Language paper assignment

Language Paper Michelle Langmesser Psy-360 June 6, 2010 Eboni Sheilds Definition of Language “ Many definitions of language have been suggested. An English Phonetician and language scholar, Henry Sweet stated, Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts” (language, 2010). The American linguists George L. Trager and Bernard Bloch have the following definition, a language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates.

Any concise definition of language makes a number of assumptions and brings up many questions. The first focuses on thought and the second on arbitrary: in a specialized but genuine way” (language, 2010). “ Language is both a working system of communication in the time and in the community, it is a product of its history and the source of its future development. Any account of language must look at it from both points of view. Language interacts with every part of human life.

It can be understood only if it is considered as part of its society” (language 2010). “ The science of language is known as linguistics. It includes what are generally distinguished as descriptive linguistics and historical linguistics. Linguistics is now a highly technical subject; it embraces, both descriptively and historically, such major divisions as phonetics, grammar (including syntax an morphology), semantics, and pragmatics, dealing in detail with these various aspect of language” (language, 2010).

Definition of Lexicon “ In its most general sense, the term is synonymous with vocabulary. A dictionary can be seen as a set of lexical entries. The lexicon has a special status in generative grammar, where it refers to the component containing all the information about the structural properties of the lexical items in a language, i. e. their specification semantically, syntactically and phonologically. In later models (see aspects model), these properties are formalized as features, and put in square brackets, e. . word-class assignments include noun [+N], etc. Given this component, the terminal symbols in phrase-markers can then be related directly to the lexicon through the use of lexical transformations; e. g. any item in the lexicon specified by [+D] can be attached to the node D, and so on. The mental lexicon is the stored mental representation of what we know about the lexical items in our language” (Crystal, 2003). Key Features of Language

There is a critical period of development in which humans are innately predisposed to the assimilation of the grammar and syntax of language. A classic study conducted by Jackie Johnson and Elissa Newport to Chinese and Korean immigrants to the United States concluded that at or around the age of 16 the ability to easily learn a new language decreases drastically, specifically the ability to become fluent in the languages syntax. In addition, language seems to be a specifically human attribute, even excluding close genetic relatives, the primates.

It is clear that primates use some symbolic level of communication to converse; however, the fact still remains that primates do not use anything like the language that humans use every day, nor are they capable of learning grammatical language. Primates seem to be quite adept at

memorizing the surface structure of language and using it in limited circumstances, but they are not capable of ascertaining the deep structure of language and then transforming the underlying meanings of language to other phrases.

In short, they are good at understanding words, not language. Levels of Language Structure There are four primary levels of language: phonemes, words, sentences, and texts. Phonemes are the individual sounds that constitute the audible and written reproduction of words. There are about 46 phonemes in the English language, but about 200 phonemes are used worldwide in human language. The 46 English phonemes can be combined, through the laws of grammar and syntax, to create approximately 600, 000 words.

Through the aforementioned lexicon, humans have the ability to determine the spelling, pronunciation, and part of speech of each word; therefore, giving humans the means through which to construct coherent sentences complete with a noun phrase and verb phrase. It is at this point in language structure that the meaningful creation of actual text is possible. The grammar that governs text creation seem to be logical rather than sequential, meaning that it does not matter so much that sentences follow a particular stream of conjunctive adverbs, but that the sentences logically flow from one to the next.

The 46 phonemes of the English language can be combined, according to the laws of grammar and syntax, to create approximately 600, 000 words, which can in turn be constructed into sentences, as an extension of lexical entries,

and can finally be assembled into texts that follow a logical flow. Language Processing and Ambiguity The obstacle of language comprehension is largely a problem of perception, rather than a problem of actual structure or articulation.

For instance, if a person were to look at the spectral analysis of speech they would quickly realize that there are no audible breaks between words, which ask the question: how do we know when one word ends and another begins? Humans resolve this example of language ambiguity through the use of phonemic cues at the beginning and the end of words. According to the motor theory of speech perception, humans largely rely on processes of speech production to resolve language ambiguity in speech assessment.

A further complication of language perception is the phenomenon of co-articulation in phonemes. For instance, one phoneme can be pronounced differently or be semantically cued by other words in a sentence. This type of language ambiguity is overcome by the rules of grammar and word syntax, which govern the placement of particular phonemes within words and particular words within sentences. In brief, the speech stream nature of language and phenomenon of co-articulation can be surmounted through the mechanisms of phonemic cueing and the rules of grammar and word syntax, respectively.

Language Processing in Cognitive Psychology The most extreme version of the Whorfian hypothesis stipulates that language literally determines our perception of reality. This radical form of the Whorfian hypothesis has received little support in the psychological community, for lack of evidence;

however, a milder form of the hypothesis has been substantiated through methodologically rich experimentation. Language appears to have a biasing effect on a few cognitive functions, such as color naming and memory representations.

In the area of color naming, several studies found that language is quite significant in determining the types of color mismatches that people of different languages will make. A deceased color naming vocabulary brings about color ambiguity when colors are very close together; whereas, with languages that have an enumeration of terms for color shades ambiguity is lessened. From these and other studies like them, it is clear that language acts as a sort of filter, preconditioning and categorizing our thoughts and perceptions (Fritz & Fritz, 1985).

In the area of memory representations language determines, at least to some extent, what descriptive words we choose to associate with what nouns. If our language emphasizes material over shape, then we might describe a tree as made of wood rather than tall. Moreover, language structure and competency seems to have a substantial impact on cognitive development in children and adolescents (Sevinc & Turner, 1976). For example, similarities in language prejudice similarities in representation of attribute and difference relations.

Altogether, language is highly correlated with fine color differentiation, choice of descriptive words, and cognitive development; but is not the sole, direct precondition to thought, only a biasing agent. Conclusion In closing, the standard definition of language—which explains that communication

must be communicative, arbitrary, structured, generative, and dynamic in order to be considered language; and the concept of lexical entries, mental entries that form the basis for our understanding of language—are only the foundational elements of language.

Above and beyond that, language is a specifically human attribute, predisposed innately from birth, but can only be optimally assimilation during a critical period of development—childhood and adolescence. Language exists on several levels, of which phonemes, words, sentences, and texts are of specific interest. Furthermore, humans overcome different types of language ambiguity, such as the speech stream effect and co-articulation, through phonemic cueing and the laws of grammar and syntax.

Lastly, it is clear that language has a biasing effect on a few cognitive functions, such as fine color differentiation and memory representations. In all, language has a significant impact on some very specific cognitive functions, but on the whole language is more of a mediating agent then a causal agent of psychological processes. References language, (2010). In Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved June 1, 2010, from Encyclopaedia Britannica Online: http://search. eb. com/eb/article-27156 . Crystal, D. , (2003) lexicon. In Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics.

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