

# Features of Human Language

It is generally believed that human beings are the sole species capable of developing language thanks to their intelligence and appropriate structure of the vocal tract. It is clear, however, that animals are also capable of communicating in their own way, for instance, bees by tail-wagging, or whales by 'singing'. Yet, there are certain apparent differences in human and animal ways of conveying messages. Numerous features common to all natural human languages have been proposed, nevertheless linguists seem not to be unanimous on ascribing certain properties only to human beings. Moreover, in some cases it seems that animal means of communication possesses some partially developed characteristics which are generally believed to be unique to man.

## Displacement

This feature of languages refers to the ability to speak not only about what is happening at the time and place of talking, but also about other situation, future and past, real or unreal. We can talk about electronic parts catalog while playing cards and without ever seeing one.

As far as we know, the majority of animals cannot do that, nonetheless as the research suggest the bee can direct other bees to a food source. This might mean that the bees' communication system also possesses this feature, although in some limited fashion.

## Arbitrariness

There is no natural connection between the word or sound and the thing it denotes, which means we cannot tell what is the meaning of a word simply by looking at it. Nothing in the German word 'Handspiele' tells us that it means the same as the English word 'handball' or Polish word 'piłka ręczna'. Although this rule applies to the most of human language there are certain exceptions. In order to understand arbitrary words one has to know a specific language, though there are a number of *iconic* symbols in every language that can be understood without having to know the entire language system. *Onomatopoeias* – words which imitate sounds – are present in the majority of contemporary languages.

## Productivity (also: 'creativity' or 'open-endedness')

The potential number of utterances, as well as the number of words and meanings in human languages is practically infinite. Humans can come up with terms such as Myspace codes or property in Cyprus and the number of these terms has no possible limits. In animal communication every signal has a *fixed reference* which means that it can only refer to one idea and its meaning cannot be broadened. In addition, it seems that animals cannot invent new signals in order to describe new ideas

## Cultural transmission

Although we are all born with certain fixed genetic predisposition for language use (e.g. shape of vocal tract) it does not predetermine which language we are actually going to use as our mother tongue. A Chinese baby brought as a toddler in Great Britain and raised by a British family is going to speak English and not Chinese, though it will still look like a Chinese. If, for example, a Korean puppy was brought to Britain it would still bark the same way as in Korea (perhaps with a slightly different accent J).

## Duality

Human languages have two levels: minimal units – the alphabet for writing and phonemes for speech – which do not have a meaning on their own, and the level where the meaning emerges as a result of combination of the units from level one. It is emphasised by the fact that with a limited set of letters in the alphabet an unlimited number of words and expressions may be produced.

The aforementioned features are generally perceived as those which differentiate the human language from the animal languages. There are three more properties which seem not to be shared by animal forms of communication, but are not fully acknowledged by all linguists. These include:

**Prevarication** : the ability to make sentences knowing that they are false and with the purpose of misleading the receiver of the information.

**Reflexiveness** : using language to talk about language which involves ability to speak of abstract things. The language used to describe language is usually called metalanguage.

**Learnability** : Apart from the fact that we naturally acquire a mother tongue we are also able to learn any of the number of other languages. It also means that unlike animals human beings are not genetically limited to use only the language of parents.

Moreover, several other features of language of both humans and animals can be enumerated:

**reciprocity** – speakers are also receivers of information under usual circumstances;

**specialization** – linguistic signals do not serve any other purpose than to communicate something;

rapid fading (also ,transitoriness') – spoken linguistic signals vanish very quickly. This is, of course, not true for written messages, or scents produced by some animals to mark territory;

**non-directionality** – anyone close enough to hear can pick up the message;

**vocal-auditory channel** use – most of communication is made via the vocal tract and is perceived by mouth