

Functions of Language

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Given below are sentences expressing one of the functions. Indicate the appropriate function against each.

i “It looks like it may rain, doesn’t it?”

ii Tired eyes,

Aching feet,

The commuters scramble

For a seat.

iii Don’t touch my papers.

iv India has a long tradition of grassroots bilingualism.

v The picture looks so pretty!

vi The place looked neat and clean.

Language is a complex phenomenon with multiple functions. Various linguists have tried to understand and elucidate the functions of language. Roman Jakobson defined six primary functions of language according to which an effective act of verbal communication can be described. These functions are:

Functions of Language

- **The referential function:**

This function is primarily used to convey information which was one of the primary reasons that language was discovered. Descriptions of situations, objects and evenmental states come under this.

- **The phatic function:**

This involves language for the sake of social interaction. This function can be observed in greetings “Hi, how are you” and casual discussions about the weather, i.e. “It’s so hot these days”.

- **The expressive function:**

This function reports feelings or attitudes of the speaker or writer and it is also meant to evoke feelings in the listener or reader. This form of communication can also happen when we are alone. For example, if my mobile phone falls into a bucket of water, what do you think I'm likely to say to myself? Probably use a swear word. We can also utter emotive utterances of a positive nature, especially when we sight something of great beauty "Wow, isn't that beautiful!"

- **The poetic function:**

This function focuses on the message for its own sake, and is used in poetry as well as in slogans. This is an aesthetic function of language.

- **The directive function:**

This function engages the addressee directly and is usually used for the purpose of causing or preventing an action. It is therefore found in commands and requests and requires the use of vocatives and imperatives, example, “Adit, come here at once”, “Please shut the window.”

The metalingual functions:

However, it is very rare for any piece of discourse to serve only one function, unless it is a very specialized and restrictive piece of discourse; most ordinary kinds of discourse are mixed.