THE PHILOSOPHY CLUB

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

A 55-minute discussion-based philosophical inquiry workshop

Resources, media and activity materials to accompany this session:

- A 'speaking ball' to help students take turns during discussion
- Slide presentation
- Three copies of the set of six cards for the card-sorting activity 'Is this a real language?'
- Header cards 'Language' / 'Not language'
- Paper & pencils/pens for each of three small groups

[Time from beginning of lesson: 0:00]

> Today we'll be talking about the philosophy of language. Let's get started with an activity. You'll be working in small groups for this.

Small group activity: Is this a real language?

Divide your students into six small groups with about four students per group. Each small group will do the same activity.

> I have here two categories: 'Language' and 'Not language'.
>
> I'm going to hand out several examples of things that *might* be considered languages.
>
> I want you to discuss each example, and decide which category it belongs in: Is it a language, or is it not a language?
>
> Have a think in your small group about where you would choose to place your cards – but don't place them down just yet.

Place down the header cards 'Not language' and 'Language' on the floor, in separate areas, within the circle of students.

Hand out a full set of six illustrated cards to each small group. (See text from the cards on pages 3 – 4 below.)

(8 mins) **Small group deliberation**

[0:09]

(4 mins) Placement of cards

Small groups/pairs in turn choose <u>one</u> card to read aloud, and then place that card in a category, while giving reasons for why it belongs there. Continue until all the cards are laid down. (No wider group discussion at this stage.)

[0:13]

(24 mins) Discussion

Students are free to move particular cards into the other category as they see fit, giving reasons for any differences of opinion.

If in doubt about where to begin, choose a card that is positioned in a controversial place on the spectrum and ask if anyone disagrees with where it is placed.

Throughout the discussion, listen to the reasons that students give and try to derive their criteria for what constitutes a language. (When interpreting or paraphrasing, check in with the student to make sure you've interpreted their meaning correctly.) Scribe the students' criteria on the board.

When discussing the Gomeran whistle:

> <u>Optional video clip: 'Whistling languages in Kuskoy, Turkey'</u>.

*If you wish to play this video clip, **please play only a two-minute segment** (or shorter) **starting at 0:35** (after the anchor's introduction to the news feature) **and ending at 2:35** (where the woman says: "It means 'Brother, let's go down to the valley'".)*

[0:37]

(4 mins) **Small group work: Define 'language'**

> Back in your small groups, I want you to try to agree on a definition of 'language', and write your definition down.
>
> What do we mean by language?
>
> *(Hand out paper and pencils/pens)*

[0:41]

(7 mins)

Compare and evaluate the various definitions of 'language' that emerge.

You can have students read aloud their definitions, or even come up and write their definitions on the board.

[**0:48**]

> SLIDE: Khipu knots (slide #1)

Here's photograph of Khipu knots, which were used for record-keeping in the Inca empire.

Read quote from the slide:

> "There's something in me, I can't explain where it came from, but I love the idea of digging around and trying to find secrets hidden from the past," says Manny Medrano.
>
> Medrano is a first year university student who spent his spring break making an original archeological discovery. He decoded census information recorded in a set of Khipus from northwest Peru, by examining the numbers of knots, lengths of cords, colours of fibres, and other distinguishing features.

> SLIDE: Khipu knots (slide #2): Could there be such a thing as a language of knots?

(6 mins) **Discussion** (questions are listed on the slide):

- Could there be such a thing as a *language of knots*?
- Is *this* an example of a language of knots?
- Could *any* medium serve as the substrate (underlying substance) of a language?

[**0:55**]

End of session. Thank the students. (Try to give some positive feedback on what they did well today.)

Collect name tags & speaking ball.

The following six examples will be provided on illustrated cards. A full set of six cards should be handed out to each small group.

Hieroglyphics
Egyptian hieroglyphics ('holy writings') can be pictures of living creatures, objects used in daily life, or abstract symbols. As well as referring to the object they depict, the pictures can also represent sounds. For example, the owl stands for the sound "m", while the mouth stands for the sound "r". Are hieroglyphics a language?

Binary code
When we use computers, all the letters of the alphabet, numbers, and symbols that we type are converted to strings of binary numbers (ones and zeroes). This reflects the way that computer hardware circuits work: they only have two states – on or off – which are represented as a one (on) or a zero (off). When we type the letters of the alphabet, they are translated into binary code and back again. For instance, the letter A is represented by the eight-character binary number 01000001. Is binary code a language?

Mime
Mime is an ancient form of dramatic entertainment in which a performer tells a story without words. Mime artists use exaggerated body movements to convey action, and exaggerated facial movements to convey emotion. Is mime a language?

The Gomeran whistle
The Gomeran whistle is a method of communication used in the Canary Islands, west of Morocco. It is a type of whistling in which the sounds of the Spanish language are replaced by whistled vowels and consonants. The whistling sounds can travel several kilometres from one mountain to another, across deep valleys. In an region without roads or telephones, using the Gomeran whistle to communicate is more effective than shouting, and more efficient than going by foot to transmit a message. Is the Gomeran whistle a language?

Honey bee waggle dance
The waggle dance is a dance that a honey bee performs inside the hive to communicate to other bees important information about where to find flowers yielding nectar and pollen. Inside the hive, the bee waggles her body from side to side and then runs in a semicircle. The angle of the dance on the honeycomb conveys the direction from the hive (in relation to the sun) that the bees should fly. So, for example, if the bee waggles at an angle 60 degrees to the left of vertical, then the food source is 60 degrees to the left of the sun. The quality and quantity of the food source determines the liveliness of the dances. If the nectar source is of excellent quality, the bee will dance most vigorously. Is the honey bee waggle dance a language?

An invented language
Imagine a new, artificially-constructed language that is spoken and understood by only one person. It has its own unique alphabet, vocabulary and grammar. Would you consider this to be a real language?

Supplementary questions and ideas (if you find yourself with extra time)

Could you have a thought, but be unable to find any words at all to express it?

You might want to consider:

- The sense of *ineffability*: the feeling that an experience just can't be put into words.
    - But then, if you can't express it, have you really had a *thought*?
    - Can you have a musical thought or a visual thought?
- "Tip of the tongue" phenomenon, when you can't quite think of a word.
- People who have had a stroke and suffer from aphasia: they understand what other people are saying, but they struggle to form a sentence themselves because they've got brain damage. The part of the brain that *processes* language is not the same part of the brain that *generates* language.

Do you think someone with no spoken language will have the same kind of thoughts as someone with spoken language?

Can you think better if you have more words?