

Psych 56L/ Ling 51:  
Acquisition of Language

Lecture 5  
Biological Bases of Language III

Announcements

Be working on review questions for biological bases of language

Be working on HW1 (due: 1/26/12)

- hard copy due in class at the end of the class period
- remember to include the name of everyone who worked on the assignment
- please type if possible!

Language and Other Species



Language and Other Species

Are we special among the animal species?

What are other species capable of?

## Communication Systems

Human language does enable communication, but it has several features that separate it from other animal communication systems:

reference: symbols stand for things in the world

syntax: productive system for combining symbols to express new meanings

intentionality: speakers use language for the purpose of communicating with others

## Human Language vs. "Animal Language"

- Is the difference between an animal communication system and human language just a matter of degree?
- Is there a sense in which human language stands above the other communication systems?

## Primate Communication

Vervet monkeys



Predator alarm calls:

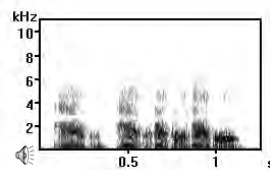
"leopard" = run to the trees

"eagle" = look up, run into the bushes

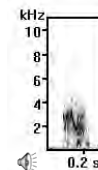
"snake" = stand up on hind legs & look around

## Primate Communication

Vervet monkeys



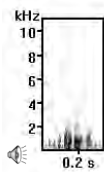
Male (KN)



Female (LO)

### Primate Communication

Vervet monkeys

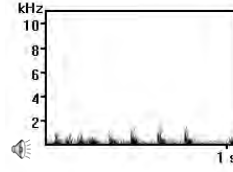


Female (BA)

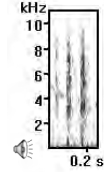
Vervet 'Eagle' Alarm Call

### Primate Communication

Vervet monkeys



Male (KN)



Female (LB)

Vervet 'Snake' Alarm Call

### Primate Communication

Vervet monkeys



However...no evidence for complex combinatorial system.

### Primate Communication

Vervet monkeys



What they can't say:

"What a large eagle up in the sky over there! We'd better take cover. C'mon!"

"I doubt there are any leopards around here. The field looks pretty clear."

"Did you see that whopping big snake yesterday? It was so scary!"

## Mollusks vs. Primates



## Mollusks vs. Primates

Primates likely have:

- More complex bodies and brains
- Better learning and problem solving skills
- More complex social structures
- More complex and flexible behavior
- Longer lives



## Mollusks vs. Primates

After 450 million years...



Cephalopods:  
15-35 distinct displays



Non-human primates:  
15-35 distinct displays

Adapted from Liberman  
<http://www.thecephalopodpage.org/cephschool/WhyCephalopodsChangeColor.pdf>

## Not just mollusks and non-human primates

- For most relatively social adult fishes, birds and mammals, the range or repertoire size [of communicative displays] for different species varies from 15 to 35 displays.

-Encyclopedia Britannica,  
"Animal Communication"

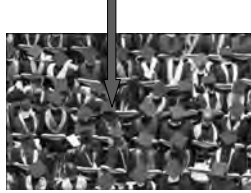


## Human Vocabulary

Wordsmith Shakespeare  
estimated to have 30,000 words



Average educated person: 15,000 words



<http://www.rhymezone.com/g/shakespeare/coinages/>

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/types-tokens/>

## Bee Communication

Honey Bees



Dance to communicate the location of food (nectar)

Can indicate: nearby vs. far, direction, richness of the food source (dance harder for the good stuff)

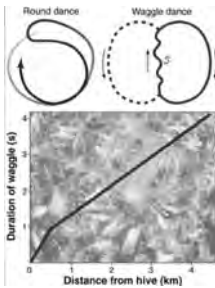
Though bees can create novel messages, they're always about the location of food.

## Bee Communication

Under 50m away

The angle from the sun indicates direction of food source. The duration of the waggle part of the dance signifies the distance.

Approximately 1 second of dance = 1 km distance.



Over 50m away: encodes distance & direction - is encoding of 2D space (a bee's "mental map")

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7ijl-g4jHg>

'deciphered' by Karl von Frisch, 1919 & onward

## Bee Communication

Honey Bees



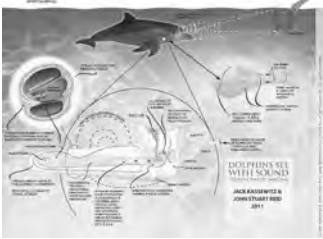
What bees can't communicate:

"Have you seen the flowers in the next field over? They totally rock. I've never seen such brilliant colors."

"I thought the hive was really crowded yesterday."

## Dolphin Communication

Dolphins



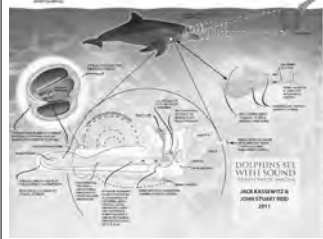
Certainly intentional, and likely referential.

Kassewitz & Stuart Reid (2011): Dolphins use "Sono-Pictorial Exo-holographic Language", (SPEL)

Evidence that dolphins can communicate about novel objects in their environment via the patterns that echolocation makes when pinging off the objects.

## Dolphin Communication

Dolphins



Unclear if they have a complex combinatorial system (syntax)

Can a dolphin communicate this?

"I wish there were some more tasty fish around."

"Those humans are soooo annoying sometimes."

## Bird Communication

Songbirds



Males use songs to attract and acquire mates. In many species, the development of the song requires exposure to adult birds who model the song.

## Bird Communication

Songbirds



Note: even though there is a learned part and a genetic part, we still classify birdsong as an instinct.

## Bird Communication

### Sparrow Song



song

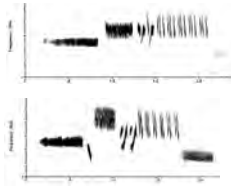
call



Song is highly structured - notes, syllables, phrases

student

teacher



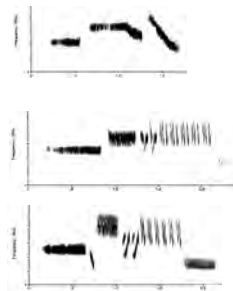
## Sparrow Songs

- Songs are highly structured
  - Notes, Syllables, and Phrases
- Songs have fixed meaning
- Songs are learned
  - Regional dialects
- Learning, however, is innately guided (Marler, 1990)
  - Many species of sparrows prefer to learn the songs of their own species
  - And if they are only exposed to other species' songs, they follow species-specific structure
  - Learning is subjected to a sensitive period (must be learned within a time period)



## White-crown sparrow song

- White-crown sparrow #1 in isolation
- White-crown sparrow #2 w/ tutor
- White-crown sparrow's tutor



## Bird Communication

### Variation in Song

Bird 1



Bird 2



## Bird Communication



Songbird communication is thought to be similar to human children needing exposure to adult language. Both human language and birdsong:

- (1) have early stages prior to the appearance of the adult form (babbling vs. subsong)
- (2) require the babies to be able to hear their own productions
- (3) have sensitive periods (between 7 and 60 days old for birds)
- (4) are lateralized in the left hemisphere

## Learning Human Language

Just because other animals' communication systems aren't as complex as human language, does that mean that they're incapable of learning human language (reference, syntax, intentional communication)?



## Non-Primates



Donning his new canine decoder, Professor Schwartzman becomes the first human being on Earth to hear what barking dogs are actually saying.

## Alex the Parrot



Grey parrot, born 1976, died 2007  
Trained by Dr Irene Pepperberg (U. Arizona) since 1977  
Impressive ability to speak/understand  
...for a parrot

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6KvPN\\_Wt8I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6KvPN_Wt8I)



### Alex's language



- Speech sounded remarkably accurate  
...produced *very* differently from humans
- Knew names of about 150 objects plus some fixed expressions
- Answered simple questions about objects (e.g. about size, color, material)
- Required *immense* amounts of training

### Non-human primates



### Non-human primates



### Teaching chimpanzees



Teaching chimpanzees to speak didn't work out very well

1930s: Gua, raised in a human home and treated like human infant along with the couple's son  
- motor skills surpassed child's, but never learned to speak (while the child did)

1940s and 50s: Viki, raised in a human home and actively taught to produce words  
- by 6, Viki could say "mama", "papa", "cup", and "up"

Problem: Chimpanzees have a vocal tract that makes speech production essentially impossible.

## Teaching chimpanzees



Teaching chimps to sign using ASL

1960s: Washoe, lived in trailer in backyard, people always communicated via ASL, taught by molding hands into the appropriate signs

- June 1965: born
- 1-yr-old: Begins training
- 2-yrs-old: 13 signs
- 3-yrs-old: 34 signs
- 4-yrs-old: 85 signs
- 5-yrs-old: 132 signs
- 27-yrs-old: 240 signs



Findings (though controversial)  
New extensions  
e.g., "dirty", "red"  
New word combination & syntax  
e.g., "water bird", "baby in my drink."  
Transmitted 50 signs to Louslis (adopted son).

## Teaching chimpanzees



Teaching chimps to sign using ASL

1979: Nim Chimpsky, raised in private home, taught signs by having hands molded into them  
- learned 100 signs and produced some combinations

But combinations produced are very different from those of a human child - very repetitive, no additional complexity:

2-sign

"eat drink"

"tickle me"

3-sign

"eat me Nim"

"me Nim eat"

4-sign

"eat drink eat drink"

"play me Nim play"

## Teaching chimpanzees



Teaching chimps to sign using ASL

Nim's longest utterance: "give orange me give eat orange me eat orange give me eat orange give me you"

Also, all Nim's sign combinations were imitations of his teachers - no novel combinations, unlike human children.

No symbolic reference:

"For Nim, meaning seemed to have no role outside of the specific association between a form and its referent that had been explicitly taught to him...for Nim, signs did not refer; he did not have words - signs, or names - for things."  
- Laura Petitto, one of Nim's teachers, 1988

## Conversations with Koko



- Moderator: Koko are you going to have a baby in the future?
- Koko: Pink.
- Dr. Patterson: We've had earlier discussion about colors today.
- Koko: Listen! Koko loves eat.

....

- Moderator: What are the names of your kittens? (and dogs?)
- Koko: foot
- Dr. Patterson: Foot isn't the name of your kitty.
- Moderator: Koko, what's the name of your cat?
- Koko: no

....

- Moderator: Do you like to chat with other people?
- Koko: fine nipple
- Dr. Patterson: Nipple rhymes with people, she doesn't sign people per se, she was trying to do a "sounds like ..."

## Lana & friends

- The Lana Project (or LANguage Analog) established in 1971.
- Yerkish: Artificial language

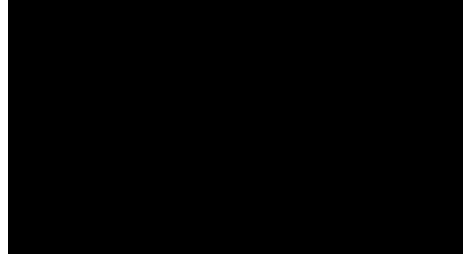
### LEXIGRAMS



- (1) <http://www.greatapetrust.org/science/history-of-ape-language/interactive-lexigram/>
- (2) <http://www.greatapetrust.org/science/history-of-ape-language/>
- (3) <http://www.greatapetrust.org/science/history-of-ape-language/use-of-human-languages-by-captive-great-apes/#videoGalleryTab>

## Teaching bonobos

[http://video.ted.com/talks/podcast/SusanSavageRumbaugh\\_2004.mp4](http://video.ted.com/talks/podcast/SusanSavageRumbaugh_2004.mp4)  
Total length = 17:25, look at 2:32 - 7:32 especially



## Teaching bonobos

Bonobos (pygmy chimpanzees)  
vocalize in communication more  
frequently than common chimps do.



1981: adult bonobo Matata instructed with an artificial  
language and utterly failed

However, her infant bonobo Kanzi - who wasn't explicitly  
instructed in anything - learned the artificial language and  
was also to understand some spoken English.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRM7vTrllis> (Lexigrams)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LxmbjLoUhhk> (Spoken Language)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Dhc2zePJFE> (Novel Sentences)

## Teaching bonobos

Did Kanzi have reference?

"strawberry" = "I want to go to the place  
where strawberries are found", "I  
want a strawberry to eat", "There's a  
picture of strawberries", ...



Kanzi's spoken English: comparable to a 2-yr-old child's  
performance (but a 2-yr-old's syntactic knowledge is fairly  
limited)

Also, Kanzi was 8 years old when he was tested, and was  
unlikely to improve his performance any further with  
age....unlike human children.

### Some interim conclusions about animal communication

- Small vocabularies
- Little evidence of grammar
- Little evidence of productive or innovative language
- Maybe some evidence of displaced reference (referring to something that's not there right now)
- Maybe some transmission of language to next generation

### Some Linguists' Concluding Remarks



- I do not believe that there has ever been an example anywhere of a nonhuman expressing an opinion, or asking a question. Not ever," says Geoffrey Pullum, a linguist at the University of California at Santa Cruz. "It would be wonderful if animals could say things about the world, as opposed to just signaling a direct emotional state or need. But they just don't."
- Source:  
<http://www.smithsonianmagazine.com/issues/2006/november/speakingbonobo.php>

### So what's the problem?



Not a lack of intelligence - chimpanzees are highly intelligent.

One answer: language is an expression of a domain-specific mental faculty that humans have and other primates do not (nativist: generativist).

Specific abilities: syntax & referential semantics

Another answer: language must be learned through social interaction with others, and chimpanzees' ability to learn from others is limited - they can't seem to collaborate

### A more detailed look at the nativist idea

Hauser, Chomsky, & Fitch 2002:

Faculty of Language – Broad (FLB): biological capacity for acquiring language that humans have and other animals don't. However, much of the biological capacity is assumed to derive from shared origins with animal communication.

Ex: Parts of the human conceptual system such as causal, spatial, and social reasoning are shared with other primates (Buttelman et al. 2007)

Difference between humans and animals is assumed to be more about "quantity" – humans have more power to drive these abilities than other animals, but the fundamental ability is basically the same.

## A more detailed look at the nativist idea

Hauser, Chomsky, & Fitch 2002:

Faculty of Language – Narrow (FLN): A subset of FLB abilities that only humans have. Biological underpinnings not shared with other animals. A difference of “quality” not just “quantity”.

Pinker & Jackendoff (2005):  
properties of speech perception,  
speech production, words (as  
referential), grammar, complex  
conceptual understanding that  
requires words (ex: *week, 10  
feet from the blue wall, half past  
five next Tuesday*)



## Recap: Animal Communication

While animal communication systems may share some properties of human language, none currently seem to be as complex as human language.

When other animals try to learn human language, they are much slower and do not achieve a level of competency that a human child does.

This suggests that there is something special about human language. Some current ideas about why suggest that there are aspects that are unique to human biology which make this possible.

## Questions?



Remember: HW1 is due Thursday, and you should be able to do all of it now.

You should also be able to do all of the review questions for biological bases of language.