

Understanding Language

A Modern Linguistics Textbook with Islamic Reflections



Ahmad Nadhif

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- (1) Setiap Orang yang dengan tanpa hak melakukan pelanggaran hak ekonomi sebagaimana dimaksud dalam Pasal 9 ayat (1) huruf i untuk Penggunaan Secara Komersial dipidana dengan pidana penjara paling lama 1 (satu) tahun dan/atau pidana denda paling banyak Rp100.000.000 (seratus juta rupiah).
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**UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE
A MODERN LINGUISTICS TEXTBOOK
WITH ISLAMIC REFLECTIONS**

Ahmad Nadhif

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PREFACE

Bismillāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm. Al-ḥamdu lillāhi rabbil-‘ālamīn. Waṣ-ṣalātu wa-s-salāmu ‘alā sayyidinā Muḥammad, wa ‘alā ālihi wa aṣḥābihi ajma‘īn.

1. The Gift of Language

Language is one of the greatest gifts bestowed upon humanity. Through it, we express thought, convey emotion, preserve culture, and transmit knowledge across generations—indeed, human civilization itself takes form through it.

The Qur’an reminds us that this ability is not accidental, but a divine mercy:

الرَّحْمَنُ عَلَّمَ الْقُرْآنَ . خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ . عَلَّمَهُ الْبَيَانَ

“The Most Merciful taught the Qur’an, created man, and taught him speech (al-bayān).” (Surah Ar-Rahman 55:1-4)

Through these verses, language appears not merely as a human invention but as a divine trust (*amānah*)—a means for revelation, remembrance, and the pursuit of truth.

Similarly, Allah draws our attention to linguistic diversity as one of His signs:

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلَقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتَلَفَ الْأَلْسِنَتِ كُتُبًا وَالْوَأْنِ كُتُبًا إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِلْعَالِمِينَ

“And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Indeed, in that are signs for those of knowledge.” (Surah Ar-Rum 30:22)

Every language—Arabic, Indonesian, English, and countless others—is a manifestation of divine creativity and a means for mutual understanding among humankind. To study language, then, is to reflect upon one of Allah’s most profound signs.

2. What Is Linguistics?

Linguistics is the scientific study of language—its structure, use, and meaning. It investigates how humans produce sounds, form words, build sentences, and convey ideas.

Major Branches of Linguistics

- Phonetics & Phonology – how speech sounds are produced and patterned
- Morphology – how words are formed
- Syntax – how sentences are structured
- Semantics – how meaning is expressed
- Pragmatics & Discourse Analysis – how context shapes communication

Linguistics also asks deeper questions:

- How is language represented in the mind?
- Why do languages differ across communities?
- How does language influence thought, culture, and identity?

By exploring these questions, linguistics helps us understand not only how we speak but who we are as thinking, social, and moral beings.

3. From Structure to Meaning

Modern linguistics—developed by scholars such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Noam Chomsky, and M.A.K. Halliday—approaches language as a systematic, analyzable phenomenon.

Major Paradigms:

- Structural Linguistics → examines relationships between elements within the system of language.
- Generative Linguistics → studies mental rules that allow infinite expression from finite means.
- Functional Linguistics → investigates how language serves meaning and purpose in communication, through Halliday's *three metafunctions*:
 - *Ideational* (representing experience)
 - *Interpersonal* (enacting relationships)
 - *Textual* (organizing discourse coherently)

These frameworks reveal that human language—though infinitely varied—operates under universal cognitive and social principles.

Yet beyond structure, the Islamic worldview centers meaning as a reflection of divine order, not merely a human construct.

4. Aim of This Book

This textbook, *Understanding Language: A Modern Linguistics Textbook with Islamic Reflections*, introduces key concepts in linguistics while grounding them in a spiritual and ethical worldview.

Learning Objectives

Students will be guided to:

- Grasp foundational concepts and analytical tools in linguistics.
- Appreciate the divine wisdom behind linguistic diversity.
- Reflect on how language study promotes unity, not division.
- Recognize how *'aql* (reason) and *naql* (revelation) work in harmony in the search for truth.

Each chapter integrates linguistic theory with Qur'anic reflection, drawing on examples from English, Indonesian, and Arabic to show both universality and diversity of language.

5. Language as Knowledge and Trust

In Islamic thought, knowledge (*'ilm*) carries moral responsibility. Language, likewise, is never neutral—it can enlighten or mislead, unite or divide.

وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا

“He taught Adam the names—all of them.” (*Al-Baqarah* 2:31)

This verse reminds us that the first human act of learning was linguistic: *naming, categorizing, and understanding* creation through words. To study language, therefore, is to continue Adam's legacy—seeking knowledge that reflects divine wisdom and upholds truth.

6. How to Use This Book

This book follows the structure of a typical *Introduction to Linguistics* course.

Chapter Overview

- The Nature and Study of Language
- Characteristics and Functions of Language

- Phonetics and Phonology
- Morphology
- Syntax
- Semantics and Pragmatics
- Sociolinguistics and Psycholinguistics
- Language, Ideology, and Worldview

Each Chapter Includes

- Summary Points for key concepts
- Discussion Questions for comprehension
- Reflective Insights linking theory with Islamic worldview

7. Final Reflection

This book invites readers not merely to analyze language but to appreciate it—as a system of beauty, logic, and divine purpose.

Through study and reflection, may our understanding of linguistics deepen our awe for the Creator of speech and meaning, the One who taught humanity *al-bayān*.

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CHAPTER 1

THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE

A. What Is Language?

Language is the most distinctive feature of humankind. It allows people to think, express, and communicate ideas beyond the limits of time and place. Unlike animal communication, human language is creative, symbolic, and rule-governed.

A simple definition used by linguists is that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication. To elucidate this definition more precisely, we may examine its principal elements as shown in table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1 Core Characteristics of Human Language

Element	Explanation	Example
Systematic	Language is rule-governed, not random.	English: word order rules (S + V + O) → “Ali eats rice.”
Arbitrary	The relationship between word and meaning is conventional, not natural.	“Cat” ≠ shaped like a cat — it’s a social convention.
Vocal	Most languages are spoken; writing is a later development.	Bahasa Indonesia and Arabic both originated as oral traditions.
Symbolic	Words represent ideas, not the things themselves.	“Justice” represents a concept, not a visible object.
Human	No animal communication system equals human linguistic complexity.	A bee dance conveys limited information — not abstract thought.

Islamic Reflection

The Qur’an portrays language as part of Allah’s creative design:

خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ، عَلَّمَهُ الْبَيَانَ

“He created man, and taught him speech.” (Ar-Rahman 55:3–4)

Here, *al-bayān* (articulate speech) reflects not only physical speech ability but also the intellectual capacity to reason, understand, and distinguish truth from falsehood. Thus, language is both a tool for survival and a means for worship and moral discernment.

B. The Functions of Language

Language serves many purposes. According to linguist Halliday (1973), language performs several key functions:

Table 1.2 Functions of Language

Function	Description	Example
Ideational	To express ideas or information.	"The Earth revolves around the Sun."
Interpersonal	To build and maintain relationships.	"How are you today?"
Textual	To organize messages cohesively.	"First..., then..., finally..."
Instrumental	To satisfy needs or desires.	"Please pass the salt."
Regulatory	To control behavior.	"Stop talking."
Heuristic	To seek knowledge.	"Why is the sky blue?"
Imaginative	To create stories or poetry.	"Once upon a time..."

Islamic Reflection

In Islam, language carries ethical weight. Speech can be an act of worship (*dhikr*, *da'wah*, *du'ā*) or sin (*ghībah*, *namīmah*). The Prophet ﷺ said:

"Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, let him speak good or remain silent." (Bukhari & Muslim)

Therefore, linguistic competence should always be joined with moral consciousness.

C. Language and Communication

Communication is the exchange of meaning between individuals. In linguistics, this is often modeled as:

Sender → Message → Channel → Receiver → Feedback

However, communication depends not only on words, but also on:

- Context (situation, purpose, participants)
- Shared knowledge (culture, background)
- Medium (spoken, written, digital)

Example:

Table 1.3 Context and the Interpretation of Meaning

Context	Possible Meaning of "It's cold here."
At home	A factual statement.
In a classroom	A polite request to close the window.
Between friends	A hint for a jacket or hug.

Language meaning, therefore, extends beyond literal words — it involves social understanding and pragmatic awareness.

D. Language and Thought

A central question in linguistics and philosophy is: Does language shape thought, or does thought shape language?

Two major viewpoints:

- Linguistic Determinism (Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis):
Language determines how people perceive the world. →
Example: Arabic distinguishes between *qalb* (heart) and *fu'ād* (deep emotion); this may influence emotional nuance.
- Universalism(Chomsky):
All humans share an innate language faculty — language reflects universal thought structures.

In reality, language and thought influence each other. Language provides a framework for reasoning, while human cognition constantly shapes and extends language use.

Islamic Reflection

The Qur'an often associates thinking (*tafakkur*) and speech (*qawl*) as parallel acts of intellect:

"Do they not reflect upon themselves?" (Ar-Rum 30:8)

"Say: My Lord commands justice." (Al-A'raf 7:29)

True knowledge arises when sound thought and truthful speech align.

E. Language, Culture, and Identity

Language carries cultural values and social identity. Through language, people express politeness, respect, gender roles, and worldview.

Table 1.4 Sociocultural Variation in Language Use Across English, Indonesian, and Arabic

Aspect	Example (English)	Example (Indonesian)	Example (Arabic)
Politeness	"Could you please...?"	Use of <i>Anda</i> vs <i>kamu</i>	Use of <i>Antum</i> vs <i>Anta</i>
Social status	Titles: <i>Mr., Dr.</i>	Honorifics: <i>Bapak/Ibu</i>	Titles: <i>Sayyid, Ustadh</i>
Religion	"God bless you."	"InsyaAllah," "Alhamdulillah."	"Barakallahu feek."

Language both reflects and constructs identity — personal, national, and spiritual.

Islamic Reflection

Islam celebrates linguistic diversity as a sign of divine wisdom, not division:

وَإِخْتِلَافُ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَأَلْوَانِكُمْ

"And the diversity of your languages and your colors." (Ar-Rum 30:22)

Thus, linguistic plurality should inspire mutual respect, not superiority. Every language contributes to the tapestry of human understanding.

F. Summary

- Language is a system of sounds and symbols governed by rules.
- It is arbitrary, productive, and uniquely human.
- It serves multiple functions: ideational, interpersonal, textual, and more.
- Language is tied to thought, culture, and identity.
- From an Islamic perspective, language is a divine trust, a means for knowledge, worship, and moral expression.

G. Review Questions

1. What characteristics distinguish human language from other forms of communication found in animals?
2. How does the Qur'an portray the origin and purpose of human speech?
3. Explain how linguistic diversity serves as a sign (*āyah*) of divine wisdom.
4. In what ways can language reflect a community's cultural, moral, or religious values?
5. How does studying linguistics as a scientific discipline contribute to our understanding of human cognition and society?
6. Reflect: How might viewing language as both a divine trust (*amānah*) and a human tool influence the way we speak, teach, and study linguistics?

CHAPTER 2

LANGUAGE AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Introduction

Language is one of the most remarkable gifts bestowed upon humankind. It enables people to think, communicate, build relationships, and develop civilizations. From an Islamic viewpoint, this ability is not accidental but a divine trust (*amānah*) that distinguishes humans from other creatures. Through language, humans express knowledge, faith, and emotion — tools for both worldly interaction and spiritual purpose.

Linguistics, therefore, does not only study how language works, but also invites us to reflect on the wisdom behind human speech: how sounds, symbols, and meanings intertwine to build human culture and convey truth.

B. What Is Language?

Defining *language* has long been a central question in linguistics. Different scholars have offered perspectives that highlight different aspects of this complex phenomenon.

- Edward Sapir (1921): Language is “*a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.*”
- Noam Chomsky (1965): Language is “*a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed from a finite set of elements.*”
- M. A. K. Halliday (1978): Language is “*a social semiotic*” — a system of meaning used within context.

From these views, we can see that language is:

1. Human – unique to mankind.
2. Symbolic – made of arbitrary sounds and signs.
3. Systematic – governed by structural rules.
4. Social – learned and shared within communities.

5. Meaningful – always serving communication and expression.

In the Islamic perspective, language is also a sign of divine wisdom (*āyah*). Human diversity in languages is a reflection of God’s design in creation, meant for understanding and cooperation among peoples.

C. The Major Characteristics of Human Language

Linguists have identified several features that distinguish human language from animal communication. Below are the most commonly discussed characteristics, each followed by a short reflection connecting it to human responsibility and meaning.

1. Arbitrariness

There is no natural connection between the sound of a word and its meaning. For instance, the animal called *cat* in English is *kucing* in Indonesian and *qitt* in Arabic — showing that the link between sound and meaning is conventional, not inherent.

This arbitrariness gives language its flexibility and cultural variation. From a spiritual lens, the human ability to name and assign meaning is a reflection of intellectual capacity and stewardship — a responsibility to use words wisely.

2. Productivity (or Creativity)

Humans can produce and understand infinite new utterances, even ones never heard before. We invent words, combine ideas, and create metaphors.

This creativity illustrates human intellect and imagination. Yet in moral terms, it reminds us that language should be used for truth, goodness, and clarity, not falsehood or harm. Speech is a creative act — and thus, an ethical one.

3. Displacement

Human language allows reference to things beyond the immediate context — past, future, hypothetical, or abstract. This ability makes storytelling, planning, and moral reasoning possible.

It also allows humans to speak about unseen realities and ideals — such as justice, mercy, or hope — reflecting the higher cognitive and spiritual dimension of human communication.