

**GEORGE YULE**

**THE STUDY OF  
LANGUAGE**

**FIFTH EDITION**

# The Study of Language



This best-selling textbook provides an engaging and user-friendly introduction to the study of language. Assuming no prior knowledge of the subject, Yule presents information in bite-sized sections, clearly explaining the major concepts in linguistics – from how children learn language to why men and women speak differently, through all the key elements of language. This Fifth Edition has been revised and updated with new figures and tables, additional topics, and numerous new examples using languages from across the world. To increase student engagement, and to foster problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, the book includes thirty new tasks. An expanded and revised online study guide provides students with further resources, including answers and tutorials for all tasks, while encouraging lively and proactive learning. This is *the* most fundamental and easy-to-use introduction to the study of language.

**George Yule** has taught Linguistics at the universities of Edinburgh, Hawai'i, Louisiana State and Minnesota.

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FIFTH EDITION

George Yule

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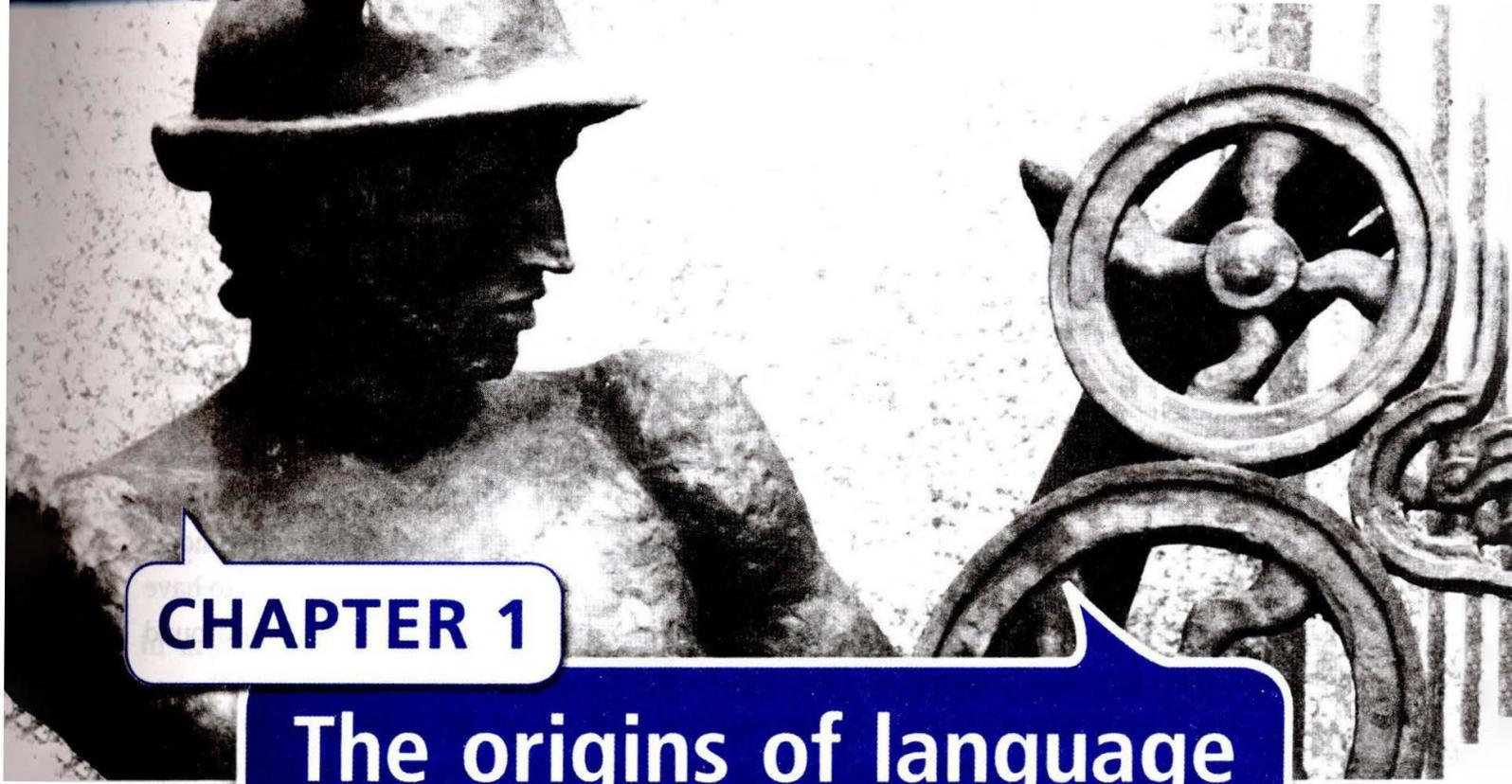
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## CHAPTER 1

# The origins of language

The suspicion does not appear improbable that the progenitors of man, either the males or females, or both sexes, before they had acquired the power of expressing their mutual love in articulate language, endeavoured to charm each other with musical notes and rhythm.

Darwin (1871)

In Charles Darwin's vision of the origins of language, early humans had already developed musical ability prior to language and were using it "to charm each other." This may not match the typical image that most of us have of our early ancestors as rather rough characters wearing animal skins and not very charming, but it is an interesting speculation about how language may have originated. It remains, however, a speculation.

We simply don't know how language originated. We do know that the ability to produce sound and simple vocal patterning (a hum versus a grunt, for example) appears to be in an ancient part of the brain that we share with all vertebrates, including fish, frogs, birds and other mammals. But that isn't human language. We suspect that some type of spoken language must have developed between 100,000 and 50,000 years ago, well before written language (about 5,000 years ago). Yet, among the traces of earlier periods of life on earth, we never find any direct evidence or artifacts relating to the speech of our distant ancestors that might tell us how language was back in the early stages. Perhaps because of this absence of direct physical evidence, there has been no shortage of speculation about the origins of human speech.



## CHAPTER 2

# Animals and human language

One evening in the mid-1980s my wife and I were returning from an evening cruise around Boston Harbor and decided to take a waterfront stroll. We were passing in front of the Boston Aquarium when a gravelly voice yelled out, "Hey! Hey! Get outa there!" Thinking we had mistakenly wandered somewhere we were not allowed, we stopped and looked around for a security guard or some other official, but saw no one, and no warning signs. Again the voice boomed, "Hey! Hey you!" As we tracked the voice we found ourselves approaching a large, glass-fenced pool in front of the aquarium where four harbor seals were lounging on display. Incredulous, I traced the source of the command to a large seal reclining vertically in the water, with his head extended back and up, his mouth slightly open, rotating slowly. A seal was talking, not to me, but to the air, and incidentally to anyone within earshot who cared to listen.

Deacon (1997)

**There are a lot of stories about creatures that can talk. We usually assume that they are fantasy or fiction or that they involve birds or animals simply imitating something they have heard humans say (as Terrence Deacon discovered was the case with the loud seal in Boston Aquarium). Yet we think that creatures are capable of communicating, certainly with other members of their own species. Is it possible that a creature could learn to communicate with humans using language? Or does human language have properties that make it so unique that it is quite unlike any other communication system and hence unlearnable by any other creature? To answer these questions, we first look at some special properties of human language, then review a number of experiments in communication involving humans and animals.**

## Displacement

When your pet cat comes home and stands at your feet calling *meow*, you are likely to understand this message as relating to that immediate time and place. If you ask your cat what it's been up to, you'll probably get the same *meow* response. Animal communication seems to be designed exclusively for this moment, here and now. It isn't used to relate events that are far removed in time and place. When your dog says *GRRR*, it means *GRRR, right now*, because dogs aren't capable of communicating *GRRR, last night, over in the park*. In contrast, human language users are normally capable of producing messages equivalent to *GRRR, last night, over in the park*, and then going on to say *In fact, I'll be going back tomorrow for some more*. Humans can refer to past and future time. This property of human language is called **displacement**. It allows language users to talk about things and events not present in the immediate environment. Indeed, displacement allows us to talk about things and places (e.g. angels, fairies, Santa Claus, Superman, heaven, hell) whose existence we cannot even be sure of.

We could look at bee communication as a small exception because it seems to have some version of displacement. When a honeybee finds a source of nectar and returns to the beehive, it can perform a dance routine to communicate to the other bees the location of this nectar. Depending on the type of dance (round dance for nearby and tail-wagging dance, with variable tempo, for further away and how far), the other bees can work out where this newly discovered feast can be found. Doesn't this ability of the bee to indicate a location some distance away mean that bee communication has at least some degree of displacement as a feature? Yes, but it is displacement of a very limited type. It just doesn't have the range of possibilities found in human language. Certainly, the bee can direct other bees to a food source. However, it must be the most recent food source. It cannot be *that delicious rose bush on the other side of town that we visited last weekend*, nor can it be, as far as we know, possible future nectar in bee heaven.

## Arbitrariness

It is generally the case that there is no "natural" connection between a linguistic form and its meaning. The connection is quite arbitrary. We can't just look at the Arabic word **كلب** and, from its shape, for example, determine that it has a natural and obvious meaning any more than we can with its English translation form *dog*. The linguistic form has no natural or "iconic" relationship with that hairy four-legged barking object out in the world. This aspect of the relationship between words and objects is described as **arbitrariness**. It is possible, as in a child's game, to make words appear to "fit" the idea or activity they indicate, as shown in Figure 2.1.

## CHAPTER 5

# Word formation

Since the sexual revolution of the 1960s we have needed a term for the members of an unmarried heterosexual couple, and none of the popular suggestions has caught on – paramour is too romantic, roommate is not romantic enough, partner is too gay, and the suggestions of journalists too facetious (like POSSLQ, from the census designation “persons of opposite sex sharing living quarters,” and umfriend, from “This is my, um, friend”).

Pinker (2007)

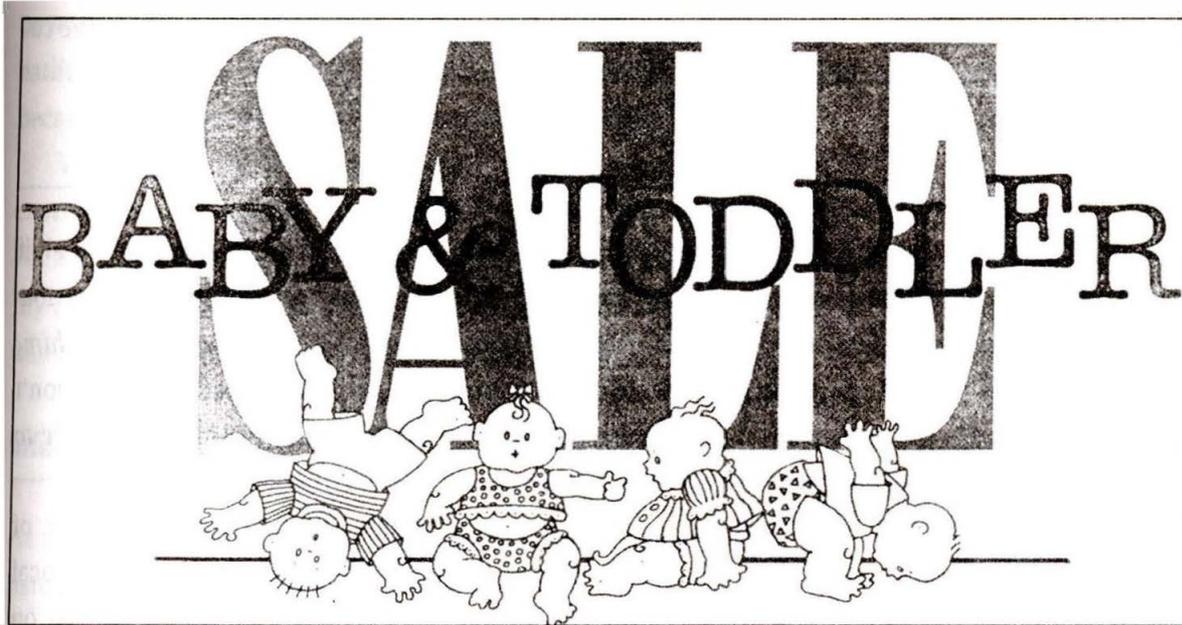


Figure 10.2

be an attendant to look after the car. So, how do we decide that the sign means this when the sign doesn't even have the word *car* on it? We must use the meanings of the words, the context in which they occur, and some pre-existing knowledge of what would be a likely message as we work toward a reasonable interpretation of what the producer of the sign intended it to convey. Our interpretation of the "meaning" of the sign is not based solely on the words, but on what we think the writer intended to communicate.

We can illustrate a similar process with our second example (Figure 10.2), taken from a newspaper advertisement. If we only think about the meaning of the phrase as a combination of the meanings of the words, using *Furniture Sale* as an analogy, we might arrive at an interpretation in which someone is announcing the sale of some very young children. Of course, we resist this possible interpretation and recognize instead that it is advertising a sale of clothes for those young children. The word *clothes* doesn't appear in the message, but we can bring that idea to our interpretation of the message as we work out what the advertiser intended us to understand. We are actively involved in creating an interpretation of what we read and hear.

## Context

In our discussion of the last two examples, we emphasized the influence of context. There are different kinds of context. There is obviously the **physical context**, which can be the location "out there" where we encounter words and phrases (e.g. the word *BANK* on a wall of a building is understood as a financial institution). There is also the **linguistic context**, also known as **co-text**. The co-text of a word is the set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence. If the word *bank* is used with other words like *steep* or *overgrown*, we have no problem deciding which type of *bank* is meant.

## CHAPTER 11

# Discourse analysis

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There are two types of favors, the big favor and the small favor. You can measure the size of the favor by the pause that a person takes after they ask you to "Do me a favor."

Small favor – small pause. "Can you do me a favor, hand me that pencil." No pause at all.

Big favors are, "Could you do me a favor . . ." Eight seconds go by. "Yeah? What?"

"... well." The longer it takes them to get to it, the bigger the pain it's going to be.

Humans are the only species that do favors. Animals don't do favors. A lizard doesn't go up to a cockroach and say, "Could you do me a favor and hold still, I'd like to eat you alive." That's a big favor even with no pause.

Seinfeld (1993)

In the study of language, some of the most interesting observations are made, not in terms of the components of language, but in terms of the way language is used, even how pauses are used, as in Jerry Seinfeld's commentary. We have already considered some of the features of language in use when we discussed pragmatics in Chapter 10. We were, in effect, asking how it is that language-users successfully interpret what other language-users intend to convey. When we carry this investigation further and ask how we make sense of what we read, how we can recognize well-constructed texts as opposed to those that are jumbled or incoherent, how we understand speakers who communicate more than they say, and how we successfully take part in that complex activity called conversation, we are undertaking what is known as **discourse analysis**.



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- constituents are higher than and contain other constituents
- holophrastic (utterance):** a single form functioning as a phrase or sentence in the early speech of young children
- homonyms:** two words with the same form that are unrelated in meaning (e.g. *mole* (on skin) – *mole* (small animal))
- homophones:** two or more words with different forms and the same pronunciation (e.g. *to*–*too*–*two*)
- hypocorism:** a word-formation process in which a longer word is reduced to a shorter form with *-y* or *-ie* at the end (e.g. *telly*, *movie*)
- hyponymy:** the **lexical relation** in which the meaning of one word is included in the meaning of another (e.g. “*daffodil*” is a *hyponym* of “*flower*”)
- iconics:** **gestures** that seem to echo or imitate the meaning of what is said
- ideogram (ideographic writing):** a way of writing in which each symbol represents a concept
- idiolect:** the personal **dialect** of an individual speaker
- implicature:** an additional meaning conveyed by a speaker adhering to the **co-operative principle**
- indirect speech act:** an action in which the form used (e.g. interrogative) does not directly match the function (e.g. request) performed by a speaker with an utterance, in contrast to a **direct speech act**
- inference:** additional information used by a listener/reader to create a connection between what is said and what must be meant
- infix:** a **morpheme** that is inserted in the middle of a word (e.g. *-rr-* in *smarrl*)
- inflectional morpheme:** a **bound morpheme** used to indicate the grammatical function of a word, also called an “inflection” (e.g. *dogs*, *walked*)
- informative signals:** behavior that provides information, usually unintentionally
- innateness hypothesis:** the idea that humans are genetically equipped to acquire language
- input:** the language that an acquirer/learner is exposed to, in contrast to **output**
- instrument:** the **semantic role** of the noun phrase identifying the entity that is used to perform the action of the verb (e.g. *The boy cut the rope with a razor*)
- instrumental motivation:** the desire to learn an **L2**, not to join the community of **L2**-users, but to achieve some other goal, in contrast to **integrative motivation**
- integrative motivation:** the desire to learn an **L2** in order to take part in the social life of the community of **L2**-users, in contrast to **instrumental motivation**
- interdental:** a **consonant** produced with the tongue tip between the upper and lower teeth (e.g. the first sound in *that*)
- interlanguage:** the interim system of **L2** learners, which has some features of the **L1** and **L2** plus some that are independent of the **L1** and the **L2**
- internal change:** change in a language that is not caused by outside influence, in contrast to **external change**
- isogloss:** a line on a map separating two areas in which a particular linguistic feature is significantly different, used in the study of **dialect**
- jargon:** special technical vocabulary associated with a specific activity or topic as part of a **register**
- kinship terms:** words used to refer to people who are members of the same family that indicate their relationship with other members
- L1:** first language, acquired as a child
- L2:** second language
- labeled and bracketed sentences:** a type of analysis in which constituents in a

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