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Semester One

**Lecture Two: Design Features of Language**

Questions about the nature of language have preoccupied linguists for a long time. Answers have varied, and often reflect the biases and blind spots of various schools of Linguistics. Nevertheless, there is a degree of consensus. One particularly influential set of answers was provided by the linguist Charles Hockett, who refersto the things all languages have in common as the ‘design features of language’. His work has been used as a basis for discussion of this topic in many later works (e.g. Yule, 2006; Widdowson, 1996; Aitchison, 1998)

Hockett (1960) proposed a list of 13 design features, some are shared with other animal species.

1. *Use of the vocal-auditory channel*: Whereas bees communicate using dancing movements, human language (according to Hockett) is fundamentally spoken and heard. The next four features are a consequence of the former.

2. *Broadcast transmission and directional reception:* When a speaker speaks, the sound waves travel outwards in many directions, so that they are not necessarily private and could be perceived by others. However, the perceiver (listener) hears the sound as coming from a specific direction. This feature means that communication may be effective even in darkness.

3*. Rapid fading (transitoriness*): The signal does not persist in the environment once uttered. By the time an utterance is part-way, its beginning is already in the past. In this respect, spoken language is unlike written language, and is also different from e.g., scents or feces deposited by some animals to mark territory boundaries. Rapid fading leads to the need for short-term memory in which the signal may be temporarily retained by the hearer,

4. *Interchangeability*: Individuals can be both senders and receivers. Interchangeability is one of the bases of the interactive, social aspect of language.

5. *Total feedback*: The speaker can hear his speech. Consequently, he may paraphrase, correct, control and change what he is saying.

6. *Specialization*: The signals do not serve any additional physiological functions. In contrast, when a dog pants, or when a person coughs (unintentionally), the sound is a side effect of a behavior that is not intended to be communicative. The purpose of communication is to transmit intentional signals only.

7. *Semanticity*: The signal is meaningful and the assossiation between elements, words and signals is tied to certain meanings.

8. *Arbitrariness*: The signal does not resemble the thing that it denotes. The sound of the word ‘table’ does not resemble a table. As Hockett noted, ‘whale’ is a small word for a large object, whereas ‘microorganism’ is a relatively large word for a tiny object. The opposite of arbitrariness, iconicity, means that the signal does resemble the thing that it denotes. Most spoken languages have a small number of iconic, onomatopoetic words that imitate sounds, such as chiffchaff (the name of a bird, in imitation of its song).

9. *Discreteness*: The signal can be divided into smaller, meaningless parts, each of which may be used in other combinations to form other signals. For example, Hockett claims that ‘‘the English words‘pin’ and ‘bin’ are different to the ear only at one point’’ (i.e., there are discrete units /p/ and /b/ at the beginning of these words.

10. *Traditional transmission*: Although human beings genetically possess the Language faculty (Larynx, tongue, ear, etc), meaningful communication is not instinctive. Language is learnt from environment (1st language acquisition) or in educational settings (schools).

11. *Displacement*: The referent of the message may be removed in time or space. Here is one of the main differences between animal language and human’s.

**Calls of threat of an animal**: immediate calls for immediate threat

**Human speech**: we may talk about past experiences, future plans and events happening in far places (time and place are not always important)

12. *Productivity*: The speaker has the ability to compose new messages, not just reproduce a fixed repertoire of instinctive or previously memorized calls.

13*. Duality of patterning*: Languages have at least two levels of structure. First, minimal meaningless units are combined into longer, more complex expressions. Thus, words can be combined to form phrases and sentences.

These 13 features were not enough to describe language. As a result, Hockett and Altmann (1968) added a further three:

14. *Prevarication*: Speakers can make utterances that they know to be false, with the intent of misleading. This feature includes telling lies and deceiving.

15. *Reflexiveness*: Speakers can use a language to talk about language, e.g. when the teacher of linguistics explains the lesson (he uses language to talk about the language itself).

16. *Learnability*: language is teachable and learnable.

Although this list of features applies to human language and nonhuman communication systems, it is clear from its use that one of Hockett’s goals is to demonstrate the special and unique properties of human language.

**2. Difference between Human Language and Animal Communication**

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| **Human Language** | **Animal Communication** |
| Unlimited | Limited and finite |
| Open system | Closed system |
| Extendible | Inextendible |
| Flexible and varied | Non-inflexible |
| Non-intrinsic | Instinctive |
| Acquired | Inherent |
| Creativity | Non-creativity |
| Has grammaticality | No grammaticality |

**3. Why do we Study Language?**

Not only is human language important to us as a means of communication, it’s a uniquely human ability. Language is central to human life; it pervades most of aspects of human life such as arts (music and literature), religion (sacred books, rituals, prayers, etc.), witchcraft, spread of knowledge, translation, psychology (diagnosis of psychological pathologies), politics (canvassing and voting), business (contracts, money, etc.), etc. Because of the centrality of language in human life, the study of language allows us to understand the nature of what it is to be human.