

Linguistics

By; Dr. Aras A. Amin

PhD in Applied Linguistics/ELT

Properties

- Human languages share five key properties that set them apart from other forms of communication.

1. Arbitrariness

Linguistic forms lack physical correspondence with the entities in the world to which they refer. There is almost never correspondence between a speech sound and the object it stands for. The relationship between a word and its referent is nearly always arbitrary, based on chance rather than plan.

For example, nothing in the word box imitates the sounds associated with the object.

Exceptions are onomatopoeic expressions such as buzz, hiss, rattle, etc. which mimic the noises to which they refer.

2. Transferability

Human language has three basic manifestations: speech, writing, and sign.

Speech involves the use of sounds arranged according to set patterns.

Writing involves the use of certain symbols for speech sounds. It is possible to write down spoken language and read aloud the written record.

Sign language involves the use of visual gestures to convey meaning. As a means of communication, the three forms of language are equally important in expressing ideas.

3. Duality

Language is organized on two levels of patterning.

At the lower level, language consists of smaller units called phonemes, as exemplified in /b/, /i/ and /g/.

At the higher level, these phonemes combine to form larger units called morphemes. Such morphemes carry meaning, as exemplified in **big**.

The two levels of structure are referred to as combination: secondary and primary, respectively.

Duality enables the production of a potentially near-infinite number of meaningful language sequences .

4. Displacement

Language gives us the capability to talk about objects or events that are not present at the time and place of speaking.

In other words, language can be used to refer to objects or events displaced from the immediate situation of the speaker. This is because **human language is capable of talking about things beyond the here and now.**

This shows that words are still valid with or without visual support, as exemplified by the ability of humans to refer to past and future time by the use of auxiliaries or affixes.

5. Creativity

Human beings are capable of creating new expressions by manipulating the linguistic resources at their disposal to describe new situations.

Language empowers human beings to produce a large number of expressions by using a few basic rules.

There is no grammatical limit to the length or number of expressions a speaker can produce.

For example, any noun can be modified by one more adjective, such as the red house, the big red house, the big, red, untidy house, and so on.