

Merge and combinatorial properties in animal call systems

(Abstract)

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The study of the evolution of language raises the crucial question of what makes human language unique in comparison to the call systems observed in the animal world (Reboul 2010, 2016). Schlenker et al. (2016) argue that an important starting point may be the use of the sophisticated analytic techniques introduced in formal linguistics for the precise study of phonetics/phonology, morphosyntax, semantics, pragmatics of natural languages to analyze animal call systems. In addition to making a comparative analysis across animal species a more feasible enterprise, the authors argue, this approach may permit substantive progress in the study of animal call systems.

In the spirit of this approach, in this short paper I intend

1. to illustrate the mechanism that, according to recent formal linguistic approaches, is the key to the unbounded combinatorial properties of human languages: merge (Chomsky 1995);
2. to use the typology of merge to analyze the limited combinatorial aspects which emerge from the study of monkey call systems, following the detailed characterization provided in Schlenker et al (2016).

In order to address the second point, I will have to focus on some basic properties of natural language syntax and provide an illustration of the typology of merge according to current models of formal syntax (Chomsky 2013, Rizzi 2014).

References

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