

# Language

Language exerts hidden power, like a moon on the tides.

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## Nature of language

- What different functions does language perform? Which are most relevant in creating and communicating knowledge?
- What did Aldous Huxley (1947) mean when he observed that “Words form the thread on which we string our experiences”? To what extent is it possible to separate our experience of the world from the narratives we construct of them?
- In what ways does written language differ from spoken language in its relationship to knowledge?
- Is it reasonable to argue for the preservation of established forms of language, for example, as concerns grammar, spelling, syntax, meaning or use? Is one language common to the whole world a defensible project?
- What is the role of language in creating and reinforcing social distinctions, such as class, ethnicity and gender?
- What is the role of language in sustaining relationships of authority? Do people speak the same way to inferiors and superiors in a hierarchy? Does the professional authority speak in the same way as the person seeking opinion or advice? Can control of written language create or reinforce power?
- How does technological change affect the way language is used and the way communication takes place? How might innovations in language, such as Internet chat or text messaging, be assessed: as contributions to or assaults against how language and communication “should be”?
- What may have been meant by the comment “How strangely do we diminish a thing as soon as we try to express it in words” (Maurice Maeterlinck)?

## Language and culture

- If people speak more than one language, is what they know different in each language? Does each language provide a different framework for reality?
- How is the meaning of what is said affected by silences and omissions, pace, tone of voice and bodily movement? How might these factors be influenced in turn by the social or cultural context?
- What is lost in translation from one language to another? Why?
- To what degree might different languages shape in their speakers different concepts of themselves and the world? What are the implications of such differences for knowledge?

## Language and thought

- How have spoken sounds acquired meaning? What is the connection between the sounds and what they are taken to represent? Given that a word such as "tree" groups together a lot of different individual objects, what is lost in using language to describe the world? What are the advantages?
- Is it possible to think without language? How does language facilitate, extend, direct or limit thinking?
- To what extent does language generalize individual experience, classifying it within the experience of a linguistic group? On the other hand, to what extent do some kinds of personal experience elude expression in language?
- Can language be compared with other human forms of symbolic representation, such as conventionalized gestures, sign language for the deaf, dance, painting, music or mathematics? What might language share with these other forms in the communication of what we know? In what ways might it be considered distinct?
- How do "formal languages", such as computer-programming languages or mathematics, compare with the conventional written and spoken languages of everyday discourse?

## Language and knowledge

- How does the capacity to communicate personal experiences and thoughts through language affect knowledge? To what extent does knowledge actually depend on language: on the transmission of concepts from one person or generation to another, and on exposure of concepts or claims to public scrutiny?
- How does language come to be known? Is the capacity to acquire language innate?
- In most of the statements heard, spoken, read or written, facts are blended with values. How can an examination of language distinguish the subjective and ideological biases as well as values that statements may contain? Why might such an examination be desirable?

## Linking questions

- To what extent is it possible to overcome ambiguity and vagueness in language? In what contexts might ambiguity either impede knowledge or contribute to its acquisition? Does the balance between precision and ambiguity alter from one area of knowledge to another?
- What do we gain, and what do we lose, when we name something? Do different areas of knowledge manage differently the balance between particularity and generality?

## Language and areas of knowledge

- How do the words we use to describe an idea affect our understanding of the world? For example, is “globalization” a synonym for “westernization”? What is the meaning of the term “anti-globalization”? Does it matter which words we use?
- How does the language used to describe the past (for example, a massacre, an incident, a revolt) change history? Does something similar occur when different terms are used to describe natural phenomena (greenhouse effect, global warming, sustainable development) or human behaviour (refugee, asylum seeker)?
- How important are technical terms in different areas of knowledge? Is their correct use a necessary or sufficient indicator of understanding? The following illustrative examples relate to the Diploma Programme subject groups.
  - Group 1: metaphor, alliteration, onomatopoeia, synecdoche, genre, sonnet, haiku
  - Group 2: preposition, active/passive, pluperfect, genitive, creole, dialect
  - Group 3: cost–benefit analysis, price elasticity, evapotranspiration, neo-fascism, push–pull technology, ontology, cognitive dissonance, enculturation
  - Group 4: symbiosis, allotrope, ergonomics, trophic level, entropy
  - Group 5: irrational number, asymptote, dot product, isomorphism, minimum spanning tree
  - Group 6: dynamic content, L cut, sonata, dramaturgy, trompe l’œil
- To what degree might each area of knowledge be seen as having its own language? Its own culture?