

Language as a human instinct

1. Human language vs. other meanings of language

[lan·guage]	
1	a. Communication of thoughts and feelings through a system of arbitrary signals , such as voice sounds, gestures, or written symbols.
	b. Such a system including its rules for combining its components , such as words.
	c. Such a system as used by a nation, people, or other distinct community; often contrasted with dialect .
2	a. A system of signs, symbols, gestures, or rules used in communicating: <i>the language of algebra</i> .
	b. <i>Computer Science</i> A system of symbols and rules used for communication with or between computers.
3	Body language; kinesics.
4	The special vocabulary and usages of a scientific, professional, or other group: " <i>his total mastery of screen language -- camera placement, editing -- and his handling of actors</i> " (Jack Kroll)
5	A characteristic style of speech or writing: <i>Shakespearean language</i> .
6	A particular manner of expression: <i>profane language; persuasive language</i> .
7	The manner or means of communication between living creatures other than humans: <i>the language of dolphins</i> .
8	Verbal communication as a subject of study.
9	The wording of a legal document or statute as distinct from the spirit.
<i>American Heritage Dictionary. 4th ed.</i>	

In linguistics, language is

1. the **pattern of human speech**
2. the (implicit) **systems** that speaking and listening rely on

Other things are "language" because of **connections or analogies** to this central case:

writing

computer languages

the language of dolphins or bees...

Exception:

sign languages - full-fledged human languages, so central, not peripheral object of linguistic study

2. Primacy of spoken language (vs. written)

- French *langue* (same root as English *language*)
- Greek *glossa*
- Russian *jazyk*
- Irish *teanga*
- Hebrew *lâshôn*
- Hausa (a Chadic language of Nigeria and Niger) *harshèe*
- and of course English *tongue*!

The **core of the field of linguistics** – the **analysis of spoken linguistic structure**.

3. Pinker: language is an instinct

Evidence:

1. **All human societies** have full-fledged complex language. (No known exceptions, now or in the past)
E.g., Mohawk prefixes vs English “we”
2. Language is **spontaneously created in the form of Creoles** where it would otherwise be lacking.
E.g., Tok Pisin agreement
3. Children **use language productively** in ways they couldn't be simply repeating.
E.g., holded, bringed, mouses; wug test
(people with Specific Language Impairment fail the wug test)
4. Damage to specific **parts of the brain** leads to consistent language deficits.
E.g., Wernike’s aphasia vs Broca’s aphasia

4. Nicaraguan Sign Language

Ann Senghas:

“Thirty years ago, Nicaragua had no sign language... Today, Nicaragua has a rich, developed sign language...”

... Nicaraguan Sign Language came from the same place that all languages came from – human minds, trying to connect with other human minds.”

- Not imported from another country.
 - Not invented by teachers or parents.
 - Not made up by deaf adults.
- Before 1970 – separate “home sign” systems in each person
 - 1977 – school established with 50 young deaf children.
 - Grows to 100 by 1979; vocational school for adolescents in 1980,
 - over 400 students enrolled in two schools by 1983.
 - Teachers tried teaching Spanish and lipreading
 - students fail to acquire the concept of words, or of spelling
 - Children created a **pidgin** from their home-sign systems: ***Lenguaje de Signos Nicaragüense (LSN)***

- In June 1986, the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education contacted Judy Kegl, an American Sign Language linguist from Northeastern University.
 - Kegl and colleagues noticed that the young children had taken the pidgin-like form of the older children to a higher level of complexity.
 - This full and complex sign language is now known as *Idioma de Señas de Nicaragua (ISN)*.

Home sign	LSN (pidgin)	ISN (creole)
Continuous signs	Continuous signs	Discrete signs
Iconicity	A bit of arbitrariness	More arbitrariness
	LSN: 20 – flashing fingers of both hands twice	arbitrary sign, one hand
No “grammatical” words	No “grammatical words	Rich verb agreement, etc.
Two-word sentences	Longer sentences (not much)	Sentences of any length
Thematic roles: must be mentioned		Roles indicated on the verb grammatically