



## **Some Characteristics of Human Language**

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## **Some Characteristics of Human Language**

There is a number of properties which differentiate human language from all other forms of signalling and which make it a unique type of communication system:

- 1. Language is Sound:** Language is basically oral, since the most common experience most humans have of language is in speaking and listening to it. This statement also implies that the sounds of a language have primacy over their representation in writing. While the writing systems of languages have their systematic aspects, the linguist considers writing and other methods of representing language secondly to the basic phenomenon of speech.
- 2. Language is Systematic:** All human languages are systematic, and each language has its own system. There must be a system to organize whatever language or dialect. It is describable in terms of a finite number of units that can combine only in a limited number of ways. It refers to the number of permissible combinations, i.e., whatever the number of symbols not all the number of possible combination of sounds or grammatical units will occur, e.g., the word order SVO is a permissible order in English, but not in Arabic where the order VSO is permissible. Moreover, with the words 'table' and 'stable' it is possible to add to each the suffix (-s) to give 'tables' and 'stables', but we cannot add a prefix to 'stable' that would give a recognizable sequence in English, nor can we add another suffix to each. On the phonological level, for example, 'stab' is a possible combination in English, while 'stba' is not.

3. Language is a system of systems: Languages have both a phonological or a grammatical system, each with its proper units and rules of possible combination and order. Units are not permitted to combine for several reasons: phonological, grammatical, stylistic or semantic. Language is a system of systems all of which operate simultaneously, but we can distinguish, for the sake of analysis, the units and combination rules proper to each. For example, there is no such word as 'gstable' in English, also there is no grammatical rule by which we can add another suffix to 'tables'.
  
4. Language is Meaningful: The sounds produced in speech are connected with almost every facet of human life and communication. There is, in fact, a relationship between the kinds of sounds speakers of various languages make and their environment. It is through the learning of language that a child becomes an active member of the community. Moreover, the leaders in a society preserve and advance their leadership through their ability to communicate with people via the use of language.
  
5. Language is Linear: A fundamental feature of a spoken language is that it is linear, since the sounds of language are produced by successive movements of the speech organs. Speech is linear in terms of time. We can represent language by using separate symbols for each sound and arranging the symbols in a linear succession that parallels the order in which the sounds are produced. For example, in spoken language, linearity is realized in terms of time. Consequently, when we say 'cup' for instance, first we pronounce /k/ then /ʌ/ and finally /p/, one follows the other. In writing, linearity is realized in terms of space or distance, i.e., in writing 'cup' we start from left to right, writing one letter after the other.

6. Language is Arbitrary: The forms of human language demonstrate a property of arbitrariness, i.e., they do not, in any way, fit the objects they denote. There is no natural connection between a linguistic form and its meaning. They have arbitrary relationship with the objects they are used to indicate. There is no intrinsic connection. For example, between the word 'elephant' and the animal it symbolizes. Thus, communication through speech alone between speakers of different languages is impossible because there is no necessary connection between the sounds that each language uses and the message that is expressed, even if the message in both languages is identical. There are different expressions for 'baby' or 'infant' in English, and the other languages use different-sounding words to express the same thing, e.g., Germans say 'kind' and Turkish say 'cojuk'. If there had to be a direct connection between the nature of the things languages talk about and the expressions used to represent them, there would only be one language. Note: In English, 'onomatopoeic' words such as 'cuckoo', 'quack-quack', 'splash' and 'crash' are also referred to as 'echo words' or 'mimetic words'. This indicates that a word intended to mimic a natural sound, i.e., some words in a language have sounds which seem to echo the sounds of objects or activities. In most languages, these onomatopoeic words are relatively rare and the vast majority of linguistic expressions are in fact arbitrary.

7. Language is Conventional: The use and formation of linguistic units is so regular that these units almost seem to be employed according to an agreement among the speakers. Language, therefore, can be said to be conventional as a consequence of this apparent agreement. Speakers in a given community, for example, use the same sort of expressions to name the same things, and the same sort of constructions to deal with similar

situations. It is this implicit convention that constitutes and stabilizes linguistic system.

- 8. Language is a System of Contrasts:** Language is a system of differences to be observed. Individuals speak alike and in the same language when they make the same number of phonetic and grammatical distinctions as other speakers, for example, there is a difference on the phonological level between /neim/ and /mein/. Thus, the meaning is understandable. Moreover, between record /re'co:d/ and record /riko':d/, the stress tells that the former word is a 'noun' and the latter is a 'verb'.
  
- 9. Language is Unique:** Since languages are arbitrary and systematic network of contrasts, each language must be considered unique. For example, two languages may differ in the number of parts of speech or may require quite different combinations of these parts, even though the number is the same. For this reason, there are new patterns to learn in the study of foreign languages.
  
- 10. Displacement:** It is one of the properties of human language, which animal communication is generally considered to lack. Most animals can communicate about things in the immediate environment only, i.e., they are restricted to the 'here' and 'now', e.g., a bird utters its danger cry only when danger is present. It cannot give information about something which is remote in time and place. But, human language can communicate about things that are absent as easily as about things that are present. This phenomenon is known as 'displacement'. It is this property which enables humans to recount events that happened in the past, to talk about future plans and to create imaginative events of myth and fiction.

**11. Productivity/Creativity:** It is a feature of all languages that new utterances are continually being created. A child learning a language is especially active in forming and producing utterances, which s/he has never heard before. With adults, new situations arise or new objects have to be described, so the language users manipulate their linguistic resources to produce new expressions and new sentences. It is an aspect of language, which is linked to the fact that the potential number of utterances in any human language is finite. On the other hand, by imaginative manipulation of the linguistic units, poets and creative writers extend our awareness of possible relations among things. In this way, they may be said to create a new world for us through language.

**12. Cultural Transmission:** Brown eyes and dark hair are inherited from the parents, but the parents' language is not inherited. A language is acquired in a culture through contact with other speakers and not from parental genes. For instance, an infant born to Arab parents, who live in Iraq and speak Iraqi Baghdadi accent; which is brought up from its birth by English speakers in England, may have the physical characteristics inherited from its natural parents, but it will inevitably speak English. This process, whereby language is passed on from one generation to the next, is described as 'cultural transmission'. While humans are born with innate predisposition to acquire language, it is clear that they are not born with the ability to produce utterances in a specific language, such as English. Human infants growing up in isolation produce no instinctive language. Thus, cultural transmission of a specific language is crucial in the human acquisition process.

**13. Discreteness:** The property of discreteness indicates that the sounds used in language are meaningfully distinct. Each sound in a language is treated as discrete. For example, the pronunciations of 'pack' and 'back' lead to a distinction in meaning which is due to the differences between the /p/ and /b/ sound in English. Both sounds are bilabial stops, but /p/ is a member of the class of voiceless stops, while /b/ is a member of the class of voiced stops.

**14. Duality:** This property indicates that language is organized at two levels simultaneously. In terms of speech production, there is the physical level at which it is possible to produce individual sounds like /t/, /æ/ and /k/. When these sounds are produced in a particular combination as in /tæk/ (tack), we have another level producing a meaning which is different from the meaning of the combinations 'act' and 'cat' /ækt/, /kæt/. So, there are distinct sounds at one level and at the other level, there are distinct meanings. The duality of levels is one of the most economical features of human language, since with limited sets of distinct sounds, it is possible to produce a very large number of sound combinations, i.e., words, which are distinct in meaning.