The following properties are widely believed by linguists to be the defining hallmarks of spoken language. They were originally formulated by Charles Hockett. They provide away of distinguishing linguistic behaviour from the other behaviours of organisms that may be communicative but not linguistic. For example the dances that bees do to inform other bees about the location of nectar or a dog dropping a ball at your feet.

Displacement

Human language can talk about things that are beyond the immediate here and now. It can express concepts which transcend the current location or circumstances of the speakers (for example abstract ideas, past events, future events). For instance two people could be at a watercooler in a work environment but this doesn't mean they must be talking about the watercooler, they could be talking about the causes of the French Revolution.

Hockett's design features - Wikipedia

Arbitrariness of the sign

Duality of patterning

Speech can be analysed on two levels at once:

1. As made up of meaningless elements (i.e a finite inventory of phonemes)
2. As made up of meaningful elements (i.e an infinite array of morphemes)

    Spoken languages are composed of a limited set of meaningless speech sounds that are combined according to rules to form meaningful words

Reflexivity

In essence, the ability of speakers of language to engage in linguistics: to use language to talk about language. Due to reflexivity humans can describe what language is, talk about the structure of language and discuss the idea of language with others, using language.

Additional features

Add shorter notes on additional features listed by Hockett