

المحاضرة الثالثة

المادة: مقدمة في اللغويات العامة

الفرقة الثالثة – لغة انجليزية – عام

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What is “language”?

- ❖ **The term ‘language’ can be used to refer to a variety of concepts / things, such as “the particular form of words and speech used by the people of a country, area or social group”, or “the method of human communication using spoken or written words”.**
- ❖ **In other words, we can talk about a specific language e.g. English, German, etc. or about language as such.**

❖ In linguistics, we are interested in both of these fields, whereby General Linguistics will tend to concentrate on the latter topic and the individual language departments on their specific language e.g. English linguistics. A further meaning of ‘language’ is “the style or types of words used by a person or group”.

Language as a form of human communication

- ❖ **Most linguists agree that although many animals are able to communicate, they do not actually have ‘language’ in the sense that humans do. Birds may sing, cats miaow and purr, dogs bark and growl, apes grunt, scream and even chatter, but they are not assumed to be using these sounds in the way we do.**
- ❖ **‘Language’ is therefore a major attribute distinguishing us from the rest of the animal kingdom.**

characteristics of human language

Displacement

- ❖ **This is the ability to use language to talk about times, places and people other than the ‘here and now’.**
- ❖ **It enables us to say things which we know to be false i.e. to lie.**

- ❖ **Bees are said to be able to convey some of this information in their ‘dance’ which they employ to pass on information about food sources.**

Arbitrariness

- ❖ **This means that there is generally no natural, inherent relationship between the signs (i.e. sounds or letters) we produce and their meaning.**

- ❖ For this reason, different languages use different signs to refer to the same thing e.g. a *flower* in English, *Blume* in German or *fleur* in French.
- ❖ Occasionally we find examples of iconicity, where someone creates a resemblance between the sign and its meaning.

Example:

small

tall

fat

- ❖ **When language tries to mirror or ‘echo’ the sounds made by animals and objects this is called onomatopoeia.**

Example:

cuckoo

squelch

ticktock

- ❖ **Arbitrariness also enables languages to evolve, both in the sense that existing signs can come to mean new things (e.g.**

pen which used to refer to a quill), but also that new signs can be introduced for existing things.

- ❖ **Animal languages, in contrast, are more likely to have fixed reference i.e. a certain sign has a specific and fixed meaning.**

Productivity

- ❖ **This is an important characteristic of human language allowing us to continuously create new utterances, combining**

the ‘building bricks’ of language in ever new ways, whether these be sounds, words or sentences.

- ❖ **Human languages are therefore continually evolving.**

Cultural Transmission

- ❖ **This refers to how languages are acquired by our children.**
- ❖ **The assumption is that there is no genetic component (although Noam Chomsky challenges this with his theory of Universal Grammar) which would enable a child to simply**

start speaking e.g. English at a certain age, but rather that children need to be exposed to a language (and culture) in order to acquire it.

- ❖ This means, for example, that a child born in Korea to Korean parents but then adopted by French parents in France will tend to grow up speaking French as his/her first language and not Korean (unless the French parents make sure the child is also exposed to Korean).**

- ❖ **Many animals, however, do seem to pass the ability to communicate on to their offspring genetically e.g. dogs will bark even if they have never heard another dog.**

Duality

- ❖ **Duality (or ‘double articulation’) refers to two separate layers of language working together to provide us with a pool of sounds which we can combine to communicate with one another.**

- ❖ **On the one hand, we have a limited number of discrete sounds (e.g. the 44 phonemes in English) which in isolation have no inherent meaning e.g. *b*, *i*, or *n*.**
- ❖ **On the other hand, we have a virtually unlimited number of distinct meanings which we can create by combining these sounds in certain ways e.g. *bin*, or *nib*. Various other combinations such as **bni* are not meaningful in English, but could possibly be in other languages.**

Other features of human language

Other features of human language include reflexiveness and discreteness.

Reflexiveness

Reflexiveness means that we are able to use the language to talk about language – which is typically what linguists do.

Discreteness

- ❖ **Discreteness is also something that is said to distinguish human languages from other forms of animal communication.**
- ❖ **It means that the sounds of a language differ sufficiently from one another for a (native) speaker to distinguish them and thereby know which sign with which meaning is being used at any one time.**