

Lectures in Linguistics for College Students

Dep. Of English language and Linguistics

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The first lecture is going to produce the basic definitions of terms like language, a linguist, linguistics, the major features of human language versus animal language.

Language can be defined as a patterned system of arbitrary sound signals characterized by structure dependence, creativity, displacement, duality, and cultural transmission.

Wait for a second! What do we mean by arbitrary sound signals? Or cultural transmission?

These are Charles Hockett's design features of language. He is an American linguist who put the following points as characteristics for human language as a way of human communication, as opposed to animal communication:

1. Use of sound signals:

This feature is employed by humans in specific cases such as to communicate certain messages in the dark such as wistling, and action such as weightlifting and childbirth. In animals, such as dolphins, monkeys, and birds they use certain sounds to communicate some messages in presence of nearby danger or in the mate season.

2. Arbitrariness:

In human language there is no link between the actual sign and the message. The symbols used are arbitrary. For example, there is no connection between the word elephant and the animal it symbolizes.

3. The need for learning:

Humans only need to learn how to acquire language which is culturally transmitted, i.e., humans have the potentiality to acquire language but it is totally conditioned by humans environment. A human being brought up in isolation does not learn language.

4. Duality:

Human language consists of a set of phonemes that becomes meaningful only when they are combined with other phonemes. For example; (f – g- d- o) can be meaningful when they are combined together as in (fog – dog- god). This organization of language into two layers – a layer of sounds which combine into a second layer of larger units, morphemes, is called duality or double articulation.

5. Displacement:

Human language can communicate about things that are absent as easily as about things that are present. It doesn't matter how far away the topic of conversation is in time and space. For example, they can talk about past events or future plans unlike animals that can communicate only about things found in their immediate environment.

6. Creativity:

Humans can produce new (novel) utterances whenever they want to. A person can utter a sentence which has never been said before. Every day on breakfast he speaks new words, another day he may use other words according to his/her desire to have certain type of food, or drink on breakfast.

7. Patterning:

Human language consists of sounds and words that are combined in well-defined patterns. As in English language , for instance, there are certain consonant sequences to be arranged to form meaningful words. The sentences have also certain arrangements ,i.e., the subject is followed by the verb which might be followed by an object or an adjective or else.

8. Structure Dependence:

This the last feature of Hockett's design features of human language.

Language operations are structure dependent, which means they depend on an understanding of the internal structure of a sentence. The use of the past tense is by adding (-ed) at the end of regular verbs not to nouns. When making questions, we would add certain words, omit others, or even change places of some words.