

LANGUAGE AND ITS SPECIFIC FEATURES THAT MAKE IT A HUMAN PHENOMENON

Ангел Николов

ПУ, филиал "Л.Каравелов", Кърджали 6600, anikolov@uni-plovdiv.bg

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore basic characteristics of language, how it functions and what makes a language. It is difficult to be comprehensive in that matter, but I've tried to formulate some basic ideas and principles being well aware of the difficulty to be all-embracing. Some basic theoretical concepts are also discussed and given special attention to: grammar, lexicon, sound system, syntax, word order and the way they interact on different levels are all really important to make a language function as a whole system. A focus is placed on Language Universals as they tend to explore and explain language from a slightly abstract perspective as well. I believe that a systematic approach to a description of language and a due awareness how it functions enhances its comprehension and learnability. This research has led me to conclude that language is exclusively a human phenomenon.

Keywords: *language, language universals, grammar, sentence, word order, levels*

What is language?

Language, being primarily a tool for communication, is also a system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. Language has no independent existence, living in some sort of mystical space apart from the people who speak it.

Knowledge of the Sound System

When we know a language, we know what sounds (or signs) are used in the language and which sounds (or signs) are not. This also includes knowing how the sounds of the language can be combined - which sounds may start a word, which may end a word and which ones may follow each other within a word.

Knowledge of Words

Knowing a language also means identifying certain strings of sounds as meaningful words. Most words in all languages are arbitrary connections of sound to meaning. Every language has an infinite number of possible sentences. Knowing a language enables you to create a sentence that has never been uttered before. Understand a sentence that has never been uttered before. Most sentences we use are new; very few sentences are stored in our brains. Every individual who has mastered a language has intrinsic and instinctive knowledge of sentences and nonsentences. Language is more than a set of words because words must be ordered in certain ways to create sentences. Our knowledge of language allows us to separate possible sentences from nonsentences. What we know about a language constitutes the linguistic competence. These are mostly unconscious knowledge about sounds, structures, meanings, words, and rules for combining linguistic elements. How we use this knowledge in actual speech production and comprehension is called linguistic performance. We can theoretically create an infinitely long sentence, but physical constraints make this impossible. Spoken language is very different from the written one. In speech we stammer, pause, and produce slips of the tongue whereas the written language is way more organized and orderly.

What Is Grammar?

Grammar is the knowledge speakers have about the units and rules of their language. These are the rules for combining sounds into words, word formation, making sentences, assigning meaning. When a sentence is ungrammatical in a linguistic sense, it means that it breaks the rules of the shared mental grammar rules of the language. A grammar can be descriptive: a true model of the mental grammar of language speakers. In other words, a descriptive grammar describes the linguistic rules that people use when they speak their

language A grammar can also be prescriptive Prescriptive Grammar attempts to prescribe what rules of language people should use to speak “properly”.

Language Universals is a term in linguistics that refers to the universal properties that all languages share. A Universal Grammar would be a part of a biologically endowed human language faculty, the basic blueprint that all languages follow. It is a major goal of linguistic theory to discover the nature of UG. According to Padley (1976) the expression universal grammar dates from the xvii century, but terms such as language universals or linguistic universals are more recent, originating in the. The term linguistic universals first appeared in 1964 in Katz and Postal’s *An Integrated Theory of Linguistic Descriptions*. The term became popular after the publication of Chomsky’s *Aspects* in 1965. The notion linguistic universal is somehow connected with the whole background of transformational generative grammar. Language Universals are the basic blueprint that all languages follow. Bertrand Russell stated in 1948 that “A dog cannot relate his autobiography; however eloquently he may bark, he cannot tell you that his parents were honest though poor” (Whaley 1997: 4). Language is not only unique to humans and diverse but there are also commonalities between languages. About five thousand languages are spoken in the world today but there still is a basic unity that underlies their diversities. Many of the world’s languages show similar principles. An example of such a similarity is word order. In some languages such as English, French and Italian the word order is subject, verb and object. This is the so called SOV order. Besides similarities like this, there also exist features between some languages, which are common to all human languages in the world and are called language universals. These language universals classify entire languages into categories which are then based on shared properties.

Absolute and non-absolute universals

Absolute universals are statements which hold true for all languages at any time. The term universal already suggests that something has to hold true everywhere and any time. Absolute universals require deeper explanations, for example why all languages are able to form questions. These universals are absolute because they have no counter arguments in any of the world’s languages. This also includes all the languages for which there is no description and all those which have become extinct. It also has to include all the languages which will come into existence in the future because language is constantly changing. It is assumed that the rules that govern language structure today are the same that governed language structure yesterday and will be the same that will govern language structure tomorrow. If anyone will ever discover one language for which the supposed universal does not hold true, then it will not be an absolute universal anymore but instead a non-absolute universal. A non-absolute universal is one which admits exceptions.

Humans are able to communicate with each other in ways that are unique to our species because of the properties of human language. Regardless of how different human language may sound across various cultures, all share eight qualities These are features of human language that differentiate it from a non-human language.

- Productivity/Creativity is the ability to create and understand neverbefore-uttered sentences. Humans can use combinations of sounds to create an infinite number of new words, expressions, and sentences. As their worlds and experiences shift, humans can adapt and create new ways to use language to communicate those changes. Generally, there is no ‘natural’ connection between a linguistic form and its meaning. The number of utterance in any human language is infinite. Anyone having a decent lexical and grammatical competence of a language is able to come up with an endless number of utterances to express his/her thoughts.
- Cultural transmission: Humans inherit physical features from their parents but not language. We acquire a language in a culture with other speakers (not from parental genes) The process whereby a language is passed on from one generation to the next. We are born with a predisposition to acquire language (but not with the ability to produce utterances in a specific

language) We acquire our 1st language as children in a culture. Infants are born without an ability to use the language of their societies. By observing and listening carefully for the first few years, those children learn the unique usages of the language of their culture. This is why it is crucial to talk often to even the youngest children and to engage them as much as possible in conversation.

-Arbitrariness: Why is a kiss called a kiss in English? There is nothing that connects this group of letters and sounds to the thing we recognize as an act of affection. In Swedish, this same combination of letters can mean urine. Human language is formed around arbitrary combinations of sounds to create meaning. Generally, there is no 'natural' connection between a linguistic form and its meaning. The relation between linguistic forms and the objects they refer to is arbitrary Dog in English and كلب in Arabic. There are some words (onomatopoeic) in language with sounds that seems to 'echo' the sounds of objects or actions (less arbitrary). Onomatopoeia is the use of words that sound like the thing they are describing, (e.g. 'hiss' or 'boom') Onomatopoeic words are relatively rare in human language.

- Displacement: Human language isn't simply limited to describing what is tangible in the present. It can be used to describe or imagine things by people who are not in that immediate situation. This allows for humans to discuss history and to imagine a future. Displacement is the ability to talk about things that are not physically present, discussion of past events, abstract ideas, lying, etc.

- Specialization: This key property refers to the fact that language allows us to substitute an arbitrary word for a physical action. An example might be a child who instructs their friend to 'Stay away!' This utterance means that the child does not then have to act out his or her message by physically pushing the friend away. Similarly, the police officer who instructs a crowd to 'Move along!' has used language to substitute for the physical action of driving the crowd forwards. In both instances the language has substituted for a physical action.

- Discreteness: All of the sounds we use in language are distinct, and those sounds create meaning. In the word *pig*, there are three distinct sounds, and each one is needed to fully convey the meaning of the *pink farmyard animal*. The way language combines distinct sounds in ways to create meaning is a human feature of language usage. Discreteness is the ability to combine linguistic units to make larger units of meaning

- Duality: Language is organized at two levels simultaneously. There are particular sounds of a language which users understand, such as the sounds for *w*, *i*, *n*, and *d*. This is the phonological function of language. At the same time, the way those letters are arranged creates meaning. If we arranged the letters *wdni*, there is no meaning. Yet if we rearrange them to create wind, the syntax is clear (and actually differs depending on the way the *i* is pronounced). Both the sounds of the symbols and the way they are arranged create the organization that brings meaning to language.

Language appears to be organized at least at two levels: the primary level consisting of the units and the secondary level consisting of the elements . The elements of the secondary level combine to form the units of the primary level. For our purposes, we can consider the elements of verbal language to be speech sounds, i.e. consonants and vowels. These speech sounds then combine to form units at the primary level, i.e. words. Consider, for example, how the word *cat* is formed by the combination of three speech sounds: the consonant 'c', the vowel 'a' and the consonant 't'. These speech sounds at the primary level are meaningless if they are uttered in isolation. For example, if I just say the sound 'c' this has no meaning. Similarly, 'a' and 't' spoken on their own are meaningless. It is only when these secondary level elements are combined in a systematic way that they have the possibility of conveying meaning. Consequently, *cat* is meaningful, whereas 'c', 'a', and 't' are not.

- Systematicity: Language is an orderly method of communicating ideas, thoughts, emotions, and so on. If language were random then there would be no way of ensuring that the intended

meaning was conveyed. Regularity and order (i.e. systematicity) are essential for language to work properly. If we misorganize the letters in the word cat, we might get meaningless words like 'tac', 'atc' and a meaningful word 'act'.

Can Animals Learn Human Language?

Human is not the only creature which is capable of communicating. All creatures, from apes, bees, dolphins, are capable of communicating with other members of their species. Animals are born with a set of specific signals that are produced instinctively. Animals' communicative signals are fixed and cannot be broken down into separate parts. Can Animals Learn Human Language? Is there an evidence that non-humans can understand human language? The standard explanation is that the animal produces a particular behavior in response to a particular sound-stimulus or 'noise', but doesn't actually understand what the words in the noise mean. Parrots can mimic words, but their utterances carry no meaning. They cannot dissect words into discrete units. Polly and Molly don't rhyme for a parrot. If a parrot learns "Polly wants a cracker" and "Polly wants a doughnut" and learns the word "bagel," the parrot will not say "Polly wants a bagel". They cannot deduce rules and patterns to create new utterances. Birdcalls convey messages associated with the immediate environment. Bird songs are used to stake out territory and attract mates. There is no evidence of internal structure in these songs, although they may vary to express varying degrees of intensity. Honeybees have a communication system that relies on dance to convey information about the location and quality of food sources to the rest of the hive. Nonhuman primates have communication systems in the wild to convey information about the immediate environment and emotional state (stimulus-response). Humans have attempted to teach human language to other primates. These nonhuman primates were taught sign languages because their vocal tracts cannot produce the sounds of human language. Researchers concluded that while nonhuman primates can string two signs together and show flashes of creativity, their use of language is nowhere near human linguistic ability.

Let's make no mistake about it, language is something uniquely human.

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