and use lexical and syntactic patterns; communicative competence, which is our ability to use our grammatical competence to communicate effectively; and creative competence, which is our ability to exploit the other competences uniquely. We need now to consider in more detail some of the functions which these competences enable, in other words, what we use language for. This is the concern of the next section.

2.2   The functions of language

We use language for an almost infinite number of purposes, from writing letters, or notes to the milkman, to gossiping with our friends, making speeches and talking to ourselves in the mirror. However, if you think about it, there are a number of recurring functions which, despite the many different uses we make of language, are generally being served. Some are apparently so ordinary as almost to pass unnoticed as functions, whilst others are more lofty and almost abstract. But the important thing to recognise is that, linguistically speaking, they are all of equal importance. Whatever social significance we may give to various functions, language itself does not discriminate.

It's useful first of all to distinguish between the micro and macro functions of language. Micro functions, as the name suggests, cover the particular individual uses whilst macro functions relate to the larger, more general purposes underlying language use. Let's begin by looking at some of the micro functions.[1]

2.2.1   Micro functions
(i)   *To release nervous/physical energy (physiological function)*
This may seem a rather trivial function but in fact a good deal of language use has a physiological purpose. If you are a sports fan watching your favourite sport on television you may well feel the overwhelming urge at certain exciting moments in the match to shout instructions to the players: *Go on, don't mess about, for God's sake shoot!* The instructions are perfectly useless; they serve no communicative purpose, but they allow us to release pent-up energy which otherwise would be quite intolerable. A great deal of what we say when angry, in the heat of the moment, is said simply to relieve the physical and nervous energy generated by emotional distress. It's often a mistake to take what is said in such moments literally. The distress, of course, is real enough but the language we use is really the equivalent of flailing about. Indeed, language is frequently not

adequate enough to relieve our feelings fully and we may need to find other ways of finding relief – bursting into tears, for example.

 A great deal of so-called 'bad language' or swearing fulfils this function. If you hit your thumb with a hammer you need some way of expressing your anger. One way would be to throw the hammer through the window. Parents frequently tell children *to smack the naughty door* when they have bumped into it. The impulse here seems to be to punish the object for hurting you. But hitting and throwing things is only likely to cause more damage, either to yourself or another object. For most people the usual outlet is a volley of oaths, the more violent the better. Clearly, words like *fuck*, *bloody*, *bugger*, *shit*, and so on, are not being used for any conceptual content they may have. They are essentially meaningless. They are being used because they are socially taboo and because at such moments we need a vocabulary of violence to match that of our feelings. The origin of many of these words is the curse and in a way we are perhaps ritually cursing the object which has hurt us.

(ii)   *For purposes of sociability (phatic function)*

It is surprising how often we use language for no other reason than simply to signal our general disposition to be sociable. The technical term for this is **phatic communion**. The word 'phatic' comes from Greek and means 'utterance'; it's the same root from which we get 'emphatic'. So literally this is speech for its own sake. The term itself was coined by Malinowski, the anthropologist, who was struck by how much of what we say is essentially formulaic and meaningless. He did most of his research on the Pacific islanders and found that the same was true of their languages. His description of this function is worth quoting in full:

 A mere phrase of politeness, in use as much among savage tribes as in a European drawing-room, fulfils a function to which the meaning of its words is almost completely irrelevant. Inquiries about health, comments on weather, affirmation of some supremely obvious state of things – all such are exchanged, not in order to inform, not in this case to connect people in action, certainly not in order to express any thought. It would be even incorrect, I think, to say that such words serve the purpose of establishing a common sentiment, for this is usually absent from such current phrases of intercourse; and where it purports to exist, as in expressions of sympathy, it is avowedly spurious on one side. What is the *raison d'être*, therefore, of such phrases as 'How do you do?', 'Ah, here you are,' 'Where do you come from?' 'Nice day today' – all of which serve in one society or another as formulae of greeting or approach.

I think that, in discussing the function of speech in mere sociabilities, we come to one of the bedrock aspects of man's nature in society. There is in all human beings the well-known tendency to congregate, to be together, to enjoy each other's company. Many instincts and innate trends, such as fear or pugnacity, all the types of social sentiments such as ambition, vanity, passion for power and wealth, are dependent upon and associated with the fundamental tendency which makes the presence of others a necessity for man.   (from Quirk, 1962, p. 58)

Malinowski is suggesting that language acts as a form of social bonding, that it is the adhesive which links people together. According to the psychiatrist Eric Berne (*Games People Play*, 1968), such language is the equivalent of 'stroking', and acts as an adult substitute for the considerable amount of cuddling which we receive as babies. Clearly it would be inappropriate to expect the formulas which perform this function to be particularly sincere. Too many people are linguistic puritans and want everything to have a precise and clearly definable semantic meaning. But the point is that we need language at times to be imprecise and rather vague. Semantically empty language can none the less be socially useful. Greetings and leave-takings are often especially problematic. When you pass an acquaintance in the street by chance you can't ignore them because to do so would be unfriendly but at the same time you may not wish to start a lengthy conversation. Both parties need a set of ready-made phrases to negotiate the encounter without either being offended. So it might run:

> *Hello. How are you?*
> *OK but I can't take this heat. What about you?*
> *Oh, bearing up.*
> *I know how you feel.*

No one expects in reply to *How are you?* a detailed medical history. Phrases like these are the verbal equivalent of waving. They are also subject to fashion. *Have a nice day* is now fairly well established but when it first was used in England many people responded like the American humorist S. J. Perelman, *I'll have any kind of day I want*, but it's not really so different from the more traditional *Have a good time*. Down South the usual greeting currently is *Alright?* and fairly popular in leave-taking is *Take care*. The phatic use of language is mainly spoken but there are some written equivalents. The most obvious examples are the conventionalised phrases for starting and ending letters: *Dear Sir/Madam* . . . *Yours faithfully, sincerely, truly*. In one of the *Monty Python* episodes, John Cleese played a senior civil servant investigating a subordinate over allegations of homosexuality. The

evidence for the allegations lay in the letters he had written: what did he mean by addressing a man as *Dear* or declaring his faithfulness and sincerity, and what of *Yours truly* or, even more incriminating, just *Yours*?

Phatic language, then, fulfils important contact uses: it helps us negotiate the start and end of exchanges whether in spoken or written form. Failure to observe these social courtesies can cause considerable embarrassment and even bad feeling, as this account by Samuel Johnson of a stage-coach ride in the eighteenth century demonstrates:

> On the day of our departure, in the twilight of the morning I ascended the vehicle, with three men and two women my fellow travellers. . . . When the first ceremony was despatched, we sat silent for a long time, all employed in collecting importance into our faces, and endeavouring to strike reverence and submission into our companions.
>
> It is always observable that silence propagates itself, and that the longer talk has been suspended, the more difficult it is to find anything to say. We began now to wish for conversation; but no one seemed inclined to descend from his dignity, or first to propose a topic of discourse. At last a corpulent gentleman, who had equipped himself for this expedition with a scarlet surtout, and a large hat with a broad lace, drew out his watch, looked on it in silence, and then held it dangling at his finger. This was, I suppose, understood by all the company as an invitation to ask the time of the day; but nobody appeared to heed his overture: and his desire to be talking so overcame his resentment, that he let us know of his own accord it was past five, and that in two hours we should be at breakfast.
>
> His condescension was thrown away, we continued all obdurate: the ladies held up their heads: I amused myself with watching their behaviour; and of the other two, one seemed to employ himself in counting the trees as we drove by them, the other drew his hat over his eyes, and counterfeited a slumber. The man of benevolence, to shew that he was not depressed by our neglect, hummed a tune and beat time upon his snuff-box.
>
> Thus universally displeased with one another, and not much delighted with ourselves, we came at last to the little inn appointed for our repast, and all began at once to recompense themselves for the constraint of silence by innumerable questions and orders to the people that attended us. . . . Thus we travelled on four days with malevolence perpetually increasing, and without any endeavour but to outwit each other in superciliousness and neglect; and when any two of us could separate ourselves for a moment, we vented our indignation at the sauciness of the rest.
>
> (Johnson, 1958, pp. 163–4)

Johnson's humorous story makes clear just how important the phatic use of language is in creating and maintaining social links. At the same time,

however, it has its limitations. An entire conversation made up of ritualised exchanges would be tedious. As a consequence most playwrights use phatic language sparingly and then only to establish a sense of realism. The exception to this is Harold Pinter, the twentieth-century dramatist, for whom the phatic function of language is its most important characteristic. He explores the failure of people to make relationships and our obsession with hiding behind repetitive phrases. More than any other dramatist his plays recall the philosopher Kierkegaard's claim that not only do we use language to conceal our thoughts but to conceal from ourselves that we have no thoughts:

Last to Go

A coffee stall. A BARMAN *and an old* NEWSPAPER SELLER. *The* BARMAN *leans on his counter, the* OLD MAN *stands with tea. Silence*

MAN:	You was a bit busier earlier.
BARMAN:	Ah.
MAN:	Round about ten.
BARMAN:	Ten, was it?
MAN:	About then.

Pause

	I passed by here about then.
BARMAN:	Oh yes?
MAN:	I noticed you were doing a bit of trade.

Pause

BARMAN:	Yes, trade was very brisk here about ten.
MAN:	Yes, I noticed.

Pause

	I sold my last one about then. Yes, about nine forty-five.
BARMAN:	Sold your last one then, did you?
MAN:	Yes, my last *Evening News* it was. Went about twenty to ten.

Pause

BARMAN:	*Evening News*, was it?
MAN:	Yes.

Pause

	Sometimes it's the *Star* is the last to go.
BARMAN:	Ah.
MAN:	Or the . . . whatsisname.
BARMAN:	*Standard*.
MAN:	Yes.

Pause

All I had left tonight was the *Evening News*.

Pause

BARMAN: Then that went, did it?

MAN: Yes.

Pause

Like a shot.

Pause

BARMAN: You didn't have any left, eh?

MAN: No. Not after I sold that one.

Pause

(Pinter, 1968, pp. 129–30)

It's the sheer inconsequentiality of the dialogue with its repetitions and banal phrases combined with the total lack of dramatic action that makes the technique so novel. Where other dramatists load speeches with images, significant ideas, or themes, Pinter offers seemingly bland statements that carry no weight. But underlying the technique is the recognition of just how much everyday discourse is made up of phatic language. In a sense, Pinter is dramatising what is *not* said rather than what *is*.

(iii)   ***To provide a record (recording function)***

This is a more obviously 'serious' use of language than the previous two, although not necessarily more significant even so. We are constantly using language to record things we wish to remember. It might be a short-term record, as in a shopping list or a list of things to do, or a long-term record, as in a diary or history of some kind. It's the most official use of language; bureaucracies thrive on exact records and modern commercial life would be impossible without up-to-date and accurate files. Indeed, it's probably the most significant function behind the development of language from being simply an oral medium to becoming a written one. Archaeological evidence from around 4000 BC suggests that the peoples of the Middle East were using an early writing system to record business transactions. Clay shards from the Sumer valley with pictures of animals, and scratches indicating numbers, suggest that a primitive form of trading script flourished there. This is obviously a long way from writing as we know it in the shape of a modern alphabet, but once pictures are used to represent material transactions it's only a small step to the development of further expressive possibilities. A pictogram of an animal can easily develop into a phonogram, or rebus as the puzzle game is often called, in which the picture represents the sound of the object rather than the thing itself, so a

picture of a mill, a wall, and a key can represent Milwaukee, or it could develop into an ideogram in which the picture represents an idea associated with the object – for example, a picture of a sheep to represent rural life.

All these uses of pictures can be found in Egyptian hieroglyphics which is one of the most complex of surviving scripts from the ancient world. But the difficulty with all pictographic systems whether ancient or modern is that they are enormously wasteful. A huge number of characters would be necessary to represent all the words in an ordinary person's vocabulary. The Chinese system has about 40,000 characters, of which most people only know a few thousand. Writing systems which use pictures, despite their various sophistications, and indeed, in the case of Chinese, their elegance, are all linked at some point to the view of writing as a representation of the real world, the root of which lies in the power of the system to record transactions and objects in as literal a way as possible. The alphabet represents an advance on such systems in that the link with the real world has vanished completely. There is no connection between the letter and the sound it represents. The relationship is totally arbitrary, that is, we could quite easily use another shape to represent a given sound provided everyone else agreed. The alphabet has no connection with things as such; what it does, as Walter Ong points out in *Orality and Literacy* (1982), is to represent sound itself as a thing.

If you look at Figure 2.1 you can see the process by which this most probably happened over a period of some centuries. First of all the picture of the object is used to represent the word, so an ox yoke represents the

Ancient Egyptian hiero-glyphics	Sinai script	Meaning and letter-name in Semitic	Moabite stone and early seals	Early Phoeni-cian	Western Greek	Early Latin	Oldest Indian
𐂨	∀	ox yoke: **aleph**	⟨	K,⟨	A,α	A	⟩
⬓ ⬓	⬓⬓ ℧	house: **beth**	⟨	⟨	β,B	B	▢
Y Y	⟨	hook, nail: **wau**	Y	Y,Y	V,Y,Y	V	⟂
〜〜〜	〜〜	water: **mēm**	⟨	⟨ ⟨	M,M	M	⟨
⟨	⟨	snake, fish: **nūn**	⟨	⟨	N,N	N	⟂
👁	👁 ⬯ ⟨	eye: **'ain**	○	○	○	○	▷
⟨	⟨	head: **rēsh**	⟨	⟨	D,R,P	R R	⟨
	+	mark: **tau**	× †	+	T	T	⟨
	⟨	tooth: **shīn**	W	⟨	⟨S⟨	⟨S	⟨

FIGURE 2.1   The development of the alphabet (Firth, 1937, p. 45)

word 'aleph' in Semitic script (the name given to a form of writing which developed along the eastern Mediterranean between about 1800 and 1300 BC). Then over time the picture becomes more stylised and less recognisable as an ox yoke, and at the same time it comes to stand for the first sound of the word rather than the word itself. But, clearly, the point about writing is not so much that it makes it possible to record things, but that it enables us to do so accurately and permanently. Imagine the difficulty of recording things without a writing system of some kind. Most non-literate societies expend an enormous amount of time and energy on preserving their links with the past either through the re-enactment of rituals or the recitation of time-honoured formulas. Much early oral poetry contains devices for recording things from the past. Here is a passage from the Old Testament which utilises a simple repetitive pattern for recording genealogy:

> And Sheshan gave his daughter to Jarha his servant to wife;
> and she bare him Attai.
> And Attai begat Nathan, and Nathan begat Zabad,
> And Zabad begat Ephlal, and Ephlal begat Obed,
> And Obed begat Jehu, and Jehu begat Azariah,
> And Azariah begat Helez, and Helez begat Eleasah.

> (1 Chronicles 2: 35–9)

It has only been relatively recently that anthropologists and literary historians have appreciated to what extent oral narrative is shaped by the need to provide a record of the past in memorable form. *The Iliad*, the ancient Greek epic which tells the story of the Trojan Wars, for example, begins, not with what we would consider a normal story opening but with a quarrel between two of the principal characters and then proceeds to give a list of the ships and warriors who went to Troy. The narrative itself, as with other oral narratives like the Old English eighth-century poem *Beowulf*, is interrupted by details of precious objects handed down from warrior to warrior. Most myths and legends exist in more than one form simply because without a written record things get added or left out. In time, accounts may become so different that they assume the status of separate stories. This need to record and preserve the past may be one reason why non-literate societies are inherently conservative in their social structures and practices. Once it becomes possible to use writing for this purpose, then the mental and emotional energies devoted to recalling the past can be directed towards changing the present. In this way we can see that learning to read and write involves not simply the acquisition of another set of skills but an important change in the human

psyche. Literacy is dynamic. Part of this may have to do with the different senses involved; the poet W. H. Auden has suggested that the ear enjoys repetition whilst the eye enjoys novelty. He illustrates this by referring to the way in which people tend to listen to their favourite music repeatedly and like to tell and hear the same stories over again, but will rarely read the same novel twice. When we look back at the way in which writing first developed out of the need to record things, we can see the first steps taken by our ancestors in exchanging a linguistic world dominated by sound for one dominated by sight. The consequences of that exchange have been profound, and are a reminder of the necessary relationship between linguistics and other related fields of enquiry, such as communication and media studies.

(iv)   *To identify and classify things (identifying function)*

Language not only allows us to record, but also to identify, with considerable precision, an enormous array of objects and events, without which it would be very difficult to make sense of the world around us. Learning the names of things allows us to refer quickly and accurately to them; it gives us power over them. Many non-literate societies believe that names are sacred; once you know the name of someone or something you can manipulate it magically by means of a spell or special ritual. In some cultures the special name of god is sacred and not allowed to be spoken except by priests because that name is enormously powerful and could be used for evil purposes. This is the origin of many taboo words. The Bible warns against using God's name 'in vain', or indiscriminately, and a special value is attached throughout the New Testament to the name of Jesus.

Our own culture is enormously confused about the naming function of language. On the one hand we feel that the uniqueness of names is a piece of superstition. How can a mere word have any intrinsic power let alone be sacred? Juliet's argument, in Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*,

> What's in a name? That which we call a rose
> By any other name would smell as sweet.

(II.ii.43–4)

makes logical sense since we know that names are made up and essentially arbitrary. To call a lion a 'mouse' would not alter the reality of the animal. And yet most people spend a considerable amount of time deciding on the right name for their child or pet. We persist in feeling that the name confers some special quality, that it is, in some indefinable way,

powerful. In Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, for example, Tristram's father, Walter, believes that part of his son's misfortune in life is due to his being given the wrong name. He believes that names influence personality and individual destiny, a theory which he supports by asking 'Your son! – your dear son . . . would you, for the world, have called him JUDAS?' Unfortunately for Tristram, because of a mistake at the christening ceremony, he ends up with a name which his father absolutely detests.

Walter is a victim of **nomenclaturism**, the belief that words represent the true essences of things, and that everything has its own right and proper name. It's a belief about language which has had a long and influential history. In Genesis, for example, Adam is given the authority to name everything which God has created, 'And whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof' (2:19). In this way, he confers a unique importance on each animal. The concept of the true name is not limited to Christianity, however; in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*, a philosophical work about the nature of language, one of the principal participants holds that:

> everything has a right name of its own, which comes by nature, and that a name is not whatever people call a thing by agreement, just a piece of their own voice applied to the thing, but that there is a kind of inherent correctness in names which is the same for all men, both Greeks and barbarians.
>
> (Harris, 1988, p. 9)

Nomenclaturism still persists; the natural assumption of children is that things have their own real names which express what they are. The realisation that other languages have different names can at first be confusing, as James Joyce demonstrates in his twentieth-century novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

> It was very big to think about everything and everywhere. Only God could do that. He tried to think what a big thought that must be; but he could only think of God. God was God's name just as his name was Stephen. Dieu was the French for God and that was God's name too; and when anyone prayed to God and said Dieu then God knew at once that it was a French person praying. But, although there were different names for God in all the different languages in the world and God understood what all the people who prayed said in their different languages, still God remained always the same God and God's real name was God.   (Joyce, 1960, p. 16)

Like all powerful instinctive beliefs, however, nomenclaturism is not simply to be dismissed; as the Romantic poet William Blake reminds us, 'Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth' (*The Marriage of*

Heaven and Hell). Names are important to us – otherwise we should not feel so affronted when someone gets ours wrong or admire so highly someone who can correctly distinguish an arctic from a common tern.

Half the mystique of new disciplines comes from the hidden power suggested by a new terminology. Mastering a fresh concept means mastering the terms in which it is encoded, which in turn allows us to control and manipulate reality. This applies, incidentally, as much to learning card games as it does to a discipline such as linguistics. The mistake is to think that the terms mean anything outside the system to which they belong. In other words, it's the system which endows the individual word with meaning and which relates it to the real world rather than the other way round: words don't exist on their own but are always part of a larger network. That is why I have referred to this function as classifying as well as identifying things, for we can only identify things within a classificatory system. The linguist most associated with this approach to meaning is Ferdinand de Saussure, whose work we shall be looking at later. But, to take a fairly simple example, let's consider all those terms which classify types of residences: *house*, *maisonette*, *flat*, *bungalow*, *caravan*, *castle*, *mansion*, *palace* – to mention only a few. These all belong within the linguistic system known as English, and outside of that they are essentially meaningless. This is stating the obvious, but even within English they belong to various subsystems, or fields, of meaning. For the moment, until we come to Chapter 5, we can think of a 'field' simply as an area of meaning of some kind, within which the individual word belongs. It's important to establish the correct field as the majority of these terms will belong to more than one. *Castle*, for example, as well as being a residence also belongs to the field of chess, whilst *flat* belongs to the field of shape, both of which have their own classificatory groupings. In this case the field we are considering is that of residences. Clearly all these terms relate to things in the world but according to Saussure they do not derive their meaning simply from the real world. Rather, the meaning of any one of them is the sum of its similarities to and differences from the other terms. For Saussure, then, the meaning of a word is dependent on the relationship it has with other words in the same field. This will change according to how many terms there are in the system. If the word *maisonette* did not exist, for example, then either *flat* or *house* or possibly both would have to expand in meaning to absorb it. Similarly, someone who did not know the word would have to use one of the others to include it. In this way each term derives its meaning from its place in the classificatory system through which it is related to the real world. Its meaning is determined by the space it occupies, fewer terms means greater space, more terms

means less; it expands or contracts accordingly. Terms may overlap, but no single item is completely identical with another, otherwise one of them would soon become redundant. You might say what about *flat* and *apartment*? To which I would reply that *apartment* belongs to a different system or variety of the language – American English. We shall return to this again in Chapter 5, 'Studying Meaning'.

In a sense we could say that language puts its own blueprint over reality, and many of the arguments which people have about words are about the way in which the blueprint either matches or fails to match. We would all agree that *flat* and *maisonette* mean something different but may still disagree on whether a particular residence is one or the other. Rivers, streams, and brooks are all different but at what precise point does a stretch of moving water change from one category into another? When does a branch become a twig? Nature is a continuum which language can only approximately represent. It is still a contentious issue within linguistics as to how far a particular language influences our view of the world but at the very least we can say that languages do differ in the way they classify things, and this means that certain distinctions are possible in one language which are not possible in another. We need to consider some of these issues later on and, in particular, to look more closely at the variety of classificatory relationships which operate in language, because they bring us to the heart of modern approaches to the way in which words carry meaning.

(v)   *As an instrument of thought (reasoning function)*

All of us have a running commentary going on in our heads during our waking hours. For most of the time we are not aware of it; like breathing, it's automatic. Schizophrenics are acutely conscious of it and imagine it to be coming from someone else. But the voices they hear are really parts of themselves which they are unable to acknowledge. Running for the bus or the train we are constantly talking to ourselves in a form of continuous monologue. Sometimes it takes the form of a dialogue with some imagined 'other', but more often than not it is simply a form of silent thinking. As an exercise you might try thinking about something, making a conscious effort not to use words. Making your mind blank is one of the most difficult things to do because the brain is in a state of constant activity; its principal concern is with enabling us to survive, and language is an essential part of that survival process.

A majority of our thinking is done with words or, to be more precise, in words. A common view of language is that it is merely a tool of thought, in other words, that we have ideas forming in our minds for which we

need to find the appropriate words: the words are simply the expression of the ideas. In practice, however, the words are the ideas because our ideas are generated in language, they come to us already linguistically encoded. Speaking and writing are forms of thought. This is why most people feel that they have not really understood something until they have been able to express it in language. Language doesn't just express thought, it also creates it. A simple example of the way in which it can do this is given by the well-known linguist Randolph Quirk:

> Most of us can remember passing through stages like the following. Let us suppose we have attained, in early childhood, the distinction between 'round' and 'square'. Later on, 'round' is further broken down into 'circular' and 'oval', and it becomes easier to see this 'obvious' difference between shapes when we have acquired the relevant labels. But then we come to metaphorical extensions of the terms. We grope towards a criticism of arguments and learn to follow a line of reasoning; we learn to exercise doubt or be convinced according to how the argument goes. Some arguments may strike us as unsatisfactory, yet they have nothing in common except their tendency to give us a vague lack of conviction and some discomfort. Then we hear someone discussing a line of argument and we catch the word 'circular' being used. At once everything lights up, and we know what is meant; the idea 'clicks', as we say. There is of course nothing about an argument which resembles the shape of a circle, and we may never have thought of 'circle' except in terms of visual shapes. Yet in a flash we see the analogy that the metaphor presents, and thereafter we are able to spot this type of fallacious agument more speedily, now that we have this linguistic means of identifying it.   (Quirk, 1962, p. 55)

What exists in terms of thought prior to its emergence linguistically is difficult to determine. Like the chicken and the egg each seems to be contained within the other. In recent years, however, a number of studies have been carried out of deaf adults who lack any kind of language whatsoever and these have shown that an ability to understand mathematical processes and logical relations exists independently of language. The linguist Steven Pinker (1995) labels this ability 'mentalese' and argues that it is a reasoning faculty which we all possess. Clearly, not everything in our mental life depends on language. At the same time, however, it still remains that the gap between mentalese and linguistic competence is huge. And we might still wonder how a languageless society would communicate. In his novel *The Inheritors*, William Golding tries to imagine a race of pre-historic neanderthals who have a very limited form of language. Their thought processes are made up of images of the outside

world by means of which they communicate telepathically to the rest of the group. But their world is static, and dominated by sensations which they are unable fully to understand. Eventually they are destroyed by a 'superior' race with far more developed language skills which is able to reason about the outside world in a more sophisticated way, but in the process an alternative manner of communicating and existing vanishes. It may be, therefore, that whilst language enables certain mental processes to develop, it also inhibits others.

A principal problem, however, of this reasoning function of language is that the meanings of many words are not stable and as a consequence it is difficult to think with any precision. People are often told in developing an argument to define their terms, but how can we define words like *civilisation*, *culture*, *democracy*, and *liberty*? They seem to be subject to what has been called the law of accelerating fuzziness by which words expand in meaning and decline in precision. Because many nouns (like *table* and *chair*) refer to real substantial things, there is a tendency as the nineteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham pointed out, to think that other nouns like *democracy* and *crime* are also real in the same way. We call them **abstract** nouns but often treat them as **concrete** nouns. We know of course they are not but, nevertheless, the 'thing' view of language is pervasive.

Attempts to make language logical and precise, like George Orwell's Newspeak in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, usually entail trying to get rid of ambiguity and nuance in language. The slipperiness of language is something that has been bewailed by philosophers for centuries. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* the seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke moans that: 'every man has so inviolable a liberty to make words stand for what ideas he pleases, that no one hath the power to make others have the same ideas in their minds as he has, when they use the same words as he does' (1964, p. 262). Words mean different things to different people, they are laden with connotations and subject to the influence of fashion. They are rarely neutral in meaning. We have only to think of the debate about colour prejudice to see how difficult it is to find a vocabulary which is truly non-discriminatory. A few years ago the term *black* was considered discriminatory because in European culture it is associated with evil and death, and *white* with purity and goodness. As a consequence the term *coloured* became fairly common, but that of course entailed regarding white as not a colour and therefore more statusful. At the same time, however, in many non-European cultures, and to a certain extent in European, the term *black* was often associated with vitality and power, whilst *white* suggested frigidity, coldness, and death.

This reversal of values allowed the term *black* to be rehabilitated as a positive instead of a negative term. People of an older generation, however, who are not aware of this movement in the language, will still use the term *coloured*. To them *black* remains an offensive term. Perhaps, as T. S. Eliot laments in *Four Quartets*, we expect words to carry too much meaning:

> . . . words strain,
> Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
> Will not stay still.

<div align="right">('Burnt Norton', ll. 149–53)</div>

Eliot's lines can also serve as an important reminder to us that language is not the preserve of linguistics. The struggle with words, and the ways in which they 'mean', is the concern of all of us: not least, the poet.

(vi) *As a means of communicating ideas and feelings (communicating function)*

This is probably the function that most people would select first as the principal purpose of language. And clearly it is an extremely important function. But as we have just seen, the relationship between language and meaning can be problematic. Communication is a two-way process. On the one hand we need to be able to use language to express ourselves to others, and, conversely, we need it in order to understand what they are communicating to us. There are of course a variety of reasons which may prompt the act of communication. We use language for requesting, informing, ordering, promising, and reprimanding, to mention just a few. In all these cases we could say that language is being used to perform certain speech acts, or, more specifically, 'direct' speech acts.

Speech act theory is associated with two linguistic philosophers, J. L. Austin and J. R. Searle. They developed a functional view of language based on the notion that the social use of language is primarily concerned with the performance of certain communicative acts. The problem is to determine what those acts might be. If, for example, I say to you, *it's cold in here*, I am presumably performing an informing or announcing act, but I may also be doing other things as well. I could be indirectly asking you to close the window, or perhaps complaining because you have turned off the heating, or indeed both. Speech act theory copes with this indeterminacy by distinguishing between direct and indirect speech acts. We frequently find that people convey their wishes indirectly and it is an

important part of communicative competence to be able to decode these. We rarely find that employers *tell* their workers to see them, they invariably *ask* them. But although the direct speech act might be a request, *can I see you?* or *could I see you?*, the indirect act is interpreted as a demand of some kind since to refuse is not permissible. In this instance indirectness is a form of politeness and, indeed, the greater the indirectness the more polite it is. *Could* is more indirect than *can*, since it uses the past tense. Past here has no connection with time, it simply indicates mood. Even more polite would be *do you think I could see you?* or even more obsequiously, *I couldn't see you, could I?* These are colloquially known as 'whimperatives'. Indirectness is not simply a feature of politeness, however. It also is an important element in irony. Calling out *nice one* when someone does something stupid is clearly performing an act of derision, even though on the surface it is performing one of praise.

Speech act theory provides a useful framework for analysing the personal and social purposes which language fulfils, and we shall be returning to it in Chapter 5. Meanwhile, we could say that any utterance performs two essential macro – that is, general – acts: a message act and a communicative act. The message act comprises the total message made up of both direct and indirect acts. The communicative act conveys the intention to communicate. That is to say that in any interchange the listener assumes that the speaker is attempting to communicate to him/her so that even if the message part fails and the listener completely misunderstands what is being said, s/he is still aware of the intention to communicate. If this were not the case the listener would not bother to pay attention. In other words, the process of communication involves cooperation. A great deal of work has been done on the importance of cooperation in speech acts by the American philosopher Paul Grice. He elaborated the **cooperative principle** together with its associated maxims of quantity, relation, manner, and quality. Basic to the principle is the belief that communication involves an ethical imperative to cooperate. We go a long way before we abandon the attempt to make sense of what someone says to us simply because the idea that they may be speaking to us without wishing to communicate seems nonsense. This is reinforced by the phenomenon known as **accommodation**, or **convergence**. It is interesting that when two friends are speaking to each other they will tend to copy each other's speech patterns. They will accommodate by converging in terms of **accent** and **dialect**. This is often an unconscious process, and allows them to switch from speaking to their friends, to their boss quite easily. On the other hand, one way of stressing our difference from someone we do not like is by diverging. In this case we deliberately adopt a different

speech pattern in order to stress the mental, or emotional, distance between ourselves and the person(s) with whom we are communicating.

Clearly the need to understand and be understood, to have our feelings and ideas recognised and acknowledged, is an important one for most human beings. Language has become especially well equipped to perform this function because the dominance and survival of the human race depend on it. When the system breaks down we employ counsellors or therapists to re-establish the communicative ability. Much of the success of counselling comes not from any message delivered by the counsellor but from the client's sense of achievement in having been able to communicate successfully to a wholly disinterested party. All human achievement is bound up in some way with successful acts of communication. Language is obviously not the only way in which these acts can be performed, but it is the most developed and the most subtle, and it is the natural inheritance of us all as 'talking animals'.

(vii)   *To give delight (pleasure function)*

There are various kinds of pleasure which we derive from language. At the simplest level there is the sheer enjoyment of sound itself and the melody of certain combinations of sounds. Most poetry exploits this function. Devices such as **onomatopeia**, **alliteration**, and **assonance** all draw on the pleasure we find in **euphony**, as do rhythm and rhyme. This pleasure is important in language learning. There is considerable evidence to suggest that children respond as much to the melody of the language as to any cognitive content. Indeed, spoken English is rhythmically organised around the syllable. The syllable is the smallest rhythmic unit in the language. Derek Attridge in his book *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (1982) compares it to the step in dancing. If you say the following line, emphasising the rhythm of it, you will find yourself separating the words into syllables:

Ma-ry, Ma-ry, quite con-tra-ry

We perceive some syllables to be stronger than others, and it is this pattern of strong and weak syllables which gives us the rhythm of speech. If we gave every syllable equal weight we should end up talking like the Daleks, whose non-human condition was indicated, amongst other things, by their syllabic method of speaking: 'you-will-be-ex-ter-min-at-ed'. At the heart of the syllable, its **peak**, is the vowel, and vowels are the most sonorant or resonant of all the sounds of English. They are produced without any restriction in the mouth and simply use the interior of the mouth as a kind of echo chamber (see Chapter 3). English is a musical language – all that poetry does is to make us more aware of that.

At the syntactic level – the level of word order and word classes – there is the pleasure we gain from the rearrangement by inversion or ellipsis of normal phrase or clause order and from the conversion of words from one class to another. These changes play against our normal expectations from the language and create a sense of novelty. In his poem *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats describes the nightingale as singing in 'Some melodious plot / Of beechen green, and shadows numberless'. We would normally expect 'green beeches' and 'numberless shadows' but by inverting the order Keats creates a minor surprise for the reader. But he does so in a way which seems wholly appropriate since the emphasis of the line is very different. And turning 'beech', a noun, into an adjective 'beechen', and vice versa with 'green', is another linguistic surprise. Keats not only inverts word order but normal word classification, that is, nouns and adjectives, as well. Some poets do this more startlingly than others. The American poet e. e. cummings begins one of his poems 'anyone lived in a pretty how town', where instead of 'how pretty', we find 'pretty how', with 'how' in the unusual position of an adjective. Suddenly we find a complimentary term becoming its opposite since a 'how town' in American slang is a dump.

How can we justify, as readers, such syntactic novelties? After all, poets who employ such devices are demanding more attention from us. We can only do so, I suggest, if we feel that there is some compensating gain in meaning for the extra effort involved in processing these syntactically eccentric phrases. Part of the pleasure, then, will lie in discovering precisely how, and why, the effort has paid off. As a consequence, we could say that an essential ingredient of the creative competence which we looked at earlier is the ability to manipulate language in exactly these sorts of ways. At the level of meaning (the semantic level), most creative uses of language provide considerable pleasure through the generation of puns, parodoxes, ambiguities, and metaphors. With these the oddness is not necessarily syntactic but lies in the capacity of the language to generate a plurality of possible meanings. Advertisers exploit this capacity just as much as poets and novelists. When cash dispensers first appeared, Lloyds bank advertised this facility with the slogan 'The bank that stays open even when it's closed.' In one sense this is a contradiction, but if we take 'open' to mean 'open for business', then a bank can be open even if its doors are closed (see Chapter 5 for further discussion of plural meaning).

There is much to suggest, then, that a large part of the pleasure we derive from language comes from the successful exploitation of linguistic novelty at different levels of the language. The most memorable examples are those where the manipulation of sound, syntax, and semantics works to provide a pleasing density of novelty.

Initial summary

We have identified seven main functions of language:

(i)	To release nervous/ physical energy	(physiological function)
(ii)	For purposes of sociability	(phatic function)
(iii)	To provide a record	(recording function)
(iv)	To identify and classify things	(identifying function)
(v)	As an instrument of thought	(reasoning function)
(vi)	As a means of communicating ideas and feelings	(communicating function)
(vii)	To give delight	(pleasure function)

   This is not an exhaustive list and you may well have thought of other functions which we could add. Notice, however, that I am making the following broad distinctions which I think are necessary to delimit the area of enquiry. First, we should distinguish between functions which are 'linguistic' and those which we can consider 'extra-linguistic'. All of those which I have listed above I would argue are of the first kind in that they are fundamental to language activity. It is possible, however, to think of all kinds of functions which involve language but which are not part of its *raison d'être*, such as, for example, as an instrument of colonial rule. It is the first kind that I am concerned with here. Second, it is important to distinguish between function and use. This is a necessary distinction since the range of possible uses is potentially infinite. I may use language to get people to do things for me, like fix my car or make my breakfast, and I may employ a variety of tactics such as persuading, cajoling, or threatening. But rather than see these as separate functions it is better to see them as uses to which the communicative function can be put. It is here, as I suggested earlier, that speech act theory can be enormously helpful. Similarly with the recording function. We may use language to record the minutes of a meeting or a recipe for a meal. They are different uses of the same function. It is also important to bear in mind that a specific use of language may fulfil more than one function. A recipe, for instance, may be used to record something but if it is inventive in its choice of expressions it can give delight as well. Indeed, the more functions something fulfils the more complex it usually is. And last, we can distinguish between overt and covert uses, or following speech act theory, direct and indirect acts. A recipe written with a great deal of flourish may overtly be performing an informing act, but we may also feel that covertly it is showing off. Clearly these kinds of judgements are socially and culturally constructed and depend on individual responses, but it is

important for any functional framework to take account of the indeterminate nature of human motivation.

2.2.2 Macro functions

If instead of going below the level of individual functions we go above it, it is possible, as I suggested earlier, to identify several macro functions. But perhaps a better way of describing them would be to follow the linguist Michael Halliday and call them 'metafunctions'. A metafunction is one which is capable of describing one or more other functions. Let's see how this might work out.

(i) *The ideational function*

With a number of the micro functions identified above we can see that there is a common mental or conceptualising process involved. In using language to identify things, or as an instrument of thought, or to provide a record, we are using language as a symbolic code to represent the world around us. The ideational function, then, is that function in which we conceptualise the world for our own benefit and that of others. In a sense we bring the world into being linguistically.

(ii) *The interpersonal function*

Several of the micro functions are concerned with the relationship between ourselves and other people or things. Clearly, in addition to using language to conceptualise the world we are also using it as a personal medium. We gain much of our sense of identity, of who and what we are, from our relationships both with animate and inanimate things, and language is an essential part of that personalising process. We could say that rather than bringing the world into being, this function is concerned with the way we bring ourselves into being linguistically. Using language as a means of communication, for purposes of phatic communion, or to release nervous/physical energy, involves activities in which we are prioritising the interpersonal function of language. And it is possible for people to be able to perform this function very well without necessarily being able to perform the ideational function so well. There are those whose interpersonal skills and general ability to project themselves are quite developed but whose conceptual powers and level of understanding may be limited. And vice versa, of course.

(iii) *The poetic function*[2]

Any functional account of language must take into consideration that side of our nature in which rather than conceptualising the world or

interacting with it we are simply playing with it. In this sense the word 'poetic' doesn't mean the ability to write poetry. It means the ability to bring the world into being as an area of play. It is by such means that we bring delight to ourselves and others, but we also do much more. We render the world safe and less threatening because we can manipulate it linguistically for our own individual pleasure. Through metaphor, jokes, and rhythm we express our own creative freedom. All utterances or writings of whatever kind are by this criterion 'poetic' in so far as they appeal to our fundamental instinct for play.

We can see that these three functions, the ideational, the interpersonal, and the poetic, relate very broadly to the competences outlined earlier: grammatical, communicative, and creative. I am suggesting, then, that linguistic competence is a mix of competences which all individuals possess and which are basic to the fulfilment of a few overarching and central functions.

Developing a framework such as this enables us to put linguistics, as a subject of enquiry, into some perspective. We can see that its scope is extremely large; it's as extensive as language itself. But its fundamental concern is with relating the many individual ways in which we use language to the linguistic abilities of native users – with mapping function on to competence – and with developing a systematic way of describing that relationship. Some approaches, as we shall see, concentrate on the competence level and, in particular, on grammatical competence. This is the kind of linguistics which is often thought of as 'formal' linguistics, in that its overriding purpose is with describing the mental rules which govern linguistic behaviour. Other approaches, for example discourse analysis and stylistics, concentrate on the functional level and are more concerned with the specific use we make of language. But whether we approach language from the angle of competence or function, it's important, from the outset, that we should see them as complementary (see Figure 2.2).

(iv)   *The textual function*

There is, finally, however, one function of language which I have so far ignored. It is in a way the most purely linguistic function in that it relates to our ability to construct texts out of our utterances and writings. Michael Halliday calls it the 'textual function'. We can see it as using language to bring texts into being. When we speak or write we don't normally confine ourselves to single phrases or sentences, we string these together to make a connected sequence. And there are words in our language which are particularly designed to enable us to do that. Consider, for example, the following piece: *One day a lady came into our*
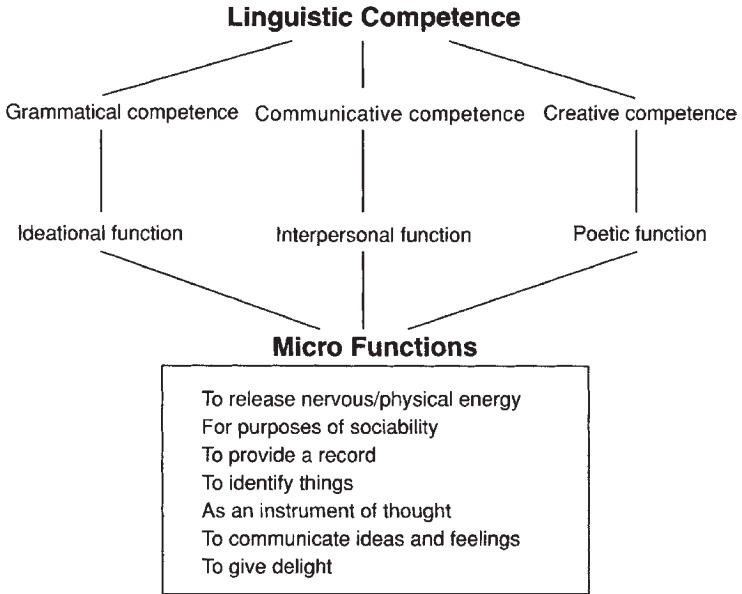
Linguistic Competence

Grammatical competence   Communicative competence   Creative competence

Ideational function   Interpersonal function   Poetic function

Micro Functions

To release nervous/physical energy
For purposes of sociability
To provide a record
To identify things
As an instrument of thought
To communicate ideas and feelings
To give delight

FIGURE 2.2

street. She had on a brightly coloured bonnet which seemed out of place there. It had three feathers and a broad blue ribbon which fluttered gaily in the breeze.

There are a number of words and phrases here which indicate that these sentences belong to the same little story. In the second sentence, the word *She* clearly refers back to the phrase *a lady*. Similarly, *there* looks back to *our street* and is only comprehensible because of that link. In both the second and third sentences *which* relates to the much longer phrases *a brightly coloured bonnet* and *a broad blue ribbon* respectively, and in each case it enables the grafting of a second clause onto the main one. These words ensure that the sentences are cohesive and form a recognisable text. The study of **textual cohesion**, the way in which words refer backwards and forwards, or substitute for others, is now quite developed and there is every indication that people are able to negotiate a very wide array of cohesive devices effortlessly. Even those suffering from quite severe mental disorders frequently speak cohesively, though they may not always make sense. Consider the following, which uses the cohesive device of substitution unexceptionably but is still nonsense: *a castle is a piece in chess. There's one at Windsor.* In the second sentence *one* substitutes for *castle* but, of course, a completely different kind of castle

from the first sentence. This utterance is cohesive but not coherent. We obviously need more than cohesion to form a successful text.

And where should this important function fit in our scheme of things? We could see it as an aspect of communicative competence since the purpose of most texts is to communicate, and devices such as reference and substitution are helpful communicative aids. But there is more to it than that. Many of these devices are not essential to communication. We could manage without them, but our communications would be more long-winded and boring. A good deal of the problems we face in drafting material are precisely because we like to avoid repetition by finding alternative words and phrases. The concern for 'elegant variation' is as important as communicative efficiency, particularly in written style. In other words, an element of creative competence is important here. Arguably, then, we are looking at a distinct skill which involves a range of linguistic competences. It is perhaps best understood as textual competence. Approaching something as a text means perceiving it in quite a different way from a series of utterances or a string of sentences. Fundamental to a text is the principle of unity whereby everything is perceived to hang together. Preserving that unity over long stretches of language is a considerable achievement and it is not surprising that rhetoric, the study of effective forms of speaking and writing, was for centuries the principal subject pursued in Western universities. So a revised scheme might look something like Figure 2.3.
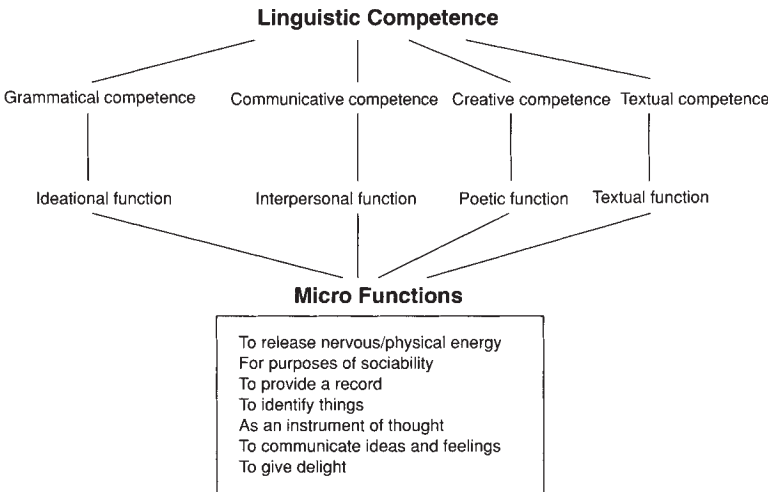

Linguistic Competence

Grammatical competence   Communicative competence   Creative competence   Textual competence

Ideational function   Interpersonal function   Poetic function   Textual function

Micro Functions

To release nervous/physical energy
For purposes of sociability
To provide a record
To identify things
As an instrument of thought
To communicate ideas and feelings
To give delight

FIGURE 2.3

2.3   Final summary

In this section we have tried to identify and categorise some of the principal functions of language. We have identified seven individual, or micro functions, which can themselves be related to four broader, or metafunctions. These functions are in turn related to a range of competences which are the natural inheritance of a native speaker of English. We must now turn our attention to looking in a closer fashion at some of the ingredients of these competences.

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