

What is language?

The fundamental questions about the origin and function of language

Narrator:

Language first developed about 100,000 years ago, allowing people to work together and shape the society they were living in. 5,000 years ago, writing was invented. This revolutionized the way we record history and pass knowledge on from generation to generation. But what exactly is language?

By the age of three, almost all children have an expert knowledge of how to use it. But a knowledge of precisely what constitutes the phenomenon of language is much more elusive. According to the linguist Edward Sapir, language can be defined as a purely human and non-distinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols.

These symbols can be made by speech, writing, or sign language. And although we might think of language as mostly consisting of words and the way they're combined, other things like gestures, tone of voice, and accent are all part of the way we communicate.

Then there's the technology we use to communicate. These days, this often means computers and smartphones. But writing itself is a technology. So is paper, ink, and all sorts of other things. Every new technology that comes along alters the way we communicate.

Some people take a very prescriptive view of how language should be used, but in reality, it's changing all the time. It doesn't degenerate, just adapts to the different contexts in which it's used.

Language is also fundamental to our culture. It's a badge of identity, both for individuals and groups. But this can lead to prejudice. People make assumptions about everything from someone's education, to their moral values, based on how they speak.

Language also mediates the way we experience and understand the world. It influences the way we relate to each other, and ultimately, it's connected to almost everything we do in society.