

Features of Human Language and Animal Communication

Introduction:

People can produce two types of signals when communicating; **communicative signals** intentionally sent (when using language) and **informative signals** not intentionally sent (sneezing and body language). The distinction between human language and animal communication is based on the consideration of both as means of intentional communication.

Properties of human language:

Communication is the main function of human language but it is not a distinguishing feature since animals also have specific ways to communicate. So, what are the properties of human language that make it different from animal communication?

1-Reflexivity/Reflexiveness:

This property refers to the fact that human beings can use language to talk and think about language itself. This feature is specific to human language since animals cannot reflect on their innate ability to communicate. Without this feature, explaining the other features would not be possible.

2-Displacement :

Animal communication seems to be **limited in time** which means that it is **designed exclusively for this moment, here and now**. Thus, it cannot be effectively used to refer to events that are removed in time (past and future) and place. In contrast, human language is characterized by **displacement**. This feature **allows language users to talk about things and events not present in the immediate environment**. In fact, displacement allows us to talk about things and places (heaven and angels) whose existence is not concrete. Animal communication seems to lack this property. However, bee communication is an exception because it seems to have some version of displacement. It is true that a bee can direct other bees to a food source but it must be a recent food source which means that displacement is limited in animal communication.

3-Arbitrariness :

In language, there is no natural relationship between a linguistic form (a word) and its meaning. This aspect of the relationship between the linguistic signs and objects in the world is described as **arbitrariness**. There are some words in language with sounds that echo the sounds of objects or activities in the environment. The latter have a less arbitrary relationship.

linguistic structures to represent objects and events. This feature is referred to as **productivity** which means that the potential number of utterances in human language is infinite. Animal communication is characterized by fixed reference which means that animals cannot create new signals to communicate.

5-Cultural transmission:

Humans do not inherit the ability to speak one specific language from their parents. Language is acquired in a given culture with other speakers. A baby born in Spain can speak English if it is brought up in Britain. The process by which a language is passed on from one generation to the next is called **cultural transmission**. So, any language is the product of a specific culture.

6-Duality :

Human language is organized at two levels at the same time. This feature is called **duality or double articulation**. When producing sounds, people operate at two different levels: **physical level**; producing single sounds and **intellectual level**; putting sounds together to form meaningful words. Animal communication lacks this feature because animals cannot make different sound combinations to express different meanings.

Conclusion :

In spite of the fact that communication is not a distinguishing feature between humans and animals, human language has other features that make it different from animal communication. Some of the latter can also characterize animal communication but they are still very limited.

English Department

Origin and Development of Language/ Year1

Origin of Language

Introduction:

The origin of language was an issue that occupied Man for centuries. In this context, different questions were asked: Have all languages developed from one source? And what was the language spoken in the Garden of Eden? As a result, a debate started between philosophers and religious men who speculated on this issue giving rise to different explanations which were often contradictory.

1. The Theory of Religions:

The Bible was considered as a reference for explaining the origin of language. The latter presents two legends:

- 1.1. Language as a gift given by God to Man: God taught Adam to name beasts and the dialogue between Eve and the serpent.
- 1.2. Language as a Divine Punishment: People of Babel built a tower to reach the Heavens. As a result,

God punished those people by scattering them on Earth and transforming their united language into a variety of languages to prevent them from building a tower again.

These biblical legends asked the question of whether there was one language at the very beginning of human life *monogenetic hypothesis* or whether diversity dominated since language came into being *polygenetic hypothesis*.

The holy Quran also explains the origin of language in Surat El Baquara (2:30). The thirtieth verse notes that God (Allah) has taught Adam to name all creatures:

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم:

In his dialogue *Cratylus*, Plato 428/427-349/B presented important insights into the relationship between words and things. Plato and *Hermogenes* tried to find out whether words are created by nature or made up by convention. *Cratylus* defended the natural origin of words, which was based on principles of sound symbolism and imitation. *Hermogenes*, however, argued for the conventional origin of language claiming that the diversity of languages is a proof of the non natural origin of words.

3. The Theory of Jespersen:

The Danish linguist Otto Jespersen (1860-1943) explained that the origin sounds of language may have come from the sounds man makes to express emotions and mainly happiness. These sounds were then organized in form of words. Jespersen's view is often referred to as "The Historical Approach" in which language developed from sounds to words. This approach was criticized for its reliance on specific sounds produced by people as an expression of joy whereas people produce other sounds which are different from that used to express emotions. In addition, this view does not pay attention to the rational aspect of language since it focuses on the emotional side only.