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1 What is this thing called language?

Introduction and overview

The aim of this chapter is to set the scene for the rest of the book. Some of the themes and key concepts that will be developed in the course of the book are introduced and illustrated here. The main subsections of the chapter, presented as bullet points below, sum up the terrain to be covered in this opening chapter.

- Language as a defining characteristic of humanity
- Language as a tool for communication
- An introduction to language systems
- Human and animal communication systems
- The origins of language
- The design features of language.

The chapter concludes with a brief overview of the rest of the book.

Language: a defining characteristic of humanity

Language is a common commodity. Unfortunate individuals with some form of pathology, and those religious figures who have taken vows of silence aside, humanity is assailed by language. Our lives, as the American linguist Deborah Tannen (1991) once remarked, are lived as a series of conversations. With relatively few exceptions, we all manage to acquire one (and often more than one) language in the first few years of life. Having acquired it, we use it until shortly before we draw our last breath. In short, language is the phenomenon that defines us as humans.

The main thing distinguishing humans from other animals is language. Of course, many animals also communicate in quite efficient ways, as the

> dance of the bees, the sounds of dolphins, and the concerted actions of armies of ants demonstrate. But we humans feel that language is at the very core of our existence, that it defines us and shapes our being more than any other assets we possess (actually the ant, if we had a way of listening to it, might tell us the same thing). Language builds and cements our social relationships, helps us to think and allows us to reflect, is used first to educate us and subsequently by us to educate others. Without it no war can be declared nor peace announced, and neither ships nor babies can be named. Clearly, language is a vital area of study for a better understanding of ourselves and the improvement of our situation. (van Lier, 1995: 1)

Language is ubiquitous, it is all around us and we all possess it, and yet at the same time it is the most complex of all human phenomena and its acquisition borders on the miraculous. Despite the hundreds of researchers who have devoted their professional lives to investigating language acquisition and use, we still know comparatively little about it, although we do know a lot more than we used to. So, what is this thing called language? As you will see in the pages that follow, it is many things.

Language as a tool for communication

I want to begin this chapter with a couple of anecdotes that illustrate some important perspectives on language. The first is centred on a conversation that I overheard on a recent trip to California. It took place late one afternoon on the campus of a university in San Francisco where I had just given a talk. I was wandering around the campus trying to remember where I had left my rental car, when I was overtaken by a couple of smartly dressed young students carrying books and a notebook computer. As they passed me, the girl asked *So, who is that guy?*

The following conversation then ensued:

Boy: *That's our professor.*
Girl: *That's our professor?*
Boy: *THAT'S our professor.*

Here was part of a conversation made up of identical words and grammatical structures. The only difference was in the way that the words were uttered; in the intonation patterns and word **stress** – but what a world of difference they made. Whole realms of meaning were invested

in the conversation, not by the grammar, not by the vocabulary, but by the way the words were spoken.

Although I understood the words and grammar perfectly, the conversation mystified me. I knew what the couple had said, but I did not know what they meant. Then I noticed that they were looking at a middle-aged man about my own age who was dressed the way I used dress as a student over thirty years ago – scuffed boots, torn denims and a lumber jacket. His head was shaved and he wore a long, scruffy beard. Apart from the bald head and the wrinkles, he could have been a student caught in a time warp from a former generation.

Instantly, the conversation made sense to me. Or rather, I made sense of the conversation. The visual context helped me get on the inside of the conversation, and served to remind me that non-verbal, contextual information is essential when it comes to making sense of language. It was clear that the girl had a great deal of difficulty accepting that a professor could look as dishevelled as this particular individual, and she expressed her incredulity in the form of a question – which, in fact, was not a question at all. Her male friend confirmed that this was indeed their new professor by repeating the utterance but by placing most stress on the initial word 'that'.

Here is another short conversation. I overheard the conversation as I was taking the lift to my office on my home campus in Hong Kong. It took place between the Professor of Jurisprudence and the Professor of Sociology. Both, as it happened, were Westerners.

So, did you have an enjoyable Christmas? asked the Professor of Jurisprudence.
I was in Beijing, replied the Professor of Sociology.
Oh, replied her companion.

I wondered whether she'd had a good time or a dismal time. It all depended on her attitude towards Beijing. Later, I ran into her in the faculty lounge and asked her what she thought of Beijing.

My husband's family lives there, she replied. I was still none the wiser on the question of whether she enjoyed Christmas or not, and had to ask her to spell out her attitude. (Later, I found that despite the pollution she was very fond of Beijing.)

So, what do these anecdotes have to do with the theme of this book? What insights do they provide into language and its functioning? How do they help us begin to frame a response to the question 'What is this thing called language?'

First, they tell us that language as a tool for communication can often be understood only from the inside out. As we will see, a great deal of language only makes sense in context. We can only interpret the words we hear and see when we have inside knowledge of the facts and circumstances surrounding their creation, and the loves, desires and hates of those who created them. Second, they show us that while we can tease apart and examine separately the different systems of language, the grammatical system, the lexical system (or system of words) and the phonological system (or system of sounds), this will only take us a certain way in our quest to comprehend the nature of language. Ultimately, if we really want to understand this most complex phenomenon, we need to see how the different linguistic systems work together. Finally, they illustrate the fact that ultimately language is about meaning and the creation of meaning, and the various subsystems of the language must be seen as servants to the master of meaning.

Language systems

In many books on language and linguistics, you will read that there are numerous systems; for example, the sound system, the vocabulary system, the grammatical system, the semantic (or meaning) system, the communication system and so on. But what do we mean when we use the word 'system'? Here are two dictionary definitions:

system n. 1. Complex whole, set of connected things or parts, organized body of material or immaterial things. (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*)
system n. 1. an assemblage or combination of things or parts forming a complex or unitary whole. (*Macquarie Dictionary*)

Although definitions of *system* vary, most either state or imply the following:

- a system consists of a set of 'things', entities or parts
- these are interconnected and interrelated in some way
- there are rules and principles specifying how they are interconnected
- parts of a system function to do a job.

There are open and closed systems. A closed system has a finite membership. In the natural world, closed systems would include the

digestive system and the solar system. Open systems admit new members from time to time. In language, some systems are relatively closed (for example, the sound system), while others such as the lexical system are relatively open.

Language is commonly seen as a complex system consisting of the following subsystems (see, for example, van Lier, 1995). Do not be concerned if some of these terms are new to you. We will deal extensively with each of them in succeeding chapters. You can also consult the Glossary at the end of the book which provides definitions and examples.

From the diagram, you can see that these subsystems constitute a hierarchy, the subsystem above being assembled from the subsystem below. So, morphemes are made up of phonemes, words are made up from morphemes, phrases are made up from words and so on. When linguists talk of one system being made up from lower order systems they talk of **constituent structure** (Brown and Miller, 1988). Using lower level elements to understand higher level ones is known as **bottom-up processing**.

The position I take in this book is that while it is possible to argue that the bottom six levels of language constitute linguistic subsystems, the final level – discourse – does not. Phonemes belong to the subsystem of sounds; morphemes and words to the subsystem of

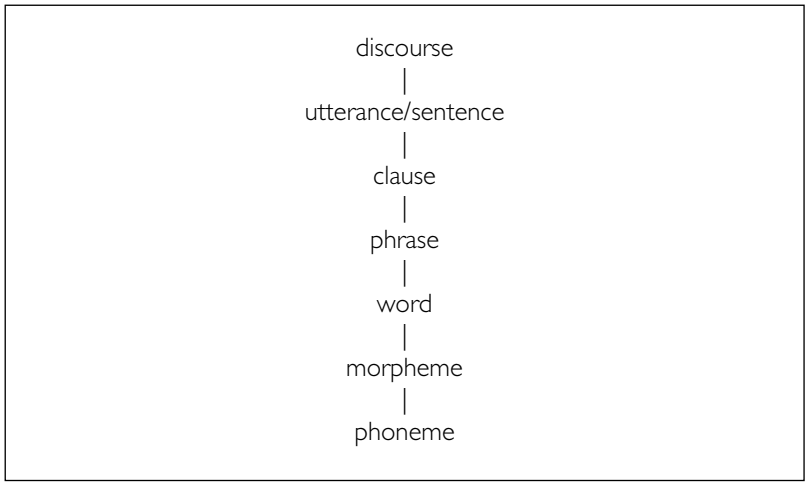

FIGURE 1.1 BOTTOM-UP PROCESSING

lexicology; and phrases, clauses and utterances/sentences to the subsystem of grammar. Each has rules for determining 'well-formedness'; that is, what counts as an acceptable sound, word and sentence as well as rules for how they can be combined. As yet, however, linguists have been unable to do the same thing for discourse because discourse is a process rather than a product. This highest level of linguistic analysis has defied concerted efforts to characterize it in terms of 'well-formedness' because, although discourse is partly a linguistic phenomenon, it is also a psycholinguistic phenomenon. It exists in the mind as much as it does on the page. This does not mean that it is not systematic, nor that it does not display some of the characteristics of a system. However, the fact of the matter is that well-formedness will be determined, not by the acceptable arrangement of lower order elements, but by language users. Listeners, speakers, readers and writers draw on the lower-order subsystems, along with other sources of information, in creating discourse, but well-formedness is not determined by the selection and arrangement of these lower-order elements.

Well-formed discourse is determined by meaning. However, meaning is a psycholinguistic phenomenon that does not constitute a system. Asking where the meaning system is to be found is akin to the foreign visitor to the English city of Oxford who once asked *Nice town, but where's the University?* I am not sure what the host said in reply, but an appropriate response might have been 'You're standing in it!', because the town *is* the University. They do not exist as separate entities.

In this book, I present language as a tool for achieving ends that go beyond language itself. I will explore the ways in which the English language is constructed, and the resources it provides to do things – to order food and drink, to complain about the air-conditioning in our hotel room, to find out whether there are seats on the next shuttle flight to Barcelona, to bond with co-workers, to find out how we did on our last assignment, to make a joke, to write a poem, to cajole a friend into picking up our dry cleaning and so on.

What do I mean when I say that language is a tool for achieving ends that go beyond the language itself? In order to address this question, consider the following invented dialogue. (The great majority of language samples in this book are from real people engaged in authentic communication, but from time to time I'll throw in some examples of my own invention to illustrate a point.)

Context: In a restaurant
Waiter: *Are you ready to order?*
Customer: *Yes, I am*.
Waiter: *OK*.
Customer: *I'd like the minute steak with fries, please*.
Waiter: *That's a good choice.*
Customer: *And could I get a little salad on the side?*
Waiter: *Well done! You're obviously a master of polite requests, and you've really got modal verbs down pat!*
(Waiter departs never to be seen again.)

In this situation, while praise for facility with language might add a warm inner glow, what the customer really wants is food on the table. He is using language, not to demonstrate his linguistic acuity, but to satisfy his hunger.

In case you think this example is too fanciful to be taken seriously, here is an interaction that actually happened. It is my very first day on my very first visit to the United States and I am sitting in a restaurant trying to get served. A young man wearing a white coat and carrying a tray of glasses passes my table. I take him to be a waiter, and the following conversation ensures.

Me: *Excuse me.*
Waiter: *Yes?*
Me: *Can I get a coffee?*
Waiter: *Yes, you can*.

I catch occasional sightings of the waiter. He's busily clearing tables and pouring glasses of water. However, he doesn't come near me, and no coffee appears. Eventually he passes my table, pours me a glass of water and hurries off before I can protest that it's coffee I need right now, not water. Eventually a woman come up to me and takes my order for coffee.

I later asked an American friend about this puzzling incident. *Oh*, she said, *I guess that you were talking to the busboy. His job is to 'bus' or clear the tables. It isn't his job to take orders for food or drink. When you asked if you could order coffee in that restaurant, and he replied 'Yes', he was being perfectly truthful – you* could *order coffee there – just not from him! While you intended your utterance to be a request for coffee, he took it as a request for information because it's not his job to serve coffee*.

Human and animal communication systems

All creatures communicate with their own species, and many communicate across the species divide. The dog guarding the cemetery gate at the end of my street barked at me ferociously this morning as I passed him on my morning run. His meaning was clear and unambiguous, and I quickly crossed to the other side of the street. However, although most of us bark from time to time, human language is different from dog language, frog language, birdsong, and in fact, all non-human systems of communication. Here, I will touch on three things that make it different: in the first place it is arbitrary; second, it is creative and generative; third, as far as we know it is unique to the human species.

Before discussing these characteristics, it is worth mentioning that a great deal of human communication does not involve language. In many contexts, we convey our intentions just as animals do. We point, we grunt, we signal our attitude to circumstances and events by frowning, laughing, crying and shrugging. We also communicate through symbols and signs. Out driving, when we see a road sign consisting of an  we know that there is a crossroads ahead. When we see a  , we know that there is a bend in the road.

Some symbols, such as the  and the  in the preceding paragraph, are widely used across cultures. Others are culturally specific, a fact that can sometimes cause problems. Just the other night in Hong Kong, I was having a drink in one of my favourite bars when the individual on the bar stool next to me struck up a conversation. He was on his way back to England after an unsuccessful business trip to China. *Couldn't make any headway at all*, he said, handing me his business card. I looked at his card, and thought I saw where the problem was. I pointed to the company logo, which consisted of a somewhat stylized owl, printed in the upper left-hand corner of his card.

Why do you have the owl as your logo?, I asked.
Well, my company wants to project an image of wisdom and protection, just like the owl.
Well, just so you know, I said, *in China it symbolizes deviousness and cunning! I'm not necessarily suggesting that the logo ruined your trip, but it won't have helped.*

(Some fascinating examples of intercultural communication, and miscommunication, can be found in Lustig and Koester, 1993, and similar texts on intercultural communication.)

At this point, it is pertinent to ask what it is that differentiates symbols such as a the road sign and the owl logo from the symbols that make up languages. In the first place, the relationship between the language symbol and the thing it represents is arbitrary, whereas with the and the owl there is a link between the symbol and the object or idea that it is trying to represent. With language, apart from onomatopoeic words such as 'Ouch!' and 'Bow-wow!' which are meant to provide some sort of direct representation between the sound and the object (although note that French dogs don't go 'Bow-wow!' – nor do Spanish dogs or Chinese dogs for that matter), the relationship is arbitrary. In the case of language, there is no direct connection or relationship between, say, the word *egg* and the object that accompanies our breakfast bacon. In fact, in French, Italian, Chinese and Arabic, it is not called *egg* at all.

Another characteristic of human language that linguists love to talk about is its generativity. This rather intimidating word (I prefer *creativity* myself) simply means that although there are finite numbers of sounds, words and structures in any language, these can be used to generate an infinite number of unique utterances. Many of the things that we say each day have never been said before and will never be said again. It is truly remarkable that with fewer than fifty sounds and (in written form) only twenty-six letters of the alphabet, the speaker of English can articulate an infinite number of ideas. These sounds and letters combine and recombine to constitute over 500,000 words, and we haven't even come close to running out of options. We even have plenty of single **syllable** options available (for example, *zug*, *wug*, *nop* are not currently part of the English lexicon but stand ready to be pressed in to service should the need arise).

Unlike symbol systems such as systems of road signs, where there is a one-to-one relationship between the symbol and the thing it represents, language is not so constrained. This is because, in the evolution of language, grammar intervened between the symbols and the entities and events that the symbols represent. Imagine that English had no grammar and its lexicon consisted of only seven words: *Betty*, *Bill*, *Ronan*, *tall*, *short*, *interesting*, *lonely*. It would only be possible to say seven things. Along comes grammar – specifically the singular form of the **verb** *to be*. We can now say twelve things. *Betty is tall*, *Betty is short*, *Betty is interesting*, *Betty is lonely*, *Bill is tall*, and so on. Add in the plural form of the verb *to be* plus the **conjunction** *and* and we can say an additional twelve things. *Betty and Bill are tall.* Add the ability to form questions by placing the verb in front of the subject, *is Ronan lonely? Are*

Betty and Bill interesting? and the generative power of language begins to make itself felt.

A further point worth noting is that, whereas symbols are used to represent objects and entities in the real world (rail crossings, stop lights and so on), language can be used to refer to things that no longer exist or that never existed. If I say *The King of France is bald*, or *The unicorn on the corner is green*, you will be able to form a mental image regardless of the fact that one of these entities no longer exists and the other, to my knowledge, never existed.

The origins of language

Where does language come from? Theories abound! Three early favourites discussed by the linguist Geoffrey Finch (2003) are the 'bow-wow' theory, 'the yo-he-ho' theory, and the 'pooh-pooh' theory. The bow-wow theory sees language as evolving from the noises made by animals as they were being hunted. The hunters imitated these sounds and turned them into human speech. According to the yo-he-ho theory, language evolved from the noises made by humans as they engaged in physical exertion. The final theory suggests that language evolved from the instinctive noises that humans make in the course of everyday life.

Finch points out that there are problems with all of these theories:

> To begin with, the first two assume that language was male in origin, since in most primitive groups it is the men who do the hunting and hauling. This seems odd because among modern humans women are generally acknowledged to have more verbal skills than men. Second and more importantly it is not immediately apparent how language offers advantages in the pursuit of any of these activities significant enough to have triggered the biological developments necessary for speech. (Finch, 2003: 11)

So, is language learned and passed down from generation to generation in the same way as other cultural knowledge and skills? Cognitive scientists think not. One such scientist, Steven Pinker (1994) is the well-known author of the best-selling book on language entitled *The Language Instinct*. He was also one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people in 2004 – a notable achievement for a linguist. Pinker argues that bow-wow theories and their ilk are nonsense, that language is an intrinsic characteristic of being human.

> Language is not a cultural artifact that we learn the way we learn to tell the time or how the federal government works. Instead, it is a distinct piece of biological makeup of our brains. Language is a complex, specialized skill, which develops in the child spontaneously, without conscious effort or formal instruction, is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic, is qualitatively the same in every individual, and is distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently. For these reasons, some cognitive scientists have described language as a psychological faculty, a neural organ, and a computational module. But I prefer the admittedly quaint term 'instinct'. It conveys the idea that people know how to talk in more or less the same sense that spiders know how to spin webs. Web-spinning was not invented by some unsung spider genius and does not depend on having had the right education or on having an aptitude for architecture or the construction trades. Rather, spiders spin spider webs because they have spider brains, which give them the urge to spin and the competence to succeed . . . Thinking of language as an instinct inverts the popular wisdom, especially as it has been passed down in the canon of the humanities and the social sciences. Language is no more a cultural invention than is upright posture. It is not a manifestation of a general capacity to use symbols: a three-year-old, we shall see, is a grammatical genius, but is quite incompetent at the visual arts, religious iconography, traffic signs, and the other staples of the semiotics curriculum. (Pinker, 1994: 18)

The claim of cognitive scientists such as Pinker that language is hard-wired into the human brain carries with it the implication that language is species specific – that it is unique to the human race, and is acquired in the same way as the spinal cord is acquired. Proponents of the hard-wiring hypothesis argue that non-human communication systems (such as the bark, yelp, or growl of a dog) have the same one-to-one correspondence as, say, road symbols. In other words, they are non-generative because they are bereft of grammar. Thus, they cannot be woven together with other sounds to create unique meanings.

This argument, however, is disputed by experts on animal communication, some of whom claim to have taught chimps languages that have the same generative and creative properties as human language. They argue that these chimps can use the symbols to create unique utterances. However, the assertion that chimps acquire language that contains all of the characteristics and attributes of human language, including generativity, can only be advanced after generations of chimps have acquired the language from their own species rather than from human beings. In other words, we need to wait and see whether parent chimps can pass on language to their offspring. (For an

overview of the evolution of animal communication systems, see Noble, 1998.)

Pinker's book is brilliant, seminal even, and fully deserves the acclaim it received. Pinker himself has a compelling way with prose, and is an original and creative thinker. However, for me, there is something unsatisfactorily in the proposition that spiders spin spider webs because they have spider brains and that humans spin webs of human words because they have human brains. It's a closing-down-the-conversation kind of argument, akin to postulating the existence of God to explain the creation of the Universe. In short, it does not account for how language got there in the first place.

A comprehensive critique of Pinker's 'absolutist' position is presented by Cziko (1995). (See also Cziko, 2000; and Barron, 1996.) Cziko argues that language, along with all other human behaviour can be explained in terms of Darwinian processes of variation and selection. These arguments are quite complex, and I will not go into them here. However, I will come back to them in Chapter 7, when we look at first language acquisition and development.

Virtually all of the language samples in this book are taken from English rather than from other languages. This is because English is my own language and it is the one that I have worked in for many years. However, while the bulk of the examples are from English, the principles behind the book are applicable to all languages.

Design features of language

At this point, we can begin a tentative definition of language by looking at some of its design features. These features differentiate it from other human and non-human forms of communication. They include the fact that language is arbitrary, creative and multifunctional. (For a more elaborated list of formal and functional design features, see Finch 2003.)

Arbitrariness

Language is arbitrary in that there is no necessary connection between a word and the thing that it represents. Four legged, usually furry creatures that bark and are popular as pets around the world are called *dogs* in English speaking societies. However, they could just as well have been called *cats*, *albatrosses* or even *posts*.

Creativity

By *creativity*, I am not referring to the use of language to create poems, love songs, limericks and plays. I am referring to the fact that languages consist of a finite set of resources (Most varieties of English, for example, have around 46 sounds), and yet this finite set of resources can be used to generate an infinite number of grammatical and comprehensible utterances.

Multifunctionality

The third design feature that I want to highlight is multifunctionality. Through language, we can make statements about the world, we can obtain goods and services, we can express our attitudes and feelings, create maintain and extend human relationships, and we can use language to create connected discourse. Not only that, but we can package many of these functions into a single sentence or utterance. Consider the following utterance:

There's a fierce dog by your front gate, and I think it might bite.

In this single utterance, the speaker:

1 makes a propositional statement about an entity (*a dog*) its location (*by the front gate*) and a possible course of action (*might bite*);
2 utters a warning;
3 expresses attitudes and feeling (*fierce*, *might*); and
4 connects bits of the utterance to other parts of the utterance (*and*, *it*)

The structure of the rest of the book

One of my tasks in this book is to argue that there are three systems: the system of sounds, the system of words and the grammatical system (which are themselves made up of subsystems), and that these systems act as resources that enable us to create meaning. In the next three chapters, I will look separately at these three systems, pointing out some of their special characteristics and illustrating the characteristics in action. In doing so, I will draw on a range of language

samples which I have collected over the years, or borrowed from other sources.

In the rest of the book, I will explore the ways in which we use these three linguistic systems to communicate. In Chapter 5, I will look principally at spoken communication. Chapter 6 looks at written language and compares it with spoken language. In Chapter 7, I will turn to the question of how languages are acquired in the first place. Chapter 8 is entitled *Language at play*. In this chapter, I will look at ways in which we have fun with language – using it metaphorically, creating jokes and so on. Then, in the final chapter, which is intended to bring closure to the topics and themes that emerge through the book, we will look specifically at English – at its varieties, and its future.

Summary and conclusion

In this initial chapter, I have taken a broad look at the question 'What is this thing called language?' I have argued that language consists of an interlocking set of systems and subsystems made up of sounds, words and sentences, and that these are meaning-making tools; resources through which listeners, speakers, readers and writers create, exchange and negotiate meanings, obtain and exchange goods and services and establish and maintain relationships. I have also argued that there is not a separate system of discourse, because discourse is the representation of mental processes. Rather than containing its own interlocking elements and entities, it is parasitical on the systems of sounds, words and grammar.

The chapter also looked at language as a phenomenon unique to the human species. In fact, it is the phenomenon that defines us as humans, and differs from other human and non-human communication systems in a variety of ways. The three that I highlighted in the last major subsection of the chapter are its arbitrariness, creativity and multifunctionality.

This book represents an initial foray into the world of **linguistics**. In it, you will be introduced to the study of sounds (**phonology**), words and their constituents (**lexicology** and **morphology**), the ways words are sequenced and combined (**grammar** and **syntax**), how language is used to convey meaning (**semantics**), and how it is used to get things done (**pragmatics**).

In summary, then:

- Language is both content and process: that is, it is a body of content that can be memorized, pulled apart and put back together again, but it is also a resource for communicating
- Language consists of three interlocking systems: the system of sounds, the system of words and the system of grammar
- Ultimately language can only be adequately understood in context
- Language is a unique human phenomenon displaying the characteristics of arbitrariness, creativity and multifunctionality
- Taken together, these design features mark language as fundamentally different from the communication systems of other species.

Questions and tasks

1 How many different functions can you think of for the following utterances (as a warning, a request, an invitation and so on)? Which one is the most obvious? Which is the least obvious? Think of a context for the least obvious function.

The window is open.
I have two tickets for the movies.
It's Mum's birthday tomorrow.
I only have a few coins.

2 How does Speaker B reveal his/her feelings and attitudes in the following exchanges?

A: *I like your dress, Jenny.*
B: *It's Nancy, actually.*

A: *Think it'll rain?*
B: *It COULD do, but somehow I kind of think it won't.*

A: *That's my car over there.*
B: *THAT old wreck's your car?*

A: *Could I have more coffee?*
B: *You COULD, but well, we're just making a fresh pot. Mind waiting?*

Further reading

Bragg, M. (2003) *The Adventure of English. 500AD to 2000. The Biography of a Language* (London: Hodder & Stoughton).
Describes how a few tribal Germanic dialects evolved into the most powerful language on Earth.

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