



the basics

language

r. l. trask

Language:

The Basics

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R.L.Trask is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Sussex and author of *Key Concepts in Language and Linguistics* and *A Dictionary of Grammatical Terms in Linguistics* and *Language Change*.

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Second edition

■ *R.L. Trask*



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*To my mother
and
to the memory of my father*

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To the reader

The book in your hand is not a textbook: it makes no attempt at comprehensive coverage, and it contains no exercises. Instead, it aims only to get you thinking about one of the most important and fascinating topics you could ever hope to encounter: human language. Nothing is more important to us than language, and I hope this little book will quickly persuade you that nothing is more interesting, more stimulating or more rewarding than the study of language.

I have chosen nine very different aspects of the study of language, and under each heading I present and discuss a representative sample of the work which has been done and which is being done now. You will discover that you know a great deal more about the grammar of English than you ever suspected, but you may also be surprised to find that you can't explain the meaning of the word *dog*. You will learn about the astonishing way in which young children go about the business of learning their first language, about the startling effects on language of genetic defects and brain damage, and about people for whom words have colours. Perhaps you already know that the remote ancestor of English was spoken in Russia, but are you aware that English is changing fairly rapidly at this very moment, and that we can see it changing if we know how to watch?

By the time you've finished this book, you will know something about the mother-in-law languages of Australia, about the amazing gender systems of Navaho, Swahili and Dyirbal, about the strange arrangements the Norwegians have made for their language, and about why plumbers sound different from lawyers; you'll learn the truth about those Eskimo words for 'snow', and you'll find out why a universal translator is impossible. You'll learn how we can express meanings that aren't actually there, find out why some questions are impossible to ask in English, and find out how the harmless little word *nurse* can wreck a social occasion.

Some of the work I discuss was done decades ago, but most of it has been done only very recently, sometimes so recently that you will hardly be able to find an account of it elsewhere.

At the end of each chapter, I suggest some further reading for pursuing the topics that particularly engage your interest; the complete list of references is given in the bibliography at the end of the book.

I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I've enjoyed writing it!

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Chapter 1

The uniqueness of human language

If you were asked to name the trait which most decisively distinguishes human beings from all other creatures on the planet, what would you choose? Love? Warfare? Art and music? Technology? Perhaps. But most people who have considered this question at length have come up with a single answer: **language**.

As I shall try to demonstrate, human language is arguably the single most remarkable characteristic that we have, the one that most truly sets our species apart. Our faculty of language, which we usually take for granted, exhibits a number of properties which are remarkable, even astonishing. Without language, we could hardly have created the human world we know. Our development of everything from music to warfare could never have come about in the absence of language. More than any other single characteristic, then, language is what makes us human. And human language is unique.

At first glance, this uniqueness may be far from obvious. After all, nearly every creature on the planet seems to have some kind of signalling system, some way of communicating with other members of the same species and occasionally even with members of other species. Crickets chirp, birds sing, monkeys squawk, fireflies flash, and even ants leave smelly trails for their co-workers to follow. And no doubt you are convinced that Rover or Tiddles has a special sort of ‘woof’ or ‘meow’ that means ‘I’m hungry’ or ‘I want to go out’. Moreover, recent work by ethologists (people who study animal behaviour) has revealed that many animal signalling systems are far more interesting than was once thought. You may be aware, for example, that certain species of whales are now known to sing songs, or that honeybees perform elaborate dances to announce the location of nectar to the hive.

Fascinating as these discoveries are, however, and however much they may remind us not to take our fellow creatures for granted, the fact is that human language is so utterly different from all these other signalling systems that we are obliged to treat it as a thing apart: a truly unique phenomenon.

In this book, I shall try to explain some of the fascinating and astonishing things we have discovered about language. I begin with some of the fundamental properties which are often collectively known as the **design features** of language. One of these design features is absolutely crucial to the very existence of language.

Duality of patterning

For most people, most of the time, the ordinary **medium** of language is speech. How do we speak? Easy: we allow air from the lungs to pass out through our mouths, and at the same time we move our mouths in various ways to produce **speech sounds**—consonants and vowels. Every utterance we make consists of a sequence of speech sounds, one after the other.

But here's an interesting question: how many *different* speech sounds can you produce? Different enough, that is, that the person you're talking to will have no trouble in telling them apart.

Well, there is no cut-and-dried answer to this question: it depends on just how much difference you want to insist on. But the number is certainly not large. Unless you've had specialist training in **phonetics** (the study of speech sounds), you will probably find it very difficult to produce even a hundred different individual sounds. (Remember, we're talking about *individual* sounds here, not sequences of sounds.) In fact, every human language operates with a much smaller set of speech sounds than this. Let's take a look at English.

Consider the word *cat*. How many speech sounds does it contain? Well, the English spelling system is not very trustworthy on questions like this, but here the spelling does suggest the right answer: three. They are the 'k-sound', the 'flat a', and the 't-sound'. For convenience, let us introduce special symbols for these speech sounds: /k/, /æ/ and /t/, respectively. We use the slashes to indicate that we are talking about the distinctive speech sounds of a particular language—in this case, English. These distinctive speech sounds are called the **phonemes** of the language. Thus, in terms of the phonemes of English, the word *cat* can be represented as /kæt/.

Now, if someone asks you what the English word /kæt/ means, you will have no trouble in answering. But suppose someone asks you instead what the English phoneme /k/ means? This time it is impossible to answer, for the phoneme /k/ in fact has *no* meaning in English. Nor does any other phoneme: /æ/ and /t/ are just as meaningless as /k/.

But now notice something else: these same meaningless phonemes can be rearranged to produce different words with different meanings. Thus, the order /tæk/ produces the word *tack*, while /ækt/ gives *act*, /æt/ gives *at*, and /tækt/ gives *tact* or *tacked*. (Note that *tact* and *tacked*, in spite of their different spellings and different structures, are pronounced identically by most speakers of English.)

Let's add one more phoneme to our set: the 'p-sound', or /p/. Now we can form the word /pæt/ *pat*, as well as /tæp/ *tap*, /pæk/ *pack*, /kæp/ *cap*, /pækt/ *pact* or *packed*, /tæpt/ *tapped*, /æpt/ *apt*, /kæpt/ *capped*, and quite a few others. You can see what's going on: by combining a very small set of meaningless speech sounds in various ways, we can produce a very large number of different meaningful items: words. All human languages are constructed in this way, and this type of structure is called **duality of patterning**, or **duality** for short. Duality is the use of a small number of meaningless elements in

combination to produce a large number of meaningful elements.

Why is this type of structure so significant? Well, just imagine what the alternative would be. Suppose we had no meaningless sound units to work with—suppose instead that every individual sound we could produce had its own meaning. What would be the consequence of such an arrangement? It's obvious: *the number of different meanings we could express would be no greater than the number of different sounds we could produce*. And, since we have already seen that we can't produce more than about a hundred different speech sounds, the result would be that a language could only contain about a hundred 'words'. And this would be catastrophic: imagine an 'English' consisting of no more than a hundred words. It is not remotely possible that, with such a drastically limited vocabulary, we could do most of the things we do with English: we couldn't explain to the mechanic what's wrong with our car, we couldn't tell our children stories about rabbits or elves, we couldn't organize elections or negotiate treaties, we couldn't charm our way into another person's heart with seductive conversation, and we certainly couldn't write books about language.

'So what?' you may be asking at this stage. Why am I making such a song and dance about duality? Isn't it the obvious way to go about things? Maybe so, but here's the crux: *no other species on earth has a signalling system based on duality*. Duality is unique to human language. (In fact, bird songs and whale songs arguably contain an element of duality, but these are not exactly signalling systems.)

What do other creatures do, then? They do what we have just declared unthinkable for human language: their signalling systems are based on the principle of 'one sound, one meaning'. That is, a typical non-human animal will have one sound meaning, perhaps, 'This is my territory', and another meaning 'Look out—danger in the air', and perhaps a few more. But that's it—the total number of different things such a creature can 'say' is no larger than the number of different sounds available. In practice, the number of different signals, or *calls*, used by any given species is usually between three and six—though vervet monkeys have the remarkable total of twenty or so. And this, it should be obvious by now, is a stupendous difference. Some of the other important characteristics of language that we will be discussing are only made possible by this fundamental property of duality.

Incidentally, perhaps you are wondering just how many phonemes there are in English all together. The answer: forty-odd. Why such a vague answer? Because not all English speakers use exactly the same set of speech sounds. For example, do you pronounce the words *buck* and *book* differently or identically? People who pronounce them differently have one more vowel than those who pronounce them identically. How about *hair* and *air*? People who pronounce these differently have one more consonant than those who pronounce them identically. The same goes for *cot* and *caught*, *three* and *free*, *pull* and *pool*, *fur* and *fair*, and *poor* and *pour*. Similarly, people for whom *singer* and *finger* do not rhyme have one more consonant than those for whom they do rhyme. (You may be a little surprised to learn that some people make a distinction you don't make, or fail to make one you do make, but that's the way things are.) However, very few English-speakers have fewer than about forty phonemes, or more than about forty-five.

Other languages differ in the number of phonemes they use. At one extreme, the

Brazilian language Pirahã has only ten (seven consonants and three vowels), while, at the other, some languages of Africa have over a hundred (most of them consonants). The average number seems to be around twenty-five, so that English, with its forty-odd, is a little above average. But, regardless of the number of speech sounds used, every human language is built on the principle of duality of patterning, a principle which is absolutely unique to us in the natural world, and a principle without which language as we know it could not exist.

Displacement and open-endedness

Displacement is the use of language to talk about things other than the here and now. We have not the slightest difficulty in talking about last night's football game, or our own childhood, or the behaviour of dinosaurs which lived over 100 million years ago, or the ultimate fate of the universe; with equal ease, we can discuss political events in Peru or the surface of the planet Neptune.

Open-endedness is our ability to use language to say anything at all, including lots of things we've never said or heard before. Here are a few English sentences:

- (1.1) I find that polythene banjo strings give a most unsatisfactory twang.
- (1.2) Luxembourg has invaded New Zealand.
- (1.3) A large pink spider wearing sunglasses and wielding a feather duster boogied across the floor.
- (1.4) Shakespeare wrote his plays in Swahili, and they were translated into English by his African bodyguards.

It is most unlikely that you have ever encountered any of these sentences before, and yet you have not the slightest difficulty in understanding them—even if you don't believe all of them. Nor do you have any more difficulty in producing totally new English sentences whenever you need them. In fact, most of the things you say and hear every day are completely new to you, and may never before have been uttered by anyone.

Both of these phenomena, our ability to talk about places and things far away in space and time, and our ability to produce and understand new utterances virtually without limit, are so familiar to us that we never give them a moment's thought. And yet they are truly remarkable. Remarkable—and absolutely vital. Can you imagine being able to talk about nothing but the present moment and about nothing but what you can see as you speak? Equally, can you imagine speaking a language that consisted only of a fixed list of possible utterances, so that, every time you opened your mouth, you could do no more than choose one utterance from that list? Such a 'language' would be inconceivably far away from what we understand languages to be.

And yet this unthinkable state of affairs is exactly the way animal signalling systems appear to be. With one striking and famous exception, discussed below, non-human animals do not exhibit displacement. So far as we can tell, mice do not swap stories about their close encounters with cats, nor do bears soberly discuss the severity of the coming winter. Rabbits do not engage in heated arguments about what might lie on the far side of

the hill, nor do geese draw up plans for their next migration. Virtually all ‘utterances’ by non-human animals appear to relate directly, and exclusively, to the time and place of uttering.

Furthermore, these creatures exhibit nothing we could call open-endedness. Instead, it appears to be genuinely the case that each species’ signalling system contains only a small number of possible utterances, and that nothing can be expressed beyond the limited range of possibilities available. A monkey may be able to say ‘Look out—eagle’ if that message is available in the system, but that same monkey cannot introduce any novelties: he cannot, for example, come up with an unprecedented ‘Look out—two hunters with rifles’, or, still less, on spotting his first Land Rover, ‘Hey, everybody—what do you suppose that is?’

Of course, given the absence of duality, it could hardly be otherwise: we have already seen that duality is essential in a system that can express more than a small number of different meanings. Lacking duality, non-human creatures appear to be locked into a world of expression which we can barely conceive of: a system of communication lacking both a past and a future, bounded by the horizon, and devoid of novelties, consisting only of the endless repetition of a few familiar messages about what’s going on at the moment.

There is, however, one striking exception to this bleak picture: we know of one creature whose signalling system conspicuously exhibits displacement, apparently uniquely in the non-human world. What is this remarkable creature? Not the chimpanzee, or the dolphin, as you might have guessed: it’s the common honeybee.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Austrian ethologist Karl von Frisch carried out a series of studies which revealed something unexpected about the behaviour of European honeybees. When a honeybee scout discovers a useful source of nectar, it flies back to its hive and then performs an astonishing little dance inside, watched by the other bees. The details of the dance vary depending both on the distance to the nectar and on the particular species and variety of bee (honeybees have ‘dialects’!). In the most famous case, though, the dancing bee performs a ‘tail-wagging dance’ in the form of a squashed figure eight with a straight middle section. Von Frisch was able to decode this dance, as follows. The time the dancing bee takes to complete a circuit of the figure eight indicates the distance to the nectar source: a longer time represents a longer flight. The level of excitement