

Appendix 1 – Lesson Plan for Day One

Junior Linguists – Day One -- Introduction

Introduction of Instructor and Students

Overview of the Course

Only humans have language.

For that reason alone, language is worth studying. By studying language, we can find out about ourselves, what it is that makes us human and what all humans have in common.

What is language?

It is a system of vocal signs human beings use to communicate.

System – patterns of sounds and speech (grammar)

Vocal – sounds

Signs – sounds are signs that represent meaning

Communicate – sharing thoughts with others

We will look at all parts of this definition in this course. We will also look at how language changes over time.

Note: Some students might bring up sign language as language without sounds, but it isn't. It is a gesture system that represents language and allows people to communicate without sound.

How did language begin?

No one really knows, but linguists have proposed different theories.

- Mama theory – easiest sounds became attached to most significant objects
- Ta-Ta theory – body movement came before language and language began as an unconscious imitation of those movements (i.e. like sticking out your tongue when you concentrate on performing some action.)
- Pooh-Pooh theory – began with emotive cries like “ow!” or “ooo”
- Bow Wow theory – imitation of sounds
- Ding-Dong theory – “mysterious” sound symbolism (small, sharp, high things tend to have words with high front vowels in many languages, while big, round, low things tend to have round back vowels – teeny tiny moon)
- Yo-He-Ho theory – grunts and groans (rhythmic chants) emitted during group actions eventually becoming associated with those actions.
- Sing-Song theory – language came from play, laughter, cooing, courtship, and other emotional mutterings. Our first words were actually long and musical, rather than the short grunts many assume we started with.
- Hey You theory (contact theory) – language began as sounds to signal both identity (here I am!) and belonging (I'm with you!). We may also cry out in fear, anger, or hurt (help me!).

- Hocus Pocus theory – language may have had some roots in a sort of magical or religious aspect of our ancestors' lives. We may have begun by calling out to game animals with magical sounds, which became their names.
- Eureka theory – language was consciously invented. Some ancestor thought of assigning arbitrary sounds to mean certain things.

You can tell from the names of the theories that most linguists really don't take the theories too seriously. We just don't know how language began, but it's fun to think about possible reasons.

Here's what we know about language in humans:

1. Around 50,000 years ago, the human brain became "lateralized." That means each half of the brain came to specialize in different activities, with the left being responsible for language ability in most people.
2. Larynx drops in humans allowing for creation of speech sounds (Having a low larynx, or voice box, allows humans to make a wide range of sounds.)
3. Humans have capacity to imitate sounds

Put all these together and you get the ability to create and use vocal language!

What can we do without language? How does language add to what we can do?

Class exercise 1:

- a. Each student gets a number on a piece of paper.
- b. Their task is to put themselves in a line in numerical order without talking, showing their number to anyone or using any hand gestures to indicate their number. In other words, they can't in any way indicate to someone else what their specific number is.

Class exercise 2:

- a. Some students get a piece of paper with an emotion written on it, for example, sad, happy, surprised, confused, etc. Other students get a piece of paper with more complex ideas, such as that represented by the statement, "I don't understand why you are here."
- b. The task is for students to have the class guess at what they are trying to convey.

Students should be able to recognize that simple tasks and expression of simple emotions are fairly easy to accomplish, but as they get more complicated, it becomes more difficult without resorting to language.

Homework: How many sounds are in the English language?