

# A Study of Language Through Linguistic Competency

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## Abstract:

Linguistic competency is a semantic ability to use language in an effective way and it demands a good command of language and its usages. This paper focuses on the usage of words, expressions, and phrases and how they are handled proficiently by academicians to attain linguistic competency. This paper also stresses the importance of dictionaries and newspapers used as two windows in linguistic enrichment. Intensive reading will help improve the competency and this paper would like to suggest some books to improve linguistic competency.

**Keywords:** Plain English, Broken English, Tabula rasa, Competency, Performance, Euphemism, and Intentional Fallacy.

“It takes whole life to learn any language perfectly” (67 Ruskin). Reading a newspaper is a forced restraint and an unpalatable habit, precisely speaking, during undergraduate days. Even leafing through a single page is a ticklish task for the idle eyes of students who cordially hate the habit that has fruitlessly been invested in newspapers, especially, *The Hindu*, a daily, known for vocabulary and grandiose linguistic constructions. Initially, they start buying it to humour their loathing spirits and try hard to conciliate the impeccability of English usage. Many professors advise them personally on the importance of newspaper in the hope of honing communication skills and show their decayed notebook replete with many moth-eaten leaves from which students can feel many of their professors' sleepless nights spent fruitfully and advisedly. The teachers are the real masters who practise what they teach as the village school master did in “The Deserted Village”, a beautiful poem by Oliver Goldsmith. The students can remember the great professors and their balmy words inside the classrooms. The positive words fill the entire classroom and revitalise the benumbed spirits. A stony silence is ensued between half a smile and half a laugh during their literary fireworks. To put in simple words, the teachers sway, by their teaching skills, the motion of students' hearts who listen to the class with rapt attention.

Art is endless and life is fleeting. The habit of reading newspaper is an acquired taste; it can be picked up gradually. Students learn this timeless philosophy from their great teachers who sow the seed of learning into the barren minds. After achieving consistent practice in the art of reading, the students grow fond of reading *The Hindu* regularly. They find it difficult to finish a paragraph in a page at a stretch. They make acquaintance of unfamiliar words and phrases while perusing the newspaper with diligent effort. They cannot make head or tail of the words used in the newspaper despite their consistent practice. Their mental energy runs out of juice because the practice is exhausting and painstaking. During this intellectual exercise, they grasp so many words from different news articles with the help of dictionaries but,

unfortunately, they slip from their fragile memory. They try to bring them back but they are too relentless to yield. But the quote by Alfred Tennyson lingers on their mind “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (234 Abrams).

“If you want to obtain proficiency in language you must teach it” (45 Ascham). Any student of literature must follow the conviction to his/her heart’s core and start teaching the words which they learn from various newspapers. Laying all the pungent comments and hearty compliments aside, students must burn the midnight oil and leave no stone unturned in this regard. Soon after, their attention shifts from newspaper to literature and they change the modus operandi too. Reading alone does not come in handy so they ought to get into the habit of using a diary on which they conscientiously note down the new words grafted from various literary sources and make sure of themselves that they do not want to become a copycat who imitates words and phrases without understanding. They wish to make an everlasting relationship with words so they willingly fall in love with a method called ‘Internalisation’ which comprises rereading, revisiting, redefining, remembering, reviewing, recalling, reproducing, and retelling. These will help them remember the words quickly and effectively.

Vocabulary building is a cerebral exercise where ‘competency’ is transformed into ‘performance’. If people have the faculty of transforming passive vocabulary (which are stubborn) into active vocabulary, they will become a proficient wordsmith. They must take hold of contexts and ideas embedded in texts and words. Do not let the words choose their contexts forcefully, on the contrary, let the contexts choose the words naturally. If the chosen word is incongruous, the context will not give the desired meaning. Bearing this idea, students must spot the contextual meaning in their literary sources. Figuring out the contextual meaning from a web of semantic confusions is the very fabric of linguistic architecture sealed closely inside the text. They have to play a sedulous ape and take inspiration from Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, George Orwell, and Somerset Maugham who are the real masters of the English language.

Newspaper and dictionary are a happy pair complementing each other. Nowadays, they are given little importance by students whose focus is only on fluency rather than accuracy. In the past, teachers held a common opinion that dictionary was not a reference book, on the contrary, it was a text book that should be used in classrooms like other textbooks. Thanks to G.B. Shaw for writing an essay on broken English and he knew it very well that even an English man cannot speak his mother tongue impeccably because Spoken English is entirely different from Written English. He brushed aside the term Fluent English and embraced Plain English which has been spoken by a large number of people in the world. Fluent English is not Standard English conversed by the British. Many people hold a chimera about Fluent English which they consider the best English but it is not so. If a person talks fluently, it means, he or she speaks continuously and not flawlessly. The real language is a language that has been conversed by the common people as stated by William Wordsworth. Linguistic competency guides people to get along with the common conversations exchanged among people.

Communicative competency is one of the abiding faculties endowed with human beings pertaining to their language domain. This competency helps people think out of the box and propels them to widen their epistemological horizons. This shuns literal translation that takes place in conscious mind. When one devotes a span of time to immerse in a dictionary (doing away with mugging up words), this competency will be enhanced and boosted. This will help build vocabulary storehouse which stands people in good stead when they stumble upon words. This will trigger their brain cells to think nimbly and act promptly. But any language spoken by people embraces linguistic competency along with communicative competency.

“Tabula rasa” (156 Locke) is a term used by John Locke. This means the childhood memories will be deeply registered in budding minds and the same can’t be eradicated easily. A child’s mind, like a clean slate, has everlasting memory. Any 90’s kids can remember the incoherent chorus of first friends, faltering alphabet, confusing mathematics, carefree childhood days, joyful Sundays, painful Mondays, Parle G, Shakthiman, progress report and so on. Language plays a spinal role in bringing back the treasured memories. It gives many avenues to think and act. People forget Mathematics and Science taught in the class but it is very difficult to erase Tamil and English from their memories because both are language registered in their subconscious mind. So, learning a language is different from learning about the language.

“It is the slaver kills, and not the bite” (Pope 123). Alexander Pope remarked about 300 years ago about the use of polite words which have become a growing custom cultivated by the educated people. It is a universal truth that human communication is born out of cries based on the sounds uttered by birds and animals. Followed by gestures, people use crude and half- conceived words to express their emotions. Even Hermes, the first messenger of God, used plain words to interpret God’s message to the native people. Many decades later, the crudeness had slowly been changed and people started using the right words based on their dialects. In this case, linguistic shifts brought by many makers of the English language tremendously helped people choose the right word to match the context aptly. With the advent of language progression, the history of the English language has been replete with Euphemism, a term expressing polite words. Thus, the word ‘death’ has multiple versions: ‘kick the bucket’, ‘go to Maker’, ‘pay the debt of nature’, ‘attain divinity’, ‘join the majority’, ‘bite the dust’, ‘depart this life’, ‘breathe his/her last’, and ‘someone is no more’. Linguistic competency encourages students to use the supreme art of Euphemism in their writing and speaking.

*The Reader’s Digest* is one of the magazines that alters the way of linguistic perceptions implied by people. To sharpen linguistic competency, one must choose the right prepositions because they are alluringly deceptive. Once, an angry husband penned a wrathful letter to his wife stating her incorrigible mistakes which he could hardly tolerate. His letter expressed, ‘I completely mad on you and I can’t put up with your disobedience nowadays’. His wife’s joy couldn’t be traced by words for she construed the note given by her husband as a positive one. She sent a prompt reply to her husband and showered a thousand thanks because ‘mad on’ means ‘you are crazy about somebody or you love somebody heartily’. The husband should have used ‘mad at’ in place of the phrase ‘mad on’. If one misplaces a preposition unwittingly, it will throw mud on one’s face. The desired meaning will be a debacle, if one fails to grasp the competency. Reading classics is a great boon. The classics are a storehouse where one can derive indefatigable literary and linguistic pleasure. They are filled with meaningful expressions which will come in handy for a beginner. One must shun the age- old adage that classics are old and outdated but they are, in real, antique and still shine their spleen brilliantly. An individual must spend time with the works of Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Dr Johnson, William Wordsworth, Thomas Hardy and Jane Austen. These writers will help achieve the excellence of linguistic competency. Recently, a Facebook enthusiast murmurs a rumour about the origin of the word ‘unfriend’ on the internet. He states that the word ‘unfriend’ is coined by Facebook since it has been a feature incorporated in Facebook. People believe that this word is new and a dime a dozen on Facebook, a social media app where most of the cultured apes misspend their valuable time lavishly. To unfold an open secret about the word, it was coined by wise Shakespeare.

George Orwell, one of the best writers, stresses the importance of Plain English spoken by the vulgar people. Vulgar here means native. To imbibe linguistic competency, one must hinge on Plain English. Plain English is a simple English which eschews grand vocabulary and bombastic words. It is like hitting the nail on the head rather than beating around the bush. The same idea is refrigerated by Sir Ernest Gowers in his *The Complete Plain Words*. He advises students and scholars, “do not impress your audience with your words” (123 Gowers). The best communication, according to him, is to be conveyed easily and understood promptly. A good dictionary guides people to use appropriate words based on the contexts and it will develop the competency.

A common belief says, do not refer to dictionaries frequently when one fails to arrive at a meaning of a particular word or phrase. If one succeeds in finding out the contextual meaning, one can understand the used words effortlessly without consulting a dictionary. Yes, true, the contextual meaning is quintessence. But it does not give the fruit of success all the time. For instance, the word ‘dinner’ is attached to a particular time, ‘night’. According to a popular belief, dinner is the meal usually taken by people at night. If one looks into an unabridged dictionary, dinner means the principal meal of the day and it can be taken at any point of time in a day irrespective of timings. ‘I have had a sumptuous dinner with my uncle this morning’ is an example from *The Reader’s Digest*. The change of contextual meaning is determined by the placement of judicious word according to its usage.

Without consulting dictionaries, glossaries, and footnotes, you will not be able to understand Shakespeare or Milton. It is very difficult to match the words with their contexts. For example, in the sentence, ‘she is a nice girl’, the word ‘nice’ had a plenty of interpretations in Shakespeare’s time. ‘Nice’ those days meant ‘cunning’, ‘beautiful’, ‘sharp’, ‘brilliant’, and ‘good’. The same word has been evolved and has attained many polysemous changes during many language shifts. So, one must understand the origin of the word and adopt it according to the context. If one failed to understand the Elizabethan English, he or she would not achieve the intended meaning of Shakespeare. Linguistic competency dispels the confusion and encourages students to comprehend the buried meanings inside a work of art.

The very first line of the novel *Emma* runs thus: “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, rich and...” (07 Austen). The author of the novel is Jane Austen, a Victorian novelist whose words are so ingenious and clever. People laugh at Jane for using the adjective ‘handsome’ as an epithet for a woman. Many conventional people frown at the usage of this sort and they assume that Jane has committed a linguistic *faux pas*. People have a delusion that ‘beautiful’ is always attached to women whereas ‘handsome’, men. The word ‘handsome’ is also applied for a woman who has a stout physical frame. The usage of words will educate to comprehend the context. Reading against the grain always makes a room for better understanding which is unexamined in a text or work.

‘The new shoe bites me’ is an infantile expression tendered by people in every walk of life. If one takes the literal meaning of the word ‘bite’, the sentence will be a sheer absurd. No shoe has teeth to bite or nibble at one’s heel. Many researches are done by people to figure out the apt word for ‘shoe biting’, but the venture has proved a wild- goose chase. Many days later, a new discovery was made on the phrase, ‘a pinch of salt’. One can browse the word in a dictionary and chance upon a linguistic serendipity. The word ‘pinch’ also means ‘a discomfort feeling when one wears a new shoe. Thus, dictionaries give not only the desired meaning but also the unexplored meaning.

The usage of words needs to be encouraged among students as well as teachers. Learning a new word is like swallowing a tasty meal. The meal of language should properly be digested. Linguistic competency will help people digest the usage of English. It is futile to enjoy the language without cognizing the usage

of words. The words ‘ache’ and ‘pain’ are hardly distinguishable. Pain is severe, intense, and acute. Ache is less painful but chronic. During the pandemic, everyone was vaccinated against Covid-19. When someone receives a hypodermic needle into his arm, he feels a sudden pain on the surface of his arm, which is so intense but quickly disappeared, it is ‘pain’. After two days, when he will have a bothering pain inside his arm, it is ache. Toothache, headache, stomachache, and backache are the examples representing ache.

A man goes to a restaurant with his cronies to have breakfast. The restaurant is choked with people who make hustle and bustle and wage a war with food. The tired waiter of the restaurant cools the customers’ heels for a long time. To while away the time, the man gazes at the interior design of the air-conditioned room which is par excellence. Suddenly, his eyes catch a glimpse of a notice board with the following words ‘kitchen, no admission’. He is bemused for a while: The word ‘admission’ is generally used in academic institutions. ‘Admissions open’, ‘free admission’, and ‘admissions are on’ are the common phrases used there. Admission is a vacant place to be filled by someone, hence, the word ‘admission’ should be used only for people. The term admission must be replaced with ‘no admittance’ here. ‘No admittance’ means, the entry of physical presence is prohibited. The semantic difference should be understood to master linguistic proficiency.

Meaning is a cultural heritage gathered in a linguistic storehouse and the key to open the house is language. Some meanings can be understood quickly but some are tough to understand. In order to comprehend the embedded meanings buried in texts, one must break off semantic confusions embroiled in texts for they are determined by different interpretations derived from signs, symbols, and images camouflaged in verbal and non-verbal communications. John Keats explains this linguistic serendipity as, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter” (Abrams 456). It is mere child’s play to grasp ‘literal meanings’ but it is very hard to understand ‘metaphorical meanings’ hidden inherently in writing as well as in speaking. Linguistic competency will be the elixir to tackle the semantic confusions. It sheds the confusions occurred in interpretations and sharpens the accuracy of English expressions without mangling the beauty of the language.

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