

Characteristic of human language

Human languages, like the language you need to know to be reading this short text right now, are unique when compared to animal communication. Here are the key characteristics that make the languages that we use every day a unique human feature.

A-

This means that the relationship between what a word 'looks like' and its meaning is made on random choice, not based on any particular reason or determined system. For instance, there is no reason why the word 'book' is made up of the letters it is, or in the order they are. This also applies to the rest of the language system, for example, there is not a direct relationship (a reason or a system) between the sounds we make to pronounce words and the meaning they have in the real world.

B-

This means that we can use language to make reference to events or information that are not at the time of communication, that is, we can make references to past or future events. For example, we can give a presentation on historic events, or tell a friend a funny childhood memory.

C-

The language system we use to communicate is made up of two levels: a basic level that has units of information that have no meaning when isolated, and a higher level that combines these units of information to create meaning. For instance, the letters 't', 'o', 'g', 'e', 't', 'h', 'e', 'r' don't have a combined meaning when isolated, they are just letters. However, when combined in a sequence they create a word that has meaning, 'together'. This is also true for more complex combinations, like sounds into words; words into phrases; phrases into sentences; or sentences into ideas.

D-

Our human language system has a limited number of elements we can use to communicate. That is, we have a limited number of letters, sounds, etc. However, we can create an infinite number of words or sentences because the combinations of letters, sounds, words, etc. are endless. In this sense, our language system is very productive.

E-

A very interesting characteristic that human language has, but animal communication cannot provide, is that we can use our system to lie. We can create messages that are not true to the reality that surrounds us, like creating fiction writing.

F-

Another unique characteristic of human language is that we can use the language system to talk about the system itself! This is what we are doing right now. We are using words, sounds, letters, phrases, ideas to talk about how language works. This means that we can reflect on the same system we use to communicate.

G-

Within the system that human language is, there are elements that can be separated and identified. For instance, we can separate words into the sounds that make them up and we can distinguish those sounds. For example, we know that the sound we make for the 'i' in 'dip' is not the same sound we make for the 'ee' in 'deep'.

H- Human language cannot be predicted by external conditions. That is to say, human language doesn't always respond to external stimuli and because of this, we have a system that allows us to create new phrases according to what we need in each situation.

Displacement	Reflexivity
Discreetness	Creativity
Prevarication	Arbitrariness
Productivity	Duality

ANSWERS:

A- Arbitrariness

B- Displacement

C- Duality

D- Productivity

E- Prevarication

F- Reflexivity

G- Discreetness

H- Creativity