

TUTORIAL
5.2

Basic Concepts - Introduction to Linguistics

This tutorial continues to explore what language is, by looking at some of the universal design characteristics of language and also how we learn language.

Introduction

In the last tutorial we said that language is an in-born human thinking ability - a mental system - something that we were created with the ability to do. We also said that language involves communicating using arbitrary symbols.

A language consists of:

- *grammar*, which is a finite set of principles speakers use to combine the building blocks of their language, and
- a *lexicon*, which is the set of words and other meaningful forms that speakers know, like a mental dictionary that they use.

We also said that language is characterised by *rule-governed creativity* – the finite set of rules that allows us to combine the finite number of forms in the lexicon to generate or create an infinite number of utterances.

We also said that linguistic competence is the unconscious knowledge of grammatical principles or rules that we have as native speakers of our language. It is the mental system we have that generates our actual linguistic performance, which in real life can be flawed with speech errors, slips of the tongue, or other mistakes.

Language as a mental system

God created people to use language - it isn't simply an *activity* that we learn to do - language is a mental system that we are born with; that He put there.

When we think about the complexities of the language system it's quite amazing that we can speak fluently, without many mistakes, with no thought about how we are speaking, or how we are constructing our sentences. How is

it that we are able to do this? What is it that people do when they use language, and how is it that they can do it?

Language is learnt only partly by imitation - a child is born with the ability to learn language. The actual words of a particular language, and the possible structures that it uses, are learnt from the language around the child, but only on the basis of certain properties and principles of language that are innate - that are already in place in the mind of the child.

How are children able to learn something so complex when they are so young with no conscious learning if there is no innate ability to do so? Children can't learn language by memorizing sentences (because there is an almost infinite number of sentences in any language). They don't seem to learn language by imitation alone because:

- all children make the same kinds of systematic and consistent mistakes using forms they've never heard and so can't be imitating. (For example, over-applying rules: *runned, goed, sheeps, mans*, etc.)
- children treat complex forms as single words in contexts they have never heard them. (For example, *I want the other-one spoon.*)
- research has shown that children get reinforcement on the basis of truth conditions, not grammatical structure. When they say something factually wrong but grammatically right they are corrected (negative reinforcement). (Child: *mummy went to work yesterday* mother: *no darling, I didn't go to work yesterday*). When they say something factually right but grammatically incorrect they are not corrected (and might get positive reinforcement). (Child: *mummy goed to work yesterday* mother: *that's right darling, I did, didn't I?*).

Heart language

Linguists have noted that the ability to use language develops naturally as children get older, and that it develops following the same developmental stages in children everywhere. By the time a certain age is reached, children are able to use most of the complex structures of their language (whatever language that is, and whatever kinds of structures that language has).

Because of that, linguists think there is a period in a child's development when they acquire language naturally, and once that period is past, a person would not develop the ability to use language in the same way that children do during the period when language is normally acquired. Linguists call this a 'critical period' for language acquisition.

Learning a second language as an adult or even a teenager is different to acquiring your first language, which seems effortless. Children don't have to make a conscious effort to learn their first language, and they don't have to be taught it. It's one of the ways children naturally develop. Adults (and even

teenagers) trying to learn a second language have to make much more of a conscious effort to do so - it is more a process of learning, rather than just developing naturally.

One way to look at this first language (heart language) experience is through the eyes of a child as they first come into the world and try to make sense of it. They are certainly not just learning *language*, but are actually fully engaged in trying to interpret the reality that they see around them and to communicate with the people around them. They naturally seek to communicate - actually have an overwhelming *urge* to communicate; with their parents, siblings and other people. Language is a tool they need to be able to communicate with people - they hear things named or described, and then describe and name things themselves in a particular way, with words and phrases to label certain things and certain actions, or eventually to describe concepts or ideas. Their main focus is not on the language itself, but on the people and objects around them - what is *happening* and what they want to *say and do*. They use language to engage with the people and the world around them because language is both an expression of that world and their way of expressing themselves in that world.



In most cases, a child's first language (or heart language) is the one that is forever going to be an expression of that person's deepest identity - their most profound foundational experiences and thoughts - because it is the first one they heard and used to describe the world around them and it is the first medium of their expression of themselves.

Linguists have found that some of the same features of this initial learning experience - when we learned our heart language - can be applied to adult language learning programs with great effect, producing speakers with a greater depth of ability and shared understanding of the deeper meaning that the language is expressing. A focus on learning language in real-world situations and conversations, with people, in the context of relationships, with the purpose of real communication, has been found to be more effective than learning in a theoretical environment where 'language' is studied in isolation.

Language cannot be separated from the world in which it is used, from the culture and life of the people who use it. Language should never be viewed as an isolated entity, with grammar rules that can be contained in a document, or words contained in a dictionary - language is the expression of a people, and an insight into their deepest world.

Defining language

Edward Sapir, an American anthropologist-linguist defines language like this: *Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.*

“Communicating” implies that language is a shared system. Language is built on a set of conventional agreements, not individual behavior - I can’t just decide to give words new meanings or new pronunciations, or to redesign sentence structure however I like.

The idea that language is “purely human” means that no other species has language. People sometimes like to think that other creatures also use language. Cockatoos and parakeets do copy speech sounds (‘parroting speech’), but it is not language because it is not communication and has no internal structure. But... there has been quite a lot of research on communication in animal species; dolphins, monkeys and dogs. Why isn’t this language? Animals, birds and insects *do* communicate:



- Birds pass messages of various kinds to each other - alarm calls, or alerts about food sources.
- Bees communicate very precise information about sources of food - how far it is and in what direction.
- Whales and dolphins communicate with each other over long distances.
- Dogs make different sounds in different situations to communicate to other dogs and to people.

Human language is much more complex than any communication system used by animal species. But is it just a matter of degree? Is the difference between human language and animal communication systems simply one of quantity?

Animal communication and human language

It helps us to understand what language is, by comparing it to the way animals communicate. Clearly human language is vastly more *complex* than even the most sophisticated systems of animal communication, but there are other significant differences, it is not just that we communicate in a more complex way.

Bees have highly rigid systems, with no consciousness of communication and no creativity possible - their communication is simply instinctive behavior patterns in response to stimuli. How about primates? Some say the difference between humans and even the ‘highest’ primates is that only humans use tools (or failing that, only humans make tools). This is not true - we now know that many animal and bird species use, or even make, tools.

The same is true of systems of communication. Chimps have about three dozen different calls which they can combine in various ways. Experiments

involved in teaching chimps sign language demonstrate they can use an arbitrary communication system creatively. Some say this is not language because it is *instinctive*; there is no control over use so there is no presence of intentionality. Not so. Vervet monkeys demonstrate control over use. Vervet monkeys have three warning cries - one for snakes, one for eagles, and one for leopards. People say this is not language because it is instinctive, but even Vervets won't cry warning if no other vervets are around (so control over use, and presence of intentionality). They can even 'lie' (use a warning cry when the predator is not present).

So what are the differences between the way God made us to communicate and the way He gave animals the ability to communicate? The crucial difference between primates and humans is of course that we are made in God's image - we have the ability to know and understand Him, and the ability to choose to obey him or not. We are able to communicate with Him - in fact this is one of His greatest desires for us, that we would know and communicate with Him. Of course many linguists wouldn't point to this foundational difference between animal and human communication, but they *do* note a significant distinction in the way we communicate - pointing to our unique (unique to humans) ability to combine things to form a new thing which is then treated as a single unit (called *paradigmatic* ability). This human ability applies to other areas as well as communication systems.

Chimps' tools, unlike those of even the least technologically sophisticated humans today, are not composite - made up of different parts to make something more useful - demonstrating a lack of paradigmatic ability. Chimps have 'language ability' in the sense of the controlled and creative use of a system of communication, but it is not language because it is only sequential - memorized and copied - not combined in new ways. Human language involves considerable paradigmatic behavior - making words into phrases, phrases into sentences, etc.

This is important, because even highly intelligent animals don't have a communication system that is equivalent to language, and this indicates that language is 'built-in' to humans, it's quite literally a part of being human - part of being created 'in His image'.

Design features

Since the 1950s people have talked about *design features* of language. These features point to the One who designed language and gave humans the innate ability to use it to communicate. They also clearly distinguish human, from animal communication.

Arbitrariness

Language uses arbitrary symbols - so that the meanings are not predictable from forms (the words or sentences that are used) and forms are not predictable from meanings.

Duality of Patterning

Elements in language which have no meaning on their own, combine into units which *do* have meaning. Fewer than a hundred sound units can combine to make tens of thousands of words and an infinite number of messages (*act, cat, tac*).

Discreteness

Although language basically occurs in a continuous flow and the production of a speech sound or gesture can vary each time it is used, we are always able to process language into separate (discrete) units - we can recognize words in sentences and sounds in words (*pin, bin*).

Productivity

The ability to produce (and understand) an infinite number of messages using a finite number of elements and principles for their organization.

Displacement

The ability to convey a message about things that are remote in space and/or time from where the communication of the message takes place (*My late grandmother used to live in England*).

Stimulus free

The utterance or message that will be produced can not be predicted from anything apart from the speaker of that message. We can't tell for sure what someone is going to say before they say it.

Cultural transmission

The ability to acquire language is an inherent trait, but *particular* languages are learned. The conventions of any one particular language are passed on to the younger generation through exposure to the language in use, and through active interaction in the language.

Universal properties of language

All languages share key underlying characteristics. The central focus of linguistics is the study of these *universal properties* of language - the properties that every human language shares. These include such things as the sound systems, grammatical rules, the basic building blocks of language but also the cultural and social aspects of language as well. By looking at the universal aspects of language, and also comparing how languages *differ* in these aspects, we can gain insight into how people organize their thoughts and also how they organize themselves through their use of language. We also

gain insight into how languages operate within the social structures of human communities.

Over the next series of tutorials we will be investigating some of these universal properties of language in more detail, looking at the diversity that exists within each area. We will be beginning at the most fundamental level, with *phonetics* - speech sounds.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. When children are learning their first language, what are some of the things that adults around them instinctively do - in speech or behavior - to 'help'? Think of any specific behavior you have seen. Do you think it actually does help them to learn?
2. What would you say to someone who insisted that gorillas can learn to talk and communicate in real language (if you had the freedom to explain the deepest levels of that concept to them)?



ACTIVITIES

Basic Concepts - Introduction to Linguistics

1. Do a little research on sign language. What are some of the features or characteristics of sign language that might define it as a 'real' language?



ASSIGNMENT

To be submitted by the end of Module 5

Find an opportunity in the next couple of months, to talk with a person who speaks English, but for whom English is not their first language. Discuss with them their first language, or heart language, and during your conversation/s with them, try to find their answers to the

following questions and write up your results (you may need to ask permission to record the conversation):

- What is the language that they learned as a child - their first language?
- How many languages do they speak or have some knowledge of?
- When and how did they learn English and did they consider it difficult?
- Do other close family members speak other languages?
- Do they, or their parents or relatives, still use their mother tongue in the home?
- When they meet or speak to close family members today - siblings, mother and father, grandparents, uncles and aunts - which language do they use?
- Do they still engage with any media in their first language - TV programs, books or newspapers, radio programs, movies, etc.?
- Do they ever visit their home country, and if so, do they use English there?
- In their life here, what aspects from their original culture do they still enjoy or participate in (specific foods, religious activities, social activities or events, etc.)?
- If they were to meet a person today that they had never met before, who had the same ethnic background and heart language as themselves, how would they greet that person and what would they talk/ask about?