

Principles of language construction and change

Thomas Leverett, Dec. 2012

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Linguists have spent hundreds of years laying out the foundations of language as we know it, and there is no reason to reinvent the wheel; why should I object to anything that has been said, just for the sake of objection? I believe we have gone off track a few times, notably recently, and I also believe that recent research has shown some things that modern theory cannot adjust to completely, and we need to back up just enough so that we make sure our theory of language can truly accommodate everything we know. Our goal is to explain language scientifically so that we can see how much of what happens happens for a reason; we must find the principles that guide all human behavior in the formation and use of language, in such a way that when we read it, it is easy to see when we are doing what is natural, what has a good reason, what follows the course of nature, and what still creates a language that is so complex, so mysterious, that outsiders wonder at its uniqueness. In the same way a science course can explain to you how a grain of sand in the atmosphere became a snowflake, and that snowflake was unique, yet symmetrical, complex, a wonder of nature: we should find out the same things about any given language, which, after all, would have been developed by a living community passing through the ages, passing its customs and conventions from parent to child and then outward from child to child, within a community of friends and associates, until the children, as a community, become parents and start the process over.

There are principles guiding this process, the process of developing a language, and coming to understand it, and pass it on; these principles have more to do with the way people interact with each other than with the basic construction of the pieces themselves. Thus, when we arrive at the principles of language construction and maintenance, they ought to apply to a sign language that has emerged in a majority-deaf community, just as well as to an oral language in a more familiar community. The principles should be recognizable, so that when we hear them, we feel and know that these are probably correct. We can borrow some of these principles from generations of linguists, sociologists and philosophers who have come before us, and thus not have to reinvent the wheel. We just have to explain what is going on scientifically, so that we are not searching in vain for the undefinable, or making exceptions to rules which should be "natural" or "universal."

Some of these principles I have already laid out: that human behavior with respect to language is much like human behavior with respect to traffic. Language is a self-organized system, so the system has crucial points, observable states where certain changes are inevitable; its patterns can appear from above or outside to be incredibly well-organized, yet in their essence they are created by the individual players, the perceptions of those who use them. The role of perception is slippery, for it's hard to write about; admitting that "perceived truth" is different from "truth" leads to a number of problems, the first being that you shouldn't trust a word I say. But I take that as a given, and will go on to show how important this is to the construction of language.

In spite of the general notion that Saussure has been relegated to the dust-bin of history (1), Saussure, I believe, laid the groundwork for what we know as modern linguistics. There are a couple of principles that he laid out that I believe have been misunderstood, or taken the wrong way, that I believe should be revisited. The first is that language is primarily a social contract. When you buy into it, you agree to use a certain set of symbols, sounds that are used to construct words, or whatever, and you agree that you will try to use what you believe to mean what you want, and you in turn expect your partner, the listener, to understand based on a set of rules that you have carefully observed and learned. You and your partner must have this agreement before you start communicating. With your first few utterances, you in essence agree to try to communicate using this set of conventions, and though you may both recognize that your understanding of these conventions may be different, you further agree to work out those differences so that each of you can continue in the act of successful communication. Mutual communication is, primarily, beneficial to both of you, so you make these agreements for your own benefit. It furthers your survival, and your ability to get food and supplies, if you engage in this social communication, which requires this contract of sorts. Anytime you want out, you can get out: just stop communicating. But by participating, you have agreed in principle to abide by a set of social conventions to the best that you know them. Those who participate with you are doing the same, but more importantly, they are making assumptions about you and your willingness to continue to use these conventions: to understand what they intend you to understand, to know the meaning of its basic symbols, etc.

Secondly, the most important element of the symbolic structure of languages is that the symbols are arbitrary. This principle not only unites language, since all language is made up of arbitrary symbols, but also ultimately separates one from another, since one language's set of arbitrary symbols is completely separate from another's. And neither has precedence, or can claim to be closer to "truth" than the first.(2)

But Saussure made another point about the symbols in language, which in the case of most oral languages, start with the sounds, or phonemes, themselves. And that is this: They are defined by their differences from each other. It doesn't matter if a language has five vowels or ten, but the one that has ten must make sure they are ten *distinct* and *distinguishable* vowels, or its speakers will have trouble recognizing them and will often confuse one from the other. This principle, if understood correctly, can explain much of the movement of vowels as they are made in any language, much as the elevator principle can be used to explain much of people's fidgeting in an elevator. The elevator principle is as follows: people will generally move their position so as to make as much space as possible between them and the other riders of an elevator. The difference between people in an elevator and vowels in the mouth is simply that with vowels in the mouth, if you shift them, you have to make sure the people you are talking to are still understanding them, whereas, when you are alone in an elevator, you move, and you alone determine whether the move was successful, or possible, or alleviated your stress.

Saussure laid out the parts of a language, and I have no argument with them: phonology,

morphology, the construction of words, the use of words as the primary building blocks, etc. In the age of Universalists, people I think got caught up a little in the interaction of words, and the way that phrases are made as being so essential to language that, perhaps, it was considered too simplistic to view words alone as building blocks, as essential pieces. But they are; Saussure was right about that. The obsession with the way words are put into phrases, and phrases into sentences, to me allows linguists to be diverted from an overriding fundamental question, which is that sometimes our utterances rely less on grammar and the proper use of grammatical rules, than intonation and non-verbal language that contradict the grammatical essence of a sentence.

Linguists had trouble with the so-called Mehrabian's formula (3), because it said that so much of communication was non-verbal, but if we were to take it to heart, we'd have to revise some of our original principles, some of the assumptions that have guided the study of language from the start. Our revised principles would look like these:

1. Not all language is oral, and not all writing systems reflect oral language immediately and directly. Humans can make language systems with visual symbols alone, but generally start with oral language because using the mouth is easiest and most immediate, and can be done when one's hands are otherwise occupied.
2. Oral language is made with sounds which are interpreted as phonemes; these are put together into morphemes, and then into words; these morphemes and words can be considered the building blocks of language. Grammar is the set of rules and the system of putting these pieces together in an orderly way, but intonation and other signals are used before a message is over, in combination with grammatically constructed strings, to communicate ideas.
3. Language is part of a social situation, and is used by the actors for their own mutual benefit. Just as context is always part of every communication experience, non-verbal cues are always part of every message as well.
4. Written language as we know it was developed as a representative of oral language and therefore has always had a special relationship to the oral language it was developed to represent. When Saussure and early linguists tried to define that relationship, that's what they found in the data that was available to them. But language is not that way in its essence; in other words, written characters are not *by their nature* always related to oral words. Humans can and do use other methods to communicate (4).

Notes

1. See "more on Saussure".
2. This brings up the question of onomatopoeia, or of the various exceptions to the general rule that all symbols in any given language are entirely arbitrary. Some, for sure, are not, as for example words that

are intended to sound like what they describe, or written symbols which are made to look like what they describe. In some cases it has been argued that there are entire languages in which symbols and their correspondences are not random, but rather carefully and elegantly constructed so as to look like what they represent, or correspond as closely as possible to the reality that they are associated with. But in my view, this misses the point. It is possible for linguists or scientists to construct an alphabet that is not random, but rather deliberate (as King Sejong did for Korean), but it is too easy for humans to use their ability to manipulate symbols, rather than to stick rigidly to a system that is intentionally designed, since its function is symbolic as well. So the question is not, *can we design and use a system that is reality-based and free of the arbitrary nature of symbols*, but, *can we resist using arbitrary symbols, and still call it a "natural" language?*

3. A site I found by ChangingMinds.org explains both Mehrabian's formula and the great amount of misunderstanding that has accrued from it. The essence of his message is true: language is couched in a larger system; nonverbal cues can contradict verbal messages; and when they do, we tend to believe, correctly, the non-verbal cues rather than the essence of the verbal message. I first witnessed the abuse and misunderstanding of this formula (it was meant to apply to feeling messages only) when I witnessed a youtube clip of a business seminar, and was impressed by how badly the formula was misrepresented. Thus, I give you a site explaining the misrepresentation, as the formula itself is fairly straightforward.

4. Examples abound of humans choosing non-oral methods for their primary mode of communication. I would argue that, rather than make a *rule* that humans use their mouths, and then notice that there are a number of *exceptions* to that rule, we could make a *rule* that humans use whatever system is easiest, fastest, most convenient, and then we have no *exceptions*.

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