

INTD0112

Introduction to Linguistics

Lecture #1
Feb 13th, 2007

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.
- But what is so special about human language as a communication system?
- Several things. Let's see.

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.
- But communication systems exhibit other features as well.

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 iconic in animal communication systems.

Discreteness

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

Displacement

- Displacement: Humans can use language to talk about things not present in space or time. Animal communication systems are tied to the “here and now.”

Creativity

- Creativity: Humans are creative with language. We can always add new words and expressions, eg., *e-mail*, *utubification*.
- We are also able to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences. Well, how many of the sentences on these slides have you seen before? How many of them have you been able to understand?

Discrete infinity

- Human language also exhibits the so-called discrete infinity property: In theory, we can have signals of an infinite length.
John loves Mary.
Bill says that John loves Mary.
Sue believes that Bill says that John loves Mary.
Harry claims that ...
- Where do we stop?

Our linguistic knowledge is subconscious

- But what is remarkable about human language is that most of what we know we know without the need for any formal instruction. In fact, we figure out the system underlying our language even before we go to school.
- Linguistic knowledge is for the most part subconscious.

Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

- You know that “klirb” and “rnig” are not English words, but you also know that “klirb” could potentially be an English word (maybe a name of a new kind of edible CDs), whereas “rnig” can never be part of the English lexicon.
- So, how do we come to know this?

Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

- And while you can “eat a turkey sandwich” or just “eat”, you can only “devour a turkey sandwich”, but not just “devour”.

Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

- You also know that while you can “vacation in France” or “summer in Paris”, you cannot “*midnight in the streets” or “*noon at the dining hall.”

(Note that a star is linguists' convention to indicate that a language form is bad.)

Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

- Consider:
 - I took my shirt off.
 - I took off my shirt.
- But:
 - I took it off.
 - *I took off it.

Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

- We know:
 - If “John gave money to the children”, then we can also say that “John gave the children money.”
- But we also know:
 - If “John donated money to the children”, we cannot say that “*John donated the children money.”

So, how do we know that?

Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

- We know:
 - Who did John say that Mary saw?
 - Who did John say __ Mary saw?
 - So, maybe the word “that” is optional.
- But now consider:
 - Who did John say __ saw Mary?
 - *Who did John say that saw Mary?

So, what's the deal?

Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

● Consider:

John hurt himself. (himself = John)

John hurt him. (him ≠ John)

● But now consider:

John said that Bill hurt himself.
(himself = Bill, but ≠ John)

● Now consider further:

John said that Bill hurt him.
(him ≠ Bill, but may = John)

Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

● But wait, there's more:

John said he ate the sandwich.
(he may = John)

● But:

He said John ate the sandwich.
(he ≠ John)

● Maybe a pronoun can only refer back, not forward.

Hmmm, how about:
While he was playing soccer, John broke his leg.
(he may = John)

Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

● We know this is good:

Who did you see Mary with?

● But we also know this is bad:

*Who did you see Mary and?

Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

● And it gets interesting:

Who did Mary meet at the party?

Who did John say that Mary met at the party?

Who did Sarah believe that John said that Mary met at the party?

Who do you think that Sarah believed that John said that Mary met at the party?

.....

● Where do we stop? Infinity?

Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

● But compare with these now:

*Who do you believe the claim that Mary met?

*Which book did Mary talk to the author who wrote?

*Who did Mary talk to John without meeting?

● So, why are these bad? You probably don't know why, but there's no doubt that you "know" they're bad.

Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

● One more:

At a potluck dinner gathering, you may ask:

Who brought what?

But not:

*What did who bring?

Linguistic knowledge is subconscious

- You know all of this (and more) because it is part of your “unconscious” native knowledge of English. And your grammaticality judgments are based on your linguistic “intuitions”, not on what you were taught in school. It’s part of your linguistic “**competence**”.
- Linguists are concerned with characterizing native speakers’ competence of their language.

Next class agenda

- More on the nature of human language.
Continue with Chap. 1.
- Can animals learn human language?
Read Chap. 17