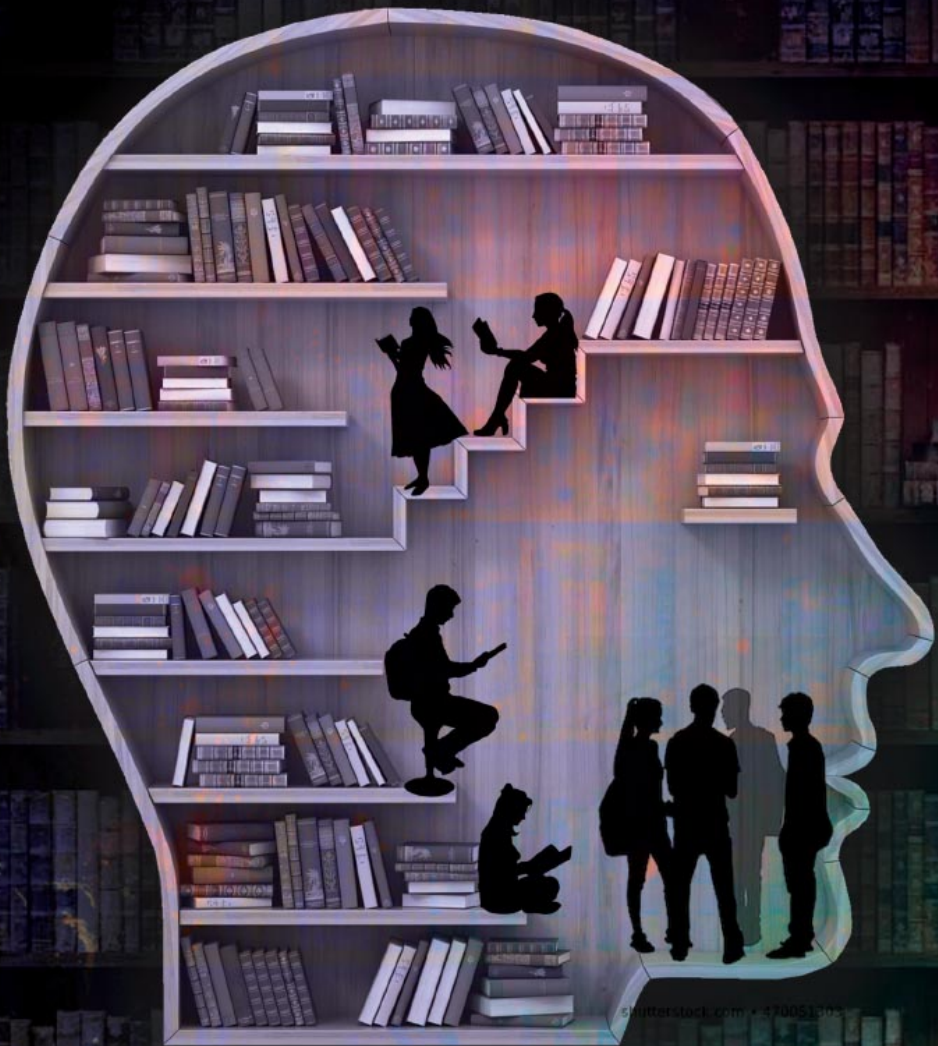


# Understanding

English Language and Literature:  
A Students' Companion



DR. PREETI BALA

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# Understanding language and literature: An Introduction

‘Language’ and ‘literature’ are words which are most commonly used by the people around the world. Language and literature are used not only in literary works but also in almost all other subjects of studies. For example, we may hear a professor of medicine telling his students, “I will supply you the literature on the function of the brain”.

A professor of computer science talking about the language of computer asks his students, “Do you know any other programming language?”

But very few people know the real meaning of language and literature in a broader sense. In our general conversation we generally take language and literature as a same thing. For us both of them has the same meaning. The followings are common questions which will be discussed in this study:

“What is language?”

“What is literature?”

“Are both same?”

“If not, how they are different?”

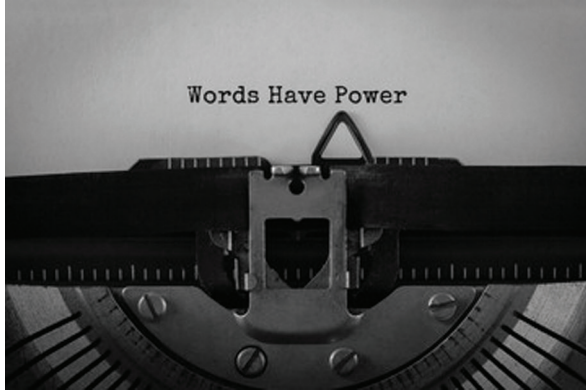


We find a great difference between them if we go deep into the meaning of the words, language and literature. We also find that language is primary and literature is secondary. The Free Encyclopaedia defines language as “the human capacity for acquiring and using complex systems of communications.” (Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia). In fact the word, language has been originally derived from Latin word, ‘Lingua’ which means ‘tongue’. When we use language in general, it refers to the cognitive faculty which enables us to learn and use systems of complex communication. There are plenty of definitions of language and literature, but in order to simplify we can say that Language is the most precious possession of human race. It is a medium of communication. On the other hand, Literature is the most creative and imaginative use of language which finds its expression with the help of language. Both are not the same but can be linked together as interrelated concepts.

Language was originated when the early men, having different cultures, started co-operating with one another. They needed a common language to convey their thoughts and ideas to others. A sign language was invented which soon became very common. They were not satisfied with the sign language because they wanted to convert their thoughts into words and wanted to hear the thoughts. So they started finding words which may produce sound. Finally, they succeeded and the language with sound came into existence. Since the people had different cultures and regions, different languages came into existence. After the invention of language they learnt

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the art of writing and, as a result, started expressing themselves in writing. Whatever they wrote was preserved and thus in this way literature came into existence.



Hence, we see that literature is the product of language and so it depends on language. If a language is dead, automatically, its literature is also dead. It has been rightly said that if you want to kill and destroy a community, first kill its language, the community will automatically be killed and vanished. There are many languages (nearly 3000—6000 languages are spoken in all over the world) so many different literature came into existence. Every language has its own literature. The literature of a language is rich because of the correct use of the language by the writers of that language. A group of language that descended from a common ancestor is known as a language family. Followings are the language families that are most spoken in the world today:





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- a. Indo-European family – This family includes English, Russian, Spanish and Hindi languages.
- b. The Sino-Tibetan family – This family includes Mandarin, Chinese, Cantonese and many other languages.
- c. Semitic family – This include Arabic, Amharic and Hebrew languages.
- d. Bantu family – This includes Swahili, Zulu, Shona and hundreds of other languages spoken throughout Africa.

## Differences between language and literature

1. Language is a set of words to express our ideas to others in other words it is a medium. Without means we cannot express our thoughts. On the other hand, literature is the thought which is expressed with the help of language. There is no existence of literature without language because without language we cannot express our thoughts.
2. Literature is produced by the creation of works in a particular language by the writer of the language.
3. A language comprises of sounds, words, meanings and sentences. While literature is made up of the thoughts expressed in any given language in various literary forms like prose, poetry, drama, novel, epic, short stories etc.
4. Language is the method of expression whereas literature is the collection of such expression in the said forms mentioned above. Any literature can be said to be rich or poor depending upon the correctness of the language in which it is created.

The above discussion shows that language is not only a collection of words but it is the individual and social passion of human beings. The language also developed and kept on changing with the development of human race. The language which is used in literature is different from the language used by the ordinary people. These languages are called the Literary Language. The literary language contains symbols, metaphor, hyperbole, etc., to express the writer's views effectively. As a matter of fact in our modern



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age it is expected that a writer should use the language of the ordinary people in his or her literary works and is considered as a quality. Since the literature is the expression of human thoughts, its content is limitless because the thoughts and desire of human beings to communicate with one another is also limitless. The subject matter of literature is as wide as human experience itself.

It is a frequently asked question that “why should we study literature?”

In this modern era when man has conquered the moon, is it justified to live in the world of imagination?

“What is the use of studying literature? Is it the wastage of time to read a poem, novel or short story in the age of science and technology?”

The great Russian novelist and thinker once said, “All great literature is one of two stories; a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town.”

According to him literature answers two important questions which are related all to the human beings in the world and they are who we are and how should we live in this world. The answer of these questions proves that literature is vital for our life because it reflects our life in it. When we study literature we come to know ourselves which is a kind of self revelation. In reality, literature is the mirror of social and political life of the age in which it was written. It represents the life of its age. So literature is a kind of documents which contains the history, social or political of its time. By studying literature of any age, we come to know about the culture, tradition, habits, customs, and the way of living of the people of that age. For example, when we study Shakespeare’s sonnets and plays, we are acquainted with the culture, custom, habits and fashion of the people of the Elizabethan period. So there are two aspects of literature: the first is enjoyment and appreciation and the second is the analysis and exact description. When study literature we go to a new world—a world of dream and magic—which is totally different from our own real world. Being an art literature expresses life in forms of truth and beauty which is expressed through the medium of language. Although the existence of language is prior to literature.

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