

Introduction to Language Properties

1. Definition of Language

Language is an integral part of human life as it is a medium of communication through which individuals transmit their thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions to other people. Many definitions have been proposed by scholars.

According to **Sapir (1921)**, language is a purely **human** and **non-instinctive** method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires through a system of voluntarily produced sounds

Henry sweet defines language as‘ the expression of ideas by means of speech sounds combined into words and words into sentences.

Robert Hall (1969) stated that‘ the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory , arbitrary symbols.

Ferdinant de Saussure considered language as an internalized system of symbols units (signs) defined by their intrasystemic relations.

David crystal defined language as the systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression.

Chomsky believed that we are born with a capacity for language. Language rules are influenced by experience and learning, but the capacity for language itself exists with or without environmental influences. He focuses on the structural features of the language and showed that it can be analyzed by analyzing it into its constituents elements.

According to him, the language is the inherent capability of native speakers to understand and form grammatical sentences. A language is a set of (finite or infinite) sentences, each finite length constructed out of a limited set of elements.

2. Characteristics of Language

Language can have scores of characteristics but the following are the most important ones: Displacement, arbitrariness, productivity, cultural transmission, discreteness and duality



Language is the collection of all the efforts human use to communicate. Whether spoken, written, or insinuated by movement and gesture, the six characteristics of language remain relevant and important to human communication.

1. Displacement: displacement refers to past and future time and other locations. This property allows the users of language to talk about things and events not present in the immediate environment, or which do not happen in the time of speaking. **This property also allows people to create fiction, too.**

2. Arbitrariness: Language is arbitrary in the sense that there is **no inherent relation between the words of a language and their meanings or the ideas conveyed by them.** Or there is **no natural connection between a linguistic form and its meaning.** For example, the word book in English can be called in different words in other languages, but there is no connection between this word and its meaning. This property of linguistic signs is their arbitrary relationship with the object.

It may be noted that if language had not been arbitrary, there would have been only one language in the world.

3. Productivity/creativity or open-endedness: the language users have the capacity to produce an unlimited number of sentences.

4 Cultural transmission: language is the outcome of social interaction, we **don't inherit** language, but **acquire it in a culture with speakers.** For example, an Algerian born in the UK necessarily acquires the English language in that society.

5. Discreteness: Discrete means distinct, separate. sounds in English are completely different from each other such as the difference between 'p' and 'b' phonemes; the words 'pack' and 'back' lead to distinct meaning. This property is called discreteness, that is to say that each sound of language is treated as discrete, distinct separate.

6. Duality/ Double articulation: Language is organized at **two levels or layers.** Individual sounds do not have meaning. They make no sense in isolation, but when they are combined, they give us meaning. Example, the sounds / i /, / ʃ / / p/ give us the meaningful word ship. A limited number of sounds in the language enable us produce an unlimited number of meaningful words.

Other properties such as language is social, language is symbolic, language is vocal, language is non-instinctive are also mentioned in other sources.

Linguistics

Linguistics is the scientific study of human language, including its form, structure, meaning and context. According to David Crystal, linguistics as the scientific study of language, has generated a wide range of branches, subdisciplines, schools of thought and many applications.

1. Branches of linguistics: Micro linguistics & Macrolinguistics

Micro-linguistics, also called theoretical linguistics or general linguistics, is the linguistic branch that studies the nature of language. It focuses on the structural components of language, while macro-linguistics views language from a broader perspective. It is concerned with how a language is acquired or used and how it relates to society.

a. Micro-linguistics

Phonology is the branch of linguistics that studies the systems of sounds within a language or between languages.

Phonetics is the study of the production and perception of speech sounds

Morphology is the linguistic branch that focuses on the study of morphemes -the smallest meaningful unit of a language that cannot be further divided. It describes how words are formed.

Syntax is a branch of linguistics that focuses on the arrangement of words and phrases to form sentences.

Semantics and pragmatics are the two main branches of linguistics that focus on the study of language meaning. Their main difference is that semantics studies the conceptual meaning of words and sentences, while pragmatics studies their contextual meaning.

b. Macro- linguistics

Sociolinguistics deals with the study of the effects of the different social and cultural factors on the use of language. It examines the patterns and variations in language within a society or community.

Psycholinguistics is focuses on the interrelation between linguistic and psychological factors that enable humans to understand, acquire, and use language.

Historical linguistics is a branch of linguistics that is also known as diachronic linguistics. It deals with the study of language change or change of a group of languages over time.

Neurolinguistics focuses on understanding how the brain processes and produces language.

Cognitive linguistics focuses on cognitive explanations for grammatical structure.

Computational linguistics studies the application of computer science in the analysis of language and speech and other linguistic studies.

Applied linguistics studies and solves language-based problems through research and application. Example of corpus linguistics and stylistics, discourse analysis, language acquisition and others are branches of applied linguistics.

References

Yule, G (2010). **The study of Language. Fourth edition. Cambridge: University Press.**

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