

What is language?

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Partners

What is language?

- Some believe that language consists of only a single operation: Merge (Hauser, Chomsky & Fitch 2002).
- Merge is the ability to combine small, meaningful units in order to make larger, meaningful units.

Merge

- Others believe that language is more than just this (Jackendoff & Pinker 2005).
- Combined units still need to be externalised, and humans still need to be able to process the relevance of language to the world around them.
- But both views believe that Merge forms a central operation of language.

An analytic approach

- Linguists have arrived at such debates via studying language from an analytic perspective.
- This means we try to understand language by breaking it down into its component parts and studying how they relate to other component parts.

An example

- Jane hugged John
- Now lets break it down.
- We have a noun, followed by a verb, followed by a noun.
- (John)(hugged)(Jane)

An example

- Notice we can replace each noun with a different noun, and the verb with certain different nouns.
- (The man)(hugged)(Jane)
- (The man)(hugged)(the woman)
- (The man)(found)(the woman)

An example

- Notice that (John) is interchangeable with (the man).
- And (Jane) is interchangeable with (the woman).
- This means that some parts of language are not just broken down into individual words, but phrases.
- This is one level of meaning.
- Individual phrases have meaning, and meanings are built upon meanings by combining smaller phrases, not words.

Another example

- We can break down words in a similar fashion.
- Words are made up of smaller units of meaning we call morphs.

Another example

- Take the word "Privatisation".
- The root of the word is "Private".
- this gives the word its core meaning.
- Adding the "-ise" morpheme to the word "Private" changes it from an adjective, to a verb.

Another example

- We can change the meaning again by adding the morpheme "-ation".
- The word then becomes "Privatisation", which is now a noun, instead of an adjective.

Where to from here?

- We have learnt that we can break down language at two levels: sentences into phrases, and words into morphemes.
- In the rest of the module we will look at these processes in more detail.
- However, instead of breaking language down as we have done here, we will be using the building blocks we have discussed into larger units of meaning.

References I

- Hauser, M. D., Chomsky, N. & Fitch, W. T. (2002), 'The faculty of language: what is it, who has it, and how did it evolve?', *science* **298**(5598), 1569–1579.
- Jackendoff, R. & Pinker, S. (2005), 'The nature of the language faculty and its implications for evolution of language (reply to fitch, hauser, and chomsky)', *Cognition* **97**(2), 211–225.