

# 1 Introduction

## Former Hooters waitress settles toy Yoda suit

PANAMA CITY, Fla. (AP) – A former waitress has settled her lawsuit against Hooters, the restaurant that gave her a toy Yoda doll instead of the Toyota she thought she had won. Jodee Berry, 27, won a beer sales contest last May at the Panama City Beach Hooters. She believed she had won a new Toyota and happily was escorted to the restaurant’s parking lot in a blindfold. But when the blindfold was removed, she found she had won a new toy Yoda – the little green character from the *Star Wars* movies. David Noll, her attorney, said Wednesday that he could not disclose the settlement’s details, although he said Berry can now go to a local car dealership and “pick out whatever type of Toyota she wants.”<sup>1</sup>

If you appreciate the pun behind the practical joke that led to this lawsuit, then you’ve understood, at least on some level, the linguistic features upon which it hinges. First of all, the company name *Toyota* and the two-word phrase *toy Yoda* both have stress on the second syllable “yo.” In addition to that, the *t* sound in *Toyota* is produced sounding much like a *d* when it occurs between two vowels (such as *o* and *a*). The result is that both sound nearly identical when pronounced in normal, conversational, rapid speech. This is not just a fact about these two expressions. Try saying *Latter Day Saints* (as in *Church of the Latter Day Saints*) rapidly, and convince yourself that you didn’t say *Ladder Day Saints*. The fact that *Toyota* and *toy Yoda* sound alike but refer to two very different things makes them homonyms. This, combined with the fact that they could each plausibly be prizes, is what fueled the joke that led to the lawsuit.

This example and our interpretation of it illustrate this book’s central motif. Our goal is not to explain humor per se, although we occasionally comment on its nature and function. Rather, we use humor here as a vehicle for introducing linguistic concepts and the various subfields in which they play a part.

Students who don’t have a formal background in linguistics often struggle to understand linguistic concepts when presented with examples of language data designed to illustrate them. Faced with ambiguous bits of data, such as

The doctor interviewed the patient on pain medication.

which can either mean that the doctor was on pain medication or that the patient was, students frequently respond that they don’t “get it.”

The solution is to find a bit of humor that relies on the targeted ambiguity, in this case the fact that a modifier at the end of a sentence can sometimes describe either the sentential subject or its object. An example of humor illustrating this particular ambiguity is found in a *Wizard of Id* strip from several years ago

SPOOK [the prisoner]: Have you ever eaten squid fried?  
 TURNKEY [the guard]: Yes.  
 SPOOK: How was it?  
 TURNKEY: Better than when I was sober.

Here, the adjective *fried*, just like the prepositional phrase *on pain medication*, can be understood to modify either the subject or the object. In Spook's question to Turnkey, he means for it to modify *squid*. Turnkey's answer takes *fried* as a synonym for *drunk*, and uses it to describe the sentential subject (that is, himself).

One cannot understand and laugh at the joke in the *Wizard of Id* strip without understanding and processing the ambiguity. The joke forces this, and laughing at the joke means that you "got it." Once someone has laughed at the joke, they've at least tacitly understood the concept, and then it's only a matter of explaining (as we've done here) why it's funny and what linguistic principles are leveraged by the joke. Utilizing cartoons and jokes to illustrate these principles, the present book makes it relatively easy to understand them, while keeping the reader's attention and interest. Organized like a course textbook in linguistics, this book covers (without the reader's realizing it) all the major topics in a typical linguistics survey course, and largely avoids technical terminology. The goal is to educate the reader about linguistic concepts without it feeling like a course book.

Note that this book is about linguistics and not humor. Although humor is featured prominently here and through the book, this volume is about understanding language (through humor), not understanding humor (through the vehicle of language). That said, we often assume a particular perspective on humor and its nature and effects. More specifically, in our interpretations of jokes, cartoons, and comedic bits, we often assume that laughter springs from incongruity (or from similar notions such as ambiguity or contradiction): in other words, a joke (or cartoon or comedic bit) typically combines two or more incongruous meanings into a single sound, word, expression, or situation. Recall the *Toyota/toy Yoda* prank. It fuses two very different meanings into a single sequence of sounds. Or recall the word *fried* from the *Wizard of Id* strip. It also combines two, incongruous, meanings into a single word. We don't argue the merits of using incongruity to discuss humor (other than to note here that it's used widely among scholars who do study humor), but we often rely on it as we reveal linguistic concepts at work in the comedic material we feature throughout this book.

If you've read this far, we might assume that you are thinking about reading the rest of this book. Before you do, we would like to briefly let you know what you should expect to find in each of the chapters that follow. As we've already noted, this book will introduce the reader to the various subfields of linguistic inquiry, and accordingly, in constructing it, we have arranged the content to

mirror that of a typical textbook for a survey of linguistics courses. Keep in mind though, that this is not a textbook per se. So, if you already own one of those, keep it.

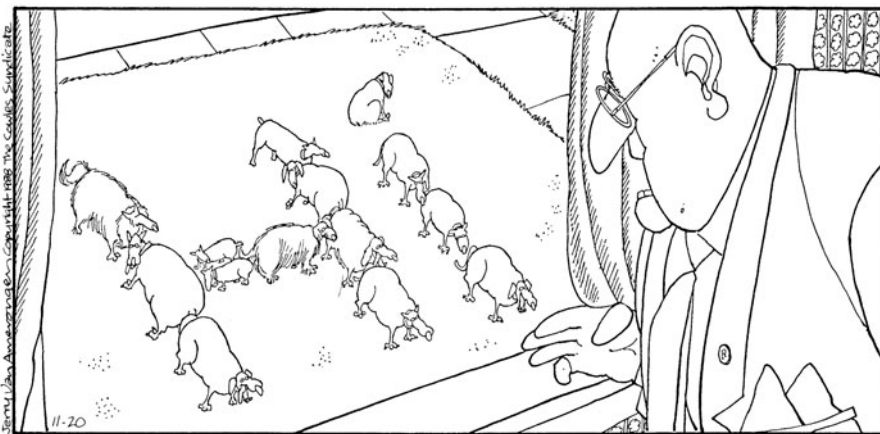
Chapter 2 presents the basic components of communication systems, surveying animal communication, and showing how human language is very distinct and specially endowed. Chapter 3 takes a close look at the sounds of human language, discussing both phonetics (their properties as sounds per se, as well as how these sounds are produced) and phonology (how language sounds are perceived and mentally represented by those using them). Chapter 4 moves on to contend with morphemes (the smallest meaningful bits of language) and words (which are sometimes individual morphemes and are sometimes combinations of them). In this chapter, we survey how these meaningful bits are assembled into words, and how they come to have the meanings they do. In Chapter 5, we step back a bit and examine the nature of phrases (that is, groups of words) and sentences (groups of words that represent complete thoughts or propositions). This chapter focuses on the internal structure of these phrases, and on how this structure can affect meaning (independently of the meaning of the individual component words). Chapter 6 steps away from language as an autonomous entity, and enters into the realm of language use. It focuses on sentences in context, discussing such concepts as deixis (that is, how language points or refers to things), indirect speech (how sentences meaning one thing are often used to convey something else), performatives (sentences that accomplish the act that they name), and principles of conversational cooperation (which underlie all linguistic discourse and which are used to leverage sarcasm, irony, and all sorts of creative language use). Building on the observations about contextually dependent meaning in Chapter 6, Chapter 7 examines sentences combined with other sentences to form discourses (longer structured texts), and then explains how those discourses function in their various contexts. Chapter 8 takes up the case of children acquiring language, how they do it, how they do it as effortlessly as they do, and how their errors reveal the inner workings of the acquisition process. Just as Chapters 6 and 7 work as a pair, so do the next two. Chapter 9 explores language variation across regional, social, cultural, and professional groups, treating variant forms at the levels of pronunciation, word choice, syntax, and language use. Chapter 10 takes matters a step further and examines how the meanings behind these formal variations differ and how, because of these differences, they can lead to cross-cultural miscommunication. With Chapter 11, we place language in perhaps its broadest context and consider how language varieties, distinct languages, and certain expressions are policed through informal and formal means. This chapter is also the one place in this book where the nature of humor and its functions shares the spotlight with linguistic concepts (our otherwise primary focus). In other words, this chapter suggests that because humor secures its effects through incongruity, ambiguity, and contradiction, it often allows speakers to circumvent any prescriptions and laws meant to regulate language in use. The final chapter is a short epilogue in which we recap some of the high points of the book, provide

suggestions for further study and reading, and point to additional sources and resources that are readily available.

One might at this point be wondering who this book is written for. The short answer to this question is, you (the reader). We really think that this book will be of great utility to a broad range of readers, from those who are not yet really sure what “linguistics” are, to those who are secure in their knowledge of what linguistics is and who have studied it for some time. If this is your first exposure to linguistics, you may have picked up the book because you’re interested in language generally. This book will serve nicely to introduce you to the major moving parts of language, without your having to go take a course on the subject. If you are already enrolled in such a course, then this book is probably assigned to supplement the main text that you’ll be using. In that case, you should know that many of the topics in your textbook will be covered here, in a nontechnical fashion and in a way that should make them more understandable. If nothing else, you will at least be more entertained by our presentation of these concepts than you will by that in the course book. If you are a student or teacher of linguistics and already quite familiar with the conceptual material in this book, then we think that you will have a great appreciation for the manner in which the topics are presented. The presentations in the following chapters will hopefully provide you with some readily understandable material that you might use to explain these concepts to your students, your friends, or your family. Finally, if you are a linguistics major or a professional linguist, you might consider giving this book as a gift to everyone who ever asks you: “What are linguistics, anyway?”

## 2 Talking to Garfield

### Human and animal communication



"Phyllis, step over here for a minute."

This cartoon panel, from *The Neighborhood* by Jerry Van Amerongen (1988),<sup>1</sup> is funny because it is so wrong in so many ways that it is hard to enumerate them all. Fourteen dogs conspire to spell out the message "Hi" on an elderly man's lawn. Presumably, they're "playing with his head." So, outside of manipulation by aliens, what would be necessary for this to happen? Well first off, this gang of dogs would have to know that a standard salutation among English speakers is a word pronounced [hai] (they would also have to know that the residents of the home in question are English speakers). They would further need to know that the graphic representation of this salutation consists of two letters "H" and "i" (notice that these dogs also appear to know capitalization conventions!). Beyond this, they would have to have some way of communicating amongst themselves in order to arrange themselves into the proper configuration to spell out the letters. Finally, one must presume that these creatures have also developed a level of communicative competence to at least desire to send a "greeting," and perhaps also to completely rattle the elderly couple living in the house. This last bit requires, beyond having knowledge of meaning, pronunciation, and graphic form, that this canine club have somehow mastered the social conventions of human language use and the subtleties of indirect communication and humor.

We know that this isn't right. Animals communicate, that much we're sure of. But they don't have what we would call "language" per se. Humor on this topic abounds. Gary Larson, of *The Far Side* fame, had a field day with this in the 1980s. One cartoon shows Professor Schwartzman "donning his new canine decoder" (a helmet with a bizarre array of signal reception hardware). The barking of neighborhood dogs, as he walks down the street, is now "translated" as:

"Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey!" and "Hey! Hey!" and "Heyyyyyyyy!"

Another Larson cartoon riffs on what dogs understand. In it, under the caption "What we say to dogs," a dog owner is saying:

"Okay, Ginger! I've had it! You stay out of the garbage!  
 Understand, Ginger? Stay out of the garbage, or else!"

Under the caption "What they hear," the dog is observed to be hearing:

"blah blah Ginger blah blah blah blah blah blah Ginger blah blah blah  
 blah blah . . ."

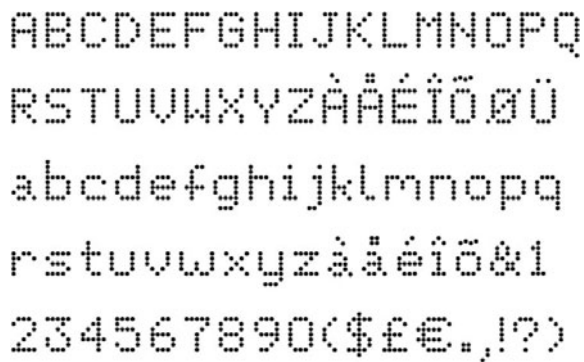
The Larson cartoon isn't far off the mark here. We know, intuitively, that dogs (and other pets) do understand some of the words we use. As the cartoon suggests, they understand their names. They may also understand some commands, such as *sit*, *stay*, and *beg*, along with other words like *food* and *out*. That said, the likelihood that a dog would make anything of *I've had it*, *or else*, and *okay* is pretty remote.

Of course, alongside what we're sure of is a whole lot that we don't exactly know. For instance, researchers are pretty sure (though not 100% certain) that dolphins don't have the equivalent of what we would call human language. But, then again, dolphin communication is indeed quite sophisticated, and is likely on the edge of where animal communication comes very close to human language.<sup>2</sup> Larson, for his part, had a field day with this notion in a cartoon showing animal researchers recording and trying to decipher dolphin messages. In it, one researcher is listening to the dolphins with a headset and another is transcribing onto a blackboard. The transcriber has noted thirteen instances of "kay pas-uh," eight occurrences of "aw blah es spanyol," and five occasions of "bwayno dee-us." The one listening with the headset says:

"Matthews . . . we're getting another one of those strange 'aw blah es span yol' sounds."

Larson's point, which is well taken, is that dolphins might be communicating amongst themselves, or even to us, in language-like ways, and we would have a hard time knowing it.

In this chapter, before we get anywhere near the "nuts and bolts" of human language per se, we will need to have a close look at what we mean by communication and the ways in which communication systems vary. In this way, we can



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Figure 2.1 *Dot matrix printer output.*

better understand what it is that humans do (and that other creatures don't) that makes human language, our primary form of communication, so special.

So, how do we distinguish *language* from *communication*? To begin to talk about this, one must understand that all forms of language involve communication, but not all communication involves language. At its core, communication is the sending and receiving of messages. . . but there are many examples of message exchange that don't even involve sentient beings. The traffic light turns red and communicates to oncoming drivers that they must stop (or risk paying higher rates on their car insurance). The microwave beeps and communicates to us that the popcorn is done (but not that it's going to taste good). It is even possible for two non-sentient things to communicate. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, when dot matrix printers ruled and produced such aesthetically "pleasing" output as shown in Figure 2.1, the computers they were attached to typically generated output much faster than the printers' tiny memory could handle. To prevent the printer from losing track of the characters it was supposed to print, it was set up to communicate with the computer. The messages were two in number, and quite simple: 'Pause' (stop sending for a moment, I'm full) and 'Continue' (OK, go on). While neither machine could be said to have understood these messages, they nonetheless were programmed to behave as though they did.

If we look at the concept of *communication* more closely, we can see that communicated messages have certain properties and (importantly) that these properties can vary. First, messages can travel down different pathways and take different forms. We normally think of human language communication as involving sound, and sound is certainly a primary medium in this. However, if I produce the letters *H* and *i* to form *Hi* (much as the dogs have done in the cartoon panel above), then I have changed the medium of the message from sound-based to visual. And even when we think we're utilizing sound, it often isn't sound all the way across. I speak the word *Hi* into my cell phone. The sound waves are converted into electrical impulses and then into digitized microwave signals, received on the other end as microwaves, converted to electrical current, and then back into sound. In addition to writing, human communication can

be visual in other ways as well, as is the case with American (and other forms of) Sign Language. Some common visual gestures (used by hearing speakers as well) include the OK sign . . . which means “OK” to us (but can be mistaken for “butthole” in Brazil . . . so be careful!):



Messages can take many mediums, including chemical “scent.” Many creatures, insects being foremost among them, release chemicals in order to send particular messages (the technical name for these is *pheromones*). Ants mark their trails with them to help guide other members of the colony to a food source. Dogs (presumably ones who cannot spell) and cats are well known for marking their territory with the scent of their urine. And many moths and butterflies release a “sex” pheromone for the purpose of attracting a mate, a chemical scent that can be detected by a potential mate from several miles away.

Of course, not all chemical scents have a meaning or message. We may understand from the smell of the month-old cottage cheese in our refrigerator that it’s not fit to eat, but that isn’t the cheese’s way of telling us so. No, for something to actually count as communication, the signal needs to have a fixed, or at least generally regular, meaning. We expect, for instance, that someone’s flashing the OK sign (except perhaps in Brazil) indicates approval. If your friend Roger started using it to let you know that he was mad at you (in place of the more commonly accepted “one finger salute”), you would be annoyed . . . not only because you came to learn that he didn’t really mean *OK*, but also because he wasn’t using the signal consistently. Likewise, an ant’s laying down a scent trail to let her teammates know “NOT to go down this path” would just mess everything up. Imagine a 25,000 ant traffic jam on the trail.

Along with a consistent meaning, communicated signals need to have some purpose. It might be (and most commonly is) the transmission of information – the “red” traffic light telling the drivers to “Stop!,” the bank clerk telling the person at the head of the line (“Next!”) to approach the window. But it need not

involve information to be purposeful, as when someone I recognize (but don't know well) passes me on my way down the block and says "How'r'yadoin'?" They are not, I am certain, asking me to share information regarding my current economic, spiritual, or emotional state. Rather, the purpose of this communication is to acknowledge me as a fellow traveler on the same street, and give me a verbal pat-on-the-head, so to speak. My response "Fine, thanks, and you?" is no more informative, and has the same general purpose.

The three properties that we've spoken about so far are necessary for anything to even be considered communication. That is, all communicated messages are sent through some medium, have a meaning, and serve some purpose. So, thinking linguistic thoughts cannot count as communication (unless your friends are telepathic). And sticking your head out the window and screaming "aaaaaahhh!!!" at the top of your lungs doesn't count as a message, even though it's carried through the medium of sound and might have some purpose (such as letting off steam), for the simple reason that *aaaaaahhh* has no fixed or regular meaning. Finally, if you walk up to a complete stranger and say the word *monkey* for no apparent reason, we would not consider you to have communicated (even though the word *monkey* itself has a regular and stable meaning), since your message has no arguable purpose.

There are also properties of communicated messages that can be considered optional. That is, some forms of communication have the properties and some don't. Take, for instance, the notion of *interchangeability* (or mutuality). In some kinds of communication, the message sender and message receiver can easily trade places. This is certainly true of most human communication. I say some words to you for some purpose, a communicated message, and you reply with some words of your own, another communicated message. We are each able to use the same stock of words (provided we're speaking the same language), so our communication system is interchangeable (we each can use it interchangeably).

This isn't always the case. Take the case of the dot matrix printer and the computer mentioned above. The printer has a simple pair of messages that it communicates to the computer, in order to manage the flow of information to it: *Pause* (stop sending for a moment, I'm full) and *Continue* (OK, go on). This is not an interchangeable system. The type of information sent by the computer to the printer (i.e. commands to print letters) is not the same type of information sent in the opposite direction (i.e. instructions to start and stop).

There is no way to know without close examination whether a given system is or is not interchangeable. For instance, if the worker ant laying down a chemical trail to guide her compatriots might on another occasion be the one reading the chemical messages set down by her colony-mates, then the system is indeed interchangeable. On the other hand, if the sex pheromones particular to a creature are only emitted by one sex (as is the case with moths and butterflies, where the female uses a chemical scent to attract males), then the communication is not interchangeable.

Communication systems also vary according to whether they are inborn or learned. Obviously, the messages communicated by machines (such as computer

printers and microwaves) are part of their design (they are built into the system). For instance, your microwave is not designed to learn how you prefer it to signal that it's finished the popcorn (although it could be). Human language, though, is obviously a learned form of communication, and whether it is also partly inborn is a vexed question that has occupied linguists for some time. There are adamant proponents for both the negative and positive conclusion (N.B. the authors of the present book would be among the latter). Some forms of communication are clearly and necessarily inborn, such as the chemical pheromone communication systems mentioned above. There's really no way for an ant to learn how to produce the right chemical to mark its trail, or for the female gypsy moth to be taught which scent will attract her mate. They either come into the world with the chemical scent-making capacity built in, or they don't.

With other species, though, there is some variability. It has been shown that some bird species, such as the zebra finch, do in fact develop their song through exposure to adults, albeit with some help from nature. When finches are raised in isolation, without any exposure to the mating songs of other finches, they produce a song that is similar to that of their own species (suggesting that they're born with some capacity for this) but they do it pretty badly (suggesting that they need to hear and learn from other finches to really get it right).

Recent research into the behavior of other bird species, such as the cowbird, has also shown that inheritance combines with learning to insure that communication is passed along. The cowbird is what is called a "brood parasite," which means that the female lays its eggs in the nest of another species and allows the female owner of that nest to raise its young (now you know what to call human parents who abandon their children to be reared by other adults). Given that young cowbirds will not have much contact with adults of their own species early on, it has long been assumed that they would need to have some genetically hard-wired knowledge of their own species' mating songs, in order to insure that they don't learn the wrong mating song and doom their own species to extinction.

However, recent research by Meridith West and Andrew King at Indiana University<sup>3</sup> has shown that the circumstances of "brood parasites" are more complex and that their environment plays at least as strong a role as their genes in helping them to get their song right. West and King discovered that males are fairly indiscriminate and will sing to and chase the tails of whatever birds they're raised with, including (with no hope of success) canaries. What they also discovered is that females provide the males with the cues (i.e. the flirtatious gestures) necessary to coax them into singing their mating song correctly. That is, the females knew what they wanted to hear better than the males knew what they wanted to sing, and the females were sophisticated enough to get them (the males) to do it.

Also quite amazing in West and King's findings was the fact that females actually inherit their song preferences from their mothers. In the case of a cross-bred female (whose mother was a Texas cowbird and whose father was a North Carolina cowbird), the preference was clearly for a Texas-style mating song even though she could not have learned this from her mother (who wasn't present to teach it to her). So in the case of the cowbird, the producer of the communicated