

On Defining Language:

Language & Communication (1)

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Language is a unique system of communication. In order to identify the criteria that characterize language and that single it out from other means of communication, Hockett compares and contrasts selected properties of language with properties of selected non-human communication systems—bee dancing, for example.

Hockett enumerates a list of sixteen design features, i.e. features shared by all human languages, some of which may appear “trivial” but become worthy of mention only when it is realized that certain animal systems— and certain human systems other than language— lack them” (1960: 6).

Hockett’s 16 Design Features

1. Interchangeability: A user can *both transmit and receive messages*.

- Not all communication displays this flexibility
- silkworm moths: only females emit chemicals
- whistling moths: males make territorial sounds.

2.Total feedback: We can hear what we say .

3. Specialization: Linguistic signals have only one purpose—of communication. They are *not the side effect of some other behavior (not used for another purpose, ecolocation)*.

4. Arbitrariness: There is *no intrinsic (natural) relation (inherent /direct link)* between signal (sound/ word) and what it refers to.

- Dog in English and كلب in Arabic.
- In animal communication- *there is a connection between the message and the signal* used to convey the message. It consists of a fixed and limited set of vocal forms

5. Displacement: It means that human language can *overcome the limitations of time and space*. Animal communication is designed *for here and now*. But, human language can relate to events *removed in time and space*.

- Human language refers to abstract concepts: Things that do not exist in real life, e.g. *superman, batman, Santa Claus*.

- Animal communication refers to the immediate moment, bees use a dance routine to communicate the location of nectar

6. Productivity: This refers to the human ability to create new expressions for new objects, and an *infinite number of novel arrangements of words* (combine limited linguistic signs to produce new sentences and expressions) based on a finite set of underlying rules.

- The man came
- The happy man came
- The happy intelligent man came
- The happy intelligent came yesterday with his wife, daughter, brother and sister...

Animals are incapable of this as animal signals have fixed reference. They cannot produce any new signals to describe novel experiences.

7.Traditional /Cultural transmission: While animals get their language genetically, human beings acquire language. The conventions of language are transmitted culturally. *Thus*, the child of French-speaking parents will learn French, as the first language he will speak in life.

8. Duality of patterning: Language is organized at two levels or layers simultaneously. The first level is the *physical level which contains* distinct sounds while the second is the *meaning* level, where sounds acquire meaning in combination.

- For example, we can produce individual sounds like *p*, *t*, and *i*. (with no intrinsic meaning). But, if we combine them into *pit* then we have produced a combination of sounds which have a different meaning than the meaning of the combination *tip*.

Animal communicative signals, on the other hand, cannot typically be broken like words:

- “woof-woof,” is not $w+o+o+f+ w+o+o+f$
- “meow” is not $m+e+o+w$

9. Prevarication: Language can be used to deceive and falsify reality. It is used to hide the truth, to lie.

10. Reflexiveness: language can be used to refer to itself (meta-language), using words, such as verb, noun, subject, verb,...

11.Learnability: Any language can be learnt.

12. Vocal-auditory channel: The majority of human languages are produced orally and received through the ear. There are some exceptions as for example writing and sign language (manual-visual channel).

13. Broadcast transmission/directional reception: Any linguistic signal can be received by any auditory system within earshot, while its origin can be traced back to a particular direction.

14. Rapid fading (transitoriness): Language, unless recorded, flies away the moment we speak it.

15. Semanticity: There is a fixed relationship between a signal and a meaning.

16. Discreteness: language is created by a series of identifiable units which may be combined and recombined.

- *a, p, r, t* combine to form *trap, part, rapt*