

Functions of Language



Language games are the different ways you use language according to a given context of conversation, the goals of language in that context, and the people involved in the context language is being used.

The language game being played can change on account of culture, gender, race, environment, age, levels of intimacy, personality, styles of communication, and goals of communication amongst other factors.

Here are some examples of general language games:

Informative language: Language that is either true or false. The function of using informative language, or playing the informative language game, is to give information.

Example of informative language: If you want to drive to my house and you're driving south on I-53, take exit #6 onto Bell Avenue, travel 3.6 miles on Bell and take a right on 3rd Street. My address is 7539 3rd Street. My house is on the right.

The directions to my house are either right or wrong. I either live at 7539 3rd Street, or I don't. The game I'm playing is one of informing.

Directive language: Language used to direct or influence actions. Directive language can range from a command to a suggestion.

Examples of directive language:

"Pass the asparagus please."

"Look at that bird!"

"Chew with your mouth closed."

Each of these examples of directive language gives direction for action.

Expressive language: Language that communicates feelings and attitudes, such as within poetry, or within some religious language, or music, or simply when you're expressing your feelings and opinions to someone, or even when you're expressing your feelings and opinions to yourself, such as in a diary or a journal.

Examples of expressive language:

"I love asparagus."

"I wish I were a bird."

Things like wearing a certain hat, crying, giving a hug, or even sulking in your chair can also be forms of expressive language.

Ceremonial language: Language used in particular prescribed formal circumstances, such as the language used when giving a formal political speech, an awards speech, greeting someone, praying, some legal ceremonies, saying the pledge of allegiance, etc.

Examples of ceremonial language:

"Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"All rise for the honorable Judge Robertson."

Other examples of ceremonial language would be shaking hands, bowing, folding your hands to pray, or kissing cheeks to greet. Ceremonial language, like all language games, doesn't have to be verbal. Lighting a candle or wearing certain clothes could be ceremonial language too.

The Complication of Blending Games

When you play sports you usually know what game you're playing, and it's usually one game at a time. However, when you are taking part in language games it's much harder to know what game is being played when, and often more than one game is being played at once.

Example: I hate when you wear that shirt.

The above sentence is emotive, describing how I feel when you wear that shirt, and perhaps it's also directional, asking you to not wear that shirt again, at least not around me.

There are many different language games, more than listed above. The rules to language games are never perfectly clear, and they're never guaranteed to be static. The statement "I hate when you wear that shirt," could also be a comedy language game in the right context. Good critical thinkers are always on their toes, always evaluating the language game, or games, being played and trying to discover what rules are in place.