language  1. A language in the ordinary sense: e.g. English or Japanese. 
Opp. *dialect*, also as in ordinary usage.

2. The phenomenon of vocal and written communication among human beings generally, again as in ordinary usage. Thus the subject-matter of linguistics includes both language as a general property of our species (sense 2) and particular languages (sense 1).

‘Language’ in sense 2 is often extended to cover other forms of communication; hence, in particular, ‘animal language’ for communicative behaviour in other species. ‘A language’ in sense 1 is defined more precisely in different ways according to different theories. For some it is a *language system* underlying the speech of a community: thus especially a *langue* as defined by Saussure. Alternatively, it is a system in the mind of an individual: thus especially *l-language* as defined by Chomsky in the mid-1980s. Others have conceived it as the set of sentences potentially observable in a speech community: thus especially a definition by Bloomfield in the 1920s. Alternatively, it is the set of sentences characterized or to be characterized by a *generative grammar*: thus Chomsky in the 1950s. A *formal* language is accordingly defined, by extension, in a way that is taken to apply not only to so-called *natural languages*, or languages in the ordinary sense 1, but also to artificial systems in logic, computing, etc.

How to cite this entry:
**language system**  The system of a specific language at a specific time, seen in abstraction from its history; from its use on specific occasions and by specific individuals; from other systems of culture, knowledge, etc.

The scope and status of language systems have been debated, under one name or another, throughout the 20th century. For some they are at best constructs, to be posited to the extent that they are useful. For others they are a real object of description, though conceived in varying ways. Cf. language.


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**langue**  = **language system**. French term borrowed from Saussure, for whom 'la langue' was a social reality ('fait social') constraining each speaker. Opposed in that sense to 'langage' (the phenomenon of language in general) and to individual speech performance or parole.

How to cite this entry:

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**parole**  Defined by Saussure in opposition to **Langue** as the system of a language. Hence of the ‘executive’ aspect of language, comprising both the mental processes involved in acts of speech and the ‘psycho-physical’ mechanisms by which signs are externalized. Thence of speech in the sense of specific utterances.

How to cite this entry:
**dialect**  Any distinct variety of a language, especially one spoken in a specific part of a country or other geographical area.

The criterion for distinguishing ‘dialects’ from ‘languages’ is taken, in principle, to be that of mutual intelligibility. E.g. speakers of Dutch cannot understand English unless they have learned it, and vice versa; therefore Dutch and English are different languages. But a speaker from Amsterdam can understand one from Antwerp: therefore they speak different dialects of the same language. But (a) this is a matter of degree, and (b) ordinary usage often contradicts it. E.g. Italian ‘dialects’ (‘dialetti’) are so called though many from the north and south are not mutually intelligible. By contrast Danish and Norwegian are called ‘languages’ though speakers understand each other reasonably well. There are also conventions among linguists themselves: e.g. the ‘dialects’ of Indo-European are the original branches of the family: Germanic, Italic, etc. Cf. accent (2).

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