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LIN 510

3/9/21

Module 1 Homework

I believe that bird communication contains modality. The birds are capable of various signals and songs, some short and discreet while others are long and flowing. These songs are designed to transmit messages, which is the primary purpose of a mode of communication. At the highest level, bird songs are used to convey various messages from warning others to pointing out the location of food.

Bird calls do not exhibit semanticity. If semanticity requires that all signals in a system have meaning and function, the robin's ability to recombine song units or repeat the same units endlessly while still expressing the same meaning would suggest that not every individual signal has a specific meaning. Were that the case, changing the order or number of the notes and tunes would change the meaning of the call or song.

As mentioned above and at the beginning of the section, bird calls can do everything from expressing a desire to mate to warning others of danger. This means bird communication exhibits pragmatic function. While not every note of every call is important to the communication or message (as the notes can be repeated indefinitely without changing meaning), the calls themselves still serve specific purposes, and therefore have pragmatic function

Bird communication also exhibits interchangeability. Bird calls can state the location of the bird making the call which in turn can be received by other birds that will either travel to or turn away from the bird making the call. If bird calls did not have interchangeability there would be no point in males signing to attract a mate or mark their territory.

Though not stated explicitly, I feel that bird communication does show signs of cultural transmission. The bird calls are unique to species and specific needs (such as danger, food, or mating). While the song notes can be recombined or repeated in many instances without changing meaning, the underlying meaning of the songs and notes is likely transmitted from one generation to the next and not an expression of some inherent quality of the notes themselves.

Bird calls are often not entirely arbitrary. As mentioned in section 14.2.2, “The calls that imply the meaning ‘locate me’ are easy to locate, whereas the class that imply the meaning ‘I don’t want to be found’ are difficult to locate”.

Bird communication does not exhibit discreteness because the songs themselves are the individual messages and units of meaning. “Songs are very complicated indeed. But, interestingly, the complications have little effect on the message that is being conveyed,” the book says in 14.2.2. This statement means that, while there are complicated sounds, the meaning of each song varies only in intensity, but the underlying messages are always individual expressions.

It does not seem as though bird communication exhibits displacement. The songs and calls are always about locations, danger, mating—all things in the here and now. The book states that the memory load for the rules that govern the calls is very low, and the variability in messages is almost non-existent, which all suggest there is no displacement.

Finally, bird communication does not exhibit productivity. New and novel messages cannot be made and birds cannot be creative in their messaging. “The robin is creative in his ability to sing the same message in many different ways, but not creative in his ability to use the same units of the system to express many different tunes,” the book continues. This suggests that the creativity does not allow for novel messages or for new forms of speech, but rather variable ways to express the same thing. The bird cannot take those songs and make new messages out of them.