

INTD0112

Introduction to Linguistics

Lecture #1
Sept 7th, 2009

Introduction to the course (including administrivia)

- Let's just click [here](#) and see what's on the course website.

So, what's linguistics about?

- Linguistics is defined as the scientific study of human language.
- So, what's "scientific" about linguistics?
- And what's "language" anyway?
- Language is a communication system.
- But what does a communication system consist of?

Signs

- A sign is a pairing of a form and a meaning.
- Signs can be iconic or symbolic.
- But is the sign system of human language different from other communication systems?
- Let's take a look.

Communication systems

- All communication systems have some features in common:
- A mode of communication: vocal-auditory (humans and most animals), visual (apes), tactile (bees), or even chemical (moths).
- Semanticity: Signals have meaning.
- Pragmatic function: Signals have a purpose, e.g., helping the species survive or influence others' behavior.

"Design features" of human language

- But human language also exhibits a set of features that sets it apart from other communication systems.

Interchangeability

- Interchangeability: Humans can both send and receive messages. This is not always the case with animals, e.g., *bombyx mori* (silkworm) moth uses a chemical communication system that is available only to females, but not to males.

Cultural transmission

- Cultural transmission: For humans to learn language, they have to be exposed to it. No exposure means no language will be learned. For most organisms, by contrast, the actual signal code itself is innate or genetically programmed.

Arbitrariness

- Arbitrariness: The relationship between form and meaning is arbitrary in human language, but largely iconic in animal communication systems.

Discreteness

- Discreteness: Each signal in human language be divided into discrete units (what we call sounds), but this is not the case with signals in other communication systems.

Displacement and Infinity

- Two of the most important design features of human language are displacement and creativity/discrete infinity.
- On Wednesday we explain what these mean, and we look at counterexamples for the “distinctiveness” of human language.

Next class agenda

- Do the questionnaire and send it to me by e-mail.
- More on the nature of human language and linguistics. Continue with Chap. 1.
- Also read Chap. 10: Language in a biological context, and the section on attempts to teach animals human language.
- Follow the link to Jackendoff's chapters on the website.