Human Language and Animal Communication

One way to gain more insight into our linguistic system is to take a look at the communication systems of other species. Let’s examine the ways in which some of the more sophisticated animal communication systems differ from human language. Linguist Charles Hockett proposed a list of **design features** that characterize human language and distinguish it from other communication systems (other animal systems, traffic signals, etc.). Hockett’s list has been revised and reexamined by many linguists, but the features of human

language that remain on almost every researcher’s list include the following.

**Semanticity** Specific signals can be matched with specific meanings. In short, words have meanings.

**Arbitrariness** There is no logical connection between the form of the signal and the thing it refers to. For example, *dog* in English is *Hund* in German and *perro* in Spanish.

**Discreteness** Messages in the system are made up of smaller, Repeatable parts rather than indivisible units. A word, for example, can be broken down into units of sound.

**Displacement** The language user can talk about things that are not present—the messages can refer to things in remote time (past and future) or space (here or elsewhere).

**Productivity** Language users can understand and create never-before-heard utterances.

**Duality of patterning** A large number of meaningful utterances can be recombined in a systematic way from a small number of discrete parts of language. For example, suffixes can be attached to many roots, and words can be combined to create novel sentences.2