

24.93 “The search for meaning”

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Lecture 1/11

Introduction

My name is Kai von Fintel. I was born in Germany many years ago. I went to the USA for graduate school and stayed. I have lived more than half of my life in Massachusetts. By now, I am an American of German descent. I received my PhD from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. I have taught at MIT since 1993. I am a semanticist = I work on meaning. I think it's the most awesome topic in the world. Hence this class.

What is meaning? Let's brainstorm!

What kind of things have meanings or mean something?

Bee Threat Elicits Alarm Call in African Elephants

Lucy E. King  , Joseph Soltis , Iain Douglas-Hamilton, Anne Savage, Fritz Vollrath

Published: April 26, 2010 • <http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0010346>

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Abstract

Introduction

Results

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Acknowledgments

Author Contributions

References

Reader Comments (1)

Media Coverage (1)

Abstract

Unlike the smaller and more vulnerable mammals, African elephants have relatively few predators that threaten their survival. The sound of disturbed African honeybees *Apis mellifera scutellata* causes African elephants *Loxodonta africana* to retreat and produce warning vocalizations that lead other elephants to join the flight. In our first experiment, audio playbacks of bee sounds induced elephants to retreat and elicited more head-shaking and dusting, reactive behaviors that may prevent bee stings, compared to white noise control playbacks. Most importantly, elephants produced distinctive "rumble" vocalizations in response to bee sounds. These rumbles exhibited an upward shift in the second formant location, which implies active vocal tract modulation, compared to rumbles made in response to white noise playbacks. In a second experiment, audio playbacks of these rumbles produced in response to bees elicited increased headshaking, and further and faster retreat behavior in other elephants, compared to control rumble playbacks with lower second formant frequencies. These responses to the bee rumble stimuli occurred in the absence of any bees or bee sounds. This

kimbbearly:

why dont humans have a specific noise that means "there are bees here lets leave immediately" why are elephants more advanced than us

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why dont humans have a specific noise that means "there are bees here lets leave immediately" why are elephants more advanced than us

we do have a specific noise, it sounds like this:

"there are bees here lets leave immediately"

A former meerkat expert at London Zoo has been ordered to pay compensation to a monkey handler she attacked with a wine glass in a love spat over a llama-keeper.

[Associated Press, Oct. 14, 2015]

**Language is a precision instrument
for conveying meanings.**

We have specific noises for everything!

**“infinite use through finite means”
(Wilhelm von Humboldt)**

Language sample #1 ← click to see movie!

Language sample #2 ← click to see movie!

Tempting idea

- Speaker S has a thought.
- Speaker S encodes the thought in a string of sounds.
- Speaker S produces the string of sounds.
- Hearer H hears the string of sounds.
- Hearer H decodes the string of sounds.
- Hearer H now has the thought S had had.

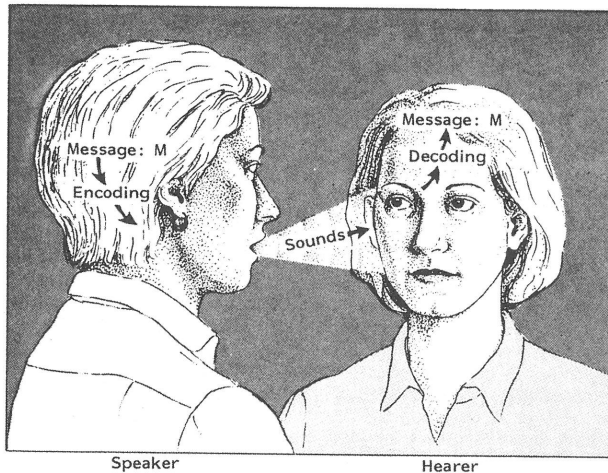


Figure 9.1

The Message Model of communication. A speaker has some message in mind that she wants to communicate to a hearer. The speaker then produces some expression from the language that encodes the message as its meaning. Upon hearing the beginning of the expression, the hearer begins identifying the incoming sounds, syntax, and meanings; then, using her knowledge of language, she composes these meanings in the form of a successfully decoded message.

That model is wrong!

- the signal is multi-dimensional
- the thought is not entirely encoded because context and inference play a huge role
- the conveyed content is multi-dimensional as well

**We can convey thoughts
with minimal means**

Dude! ← click to see movie!

**How can one word encode
so many different meanings?**

The meaning conveyed comes from

- the meaning of “dude” (very minimal)
- the context
- intonation
- co-speech gestures

Eleven more weeks of meaning

- the core properties of human language
- the interplay of semantics/grammar and pragmatics in the creation of meaning
- writing systems
- oral versus written language
- other secondary systems (drums, whistling, smoke, ...)
- sign languages

- language and thought
- translatability
- language diversity, endangerment, should we all speak the same language?
- animal communication systems
- the science of cursing
- social signals in language

Empirical Areas

Quantification LF, QR
 Indefinites Definites Scope
 Existential constructions
 Reference, anaphora, and binding
 Reciprocals and reflexives
 Possessives
 Numeral semantics

Negation and polarity
 Conjunction or disjunction

Plurality Distributivity
 Mass reference
 Genericity

Modality Mood
 Attitude verbs Opacity, de se, and logophoricity
 Conditionals Evidentiality
 Tense and aspect Subjective and evaluative predicates
 Events

Exceptives

Modification

Argument structure
 Ellipsis Antecedent
 Contained
 Deletion

Lexical semantics

Decomposition

Inflectional, derivational morphology

Vagueness and gradability

Comparatives and superlatives

Measurement, scales, and degrees

Indexicality and deixis

Context dependence

Polysemy

Irony

Metaphor

Metonymy

Nonasserted content and its projection

Implicature and pragmatic enrichment

Presupposition

Exhaustion and maximality

Expressive meaning

Politeness

Discourse particles

Intonation

Imperatives

Questions and interrogatives

Focus

Topic

Exclusives

Additives

Scalar operators

"Superlinguistics"

Application of linguistic concepts
 and tools to other semiotic systems

Animal Communication

Methods

Corpus studies

Experimental studies

Experimental studies with child
 participants

Field-based semantics and
 semantics of underrepresented languages

Signed languages

Diachrony

Perspectives, Frameworks

Algebraic models

Composition and type theory

Semantic categories

Computational methods in semantics

Acquisition of semantics or pragmatics

Typology, variation, and universals

Theories of semantics

Alternative Semantics

Variable-free semantics

Situation Semantics

Dynamic theories of meaning

Discourse Representation Theory

Mathematical Tools

Set theory, Relations, Functions

Orderings

Mereology, Lattices

Category Theory

Type Theory

Logic

Lambda calculus

Probability

Game Theory

Propositional logic

Predicate logic

Modal logic

I like to talk with students rather than at them

Might be harder in such a large class, but I will try.

Piazza

There's a piazza forum linked on Canvas

Reading for next week [on canvas]

Trask on “The uniqueness of human language”

The most complicated word in English

ismo clip ← click to see movie!