An Introduction to Language 11e

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What Is Language?

> When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the "human essence," the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man.
>
> NOAM CHOMSKY, *Language and Mind*, 1968

Whatever else people do when they come together—whether they play, fight, make love, or make automobiles—they talk. We live in a world of language. We talk to friends, associates, wives and husbands, lovers, teachers, parents, rivals, and even enemies. We talk face-to-face and over all manner of electronic media, and everyone responds with more talk. Hardly a moment of our waking lives is free from words, and even our dreams are filled with talk. We also talk when there is no one to answer. Some of us talk aloud in our sleep. We talk to our pets and sometimes to ourselves.

The capacity for language, perhaps more than any other attribute, distinguishes humans from other animals. According to the philosophy expressed in many myths and religions, language is the source of human life and power. To some people of Africa, a newborn child is a *kintu*, a "thing," not yet a *muntu*, a "person." It is only by the act of learning language that the child becomes a human being. To understand our humanity, we must understand the nature of language that makes us human. That is the goal of this book. We begin with a simple question: What does it mean to "know" a language?

As we will discuss in Chapter 10, the human language ability is rooted in the human brain. Just like human language, the communication system of each species is determined by its biology. This raises the interesting question of whether it is possible for one species to acquire the language of another; more specifically, can animals learn human language?

Can Animals Learn Human Language?

> It is a great baboon, but so much like man in most things . . . I do believe it already understands much English; and I am of the mind it might be taught to speak or make signs.
>
> ENTRY IN SAMUEL PEPYS'S DIARY, 1661

The idea of talking animals is as old and as widespread among human societies as language itself. All cultures have legends in which some animal speaks. All over West Africa, children listen to folktales in which a "spider-man" is the hero. "Coyote" is a favorite figure in many Native American tales, and many an animal takes the stage in Aesop's famous fables. Bugs Bunny, Mickey Mouse, and Donald Duck are icons of American culture. The fictional Doctor Doolittle communicated with all manner of animals, from giant snails to tiny sparrows, as did Saint Francis of Assisi.

In reality, various species show abilities that seem to mimic aspects of human language. Talking birds such as parrots and mynahs can be taught to faithfully reproduce words and phrases, but this does not mean they have acquired a human language. As the poet William Cowper put it: "Words learned by rote a parrot may rehearse; but talking is not always to converse."

Talking birds do not decompose their imitations into discrete units. *Polly* and *Molly* do not rhyme for a parrot. They are as different as *hello* and *goodbye*. If Polly learns "Polly wants a cracker" and "Polly wants a doughnut" and also learns to say *whiskey* and *bagel*, she will not then spontaneously produce "Polly wants whiskey" or "Polly wants a bagel" or "Polly wants whiskey and a bagel." If she learns *cat* and *cats*, and *dog* and *dogs*, and then learns the word *parrot*, she will not be able to form the plural *parrots*, as children do. Unlike every developing child, a parrot cannot generalize from particular instances and so cannot produce utterances that have not been directly taught. A parrot—even a very chatty one—cannot produce an unlimited set of sentences from a finite set of units. The imitative utterances of talking birds mean nothing to the birds; these utterances have no communicative function. Simply knowing how to produce a sequence of speech sounds is not the same as knowing a language. But what about animals that appear to learn the meanings of words? Do they have human language?

Dogs can easily be taught to respond to commands such as *heel, sit,* and *fetch* and even seem to understand object words such as *ball* and *toy*. Indeed, in 2004 German psychologists reported on a Border Collie named Rico who had acquired a 200-word vocabulary (containing both German and English words). When asked to fetch a particular toy from a pile of many toys Rico was correct over 90 percent of the time. When told to fetch a toy whose name he had not

"Malapropisms"

A malapropism is the confusion of a word through misinterpretation of its morphemes, usually with a humorous effect. Such "mistakes" reveal much of the lexical knowledge of the speaker. Here are a few examples. Many more circulate on the Internet.

Word	Humorous Definition
abdicate	to give up all hope of ever having a flat stomach
adamant	pertaining to original sin
circumvent	opening in the front of boxer shorts worn by Jewish men
coffee	the person upon whom one coughs
deciduous	able to make up one's mind
flabbergasted	appalled over how much weight you have gained
frisbeetarianism	the belief that after death your soul flies up and gets stuck in a tree
gubernatorial	having to do with peanuts
gullible	to do with seabirds
longevity	being very tall
metronome	a city dwelling diminutive troll
oxymoron	a really stupid cow
polyglot	more than one glot

The poor English-class student who used the word *indefatigable* in the sentence

She tried many reducing diets, but remained indefatigable.

clearly shows morphological knowledge: *in* meaning "not" as in *ineffective; de* meaning "off" as in *decapitate;* "fat" as in fat; *able* as in *able;* and combined meaning, "not able to take the fat off."

Sign Language Morphology

Sign languages are rich in morphology. They have root and affix morphemes, free and bound morphemes, lexical and grammatical morphemes, derivational and inflectional morphemes, and morphological rules for their combination to form morphologically complex signs. The affixation is accomplished by preceding or following a particular gesture with another "affixing" gesture.

The suffix meaning "negation," roughly analogous to *un-* or *non-* or *dis-,* is accomplished as a rapid turning over of the hand(s) following the end of the root sign that is being negated. For example, "want" is signed with open palms facing upward; "don't want" follows that gesture with a turning of the palms to face downward. This "reversal of orientation" suffix may be applied, with necessary adjustments, to many root signs.

In sign language, many morphological processes are not linear. Rather, the sign stem occurs nested within various movements and locations in signing space so that the gestures are simultaneous, an impossibility with spoken languages.

Inflection of sign roots also occurs in ASL and all other sign languages, which characteristically modify the movement of the hands and the spatial contours of the area near the body in which the signs are articulated. For example, movement away from the signer's body toward the "listener" might inflect a verb as in "I see you," whereas movement away from the listener and toward the body would inflect the verb as in "you see me."

for purposes of agreement between the subject noun and the verb. In the sentences given, two of these classes are included (there are many more in the language).

a. Identify all the morphemes you can detect, and give their meanings.

Example: -toto "child"

m- prefix attached to singular nouns of Class I

a- prefix attached to verbs when the subject is a singular noun of Class I

Be sure to look for the other noun and verb markers, including tense markers.

b. How is the verb constructed? That is, what kinds of morphemes are strung together and in what order?

c. How would you say in Swahili:
(1) "The child is falling."
(2) "The baskets have arrived."
(3) "The person will fall."

10. Part One:

We mentioned the morphological process of reduplication—the formation of new words through the repetition of part or all of a word—which occurs in many languages. The following examples from Samoan illustrate this kind of morphological rule.

manao	"he wishes"	mananao	"they wish"
matua	"he is old"	matutua	"they are old"
malosi	"he is strong"	malolosi	"they are strong"
punou	"he bends"	punonou	"they bend"
atamaki	"he is wise"	atamamaki	"they are wise"
savali	"he travels"	pepese	"they sing"
laga	"he weaves"		

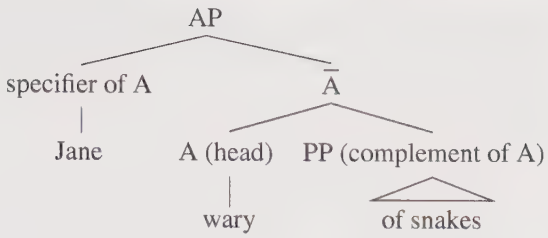
a. What is the Samoan for:
(1) "they weave"
(2) "they travel"
(3) "he sings"

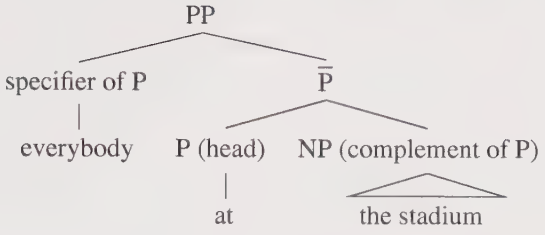
b. Formulate a general statement (a morphological rule) that states how to form the plural verb form from the singular verb form.

Part Two:

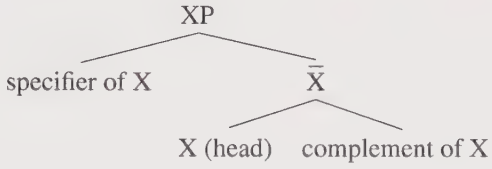
Consider these data from M'nong (spoken in Vietnam) with some simplifications for this exercise: (The ? is a sound called a glottal stop.)

dang	"hard"	da dang	"a little hard"
kloh	"clean"	klo kloh	"a little clean"
ndreh	"green"	ndre ndreh	"light green"
guh	"red"	go? guh	"reddish"
duh	"hot"	do? duh	"luke warm"
kat	"cold"	ka kat	"chilly"





To capture the generalization that each phrasal category has the same internal structure, we substitute X in place of N, V, P, A and we get the following tree:



This three-tiered structure, referred to as **X-bar ($\bar{X}$) schema**, is a template or blueprint that specifies how the phrases of a language are organized, or alternatively, how PS rules are formed. The X-bar schema "stands for" the various phrasal categories given above (and others we will see later) and applies to all syntactic phrases. The parentheses around the specifier and complement indicate that these expansions are optional and depend on the selectional properties of the head. The head is the only obligatory category of a phrase. The "bar" category is an intermediate level category necessary to account for certain syntactic phenomena that we'll see shortly.

Assuming X-bar schema we must modify our PS rules to incorporate the three tiers. Here are the revised rules for NP:

2a: NP → (Det) $\bar{N}$
2b: $\bar{N}$ → N (XP)

Under the new rules, NP expands as an optional Det and $\bar{N}$ and $\bar{N}$ expands as N and an optional complement of any category (XP). These rules will generate the PS tree for phrase *the mother of Whistler*, illustrated on the previous page, where XP stands for the PP *of Whistler* as complement to the head N *mother*.