



Boundless Psychology

Language

Introduction to Language



Introduction to Language

Language is the ability to produce and comprehend spoken and written words; linguistics is the study of language.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe the key properties and features of language

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- Grammar is a set of rules for generating logical communication.
- All languages have a grammar, and native speakers of a language have internalized the rules of that language's grammar.
- Every language has a lexicon, or the sum total of all the words in that language.
- Phonetics and phonemics are the study of individual units of sound in languages.

- Morphology is the study of words and other meaningful units of language.
- Syntax is the study of sentences and phrases, and the rules of grammar that sentences obey.
- Semantics is the study of sentence meaning; pragmatics is the study of sentence meaning in context.

Key Terms

- **lexicon:** The sum total of all words in a language.
- **grammar:** The set of rules a language obeys for creating words and sentences.

Language is the ability to produce and comprehend both spoken and written (and in the case of sign language, signed) words. Understanding how language works means reaching across many branches of psychology—everything from basic neurological functioning to high-level cognitive processing. Language shapes our social interactions and brings order to our lives. Complex language is one of the defining factors that makes us human. Two of the concepts that make language unique are grammar and lexicon.

Grammar

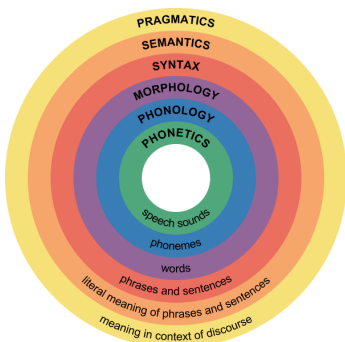
Because all language obeys a set of combinatory rules, we can communicate an infinite number of concepts. While every language has a different set of rules, all languages do obey rules. These rules are known as grammar. Speakers of a language have internalized the rules and exceptions for that language's grammar. There are rules for every level of language—word formation (for example, native speakers of English have internalized the general rule that -ed is the ending for past-tense verbs, so even when they encounter a brand-new verb, they automatically know how to put it into past tense); phrase formation (for example, knowing that when you use the verb “buy,” it needs a subject and an object; “She buys” is wrong, but “She buys a gift” is okay); and sentence formation.

Lexicon

Every language has its rules, which act as a framework for meaningful communication. But what do people fill that framework up with? The answer is, of course, words. Every human language has a lexicon—the sum total of all of the words in that language. By using grammatical rules to combine words into logical sentences, humans can convey an infinite number of concepts.

Introduction to Linguistics

Language is such a special topic that there is an entire field, linguistics, devoted to its study. Linguistics views language in an objective way, using the scientific method and rigorous research to form theories about how humans acquire, use, and sometimes abuse language. There are a few major branches of linguistics, which it is useful to understand in order to learn about language from a psychological perspective.



Major levels of linguistics: *This diagram outlines the various subfields of linguistics, the study of language. These include phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.*

Phonetics and Phonology

Phonetics is the study of individual speech sounds; phonology is the study of phonemes, which are the speech sounds of an individual language. These two heavily overlapping subfields cover all the sounds that humans can make, as well as which sounds make up different languages. A phonologist could answer the question, “Why do BAT and TAB have different meanings even though they are made of the same three sounds, A, B and T?”

Morphology

Morphology is the study of words and other meaningful units of

language like suffixes and prefixes. A morphologist would be interested in the relationship between words like “dog” and “dogs” or “walk” and “walking,” and how people figure out the differences between those words.

Syntax

Syntax is the study of sentences and phrases, or how people put words into the right order so that they can communicate meaningfully. All languages have underlying rules of syntax, which, along with morphological rules, make up every language’s grammar. An example of syntax coming into play in language is “Eugene walked the dog” versus “The dog walked Eugene.” The order of words is not arbitrary—in order for the sentence to convey the intended meaning, the words must be in a certain order.

Semantics and Pragmatics

Semantics, most generally, is about the meaning of sentences. Someone who studies semantics is interested in words and what real-world object or concept those words denote, or point to. Pragmatics is an even broader field that studies how the context of a sentence contributes to meaning—for example, someone shouting “Fire!” has a very different meaning if they are in charge of a seven-gun salute than it does if they are sitting in a crowded movie theater.

The Structure of Language

All languages have underlying structural rules that make meaningful communication possible.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Explain the hierarchy of the building blocks of language

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

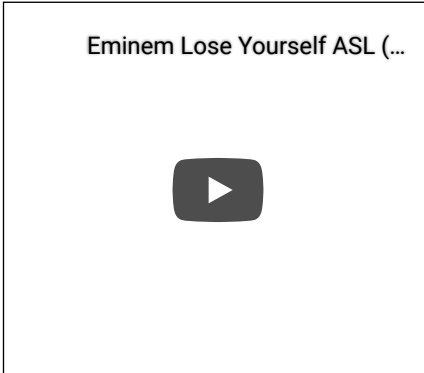
- The five main components of language are phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, syntax, and context. Along with grammar, semantics, and pragmatics, these components work together to create meaningful communication among individuals.
- A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that may cause a change of meaning within a language but that doesn't have meaning by itself.
- A morpheme is the smallest unit of a word that provides a specific meaning to a string of letters (which is called a phoneme). There are two main types of morpheme: free morphemes and bound morphemes.
- A lexeme is the set of all the inflected forms of a single word.
- Syntax is the set of rules by which a person constructs full sentences.
- Context is how everything within language works together to convey a particular meaning.

Key Terms

- **lexeme**: The set of inflected forms taken by a single word.
- **phoneme**: An indivisible unit of sound in a given language.
- **morpheme**: The smallest linguistic unit within a word that can carry a meaning, such as “un-”, “break”, and “-able” in the word “unbreakable.”

Every language is different. In English, an adjective comes before a noun (“red house”), whereas in Spanish, the adjective comes after (“casa

[house] roja [red].”) In German, you can put noun after noun together to form giant compound words; in Chinese, the pitch of your voice determines the meaning of your words; in American Sign Language, you can convey full, grammatical sentences with tense and aspect by moving your hands and face. But all languages have structural underpinnings that make them logical for the people who speak and understand them.



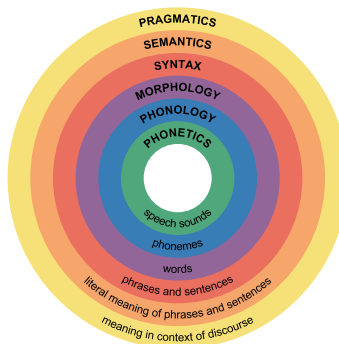
Rapping in American Sign Language: Shelby Mitchusson performs an ASL translation of “Lose Yourself” by Eminem. ASL and other sign languages have all the same structural underpinnings that spoken languages do.

Five major components of the structure of language are phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, syntax, and context. These pieces all work together to create meaningful communication among individuals.

Phonemes

A phoneme is the basic unit of phonology. It is the smallest unit of sound that may cause a change of meaning within a language, but that doesn't have meaning by itself. For example, in the words “bake” and “brake,” only one phoneme has been altered, but a change in meaning has been triggered. The phoneme /r/ has no meaning on its own, but by appearing in the word it has completely changed the word's meaning!

Phonemes correspond to the sounds of the alphabet, although there is not always a one-to-one relationship between a letter and a phoneme (the sound made when you say the word). For example, the word “dog” has three phonemes: /d/, /o/, and /g/. However, the word “shape,” despite having five letters, has only three phonemes: /sh/, /long-a/, and /p/. The English language has approximately 45 different phonemes, which correspond to letters or combinations of letters. Through the process of segmentation, a phoneme can have a particular pronunciation in one word and a slightly different pronunciation in another.



Major levels of linguistic structure:

This diagram outlines the relationship between types of linguistic units. Speech sounds make up phonemes, which make up words. Words make up sentences, which have literal meanings and contextual meanings.

Morphemes

Morphemes, the basic unit of morphology, are the smallest meaningful unit of language. Thus, a morpheme is a series of phonemes that has a special meaning. If a morpheme is altered in any way, the entire meaning of the word can be changed. Some morphemes are individual words (such as “eat” or “water”). These are known as free morphemes because they can exist on their own. Other morphemes are prefixes, suffixes, or other linguistic pieces that aren’t full words on their own but do affect meaning (such as the “-s” at the end of “cats” or the “re-” at the beginning of “redo.”) Because these morphemes must be attached to another word to have meaning, they are called bound morphemes.

Within the category of bound morphemes, there are two additional subtypes: derivational and inflectional. Derivational morphemes change the meaning or part of speech of a word when they are used together. For example, the word “sad” changes from an adjective to a noun when “-ness” (sadness) is added to it. “Action” changes in meaning when the

morpheme “re-” is added to it, creating the word “reaction.” Inflectional morphemes modify either the tense of a verb or the number value of a noun; for example, when you add an “-s” to “cat,” the number of cats changes from one to more than one.

Lexemes

Lexemes are the set of inflected forms taken by a single word. For example, members of the lexeme RUN include “run” (the uninflected form), “running” (inflected form), and “ran.” This lexeme excludes “runner” (a derived term—it has a derivational morpheme attached).

Another way to think about lexemes is that they are the set of words that would be included under one entry in the dictionary—“running” and “ran” would be found under “run,” but “runner” would not.

Syntax

Syntax is a set of rules for constructing full sentences out of words and phrases. Every language has a different set of syntactic rules, but all languages have some form of syntax. In English, the smallest form of a sentence is a noun phrase (which might just be a noun or a pronoun) and a verb phrase (which may be a single verb). Adjectives and adverbs can be added to the sentence to provide further meaning. Word order matters in English, although in some languages, order is of less importance. For example, the English sentences “The baby ate the carrot” and “The carrot ate the baby” do not mean the same thing, even though they contain the exact same words. In languages like Finnish, word order doesn’t matter for general meaning—different word orders are used to emphasize different parts of the sentence.

Context

Context is how everything within language works together to convey a particular meaning. Context includes tone of voice, body language, and the words being used. Depending on how a person says something, holds his or her body, or emphasizes certain points of a sentence, a variety of different messages can be conveyed. For example, the word “awesome,” when said with a big smile, means the person is excited

about a situation. “Awesome,” said with crossed arms, rolled eyes, and a sarcastic tone, means the person is not thrilled with the situation.

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