UNIT 1 UNDERSTANDING ISSUES OF LANGUAGE

Structure
1.1 Objectives
1.2 Introduction
1.3 What is language?
1.4 Origin and Development of English Language
1.5 Issues of English Language
1.6 Vocabulary
1.7 Phonetics
1.8 Grammar
1.9 Some other issues: pronunciation, stress, intonation and punctuation
1.10 Aids to answers
1.11 Glossary
1.12 Bibliography

1.1 OBJECTIVES

1. After reading this unit you will be able to understand the origin of English and the way in which it has evolved to its present form.

2. You will also understand how and why it has become such an important world language and why people wish to be fluent in this language.

3. You will also understand the various important issues related to the study of English

4. On reading this unit you will be able to understand why it is important to use the language correctly in relation to its many issues.

5. You will then be able to edit lessons about such issues with ease.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

"A language is a dynamic set of visual, auditory, or tactile symbols of communication and the elements used to manipulate them. Language can also refer to the use of such systems as a general phenomenon. Strictly speaking, language is considered to be an exclusively human mode of communication. Although other animals make use of quite sophisticated communicative systems, sometimes casually referred to as animal language, none of these are known to make use of all of the properties that linguists use to define language." Let us look at how language is defined by Wikipedia.

1.3 WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

A language uses a set of symbols which are commonly used by all those who understand that language to communicate with each other. These symbols are used in a set pattern and are governed by sets of rules which define the structural...
relationship between them. This is called ‘grammar’. These rules distinguish language from other forms of communication and allow the symbols to be manipulated so that an infinite set of combinations can be made and so it is possible to have an infinite number of utterances.

Languages use sounds which can be combined to represent ideas but these sounds do not have any inherent meaning and their use is arbitrary and their use is according to conventions agreed on by the users. For example a combination of sound can mean something to the users of a particular language but the same set of sounds can mean something quite different to the users of another language. In English the set of sounds in the word ‘money’ mean currency but in Hindi nearly the same sounds mean the precious stone a ‘ruby’. This explanation will make it clear to you what language is.

**Check your progress**

1. What is language?

2. How does a language use sounds?

---

### 1.4 ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Some scientists argue that the earliest humans, who might have been more animal-like than human must have had no language. However, language is a basic requirement of human life. It is an extension of speech which must have developed because of a shared culture of communication, where mental understanding with each other must have happened or have evolved. This created a social environment resulting in language. However what lead to the selection of sounds to form language is still not clear and is the subject of great speculation. It is likely to remain speculation as evidence cannot be found. As social structures became more sophisticated, the need for language must have also grown and language must also have become increasingly sophisticated. Such a language is referred to as a human language or a natural language. The most common progression for human language is that it is first spoken then written and then an attempt is made to understand its grammar.

Languages change, adapts, move from place to place and change with time. Such
changes make them living languages. English is a living language. It was originally brought to Britain by the Germanic people who migrated from their homeland in Northern Europe and spread out all over Europe in the Late Antiquity period (AD 300-600). They settled down in Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium and England. English originated from the Anglo-Frisian and the Lower Saxony (invading tribes who came from Europe) dialects brought by the Germanic people and also by the Roman soldiers who were placed there to guard the territories occupied by the Romans until 410 AD. One of the Germanic tribes were the Angles who left their native land in Angeln and came to settle down in England in ancient times from the early 5th century AD to the Norman conquest in 066AD. The Saxons were people who originally lived in Germany near the mouth of the Elbe river. The language spoken by them became the language spoken by the people of that area and came to be known as the old English dialect.

The Norman conquest of Britain changed everything there. The rulers were from Normandy and they succeeded in removing all the native ruling classes, replaced the language that had been spoken till then and in its place they began to use an older form of French and this also brought about a cultural transformation. Their language was the Norman language which displaced the Old English. French retained the status of a prestige language for nearly 300 years and has had (with Norman) a significant influence on the language, which is easily visible in Modern English.

When a study of a language is done it is important to remember that a language is always undergoing change and is constantly being added to because of changing needs and cultural and social changes. No language as we have said earlier remains the same for any length of time. This is specially the case with English which has undergone many changes in the way it is used and in the way it has been adopted by people all over the world over the centuries.

Check your progress

3. What is a natural language?

4. What is a living language?

5. Name some of the languages which were the base of English.
1.5 ISSUES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

The history of the world in the centuries following the conquest of many parts of the world from the 16th century onwards by the British has made English the dominant language and we can safely say that it has become the lingua franca of modern times. This has greatly increased the demand and need for people to learn English. However the urgency to learn the language makes people want to skip the basics and learn it in a superficial manner which they feel is adequate for them. This leads them to use it wrongly and they end up making all kinds of mistakes. The issues involved in learning a language are vocabulary and spelling, grammar and phonetics besides others such as pronunciation, stress, intonation and punctuation. We will deal with some of these issues in the following sections.

Check your progress

6. When we learn a language what are the areas which we have to pay attention to?

1.6 VOCABULARY

1.6.1 Vocabulary is defined as the stock of words known to or used by a person or a group of persons to convey their thoughts. It can also mean all the words in a particular language. It can also mean movements or actions used to express ideas such as by a dancer, which can be understood by others.

A person's vocabulary can be of many kinds. The most important would be his/her active vocabulary consisting of words which he/she commonly employs. He/she may have a large number of words which he/she understands but may not be able to use frequently. There may be some words he/she can recognize but can not define, some words he/she may have heard and some which are new to him/her.

A person's reading vocabulary consists of those words which are familiar to him. They include those words which he/she knows and can recognize and use. His/her listening vocabulary is also quite large because it includes those words which he/she understands because of the context and tone of voice. The writing vocabulary depends on his own choice and is stimulated by him.

As a child one acquires words just by listening to others and copying them. Soon words form associations with objects and actions. As a child grows his vocabulary expands because of increased activities such as reading and writing at school. Once
education has been completed the growth of vocabulary reaches a plateau. After this if vocabulary has to increase it has to be done consciously and with effort through reading and by doing word puzzles and games. The better a person’s command of words the better he/she is able to express himself/herself and the better it is for him/her to be considered as an educated person. It aids him/her at his/her work as he/she is able to communicate better and perform better.

Merely knowing words is not enough. In order to have complete knowledge of a word one must be familiar with its meanings, spelling, forms, numbers, tenses, connotations, its nuances, the way it is used in phrases and its idiomatic use. If these are at one’s command one can claim to know a particular word. In order to be able to use a word correctly one should have knowledge of all these important things. People who don’t pay attention to the basics of a word often misuse it.

Vocabulary can be subject specific that is the words commonly used in any particular field form the ‘register’ of that field. Each field has its own repertoire of words. Medicine has its own register, engineering its own, computer science its own. It is known as its jargon. The words may be similar but their use and sometimes meanings are understood in relation to that field. Even the ways in which sentences are formed are different from the way in which sentences are formed in layman’s English. People who belong to any particular field have to master the way in which language is used in their field. Of course there are many words which are specific to that field for example many new words have been coined for computers-words like ‘byte’, ‘bits’, ‘binary’, ‘modem’ and such other words.

If vocabulary has to be increase and developed attention has to be paid to learning synonyms and antonyms of a word. However learners should remember that each synonym or antonym is a word by itself and it has its own character and cannot be used in place of the original word unreservedly.

1.6.2 Spelling is the writing of a word or words with the necessary letters in an accepted standard order. Most languages try to approximate the sounds of the language into the written word.

Uniformity of spelling is a feature of recent times of standard languages and is usually prescribed by the official language. It is linked to the compiling of dictionaries but with changing times spellings also change because of the influence of other languages such as the influence of American English over British English. We can see a common example in the word ‘colour’ and ‘color’. People who are not able to spell correctly according to the standard spelling are often looked down on as being of a lower class or as uneducated.

Whenever someone tries to learn a language, learning how to spell correctly becomes one of the priorities. Wrong spellings can cause a lot of confusion also. Therefore a lot of stress is given to spell it right.

Check your progress

7. Why is it important to be able to spell correctly?
1.7 PHONETICS

The word ‘phone’ is a Greek word meaning sound or voice. From this word we get the word ‘Phonetics’ which refers to the study of human speech or sounds. Phonetics, which is a subfield of Linguistics, studies the physical properties of speech and the way in which sound is produced physically, the way in which sounds are heard (auditory processes) and the neuro-physiological perception of sound.

Phonetics was studied for the first time in ancient India by Panini, an ancient Indian Sanskrit grammarian who studied the morphology of Sanskrit. He wrote the “Ashtadhyayi” (meaning 8 chapters) in which he formulated 3959 rules of Sanskrit morphology and grammar.

Phonetics mainly studies three things: how we say words, how our ears hear the sounds and how our brains interpret them.

Unlike Hindi which is written as the words are pronounced, English pronunciation is not very clear and often confusing. This has become worse nowadays because of the growing popularity of the American pronunciation. Various other kinds of pronunciations have also gained recognition. In English there are many words which have the same pronunciation but are written differently and have different meanings such as ‘two’ and ‘two’. Sometimes words maybe written similarly but have different pronunciations such as ‘bough’ and ‘though’, ‘thought’, and ‘through’. To make matters simpler and less confusing in 1886 a group of language teachers from France and Britain formed The International Phonetic Association. At first it was meant to be a spelling reform for English but in order to allow other languages to use the symbols they used the ‘Romic alphabet.’ However in 1888 this alphabet was revised and made uniform across languages with one symbol representing one sound. Combinations of letters are not allowed to represent a sound. Below is given a diagram of the set of symbols used in English. By using these symbols people can easily make out how a word is to be pronounced. Further study would tell us how these are pronounced, which parts of the mouth are used to say a particular sound and how combinations of sounds make a word. Dictionaries these days have a complete set of symbols to help people understand the pronunciation of a word and in fact each word also has the phonetic symbols in front of it which transcribe the word to help one to understand its proper pronunciation. Daniel Jones has written a complete dictionary to help people to say words correctly in his book, ‘The Pronunciation of English’. He is considered to be the greatest phonetician of the 20th century. For example the word ‘big’ is shown in phonetic symbols to show its pronunciation /bɪg/. You will notice that the symbols are shown in slanting brackets.

Phonetic symbols for English

This is the standard set of phonemic symbols for English (RP and similar accents).
1.8 GRAMMAR

Grammar is the set of rules which govern the use of any natural language. It is a part of linguistics. Every language has its own set of rules which helps the user to use the language correctly. Students frequently ask why they need to study grammar. The reason is that by studying the grammar of any language the concepts of the structure of that language become clear and they can understand what their mistakes are and how these can be avoided. However, just by studying grammar one cannot become proficient in any language, though one can become familiar with the standard language used by writers and educated people by reading their works. By understanding this one can realize what kind of language has to be learnt. Grammar
helps to understand the rules which set a standard for what is considered cultured and educated language. Knowledge of grammar is always an asset. Even long ago the ancient grammarians felt the need to study language and set down rules for the guidance of people.

As we have seen earlier the first study of language, including pronunciation, phonetics and also grammar was done by Panini in 4th C. B.C. But even before him Yaska (6th c. B.C.) a Sanskrit grammarian had written a text called ‘Nirukta’ dealing with etymology, lexical category and semantics. It is thought that he succeeded Sakatayana, an old grammarian who expounded on the Vedas.

The first attempt to write English grammar was made after the language began to be used in the administration of government work and courts of law as it tended to acquire norms and standards. It came to be accepted as the standard language and as the official language. It was also known as ‘chancery’ English. Usually this form of language is spoken and used mostly in the capital city nowadays. This is the variety of language which is then taught to the students as it is considered to be the ‘correct’ language. When printing was introduced with movable type by William Caxton, the norms of spellings and grammar were taken from ‘chancery’ or official English.

A standard language usually has the following features:

- A dictionary, or a group of dictionaries, recognized as standard which have standardized spellings and vocabulary.
- A recognized grammar which records the rules, forms and structures of language, which classifies some forms as the better and some as the worse.
- A form of pronunciation which it considers to belong to the ‘upper’ or the ‘educated’ classes. This is considered to be the standard, different from the regional varieties.

Translations of important sacred texts such as the Bible into that language, which are considered to be authoritative by their believers;

- The teaching of the language’s standards of grammar and spelling in schools;
- The selection of this particular dialect of a language as being especially appropriate to be taught to learners of foreign languages.

In 1926 Henry Watson Fowler wrote his Dictionary of Modern English Usage in which he set forth the distinctions between different words and constructions. Some were promoted while others were condemned as being unclear or wrong. It remains a primary reference for many educated speakers and editors. Besides Fowler, other writers in this tradition include the 19th-century poet and Editor William Cullen Bryant, and, in the 20th-century, Theodore Bernstein and William Safire. English grammar attempts to set forth rules governing usage of the language by people who want to know how to use English in a way which is accepted by the educated upper classes. It classifies the words according to their work and their function in a sentence. It deals with the way in which language functions in different time frames (tenses) and in fact gives explanations about constructions and structures which are considered to be standard and correct.

In English there are 8 types of words which can be combined together in endless combinations to form structures and sentences.

1. Nouns which are the names of persons, animals, places and things or ideas.
2. Pronouns are substitutes for nouns and are used to avoid repetition.

3. Verbs which point out the action going on in a sentence. They tell about the events or states of being.

4. Adjectives provide more information about nouns hence they are often known as describing words. They qualify or modify nouns.

5. Adverbs have many functions and therefore are a wide range of words. They qualify verbs, adjectives or even other adverbs.

6. Prepositions are locators in time and place. They tell the relationship between nouns and other parts of the sentence.

7. Conjunctions link words, phrases and sentences.

8. Interjections convey emotion but are not grammatically linked to any other part of the sentence.

Check your progress

9. What is grammar?

10. What are the features of a standard language?

11. What does English grammar attempt to do?
1.9 SOME OTHER ISSUES: PRONUNCIATION, STRESS, INTONATION AND PUNCTUATION.

1.9.1 Pronunciation

By pronunciation we mean the way a word is spoken or said. Pronunciation is usually learnt by hearing others speak. As children we pick up the way words are spoken by listening to the people around us. So the way in which we speak is influenced by the area, the social class we belong to, the educational level and the kind of school we go to.

In India the way in which we speak English is influenced by the way the English people speak. This is because of our long historical association with them. The Standard English in UK called Received Pronunciation (RP) refers to national and international English accents. RP is the language of official authority and is considered to be the most prestigious pronunciation and also the most pure. The word ‘received’ meanings accepted or approved. It is the way in which the monarchy or aristocracy speak. It is also called BBC English.

However, there are many ways in which people speak English and they are no longer looked down upon because of their pronunciations. The way in which Indians speak is no longer considered strange. In fact various accents are accepted as people all over the world speak the language with their own accents.

1.9.2 Stress

Native speakers of English naturally use stress on their words. They do not even realize it. Those who are second language learners find it difficult to use the correct word stress, with the result when they speak to native speakers of English, they are often not understood and vice-versa.

While speaking, a word is naturally broken up into small parts called syllables, for example the word ‘going’ will have to be broken into two parts – ‘go-ing’. So the two parts are called syllables and have to be said separately. One part will have more stress on it and will be said somewhat more loudly. It will usually be a vowel. This is what we mean by stress. Second language learners of any language are influenced by their mother tongues and so they stress their words according to their habit of speaking their own language. However, if they wish to speak like the British people they have to learn the stress patterns of RP.

1.9.3 Intonation

Intonation is variation of pitch- saying some words at a lower pitch and some words at a higher pitch. When we ask a question, for example, we tend to raise our voices (a rising pitch) towards the end of the sentence. Or when we express surprise we say the sentence in a particular way or even if we want to emphasize something we speak a part of the sentence with greater force and also louder. This is intonation. If there were no intonation we would have to speak in flat tone which would perhaps make our language colourless.

1.9.4 Punctuation

When we talk of punctuation, we are referring to written language. Pronunciation, stress and intonation are issues of spoken language.

All the symbols used in written work which are not words or letters, are punctuation
marks or numbers. They serve to indicate the structure and organisation of writing. They indicate the pauses and intonation that have to be observed when the passage is to be read aloud.

If punctuation was not used, the meaning of a sentence would be ambiguous. This can be easily understood by the following question. What is the difference between a gunman in a restaurant and a panda? Answer: The gun man eats, shoots and leaves. A panda eats shoots and leaves.

Check your progress

12. What is pronunciation?

13. What is stress?

14. What is intonation?

15. Why is punctuation used?
1.10 AIDS TO ANSWERS

1. A language uses a set of symbols which are commonly used by all those who understand that language to communicate with each other.

2. These symbols are used in a set pattern and are governed by sets of rules which determine the structural relationship between them. This is called 'grammar'. These rules distinguish language from other forms of communication and allow the symbols to be manipulated so that an infinite set of combinations can be made and so it is possible to have an infinite number of utterances. Languages use sounds which can be combined to represent ideas but these sounds do not have any inherent meaning and their use is arbitrary and their use is according to conventions agreed on by the users. For example a combination of sounds can mean something to the users of a particular language but the same set of sounds can mean something quite different to the users of another language. In English the set of sounds 'money' mean currency but in Hindi nearly the same sounds mean the precious stone- a ruby.

3. A language which develops as society becomes more sophisticated is called a natural language.

4. A language which changes with time, adapts, grows, develops and moves from place to place is called a living language. It is in constant use.

5. It is said that invading tribes, such as the Saxons and the Angles, from Germany brought their German language with them. Before them the Romans who had conquered Britain had influenced the language.

When the Normans defeated the people living in the British Isles they changed the language used here completely. After this Norman and French language moulded the way in which people spoke.

6. When learning a language the areas we have to pay attention to are vocabulary and spelling, grammar, phonetics, pronunciation, stress, intonation and punctuation.

7. Learning correct spellings is important for several reasons. Firstly wrong spellings give the impression that the person writing wrongly is of a lower class or is uneducated. It is also important because when writing something it is important to convey exactly what one wishes to say.

8. Phonetics mainly studies three things:
   - The articulation of speech: the positions, shapes and movements of the speech organs such as the lips, tongue, teeth and the vocal cords.
   - The acoustics of speech that is the properties of sound waves, their frequencies and harmonics
   - Auditory phonetics which is concerned with speech perception- the way in which sound is received by the inner ear and perceived by the brain.

9. Grammar is a set of rules which governs a language. It guides one of the correct usage of the language and helps to remove confusion.

10. A standard language usually has the following features:
   - A dictionary, or a group of dictionaries, recognized as standard which have standardized spellings and vocabulary.
- A recognized grammar which records the rules, forms and structures of language, which classifies some forms as the better and some as the worse.

- A form of pronunciation which it considers to belong to the ‘upper’ or the ‘educated’ classes. This is considered to be the standard, different from the regional varieties

Translations of important sacred texts such as the Bible into that language, which are considered to be authoritative by their believers;

- The teaching of the language’s standards of grammar and spelling in schools;

- The selection of this particular dialect of a language as being especially appropriate to be taught to learners of foreign languages.

11. English grammar attempts to set forth rules governing usage of the language by people who want to know how to use English in a way which is accepted by the educated upper classes. It classifies the words according to their work and their function in a sentence. It deals with the way in which language functions in different time frames (tenses) and in fact gives explanations about constructions and structures which are considered to be standard and correct.

12. By pronunciation we mean the way a word is spoken or said.

13. While speaking, a word is naturally broken up into small parts called syllables, for example the word ‘going’ will have to be broken into two parts – ‘go-ing’. So the two parts are called syllables and have to be said separately. One part will have more stress on it and will be said somewhat more loudly. It will usually be a vowel. This is what we mean by stress.

14. Intonation is variation of pitch- saying some word at a lower pitch and some words at a higher pitch.

15. All the symbols used in written work which are not words, letters are punctuation marks or numbers. They serve to indicate the structure and organisation of writing. They indicate the pauses and intonation that have to be observed when the passage is to be read aloud.

### 1.11 GLOSSARY

**evolved** : to change and develop gradually

**fluent** : to be able to speak and write easily

**dynamic** : active an energetic

**structural** : essential to a structure

**speculation** : an opinion reached by the consideration of circumstances.

**dialects** : a regional variety pf a language

**lingua franca** : a language widely used by members of other languages for communication between them

**register** : a variety of language commonly used in any particular field

**repertoire** : all the words known to someone( in this context.)
1.12 BIBLIOGRAPHY

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language


http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vocabulary

http://iteslj.org/Articles/Gatehouse-ESP.html


Daniel Jones: *English Pronouncing Dictionary*