Introduction to Linguistics 1

Assignment 1

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Human language is inherently unique when we compare it to the methods of communication used by non-human species. This uniqueness allows us to express complex ideas, organize society and create mechanisms for survival and development.

Charles F. Hockett, an American linguist came up with the 'Design Features of Language', as a way of distinguishing human languages from those of the animal kingdom. These ideas were later analyzed and reworked by other linguists. Some basic design features of language are as follows:

• Arbitrariness

The semantic relationship between words and their meanings is completely arbitrary in most languages. There is no correlation between the words we use to refer to an entity and the shape, structure and properties of the same.
Though arbitrariness dominates in human languages, iconicity (where there's a correlation between the sounds of words and their meanings) also exists
(For eg. Onomatopoeic words like "Clang", "धड़ाक", "Yee-Haw", etc.).
Iconicity also exists in non-linguistic variations of tempo, tone, volume, pitch etc.
(For eg. We whisper in quiet spaces like libraries, shout in crowded markets and scream when we're agitated).

Examples:
(Arbitrariness)

English:
1.Fawn
2.Horse

Hindi:
1. बिल्ली (cat)
2. पोशाक (attire)

Hence, there's no correlation between the words we use to describe an entity, and the entities represented by those words.

(Iconicity)

English:
1.Clank
2.Whoosh

Hindi:

1. धड़ाक (The sound of something falling down.)
2. टिप- टिप (The sound of water droplets.)

• Displacement

We can communicate details about instances that happened in places and at time periods different from the ones we're currently having a conversation in. Human speech can hence be displaced, and is independent of space and time.
Bertrand Russel, a philosopher and mathematician said that "No matter how eloquently a dog may bark he cannot tell you that his parents were poor, but honest." Most animals cannot convey ideas that do not belong to their space and time.

Examples:

English:
1.I saw a cat at Parijat yesterday.
2. We're going shopping at 10 a.m. tomorrow.

Hindi:
1. कल रात बारिश हो रही थी| (It was raining last night.)
2. कल सुबह हमें सात बजे उठना है क्यूंकि हम कलकत्ता घूमने जा रहे है| (We have to wake up at 7 o' clock tomorrow morning as we're going to travel around Kolkata.)

These are examples of displacement, as we're talking about the events that happened at a different time and space than the ones in which the conversation takes place.

- # Duality of Patterning

  Duality of patterning refers to how human languages have smaller, meaningless units that come together to form meaningful messages. There are finite speech sounds that can be produced by humans, but organizing this finite resource allows us to form an infinite array of words and languages.

  # Examples:

  ## English:
  1.The letters 'h' and 'm' have no distinct meaning (neither do 'o', 'u', 's' and 'e'); Yet 'house' and 'mouse' are extremely different entities.
  2.The 'r' and 'p' sounds have no distinct meaning, but 'pan' and 'ran' have different meanings.

  ## Hindi:
  1. 'क', 'ल' and 'म' have no meanings but कलम refers to a pen.
  2. This also applies to 'बा', 'ल' and 'क' as 'बालक' refers to a young boy.

- # Recursion:

  Human language is recursive in the sense that we can embed a phrase into other phrases for conveying complicated ideas.

  # Examples:

  ## English:
  1. I studied in Bombay.
     When I was a kid, [I studied in Bombay].

2. She made a painting.
   The neighbors told us that [she made a painting].

Hindi:

1. उसे चिड़ियों को दाना डालना है| (She needs to feed the birds.)
 [उसे चिड़ियों को दाना डालना है] इसलिए वो बगीचे में गयी है| (She needs to feed the birds; hence she has gone to the garden.)
2. उसकी उमर अठराह साल की है| (She is eighteen years old.)
   उसने मुझे बताया कि [उसकी उमर अठराह साल की है] | (She informed me that she is eighteen years old.)

Here, one sentence has been embedded into the other in order to give more context regarding the situation, and to convey more complex ideas.

• <u>Productivity</u>

Human languages allow us to convey ideas we've never said or heard before. They allow us to hypothesize, contemplate and form new languages. Hence, we can come up with new ideas based on the patterns present in what we already know.

<u>Examples:</u>

English:
1. "The story said that the dragon imprisoned the princess."
2. "What if dogs could fly?"

Hindi:

1. "काश पेड़ों पर पैसे उग सकते|" (I wish that money could grow on trees.)
2. "एक खरगोश ने एक चूहे से शर्त लगायी|" (A rabbit placed a bet with a rat.)

In such examples, the situations are purely hypothetical, (Dogs can't fly and money doesn't grow on trees), yet we have the ability to communicate such ideas using the human language.

- ## Prevarication:

Human languages allow us to convey ideas which we know are false. The difference between productivity and prevarication is that productivity allows us to hypothesize while prevarication allows us to say untruths (the ability to lie).

Examples:

English:
1. "The water boiling in the kettle is cold."
2. "The dog outside is meowing at the cat."

Hindi:
1. "आम नमकीन होते हैं।" (Mangoes are salty.)
2. "बिल्ली ढेँचू ढेँचू करती है।" (A cat makes a dhenchoo-dhenchoo(braying) sound.)

The above lines are false (we know that a cat meows and that boiling water is hot), yet we can convey these lies easily using human languages.

- ## Cultural Transmission:

Human language has both universality (most humans use language(L) to communicate) and particularity (different cultural contexts and ideas shape different languages (l1, l2, l3etc.)). What language a person learns is determined by what they're taught, and not by their genetics. Humans have an INNATENESS for language (a biological endowment for language faculty), but which language they learn depends on what was spoken around them and what they have been taught.

Examples:

A child born in Maharashtra but adopted by Spanish parents will learn Spanish from his/her parents, instead of Marathi.

• <u>Structure Dependency:</u>

Sentences aren't simply a linear concatenation of words. Instead, they have a hierarchical structure to them.

<u>Examples:</u>

English:
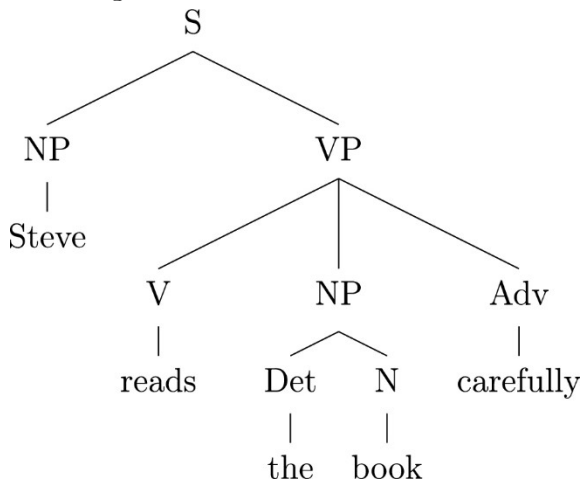1. The cow ate the hay.
   The hay ate the cow.
These sentences have the same words, but the meanings differ as English usually follows a Subject-Verb-Object format.
2. The boy is late.
   Is the boy late?
Rearrangement of the words in these sentences forms a question.

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                    S
                 /     \
              NP        VP
              |        / | \
            Steve     /  |  \
                     V   NP   Adv
                     |  / \    |
                 reads Det  N carefully
                      |    |
                     the  book
```

Hindi:
1. यशस्वी को किताब दो| (Give the book to Yashaswi.)
   किताब को यशस्वी दो| (Give Yashaswi to the book.)
2. किसान ने खेत जोते| (The farmer plowed the fields.)
   खेत ने किसान जोते| (The fields plowed the farmer.)
Hindi usually follows a Subject-Object-Verb format.

- ## <u>Vocal and Auditory Communication:</u>

  1. Language is communicated in an oral format between the speaker (vocal) and the listener (auditory) using air as a medium.
  2. It's broadcasted in all directions.
  3. It's not as permanent as a written medium.

- # <u>Ambiguity (Can come under productivity):</u>

  Language is not a slot-filling operation. It has a Surface Structure as well as a Deep Structure.
  There can hence be ambiguity in language as listeners impose a structure upon it.

  # <u>Examples:</u>

  ## English:
  1. In order to escape the police // the thief raced through the streets.
     The jewels stolen by the thief // jingled loudly as he ran.
  In the first sentence, we assume that the thief belongs to the second part of the sentence, while in the second sentence, we assume the opposite.
  2. Boiling water // is dangerous for children.
     Boiling // water is dangerous for children.
  Here we can assume that the act of boiling water is dangerous, or that water that is boiling is dangerous for children.

  ## Hindi:
  1. उसे छोड़ो // मत परेशान करो|: (Leave him alone, don't tease him.)
     उसे छोड़ो मत // परेशान करो| (Don't leave him alone, tease him)

     In the above examples, the places where we pause while speaking completely change the meaning of the sentences.

- # <u>Semanticity:</u>

  Semanticity refers to how human languages aren't made up of meaningless entities. Instead, they have specific meanings attached to certain morphemes.

Examples:

English:

1. 'Cat' refers to a specific entity which cannot be confused with a 'mouse'.
2. 'Cake' and 'Flower' are different entities which conjure different images in our minds.

Hindi:

1.'किताब' and 'खरगोश' are words that refer to very specific entities (a book and a rabbit).

2. The Hindi 'और' refers to the English 'and' which means the union of two entities; while 'or' in English refers to a choice between two entities.

Sources

- Animal 'Languages' and Human Language – Charles F. Hockett
  https://www.jstor.org/stable/41449227?seq=1
- Class notes from Introduction to Linguistics-1 (A few definitions have been quoted verbatim from the class and may be similar to those used by the rest of the batch.)
- Hockett's Design Features – Bates College
  https://abacus.bates.edu/acad/depts/biobook/Hockett.htm
- Dictionary for definitions: https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/
- Photo link (page 6): https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10670-022-00657-0