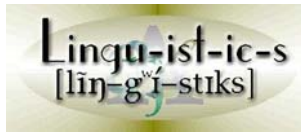


LNGT0101

Introduction to Linguistics



Lecture #2
Sept 10th, 2014

Announcements

- If you're in class for the first time today and you want to add the course, please do talk to me after the class. Also, ask me for a copy of the syllabus.
- Presentations on Monday for Myth 12 and Myth 16 in *Language Myths*.

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Summary from last class

- Linguistics is the scientific study of human language.
- Linguists study language using different methodologies:
 - They try to figure out the underlying system regulating the language (e.g., Samoan plural verb conjugation).
 - They collect and classify linguistic data (e.g., Bert Vaux's US English dialect maps).
 - They try to explain linguistic patterns (e.g., Labov's study of Martha's Vineyard's speech).
 - They can also design experiments to study linguistic behavior (as we'll discuss later).

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Variation in vowels on Martha's Vineyard



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Variation in vowels on Martha's Vineyard

- Some speakers on the island had a distinctive pronunciation of the two vowels, /əɪ/ and /əʊ/ (phonetically called **diphthongs**), in words such as "like, while, might" and "house, out, trout."
- This linguistic feature was characteristic of people living on the island (as opposed to summer tourists), hence it was a regional feature.
- The puzzle was that, within the island population, some residents had it in their speech, while others didn't.

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Variation in vowels on Martha's Vineyard

- People who lived Up-Island (strictly rural) had the feature more than those who lived Down-Island.
- The feature also increased with age, peaking between 31 and 45 years.
- Students going to college with the intention of returning to the island had the pronunciation more than those who didn't plan to go back.
- Ethnic minority groups such as Portuguese and Native Americans also had the pronunciation more than other groups.

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Variation in vowels on Martha's Vineyard

- This specific pronunciation on Martha's Vineyard thus acted as a **marker of group identification**.
- How closely speakers identified with the island, wanted to enter into the mainstream, saw themselves as Vineyarders and were proud of it, was positively correlated with the degree of occurrence of that particular pronunciation of vowels.
- Great, but how do we confirm this?
- This became obvious when Labov partitioned his informants in terms of their attitude towards the island.

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Pronunciation and attitude towards Martha's Vineyard

| Persons | /əɪ/ | /əʊ/ |
|---------------|------|------|
| 40 (Positive) | 63 | 62 |
| 13 (Neutral) | 32 | 42 |
| 6 (Negative) | 8 | 9 |

8

So, ...

- The one thing shared in common by all the examples we have talked about so far is that they involve **Language**.
- Which leads us to the question: What is language after all?

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Language

- Language is a communication system.
- But what does a communication system consist of?

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Signs

- A sign is a pairing of a form and a meaning.
- Signs can be iconic or symbolic.

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Signs



12

Signs



13

Signs



14

Signs



15

Signs

- Language is a means of communication that relies on a system of signs.
- What are the signs in language?
- But is the sign system of human language different from other communication systems?

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Communication systems

- All communication systems have some design features in common:
 - **A mode of communication:** vocal-auditory (humans and most animals), gestural (apes), tactile (bees), or even chemical (moths).
 - **Semanticity:** Signals have meaning.
 - **Pragmatic function:** Signals have a purpose, e.g., helping the species survive or influencing others' behavior.

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Spiders

- For instance, spiders use a complex system of gestures for courtship. [Link](#)

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Fiddler crabs

- The same is true of fiddler crabs' "claw-waving" movement. [Link](#)

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Vervet monkeys

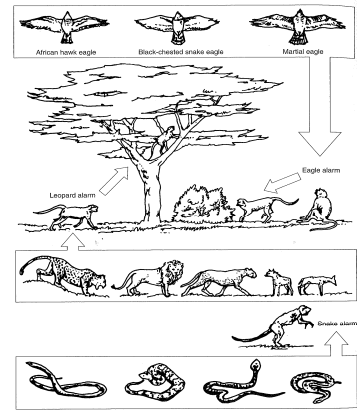


Figure 17.7 Response of vervet monkeys to specific predators

Charles Hockett's Design features

- The linguist Charles Hockett described human language in terms of a set of design features, some of which are shared by some animal communication systems, while some seem to be human-language-specific.
- We discuss each type in turn.

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Interchangeability

- **Interchangeability:** Humans can both send and receive messages.
- Many animals do that as well, but it is not always the case, though, e.g., *bombyx mori* (silkworm) moth uses a chemical communication system that is available only to females, but not to males.

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Cultural transmission

- **Cultural transmission:** For humans to learn language, they have to be exposed to it. No exposure means no language will be learned.
- For most organisms, by contrast, the actual signal code itself is innate or genetically programmed.

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Arbitrariness

- The relationship between form and meaning is largely **arbitrary** in human language (What do you call the inner core of a peach? Can you guess what 'suur' means in Arabic?), but largely iconic in animal communication systems (dogs baring teeth, lizards puffing out their necks).

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Discreteness (and duality of patterning)

- Signs in human language can be decomposed into **discrete “meaningless” units**, which in turn can be recombined to create new signs with different meanings.

spot [s-p-o-t]

tops opts pots

- This is not the case with signals in animal communication systems, which typically convey indivisible messages.

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Design features specific to human language

- In addition, there seem to be at least three design features that set human language apart from other communication systems (at least as far as we know).

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Displacement

- Humans can use language to talk about things not present in space or time.
- Animal communication systems are tied to “the here and now.”

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Creativity/Productivity

- Creativity: Humans are creative with language. We can always add new words and expressions, e.g., *e-mail*, *youtubification*, *ridic*.
- We are also able to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences.
- Well, how many of the sentences on these slides have you seen before? How many of them have you been able to understand?

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Discrete infinity

- Human language exhibits the property of discrete infinity (aka *recursiveness*): In theory, we can have signals of an infinite length.

John loves Mary.

Bill says that John loves Mary.

Sue believes that Bill says that John loves Mary.

Harry claims that ...

- Where do we stop?

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Discrete infinity

- We are able to ‘embed’ a sign inside a sign of the same type:

He’s a very nice man.

He’s a very, very nice man.

He’s a very, very, very nice man.

- Or this example from the textbook:

This is the dog that worried the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

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Knowing vs. Using

- Infinity of language is true in theory, but not in practice. Why?
- Despite their interconnectedness, our 'knowledge' of a linguistic system can actually be distinguished from our 'usage' of that system at a certain level of analysis: The so-called **competence-performance** distinction.

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Next class agenda

- Finish reading Chapter 1, if you haven't already.
- Language and the brain: Read Chapter 10, pp. 461-482 on 'Brain and Language'
- [Also, Read Nunberg and Wasow's overview of the field of linguistics.](#)
- Prescriptivism vs. descriptivism. Read Myth 12 and Myth 16 in *Language Myths*.

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