

# Hockett's list and the signature characteristic strategy



Hockett's List and the Signature Characteristic Strategy Charles Hockett, an American linguist writing in the 1960s, created a list of thirteen design features of the Human spoken language. Hockett asserted that only spoken human language adheres to all thirteen features. This list has enabled researchers to distinguish Human communication from that of animals, in order to establish whether a certain species has lingual abilities. This research method is most commonly referred to as the Signature Characteristic Strategy. In order to analyze the adequacy of this method, I will compare Honeybee and Human communication, with reference to Hockett's list. As Professor Anderson discussed in class, Honeybees communicate information about food sources, such as Nectar and Pollen, by using the Waggle Dance. The significance of this dance has been widely debated, but Karl Von Frisch was the first to uncover the meaning of the dance. The dance is used to determine the direction and distance of food sources: For example, if a bee dances in circles of ninety degrees, this means that the food is at ninety degrees from the sun. I will use the information we have learnt about the Waggle Dance, in order to decipher whether Honeybees have, or have the ability, to learn a language. According to Hockett, the Honeybee Waggle Dance differs from Human communication because of a feature called traditional transmission. Tradition transmission refers to the fact that Human language has to be learned. Humans are not born with the innate ability to speak or understand speech, which is why they must learn to communicate through observation and practice. In this sense, Human beings are similar to songbirds: Songbirds learn their specific specie's song when they are young, through imitating their elders and practicing. Honeybees, on the other hand, are born with the knowledge of

<https://assignbuster.com/hocketts-list-and-the-signature-characteristic-strategy/>

how to perform the Waggle Dance, and therefore lack the feature of traditional transmission. Another difference between Honeybee and Human communication is the feature of Arbitrariness. According to Hockett, arbitrariness means that there is no obvious connection between what is said and what is being conveyed. For example, words in the Human language such as "bed", "tired", and "backwards" do not directly connect to what we are referring to when we say them: The short, one-syllable word "bed", for example, does not directly link to the soft, comfy structure that we use to sleep on. In the Honeybee dance, on the other hand, there is a close connection between what they are doing and what they are referring to. In class we were able to observe how the orientation of the dance conveys the orientation of the food with regards to the sun. On the other hand, there are certain features of the Waggle Dance that do adhere to Hockett's list. Both animal and Human communication systems, for example, have displacement. The feature of displacement means that Humans can communicate about things in the past, present, and future. It also means that people can talk about things that are not physically present, such as foreign countries, and things that do not exist, such as Ghosts. Honeybees share this lingual characteristic; this is shown by their ability to communicate about food sources that they have found in the past, and share information about them with the hive when they are not present. Comparing the two systems of interaction using Hockett's list is very useful in helping to bring out the correspondences and variances between Human and Honeybee communication. I therefore believe that the Signature Characteristic Approach, when used in alliance with Hockett's list, is a sufficient method of studying language. This analysis has shown us that, whilst Honeybees share <https://assignbuster.com/hocketts-list-and-the-signature-characteristic-strategy/>

a few design features of Human spoken language, they do not have, or have the ability to learn, language. The Waggle Dance does show features of displacement, but does not possess transitional transmission or arbitrariness. This means that Honeybee language is limited, because they do not possess all of Hockett's features, and infers that language is unique to Humans.

----- [ 1 ]. " Karl Von Frisch." Karl Von Frisch. N.

p., n. d. Web, <http://www.animalbehavioronline.com/frisch.html> [ 2 ].

Anderson, Stephen R. (2004). Doctor Dolittle's Delusion: Animal

Communication and the Uniqueness of Human Language. New Haven: Yale

University Press [ 3 ]. Doupe, Allison, and Patricia K. Kuhl (1999). " Birdsong

and Human Speech: Common Themes and Mechanisms. " Annual Review of

Neuroscience 22: 567— 631. [ 4 ]. Anderson, Stephen R. (2004). Doctor

Dolittle's Delusion: Animal Communication and the Uniqueness of Human

Language. New Haven: Yale University Press, Page 82 [ 5 ]. Anderson,

Stephen R, Animal Communication and Human Language, Lecture 3