An Introduction to LANGUAGE and LINGUISTICS

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AND
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Introduction

RALPH FASOLD AND JEFF CONNOR-LINTON

"History is universal and basic," a history professor said during a faculty meeting, "It's about every event that involves all people at all times and in all places." "Yes," observed his colleague from linguistics, "but how would you record and interpret that history without language?" Indeed, it is hard to imagine how there could even be history without language, without a means to pass a record of what has happened from one generation to the next through retold stories and sagas, even before written records. Much of the history (and prehistory) of the human species consists of the development and adaptation of various tools to meet a broad range of needs: think of the wheel, the domestication of animals, the steam engine, computers and the internet. The development and refinement of these and all other tools could not have been accomplished without language.

The human capacity for self-awareness and abstract thought is facilitated by language, if not dependent upon it. The ability to transfer complex information, to discuss the meaning of events and possible outcomes of alternative actions, to share feelings and ideas – all these are impossible without language. The origins of language are shrouded in obscurity, but archaeological records suggest that communication with language emerged about 200,000 years ago. The ability for an individual to model the world for him/herself and to communicate using language was probably the single most advantageous evolutionary adaptation of the human species.

Universal properties of language

Over thousands of years of evolution, the human species developed a vocal tract flexible enough to make a wide range of distinguishable sounds and the ability to perceive differences among those sounds. But most important, the human species developed the ability to use these sounds in systems which could communicate meaning. No one knows just how this happened. Perhaps mental capacities that had evolved for a variety of other adaptive purposes (like fine motor hand–eye coordination) were "re-purposed" to support a complex symbolic and communicative system. Perhaps some mental capacities are exclusively dedicated to language and evolved more gradually along with the increasing complexity of human communication. Or perhaps once they reached a certain level of neurological

and cognitive complexity, the synapses of the brain "reorganized" themselves, making the development of language possible. In any case, language is a distinctive attribute of the human species.

Although languages differ in many ways, they are all made possible by the same genetic information, they are all processed by the brain in basically the same ways, and, not surprisingly, they all share certain fundamental "design features" and structural characteristics that enable them to work the way they do. For example, although different languages use different sets of sounds, their sounds are organized and combined according to just a few principles. If there were no shared, universal features of language, we would expect the sounds of languages and their combinations to vary randomly. Instead, the sounds of languages and their combinations are limited and systematic. Likewise, all languages follow similar constraints on how they can combine words into phrases and sentences.

Understanding and explaining the properties which are universal to all languages – as well as those which vary across languages – is the fundamental job of the linguist.

Modularity

Most linguists believe that language is a modular system. That is, people produce and interpret language using a set of component subsystems (or modules) in a coordinated way. Each module is responsible for a part of the total job; it takes the output of other modules as its input and distributes its own output to those other modules. Neurolinguistic studies show that different regions of the brain are associated with different aspects of language processing and, as the following chapters show, dividing language into modules facilitates linguistic analyses greatly.

Some modules have been central to linguistics for a long time. Phonetics is about production and interpretation of speech sounds. Phonology studies the organization of raw phonetics in language in general and in individual languages in particular. Larger linguistic units are the domain of morphology, the study of structure within words – and of syntax, the study of the structure of sentences. Interacting with these modules is the lexicon, the repository of linguistic elements with their meanings and structural properties. In recent decades, philosophers have developed the formal study of semantics (the detailed analysis of literal meaning), and linguistics has incorporated and added to semantics as another module of language. Still more recently, discourse – organization of language above and beyond the sentence – has been recognized by most linguists as another important subsystem of language.

Constituency and recursion

All languages are organized into constituents, allowing more complex units to enter structures where simpler ones are also possible. So we can say in English, "*She* sat down," "*The smart woman* sat down," "*The tall, dark-haired, smart woman with the bright red sweater and pearl necklace* sat down." Being composed of constituents gives language a balance of structure and flexibility. Constituents can be replaced by other constituents, but you

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