpus […] must be 'cleaned up'» (Atkinson et al. 1991: 35). The use of languages must be restricted to the *conventional* use, i.e. usage, exactly to avoid individual deviations from the structural norms.

According to Atkinson et al. (1991: 38), this means that *intuitions* are data. But intuitions are unobservable and cannot be data for others. Dyvik (1995: 26) says that data for linguists are *the informants' report* of their intuitions. But intuitions are «tacit» or *unconscious* knowledge (Atkinson et al. 1991: 43), and such reports may be wrong and deviate from the informants' *usage*, as Dyvik admits (1995: 27). In that case, we trust usage and think that the informant reported what (s)he *wants to use* or has learnt is «correct». So there is reason to be sceptical to informants' report of their own usage, and grammatical utterances are the only reliable data for a language.

But how do we know that an utterance is grammatical? *Here* we depend on informants' judgements. Dyvik (1995: 27) points out that even if informants seldom have trustworthy intuitions about the norms themselves, they usually have more trustworthy intuitions about «the norms' consequences for individual sentences», i.e. they can intuitively decide if *an utterance* «sounds right» or is in accordance with the norms or not, usually without being able to explain why. *That* requires *conscious* knowledge and is the linguist's task. A grammatical utterance must be an utterance which (a selection of) the language users accept as *right or possible* in the actual language. So informants' judgements can delimit *valid data* – grammatical utterances which follow the structural conventions. And they govern only *the structure* of utterances, both the *units* that occur in them (like words or morphemes) and how they can be *combined* in the utterance types of the language. When we know these units and rules, we know which utterances are grammatical in the actual language and can make an unlimited amount of grammatical utterances.

6 Summary

Usage is the conventional use of a language as a sender. Using a spoken or written language results in a *text*, either *speech* consisting of speech sounds or *writing* consisting of written characters. These units express the signs of the language, most importantly *utterances*, chiefly *sentences*, that are grammatically independent and have a communicative purpose or express a certain speech act.

We have a general *language faculty*, not limited to speech: the capacity to make, learn and use sign systems. It has evolved to use spoken languages, but can be transferred to sign systems with other expressions, like writing and gestures. But to use *specific* languages we also need *competence* in the language: knowledge of its structure and skill in using it properly and purposefully, which must be *learnt*. We need both *active* competence to produce grammatical utterances and *passive* competence to understand them.

A usage-based approach to language means that languages cannot be mental, as usage is physical. Nor can they be individual. Expressions have to be *physical* and signs have to be *collective* to function in communication, which is their purpose. So languages are cultural products: institutions consisting of *conventions*, both *constitutive* or structural and *regulative* or functional. More precisely, they are open sign systems with a grammar for making complex signs. Signs are partly physical (the expression) and partly mental (the content) and have a specific expression. So there is no multimodal language, just different sign systems with different expressions. Utterances are the maximal sign, and grammatical utterances are the decisive data for the actual language.

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