PART I. BEGINNING LINGUISTICS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE

KEY TOPIC(S):
- Popular ideas about language: The equality of languages.


**THE EQUALITY OF LANGUAGES**

It comes near to stating the obvious that all languages have developed to express the needs of their users, and that in a sense all languages are equal. But this tenet of modern linguistics has often been denied, and still needs to be defended. Part of the problem is that the word ‘equal’ needs to be used very carefully. We do not know how to quantify language, so as to be able to say whether all languages have the same ‘amounts’ of grammar, phonology, or semantic structure. There may indeed be important differences in the structural complexity of language, and this possibility needs to be investigated. But all languages are arguably equal in the sense that there is nothing intrinsically limiting, demeaning, or handicapping about any of them. All languages meet the social and psychological needs of their speakers, are equally deserving of scientific study, and can provide us with valuable information about human nature and society.

**A LINGUISTIC MYTH**

A belief that some languages are intrinsically superior to others is widespread, but it has no basis in linguistic fact. Some languages are of course more useful or prestigious than others, at a given period of history, but this is due to the pre-eminence of the speakers at that time, and not to any inherent linguistic characteristics. The view of modern linguistics is that a language should not be valued on the basis of the political or economic influence of its speakers. If it were otherwise, we would have to rate the Spanish and Portuguese spoken in the 16th century as somehow ‘better’ than they are today, and modern American English would be ‘better’ than British English. Yet when we make such comparisons, we find only a small range of linguistic differences, and nothing to warrant such sweeping conclusions.

At present, it is not possible to rate the excellence of languages in linguistic terms. And it is no less difficult to arrive at an evaluation in aesthetic, philosophical, literary, religious, or cultural terms. How, ultimately, could we compare the merits of Latin and Greek with the proverbial wisdom of Chinese, the extensive oral literature
of the Polynesian islands, or the depth of scientific knowledge which has been expressed in English? Perhaps one day some kind of objective linguistic evaluation measure will be devised; but until then, the thesis that some languages are intrinsically better than others has to be denied.

Question 1. Mark the thesis and main points of this text. What would you say is the overall idea the author wants to explore in this text?

Question 2. Crystal argues that ‘the view of modern linguistics is that a language should not be valued on the basis of the political or economic influence of its speakers’. What are your thoughts in relation to this idea?
Question 3. What does the author mean by the phrase ‘At present, it is not possible to rate the excellence of languages in linguistic terms’?

Question 4. In what ways do you think the view that some languages are more equal than others is widespread? What suggestions do you have to change this situation?
Question 5. Using Crystal’s text as a guide, do you believe there are primitive languages? Why?

Read the following text and comment on what you have learned after reading it:

[...] is the idea that there are such things as ‘primitive’ languages – languages with a simple grammar, a few sounds, and a vocabulary of only a few hundred words, whose speakers have to compensate for their language’s deficiencies through gestures. Speakers of ‘primitive’ languages have often been thought to exist, and there has been a great deal of speculation about where they might live, and what their problems might be [...]. The fact of the matter is that every culture which has been investigated, no matter how ‘primitive’ it may be in cultural terms, turns out to have a fully developed language, with a complexity comparable to those of the so-called ‘civilized’ nations. Anthropologically speaking, the human race can be said to have evolved from primitive to civilized states, but there is no sign of language having gone through the same kind of evolution [...]. All languages have a complex grammar: there may be relative simplicity in one respect (e.g. no word-endings), but there seems always to be relative complexity in another (e.g. word-position). People sometimes think of languages such as English as ‘having little grammar’, because there are few word-endings. But this is once again the unfortunate influence of Latin, which makes us think of complexity in terms of the inflectional system of that language.
Question 6. Complete the following passage (Crystal, 1987) with a suitable word for each blank:

Languages of excellence
Latin and Greek were for centuries viewed as models of ...............(1) in western Europe because of the literature and thought which these ...............(2) expressed; and the study of modern languages is still influenced by the practices of generations of classical linguistic scholars.

The idea that one’s own language is ...............(3) to others is widespread, but the reasons given for the superiority vary greatly. A ...............(4) might be viewed as the oldest, or the most logical, or the language of gods, or simply the ...............(5) to pronounce or the best for singing. Arabic speakers, for example, feel that their classical language is the most beautiful and logical, with an incomparable grammatical symmetry and lexical richness. Classical Arabic is strongly ...............(6) with religion, as the language of the Qur’an is held to provide miraculous evidence of the truth of Islam. From this ...............(7), it would be self-evident that, as God chose Arabic as the vehicle of his revelation to his Prophet, this must be the language used in heaven, and thus must be ...............(8) to all others.

However, a similar argument has been applied to several other languages, such as Sanskrit and Classical Hebrew, especially in relation to claims about which language is the oldest. For example, J. G. Becanus (1518-72) argued that German was superior to all other ...............(9). It was the language Adam spoke in Eden, but it was not affected in the Babel event, because the early Germans (the Cimbrians) did not assist in the construction of the ...............(10). God later caused the Old Testament to be translated from the original German (no longer extant) into Hebrew.

What was your prior knowledge of the subject before you read this text?
Now, mark the thesis and main points of this text. What would you say is the overall idea the author wants to explore in this text?