

Introduction to Linguistics/Nature of Language

The Nature of Language

a). *What is Language?*

Language is a system for communicating. Written languages use symbols (that is, characters) to build words. The entire set of words is the language's vocabulary. The ways in which the words can be meaningfully combined is defined by the language's syntax and grammar. The actual meaning of words and combinations of words is defined by the language's semantics.

In computer science, human languages are known as natural languages. Unfortunately, computers are not sophisticated enough to understand natural languages. As a result, we must communicate with computers using special computer languages. There are many different classes of computer languages, including machine languages, programming languages, and fourth-generation languages.

b). *Animal versus Human Communication*

Systems of communication are not unique to human beings. Other animal species communicate in a variety of ways. One way is by sound: a bird may communicate by a call that a territory is his and should not be encroached upon.

Another means of animal communication is by odor: an ant releases a chemical when it dies, and other ants then carry it away to the compost heap. A third means of communication is body movement, for example used by honeybees to convey the location of food sources.

Although primates use all three methods of communication: sound, odor, and body movement, sound is the method of primary interest since it is our own primary means of communication. A topic of persistent debate in linguistic anthropology is whether human communication (verbal and nonverbal) is similar to nonhuman primate communication, such as seen in apes and monkeys. Linguistics and primatologists have searched for a common thread running through the communication systems of humans and nonhuman primates. Certain scholars argue that our language capabilities are not unique and point to various aspects of non-human primate communication as evidence. Other scientists remain unconvinced. Today there continues to be a significant amount of debate concerning this area of linguistic anthropology.

Communication can be defined to include both signals and symbols. Signals are sounds or gestures that have a natural or self-evident meaning [example of someone crying (=emotion), laughing (=emotion), animal cries (=indicating fear, food, or hunt). In this regard, we can consider that most animal communication is genetically determined and includes hoots, grunts, or screams that are meant to mean only one thing and are used every time in the same situation. So there is only one way to express one thing and it never changes. Animal communication tends to consist primarily of signals.

In contrast, human communication is dependent on both signals and symbols. Symbols are sounds or gestures that have meaning for a group of people-it is the cultural tradition that gives it meaning (e.g. green light=go; teaching a child letters (see Faces of Culture video). Symbols have to be learned and are not instinctive; the meanings are arbitrary.

Some of the debate regarding human versus primate communication stems from observations by scientists in the field. For example, scientists who have observed vervet

monkeys in the wild consider at least three of their alarm calls to be symbolic because each of them means a different kind of predator- eagles, pythons, leopards-monkeys react differently to each call. Interestingly, infant vervets often make the "eagle" warning call when they see any flying bird and learn the appropriate call as they grow up. This is similar to human infants who often first apply the word "dada" to all adult males, gradually learning to restrict it one person. It is possible, therefore, to consider such calls as symbolic.

So-if monkeys and apes appear to use symbols as least some of the time, how can we distinguish human communication? For one thing, all human languages employ a much larger set of symbols. Another and perhaps more important difference is that other primate's vocal systems tend to be closed (different calls are not often combined to produce new, meaningful utterances). In contrast, human languages are open systems (capable of sending messages that have never been sent before and the ability to combine symbols in an infinite variety of ways for an infinite variety of meanings). The following exercises are designed to help you think about the similarities and differences between humans and nonhuman primates in terms of the way we all communicate.

Exercise-Major Questions:

1. What characteristics or properties of communication are common to all humans of the world?
2. Are these characteristics found among nonhuman primates as well?
3. What are the underlying causes that result in similarities or differences between systems of human and animal communication?

Many animal and even plant species communicate with each other. Humans are not unique in this capability. However, human language is unique in being a symbolic communication system that is learned instead of biologically inherited. Symbols are sounds or things which have meaning given to them by the users. Originally, the meaning is arbitrarily assigned. For instance, the English word "dog" does not in any way physically resemble the animal it stands for. All symbols have a material form but the meaning can not be discovered by mere sensory examination of their forms. They are abstractions.

A word is one or more sounds that in combination have a specific meaning assigned by a language. The symbolic meaning of words can be so powerful that people are willing to risk their lives for them or take the lives of others. For instance, words such as "queer" and "nigger" have symbolic meaning that is highly charged emotionally in America today for many people. They are much more than just a sequence of sounds to us.

A major advantage of human language being a learned symbolic communication system is that it is infinitely flexible. Meanings can be changed and new symbols created. This is evidenced by the fact that new words are invented daily and the meaning of old ones change. For example, the English word "nice" now generally means pleasing, agreeable, polite, and kind. In the 15th century it meant foolish, wanton, lascivious, and even wicked. Languages evolve in response to changing historical and social conditions. Some language transformations typically occur in a generation or less. For instance, the slang words used by your parents were very likely different from those that you use today. You also probably are familiar with many technical terms, such as "text messaging" and "high definition TV", that were not in general use even a decade ago.

Sign Language

Over the last few centuries, deaf people have developed sign languages that are complex visual-gestural forms of communicating with each other. Since they are effective communication systems with standardised rules, they also must be considered languages in their own right even though they are not spoken. The example is American Sign Language.

A pidgin is a simplified, makeshift language that develops to fulfill the communication needs of people who have no language in common but who need to occasionally interact for commercial and other reasons. Pidgins combine a limited amount of the vocabulary and grammar of the different languages. People who use pidgin languages also speak their own native language. Over the last several centuries, dozens of pidgin languages developed as Europeans expanded out into the rest of the world for colonisation and trade. The most well known ones are Pidgin English in New Guinea, Cameroon and Nigeria. However, several forms of Pidgin English and Pidgin French also developed in West Africa and the Caribbean. There have been pidgins developed by non-European cultures as well, including the Zulus in South Africa, the Malays in Southeast Asia, the Arabs in North Africa, and several American Indian societies. The most well known pidgin developed by American Indians is Chinook, which was used on the Northwest Coast of North America.

At times, a pidgin language becomes the mother tongue of a population. When that happens, it is called a Creole language. As pidgins change into creoles over several generations, their vocabularies enlarge. In the small island nation of Haiti, a French-African pidgin became the creole language. It is still spoken there by the majority of the population as their principle or only language. The same thing happened among some of the peoples of Papua New Guinea, the Pacific Islands of Vanuatu, and Sierra Leone in West Africa, where different versions of Pidgin English became creoles. Similarly, on the outer banks of Georgia and South Carolina in the United States, isolated former African slaves made another version of Pidgin English into a creole known as Gullah or Geechee. Creoles also developed in Louisiana, Jamaica, and the Netherlands Antilles.

It is common for creole speakers to also speak another "standard" language as well. In Haiti, for instance, the more educated and affluent people also speak French among themselves. Their creole language is used on the street in dealing with poor Haitians. The Gullah speakers of Georgia and South Carolina speak English when dealing with outsiders. Which language is spoken depends on the social situation. This same phenomenon is often found in societies with different dialects of the same language. People may quickly switch back and forth between dialects, depending on the person they are talking to at the time. This pattern is referred to as diglossia or "code switching." The African American situational use of standard and Black English is a prime example. Black English is usually reserved for talking with other African Americans. North American reporters and announcers on national television programs are often diglossic. They must learn to speak with a Midwestern, European American dialect regardless of the region or social class they came from originally. We become so accustomed to this that it is usually a shocking surprise to hear them speak in their own dialects.

Typically, the dialects of a society are ranked relative to each other in terms of social status. In the London area of England, the upper class speak "public school" English, while the lower class often use a Cockney dialect. Because of the stigma against the latter, upwardly mobile Cockneys in the business world may take language lessons to acquire the "public school" speech patterns.

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