

What is not human language and what makes human language.

All animals use some form of communication, although some animal communication is more complex than others.

Communication in both animals and humans consists of signals. Signals are sounds or gestures that have some meaning to those who use them. The meaning is often self-evident based on context: for example, there are many animals which roar, growl, or groan in response to threats of danger; similarly, humans may wave their arms or scream in the event of something dangerous. These signals in these situations are designed to let others in the species know that something is wrong and the animal or human needs help.

Human communication consists of both signals *and* symbols. Symbols are sounds or gestures that have a specific meaning to a group of people. This meaning could be cultural, group-related, or even related between two specific people. For example, two people may create a “secret” handshake, or a group may develop a passcode that only members are aware of. Symbols, unlike signals, must be taught and learned; they are not instinctual or self-evident.

The properties of language

Linguistic signals:

- **communicative** – intentional, used to communicate/express something directly
- **informative** – unintentional, carrying some kind of indirect information (eg sneezing = having a cold, yawning = being bored)

Unique properties of human language:

- **displacement** – ability to relate to events far from here and now (past or future, somewhere else); animals cannot refer to things not present in the immediate environment
Also, we can talk about things and places whose existence we cannot be sure of (mythical creatures, demons, angels, Santa Claus, etc). Animals cannot relate to fiction.
- **arbitrariness** – it represents no natural connection between sound and its meaning; the writing form has no iconic relationship with the real concept; However, some words ‘echo’ sounds of objects and activities – eg. *cuckoo*, *crash*, *splash*, *squelch* (onomatopoeic words).
- **productivity** (also known as: open-endedness, creativity) – it refers to the production of unlimited number of utterances using the limited number of elements in the language. Animals cannot produce new signals to communicate new experiences or events. Each animal signal relates to only one particular object or occasion
 - **cultural transmission** – we don’t inherit the language from our parents, we acquire it

in/with the culture of other speakers of the language. Language is passed from one generation to the next; Cultural transmission of a specific language is essential in the human acquisition process. People do not show any specific predispositions for speaking a particular language. This process whereby language is passed on from one generation to the next is described as cultural transmission; As far as animals are concerned, they learn their signals instinctively.

- **discreteness** – each sound in the language is treated as discrete, i.e. change in pronunciation of one sound leads to a change in meaning of the word, for example, *pack* vs *back*. Each sound in the language is treated as discrete.

- **duality** – there are two levels of language (sound and meaning):

- distinct sounds – they carry no meaning when put individually

- distinct meanings – we can combine sounds to express different meanings (messages)

People can produce a large number of sound combinations which are distinct (different) in meaning using limited number of distinct sounds;

The duality of levels is one of the most economical features of human language, because with a limited set of distinct sounds people are capable of producing a very large number of sound combinations (e.g. words) which are distinct in meaning.

Other properties (not uniquely human):

- **vocal-auditory channel** – language is typically generated by the use of the vocal organs and perceived by the ears; however, we can transmit the language without sound, eg. in writing or sign language;

- **reciprocity** – it means that any speaker/sender of a linguistic signal can also be a listener/receiver);

- **specialization** – linguistic signals serve only linguistic purpose, they cannot be used for such activities as feeding or breathing;

- **non-directionality** – anyone can pick up linguistic signals, not only their original listeners/receivers;

- **rapid fade** – linguistic signals appear and disappear quickly;

Source:

Yule, G. (2006) *The Study of Language* Cambridge University Press

