An Introduction to Language 10e

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Robert Rodman

Nina Hyams

What Is Not (Human) Language

> It is a very remarkable fact that there are none so depraved and stupid, without even excepting idiots, that they cannot arrange different words together, forming of them a statement by which they make known their thoughts; while, on the other hand, there is no other animal, however perfect and fortunately circumstanced it may be, which can do the same.
>
> RENÉ DESCARTES, *Discourse on Method and Meditation on First Philosophy*

All languages share certain fundamental properties, and children naturally acquire these languages—whether they are spoken or signed. Both modalities are equally accessible to the child because human beings are designed for human language. But what of the "languages" of other species: Are they like human languages? Can other species be taught a human language?

The Birds and the Bees

> Teach me half the gladness
> That thy brain must know;
> Such harmonious madness
> From my lips would flow,
> The world should listen then, as I am listening now.
>
> PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY, 1792–1822, *To a Skylark*

Most animal species possess some kind of communication system. Humans also communicate through systems other than language such as head nodding or facial expressions. The question is whether the communication systems used by other species are at all like human language with its very specific properties, most notably its creative aspect.

Many species have a non-vocal system of communication. Among certain species of spiders there is a complex system for courtship. Before approaching his ladylove, the male spider goes through an elaborate series of gestures to tell her that he is indeed a spider and a suitable mate, and not a crumb or a fly to be eaten. These gestures are invariant. One never finds a creative spider changing or adding to the courtship ritual of his species.

A similar kind of gestural language is found among the fiddler crabs. There are forty species, and each uses its own claw-waving movement to signal to another member of its "clan." The timing, movement, and posture of the body never change from one time to another or from one crab to another within the particular variety. Whatever the signal means, it is fixed. Only one meaning can be conveyed.

An essential property of human language not shared by the communication systems of spiders, crabs and other animals is its **discreteness**. Human languages are not simply made up of a fixed set of invariant signs. They are composed of discrete units—sounds, words, phrases—that are combined

The actual words in a language constitute a mere subset of the possible words. There are always gaps in the lexicon—words not present but that could be added. Some of the gaps are due to the fact that a permissible sound sequence has no meaning attached to it (like *blick*, or *slarm*, or *krobe*). The sequence of sounds must be in keeping with the constraints of the language, however; **bnick* is not a "gap" because no word in English can begin with *bn*. We will discuss such constraints in chapter 6.

Other gaps result when possible combinations of morphemes never come into use. Speakers can distinguish between impossible words such as **unsystem* and **needlessity* and possible but nonexisting words such as *magnificenter* or *disobvious* (cf. *distrustful*). The latter are blocked, as noted earlier, owing to the presence of *more magnificent* and *nonobvious*. The ability to make this distinction is further evidence that the morphological component of our mental grammar consists of not just a lexicon—a list of existing words—but also of rules that enable us to create and understand new words, and to recognize possible and impossible words.

Other Morphological Processes

The various kinds of affixation that we have discussed are by far the most common morphological processes among the world's languages. But, as we continue to emphasize in this book, the human language capacity is enormously creative, and that creativity extends to ways other than affixation in which words may be altered and created.

Back-Formations

> [A girl] was delighted by her discovery that *eats* and *cats* were really *eat* + *-s* and *cat* + *-s*. She used her new suffix snipper to derive *mik* (mix), *upstair*, *downstair*, *clo* (clothes), *len* (lens), *brefek* (from *brefeks*, her word for breakfast), *trappy* (trapeze), even *Santa Claw*.
>
> STEVEN PINKER, *Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language*, 1999

Misconception can sometimes be creative, and nothing in this world both misconceives and creates like a child, as we shall see in chapter 9. A new word may enter the language because of an incorrect morphological analysis. For example, *peddle* was derived from *peddler* on the mistaken assumption that the *-er* was the agentive suffix. Such words are called **back-formations**. The verbs *hawk*, *stoke*, *swindle*, *burgle* and *edit* all came into the language as back-formations—of *hawker*, *stoker*, *swindler*, *burglar* and *editor*. *Pea* was derived from a singular word, *pease*, by speakers who thought *pease* was a plural.

Some word creation comes from deliberately miscast back-formations. The word *bikini* comes from the Bikini atoll of the Marshall Islands. Because the first syllable *bi-* is a morpheme meaning 'two' in words like *bicycle*, some clever person called a topless bathing suit a *monokini* and a tank top with a bikini bottom a *tankini*. Historically, a number of new words have entered the English lexicon in a similar way, some of the most recent being the *appletini, chocotini, mintini* and *God-knows-what-else-tini* to be found as

The grammars of sign languages also include a morphological component consisting of a root, derivational and inflectional sign morphemes, and the rules for their combination.

Morphological analysis is the process of identifying form-meaning units in a language, taking into account small differences in pronunciation, so that prefixes *in-* and *im-* are seen to be variants of the "same" prefix in English (cf. *intolerable*, *impeccable*) just as *democrat* and *democrac* are stem variants of the same morpheme, which shows up in *democratic* with its "t" and in *democracy* with its "c."

References for Further Reading

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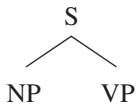
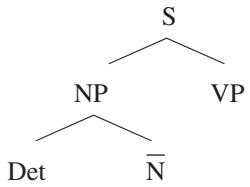
Exercises

1. Here is how to estimate the number of words in your mental lexicon. Consult any standard dictionary. (Note that Internet dictionaries may not work for this exercise.)
   - **a.** Count the number of entries on a typical page. They are usually boldfaced.
   - **b.** Multiply the number of words per page by the number of pages in the dictionary.
   - **c.** Pick four pages in the dictionary at random, say, pages 50, 75, 125, and 303. Count the number of words on these pages.
   - **d.** How many of these words do you know?
   - **e.** What percentage of the words on the four pages do you know?
   - **f.** Multiply the words in the dictionary by the percentage you arrived at in (e). You know approximately that many English words.
2. Divide the following words by placing a + between their morphemes. (Some of the words may be monomorphemic and therefore indivisible.)

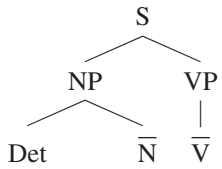
the arrow (rule 1), and put the categories on the right side below the S, as shown here:



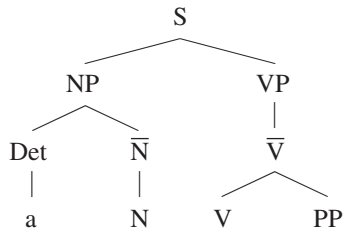
Continue by matching any syntactic category at the bottom of the partially constructed tree to a category on the left side of a rule, then expand the tree downward using the categories on the right side. For example, we may expand the tree by applying the NP rule to produce:



The categories at the bottom are Det, $\overline{N}$ and VP, and both $\overline{N}$ and VP occur to the left of an arrow. We may choose to expand either one; order doesn't matter. If we choose VP our work in progress looks like this:



Although not mentioned specifically in our five rules, certain verbs take a PP complement. According to the X-bar schema, then, the rule that we have just described can be written $\overline{V} \rightarrow$ V PP. Let's expand that along with $\overline{N}$ (applying rule 3) and complete lexical insertion for Det.



All that is left to expand is the PP, and then we'll fill in the remaining lexical items.