



## WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

Most linguists agree that human language has certain characteristics.

### *Creativity/Productivity*

- There is no limit to the number of phrases or sentences that can be produced. They may have never been heard before but they will still have meaning.
- New sounds and meanings can be added. That means a language can add new words as well as new sounds to make words.

### *Arbitrariness*

- The form of a language is not necessarily connected to meaning. For example, there is no reason *book* means "book." The word for book in French is *libre*. In Arabic it is *kitab*.

### *Displacement*

- We can talk about things that are removed (displaced) in time and space. That means we can talk about things that are in the past or will be in the future. We can also talk about people and things that are far away from us.

### *Rule Governed*

- Language has rules for:
  - The way sounds are put together to make words
  - The way words are put together to make sentences (For example, *The dog bit the man* is not the same as *The man bit the dog*.)

### *Traditional Transmission*

- The potential for language is biological. That means that we are born with the ability to use language.
- Language itself is learned. It is passed on from one generation to the next.

*Do Animals Have Language?*

