

CHAPTER 5

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Introduction

- A. Language is our primary means of communication.
 - 1. Language is transmitted through learning, as part of enculturation.
 - 2. Language is based on arbitrary, learned associations between words and the things they represent.
 - 3. Only humans have the linguistic capacity to discuss the past and future in addition to the present.
- B. Anthropologists study language in its social and cultural context.

II. Animal Communication

- A. Call Systems
 - 1. Call systems consist of a limited number of sounds that are produced in response to specific stimuli (e.g. food or danger).
 - a. Calls cannot be combined to produce new calls.
 - b. Calls are reflexive in that they are automatic responses to specific stimuli.
 - 2. Although primates use call systems, their vocal tract is not suitable for speech.
- B. Sign Language
 - 1. A few nonhuman primates have been able to learn to use American Sign Language (ASL).
 - a. Washoe, a chimpanzee, eventually acquired a vocabulary of over 100 ASL signs.
 - b. Koko, a gorilla, regularly uses 400 ASL signs and has used 700 at least once.
 - 2. These nonhuman primates have displayed some “human-like” capacities with ASL.
 - a. Joking and lying.
 - b. Cultural transmission: they have tried to teach ASL to other animals.
 - c. Productivity: they have combined two or more signs to create new expressions.
 - d. Displacement: the ability to talk about things that are not present.
 - 3. The experiments with ASL demonstrate that chimps and gorillas have a rudimentary capacity for language.
 - a. It is important to remember that humans taught these animals ASL.
 - b. There are no known instances where chimps or gorillas in the wild have developed a comparable system of signs on their own.
- C. The Origin of Language
 - 1. The human capacity for language developed over hundreds of thousands of years, as call systems were transformed into language.
 - 2. Language is a uniquely effective vehicle for learning that enables humans to adapt more rapidly to new stimuli than other primates.

III. The Structure of Language

- A. The scientific study of spoken language involves several levels of organization: phonology, morphology, lexicon, and syntax.
 - 1. Phonology is the study of the sound use in speech.
 - 2. Morphology studies the forms in which sounds are grouped in speech.
 - 3. A language’s lexicon is a dictionary containing all of the smallest units of speech that have a meaning (morpheme).
 - 4. Syntax refers to the rules that order words and phrases into sentences.

B. Speech Sounds

1. In any given language, phonemes are the smallest sound contrasts that distinguish meaning (they carry no meaning themselves).
2. Phones are the sounds made by humans that might act as phonemes in any given language.
3. Phonetics is the study of human speech sounds; phonemics is the study of phones as they act in a particular language.
4. Phonemics studies only the significant sound contrasts of a given language.

V. Language, Thought, and Culture

- A. Chomsky argues that the universal grammar is finite, and the fact that any language is translatable to any other language is taken to be evidence supporting this claim.
- B. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: Sapir and Whorf are described as early advocates of the view that different languages imply different ways of thinking (e.g., Palaung vs. English, Hopi speculative tense).
- C. Meaning
 1. Semantics “refers to a language’s meaning system.”
 2. Ethnoscience, or ethnosemantics, is the study of linguistic categorization of difference, such as in classification systems, taxonomies, and specialized terminologies (such as astronomy and medicine).

VI. Sociolinguistics

- A. Introduction
 1. Sociolinguistics is the study of the relation between linguistic performance and the social context of that performance.
 2. The notion that linguistic variation is a product of constantly ongoing general forces for change is called linguistic uniformitarianism.
- B. Linguistic Diversity
 1. The ethnic and class diversity of nation-states is mirrored by linguistic diversity.
 2. Single individuals may change the way they talk depending upon the social requirements of a given setting--this is called style shifting.
 3. Diglossia is the regular shifting from one dialect to another (e.g., high and low variants of a language) by members of a single linguistic population.
 4. Linguistic relativity says that no language is superior to any other as a means of communication.
- C. Stratification and Symbolic Domination
 1. In situations where social stratification exists, the dialect of the dominant strata is considered “standard” and valued more than the dialects of the lower strata.
 2. Sociolinguistic studies have indicated that status-linked dialects affect the economic and social prospects of the people who speak them, a situation to which Bourdieu applies the term, *symbolic capital*.
 3. According to Bourdieu, overall societal consensus that one dialect is more prestigious results in “symbolic domination.”

VII. Historical Linguistics

- A. Historical linguistics studies the long-term variation of speech by studying protolanguages and daughter languages.
- B. Anthropologists are interested in historical linguistics because cultural features sometimes correlate with the distribution of language families.