

A LANGUAGE USES SOUND AS ITS PRIMARY MEANS OF EXPRESSION

Meanings aren't magically created; they're based on physical expression, primarily through the medium of speech. While meanings can be conveyed in writing, most of our communication doesn't take this form. Sign languages of the deaf, of course, use manual expression of meaning, but they're not the most common form of language. Speech is primary for several reasons besides the frequency of its use. Children learn to talk before they learn to write. Also, languages exist that have no writing systems. Moreover, writing is a comparatively recent historical development, being only a few thousand years old. Spoken language is at least 30,000 years old.

We can, somewhat simplistically, look at a language as a means to relate sounds to meanings. In this view, one distinctive characteristic of a language is its arbitrariness. That is, there is no necessary connection between any meaning and any single sound or group of sounds. Thus the sound of the word *I* has no particular connection to the speaker; we could equally designate ourselves by the sounds *je* (French), *yo* (Spanish), *ich* (German), *wǒ* (Chinese), or thousands of other expressions that exist in other languages. Indeed, most sounds in English are meaningless by themselves - p, f, n, h, e - except as names for letters. Likewise, the sounds of a word are arbitrarily related to its meaning. An English *apple* is a French *pomme*, and a Spanish *manzana*. The word *explosion* can be said either loudly or softly, as can *whisper*. *Giant* and *dwarf* have the same number of sounds, despite the different sizes of the things they refer to. Lilliputian is a big word meaning "small"; big and huge are small words for the opposite meaning.

There are a few aspects of language that appear to be motivated - i.e., nonarbitrary. One common example is the onomatopoeic words for animal noises, e.g., *moo*, *bow wow*, and *quack-quack*. Note that the last two of these suggest that dogs and ducks normally make noises in pairs and that speakers can distinguish a dog's *bow* from its *wow*. However, an Irish dog goes *amh-amh* and a Serbo-Croatian

dog goes *av-av*. Another type of apparent motivation is sound symbolism, the association of certain sounds with certain meanings, as the two vowel sounds of teeny, represented by the phonetic symbol [i].