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Why learn about language?

Robert Rodman

Have you ever wondered which language is the oldest? Or how babies learn to talk?

Language is universal, and each of us is a kind of expert in using the language we were raised speaking, but there's a lot more to language than what we use in everyday life, and it raises a lot of fascinating questions. Whatever happened to Esperanto? Can machines translate languages? Are some ways of speaking or writing better than others? The chapters of this book will address all these questions and many more.

Lets start with a big question: what is it that makes us human? Is it walking on two legs? Or living in society? Is it our ability to love and hate? To some degree, all of those. But none is unique to the human species. Birds walk on two legs. Ants live in society. And my dog loves me, and hates the cat next door.

It's language that distinguishes us from all other creatures. Whatever else people do when they're together—whether they play, or fight, or make love, or serve hamburgers, or build houses—they talk. Were the only creatures on the planet with the power of speech.

Every human being, rich or poor, is capable of language. Every child learns his or her native tongue, be it English or Zulu, just by being exposed to the talk around them. Most children are fluent before they're ten years old, sometimes in more than one language. Equally impressive is that as they grow up they master different

styles of speech: everything from formal, job-interview talk to street slang.

Among the questions to be taken up in this book is how something as complex as language can be so easy for children to learn, yet so difficult for adults. We do know that certain areas of the brain specialize in language, and that children are born with a capacity to learn any human language to which they are exposed. Moreover, as will be discussed later, a child who is isolated from language while growing up may never learn to speak well as an adult. Based on that evidence, many scientists believe that the capacity for language is genetic, but that much of that capacity is lost by adulthood.

Our discussion pertains to spoken and signed language. Learning to read and write—literacy—is another matter entirely. Writing—though it’s closely related to spoken language and will be addressed in several chapters of this book—is a human invention, like the bicycle, and has to be studied. Talking is a biological trait, like walking, and comes naturally.

Something you’ll see clearly in the course of the book is how much variety there is in the world’s tongues, and how constantly they change over time. There are thousands of languages on the planet, all descended from earlier languages that spread and changed and split up into dialects as people moved. Given enough time, the separation of groups and the dialects they speak inevitably leads to the birth of new languages, the way French, Romanian and Spanish grew out of the Latin spoken by the Romans.

You’ll also read what linguists have discovered about how and when language began. What do you think? Was there a ‘first language’ spoken by some brilliant ancestor? Did musical grunts evolve into language around a campfire? Or did aliens from another planet teach our forebears to speak in the recesses of history? There’s no shortage of theories, ranging from the supernatural to the imitation of animal sounds.

Do animals talk? Clearly, apes and other animals communicate with each other, and can be taught to do some language-related tasks, but they lack the linguistic flexibility of humans—our

amazing ability to express new thoughts, without limits on subject matter.

And what about computers? In some ways they seem very clever. But can we teach a machine to speak and understand like a human? Not quite. Although they’re capable of some flashy simulations of human-like skills, computers are limited in their ability to understand and produce meaningful speech. And they certainly lack the spontaneity and creativity of human language.

Think about it: almost every time you speak or sign—except for a few set phrases such as exclamations of pain or anger, or words you recite from memory like poems or prayers—you’re creating a sentence different from any other sentence you’ve ever heard or seen. Each one is unique. And every day you create hundreds, or even thousands, of them! One reason language is special is that it’s a universal form of human creativity. Happily, even without being great poets, authors or orators, we can be creative every day of our life when we speak.

There is no human trait more pervasive, or in many ways more valuable, than language. It’s capable of expressing all of human thought, even thoughts about itself—which is what this book is all about. So start reading!

About the author

Robert Rodman (1940–2017) was a UCLA-trained linguist and professor in the Department of Computer Science at North Carolina State University. He was co-author of a best-selling linguistics textbook, *An Introduction to Language*. Rodman was also a forensic linguist and consulted with the judiciary in matters involving language and the legal system. In 2009, he was elected into the American Academy of Social Sciences for his achievements in Computational Forensic Linguistics.

Suggestions for further reading

Fromkin, Victoria, Robert Rodman and Nina Hyams. *An Introduction to Language* (Cengage Learning, tenth edition 2013). This is a comprehensive book about language and linguistics written for persons with no

previous background in languages. It is written in a light, readable style and makes copious use of cartoons, pithy quotations, poems, and song lyrics to make its linguistic points. More than one million copies of this book have been bought.

Pinker, Steven. *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, revised third edition 2007). This is a fascinating, witty treatment of the nature of the human mind as it pertains to language. It is well written enough to be a page-turner despite its technical subject. It's a must-read for anybody in the language field, and a joyful read for the linguistically curious.

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You're a linguist? How many languages do you speak?

Paul Chapin

What is linguistics really about? What do linguists actually do, anyway?

Every profession has its cocktail party moment, the stereotypical reaction you get when someone finds out what you do. Economists are complimented on their ability to balance their checkbooks, psychologists are asked to refrain from analyzing fellow guests. For linguists, it's the question in the title.

Most linguists have trained themselves not to wince visibly when asked this. Their answers reflect a variety of strategies, some less polite than others. One linguist would say, 'One, I think.' Another, 'All of them, at some underlying level.' But the question is asked in good faith, and offers an opportunity to explain what linguistics is really about. So a good answer is something like the following.

People who speak multiple languages are called 'polyglots.' (You can learn more about them in Chapter 36 of this book.) That's an admirable skill to have, but it's different from linguistics, which is the scientific study of natural human language. Native-level ability to speak a language being studied is generally useful and sometimes necessary, but by no means always. This is good, because