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Assignment 1- *What is human language and how do we describe it?* (2168 words)

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## What is human language and how do we describe it?

Since the publication of *Syntactic Structures* (Chomsky, 1957), Chomsky has qualified the study of linguistics as a natural/cognitive science that can be studied from a structurally and mathematically precise point of view (Lyons, 1981, p. 8). Chomsky has further extended the science of linguistics to explore how language is significant to human identity within society and culture. These revolutionary concepts have refocused the study of linguistics away from the capricious task of defining *what language is* to studying *what does it mean to know a language* and *how do people acquire a language?* This essay will argue that, or though Chomsky's ideas are significant to understanding what language is, a critical position must be taken to establish the validity of his theories.

Thus, this essay will focus on three important aspects regarding the nature of language. First, Chomsky's definition of language is discussed and accentuated by providing common English grammar examples, as well as providing contrasting examples of traditional definitions of language. Secondly, this essay will broadly discuss Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar (UG) as a foundation for knowing and acquiring a language. Examples that support the existence of UG, and consequently the structural and creative aspect of language, will be provided. Some criticisms of this theory will also be briefly examined. Finally, this essay will discuss dialects, idiolects and registers to demonstrate how the creative and structural nature of language plays an important role in creating social and cultural identity.

Theoretically, it is impossible for our brain to store the infinite number of potential sentences of a language. Therefore, the creativity of human language relates to a person's ability to create an infinite number of new sentences and understand sentences never heard before, using only a finite number of sounds, words and grammatical rules. This creative ability is not found in other animal species and is a unique feature of all human languages (Chomsky, 2006, p. 9). Chomsky (1957, p. 13) (as cited in Lyons, 1981, p. 8), in his approach to defining language, draws our attention to the structural (syntax) dependence of a language as a means of acquiring this creative aspect. Thus, the creative aspect of language broadly relies on a speaker knowing two important concepts. Firstly, the speaker must have knowledge of the phonological features of a language. How the

finite sound segments in a language combine to form morphemes and how morphemes combine to form words. For example, the word *help* as a single morpheme can combine with the bound, inflectional morpheme *-ed* to create the past participle *helped*. Secondly, a speaker must have knowledge of how structural or syntax rules, combine words to form comprehensible sentences. In English, the structural rule *subject + verb + object* is adhered to. For example *Mary helped me*. Structural rules state that the relative clause *which saved time* can be added to create *Mary helped me, which saved time*. This extends the sentence in form and meaning. Knowledge of structural rules allow for the production of an infinite number of sentences that are potentially infinite in length. Consider the following nursery rhyme cited in Fromkin Rodman, & Hyams (2007, p. 9):

*This is the house.*

Can be extended to:

*This is the house that Jack built.*

or,

*This is the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.*

This example clearly shows that knowledge of the phonological and structural rules of a language is fundamental in providing a speaker with the creative ability to produce an infinite number of sentences from a finite amount of language elements. This is the creative nature of language.

However, to validate Chomsky's definition, which focuses solely on the structural dependence of language, a critical point of view should be considered. Sapir (1921, p. 8) and Hall (1968, p. 158) (as cited in Lyons 1981, p. 3- 5) define language by focusing on the communicative, social and interactive functions of language. Initially, these terms seem relevant when considering a purpose for language. However, they are considered somewhat subjective and arbitrary (Lyons 1981, p. 3- 5) and do little in defining what it means to 'know' a language. Another critique towards Chomsky's definition is that it can be considered very limiting when considering forms of language that do not depend on structure to carry meaning. For example, how messages are clearly communicated through pictograms and ideograms.

The structural dependence of language consequentially raises the question, how does a speaker of a language acquire knowledge of the phonological and structural rules of

grammar? For example, a speaker of English intuitively knows that *Camels have* is an incomplete sentence, but *Camels have three eyelids* is a complete sentence. Chomsky (1975, p. 29) suggests that the foundation for acquiring a language lays in the existence of Universal Grammar (UG). During the critical period of language acquisition, children manage to acquire a large proportion of their language with minimal formal training. The reason children so easily master the complex task of knowing a language, is that they have UG to guide them. The UG theory advocates that individuals biologically possess an innate set of principles that pertain to the grammars of all human languages and is present in humans before language acquisition begins. UG is a 'blueprint' that all languages follow (Fromkin et al. 2007, p. 18).

The variability between individual languages depends on a speaker having the innate UG principles and acquiring the finite number of parameters which determine exactly how the principles need to be combined to construct grammatical sentences. Consider how the past participle is established in Korean compared to English:

*Youngwha bowa ssayo*

(I) movie watched

In English is:

*I watched a movie*

The UG principle is the fact that both languages use the past participle. The variation occurs in the parameters used to establish it, such as adding *-ssayo* to the Korean verb and *-ed* to the English verb. Linguists can develop a further understanding of what it means to know a language by cross examining the UG principles and the unique parameters of individual languages.

Evidence supporting the existence of UG is found in the fact that all languages share a set of common principles. Fromkin et al. (2007, p. 29) informs us that every language has distinct sound segments and consists of a class of vowels and consonants. Every language uses a similar set of grammatical features such as nouns, verbs and adjectives. Languages share similar semantic properties such as entailment. Every language has a way of fulfilling specific tasks, such as giving commands. All languages have a means of describing tense, present, past and future. The way that a creole evolves provides further support for the UG theory. Creole languages are evolved forms of pidgin languages. Children exposed to the pidgin use their innate UG principles to refine and enrich the

pidgin into a recognised language. Roper River Creole is an example of this occurring among Indigenous Australians. Additionally, ongoing neurological studies suggest the Broca's area of the brain could hold the biological substrate of UG (Marcus et al. 2003). The Broca's portion of the brain has been found to hold the biological workings that make language acquisition possible, such as the ability to form syntactically correct sentences.

The most contrasting criticism to UG stems from behaviourists, such as B.F. Skinner, who would explain that such language knowledge is developed through responses to stimuli during language acquisition. Yet, behaviourism does not account for the creative aspect of language, nor are the sentences we produce stimulus driven (Fromkin et al. 2007, p. 9). UG is also questionable when presented with evidence that UG principles do not exist in some languages. Daniel Everett's (2005) discussion of the Piraha people of the Amazon, argues that the Piraha language is void of many of the principles UG principles such as, numbers, name of colours, subordinate clauses, and past or future tenses.

As discussed, applying variations to the principles and properties of UG establishes the unique qualities of each individual language. However, though a group of people may speak the same language, no two people speak it exactly the same. Consider English speakers from Scotland compared to African Americans in New Orleans. The structural and creative aspects of language allow people from different geographical and social origins to speak unique variations within a language and, as a result establish geographical and social identity. Dialects are such variations within a single language. These variations evolve through regional or social factors. There are groups that believe in a dialect 'standard', such as Standard British English. Furthermore, there are 'purists' who consider the 'standard' form of a language as the superior form and that all other dialects are inferior. The purist's objective is to highlight this point, sometimes even banning certain dialects. However, when considering dialect variations, it is important to note that no variety of language is linguistically superior to another (Trudgill, 1994, p. 2; Fromkin et al. 2007, p. 420).

First, consider regional dialects. Phonological variations or accents exist between people from different regions of the world who speak the same language. Accent variations also exist when second language learners carry over an accent feature of their first language to their second. The IDEA (“International Dialects of English Achieve,” 1997) consists of hundreds of audio samples of English accents. Lexical variations also exist between regional dialects. What New Zealanders refer to as a bedspread or comforter, Australians call a ‘dooner’. Syntactic variations exist between regional dialects also. Fromkin (2007, p. 416) compares the Ozark dialect of Missouri and other American dialects in the conjoining of the sentence ‘*John will eat and Mary will eat*’. The Ozark dialect results in *John will eat and Mary*, compared to the more common *John and Mary will eat*. Social groups and social barriers exist amongst humans. Therefore, variations in dialects also occur due to the social backgrounds of individuals. Trudgill (1994, p. 2) highlights the dialect variations between people from Liverpool and those that come from more ‘posh’ areas of England. Social dialects occur in different ways, such as through racial barriers. Consider how African American English has developed due to the historical segregation of African Americans. Dialects can occur through a dominant social group’s control. The Singapore government’s ‘Speak Mandarin’ policy had the objective of counteracting the various dialects of Mandarin to create a new generation of Singapore-Mandarin who spoke a common language (Yangin, 2007).

Social identity is also established when individuals demonstrate their own personal dialect variations in the words, slang, argot or idioms that they speak. This is called an idiolect. Consider the contrast in language used by an individual belonging to the Hip Hop culture to that of a British monarch. People may also use different styles, or registers, between different social situations. A computer programmer describing her work in a formal manner would use argots and phrases that are unique to her profession. In contrast, when informally sitting down to a few drinks with friends she may use noticeably less formal language, such as slang or certain idioms. These variations in regional, social and individual dialects distinguish who we are as individuals with in society and culture. They are allowable due to the structural and creative nature of language.

To conclude, Chomsky's ideas are fundamental to understanding what it means to know a language. However, to validate these theories a critical position must be taken.

Chomsky's definition focuses on the structural aspects within all languages, which allow individuals to create and understand an infinite number of new sentences. Speakers must have knowledge of how the sounds of a language form words and how structural rules combine words to form sentences. In critique, Chomsky's description of language can be considered limiting as it solely focuses on the structural dependence of language. UG is a theory that explains how a person acquires knowledge of a language. UG refers to an innate set of principles that pertain to the grammars of all human languages and is present in humans before language acquisition begins. Variations between languages and within a language occur due to parameters that determine exactly how the principles need to be combined to construct grammatical sentences. Evidence for UG is found in the fact that all languages share a set of common principles. How creoles evolve also provides evidence for UG. Ongoing neurological research has also provided evidence towards the existence of UG. Critiques to UG include traditional theories regarding language acquisition, such as behaviourism, and the fact that some languages demonstrate a lack of UG Principles, such as the Piraha language. Dialects are variations within a single language. Dialect variations can be phonological, lexical or syntactic. Social dialects can evolve through social barriers and restrictions. Idiolects describe an individual's way of speaking that reflects their grammar. Speakers may use a certain style or register in a certain social situation. These variations, that are allowable in a language, give people from different geographical and social backgrounds the creative ability to define who they are through their style of language.

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