Summary over Victoria Fromkin’s “What is Language?”

Fromkin gives us an important overview into distinctions in language and linguistics. This initial chapter explains why arbitrary sounds signal meaning within a particular language, how language is universal but equal to differing languages, and various relations of grammar to linguistics.

While language carries messages, there is no reason why the sounds that infer meaning carry that message. It is due to an individual’s ability to use language that meaning is created within the sounds. To expand on this point, we must recognize the sounds of a language are finite. Yet the way an individual combines and uses those sounds to create meaning, is infinite.

Being that each particular language has a finite number of individual sounds, distinguishes that language apart from the others. While languages differ in many ways across the globe, the value of that language to the individuals it belongs is no different. This principle esteems all languages as equal in their ability to be useful and expressive. Likewise, all cultures communicate using language even from a young age. This reveals the universality of language as a human trait.

While there are many languages, each has rules that act as constructs for the many sounds that make up that language. These rules and traits are known as grammar which are studied in the field of linguistics. Linguistics seeks to define and order various types of grammar due to the complexity of language in communication. While one may understand creative grammar, teaching grammar is necessary for learning new dialects or foreign languages.

Fromkin masterfully articulates this interesting and sophisticated subject with grand detail. She uses vivid examples to show the meaning behind arbitrary sounds. She presents firm foundations in various languages that retain universality with finite sounds. Step by step she unpacks the complexity of grammar and how linguistics provides reasoning behind particular rules in language.

*Summary by G. James Mitchell*

Fromkin, V. (2003). What is language? In V. Fromkin, R. Rodman, & N. Hyams (Eds.), An introduction to language (pp. 3-29). Boston, MA: Wadsworth. Retrieved from http://relin.letras.ufmg.br/shlee/Fromkinch1.pdf