



Electronic lectures on
Linguistics

Adapted from Yule's The Study
of Language

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جامعة تكريت

Lecture I

The Origins of Language

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lecture, students should be able to:

- Explain the major theories concerning the origin of language.
- Discuss the relationship between biological evolution and language development.
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of different theories.
- Understand why human language is unique.

I. Introduction

One of the oldest questions in linguistics is:

“How did human language begin?” Despite centuries of investigation, there is still no definite answer. Unlike bones or tools, spoken language leaves no fossil record. Therefore, linguists must rely on indirect evidence from:

- Human anatomy
- Archaeology
- Anthropology
- Psychology
- Comparative studies of animal communication

The study of language origins remains largely speculative.

II. The Divine Source Theory

The Divine Source Theory suggests that language was a gift from a divine being. According to many religious traditions, humans were created with the ability to speak.

Examples:

- In Islamic tradition, Allah taught Adam the names of all things.
- In Christian tradition, Adam was given language by God.

Advantages:

- Explains the uniqueness of human language.
- Consistent with religious beliefs.

Limitations:

- Cannot be scientifically tested.
- Provides no explanation of linguistic development.

III. The Natural Sound Source Theory (Bow-Wow Theory)

This theory proposes that language originated from imitations of natural sounds. Early humans may have copied sounds they heard in nature. Examples

Natural Sound like Buzzing insect is called buzz, Snake sound is called hiss, and Bird call is called cuckoo. These words are known as onomatopoeic words. Yule Criticizes that only a small number of words imitate sounds specifically those which do not explain grammar or sentence structure. And also that different languages imitate sounds differently.

IV. The Social Interaction Source Theory

This theory argues that language developed because humans needed to cooperate socially. Early human activities required communication are:

- Hunting
- Gathering food
- Building shelters
- Caring for children

Language may have evolved from simple vocal signals used to coordinate group activities. Language is viewed as a social tool that strengthens cooperation and group survival.

V. The Physical Adaptation Source

Supporters of this theory believe that several physical characteristics evolved to make speech possible.:

A. Teeth

Human teeth are relatively upright and even. They assist in producing sounds such as: /f/ and /v/

B. Lips

Human lips are highly flexible. They help produce sounds like: /p/, /b/ and /m/.

C. Tongue

The human tongue is more muscular and flexible than that of other primates. It plays a crucial role in articulating speech sounds.

D. Larynx

The human larynx is positioned lower in the throat. This creates a larger vocal tract and allows a wider variety of speech sounds.

VI. The Brain and Language

Language development is closely connected to brain evolution. Two important brain areas are associated with language:

- Broca's Area:
 - Located in the left hemisphere.
 - Functions: Speech production & Grammatical processing

Damage to Broca's area may result in difficulty producing speech.

- Wernicke's Area
 - Functions: Language comprehension & Understanding meaning

Damage to Wernicke's area can affect language understanding.

VII. The Genetic Source Theory

Many linguists believe that humans possess an innate capacity for language. Children acquire language rapidly and naturally without formal instruction. This suggests the existence of a biological foundation for language learning.

Language Instinct

Some researchers argue that humans are born with a specialized language faculty that enables language acquisition.

VIII. Human Language Is Unique

Human language possesses characteristics not found together in animal communication systems, like:

- A. **Productivity:** Humans can create and understand an unlimited number of new sentences. Example
“I will study linguistics tomorrow.”

This sentence may never have been spoken before, yet it is immediately understandable

- B. **Displacement:** Humans can discuss things that are not present. Examples: Past events, Future plans, Imaginary situations

Animals generally communicate about immediate situations.

- C. **Creativity:** Humans can express novel ideas and abstract concepts. Examples : Freedom, Justice, Love.

- D. **Duality:** Language operates on two levels

Level 1: Sounds; Individual sounds such as: /b/, /a/, /t/ have no meaning by themselves.

Level 2: Meaningful Units; When combined: (bat) they create meaningful words.