Definition

"[D]uality of patterning," says David Ludden, "is what gives [language](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-the-english-language-1690652) such expressive power. Spoken languages are composed of a limited set of meaningless speech sounds that are combined according to [rules](https://www.thoughtco.com/rules-of-english-1691922) to form meaningful words" (*The Psychology of Language: An Integrated Approach*, 2016).

The significance of duality of patterning as one of the 13 (later 16) "design features of language" was noted by American [linguist](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-linguist-1691239) Charles F. Hockett in 1960.

Examples and Observations

* "Human language is organized at two levels or layers simultaneously. This property is called *duality* (or 'double articulation'). In speech production, we have a physical level at which we can produce individual sounds, like *n*, *b* and *i*. As individual sounds, none of these discrete forms has any intrinsic [meaning](https://www.thoughtco.com/meaning-semantics-term-1691373). In a particular combination such as *bin*, we have another level producing a meaning that is different from the meaning of the combination in *nib*. So, at one level, we have distinct sounds, and, at another level, we have distinct meanings. This duality of levels is, in fact, one of the most economical features of human language because, with a limited set of discrete sounds, we are capable of producing a very large number of sound combinations (e.g. words) which are distinct in meaning."  
  (George Yule, *The Study of Language*, 3rd ed. Cambridge University Press, 2006)

Duality of Language and Animal Communication

* "The level of sounds and [syllables](https://www.thoughtco.com/syllable-definition-1692165) is the province of [phonology](https://www.thoughtco.com/phonology-definition-1691623), while that of meaningful elements is the province of [grammar](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-grammar-1690909) and [semantics](https://www.thoughtco.com/semantics-linguistics-1692080). Has this kind of duality any analog in animal [communication](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-communication-1689877) systems?... The short answer to [that] question seems to be no.  
  (Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy, *The Origins of Complex Language: An Inquiry Into the Evolutionary Beginnings of Sentences, Syllables, and Truth*. Oxford University Press, 1999)
* "It is hard to find clear and uncontroversial examples of duality of patterning outside our own species. But let us say that we can find them—and there is evidence, from the way some animals like birds and dolphins manipulate melodies, that this might be true. This would mean that duality of patterning is a necessary condition for a communication system to be a human language, but that by itself it may not be enough. There is no human language without duality of patterning."  
  (Daniel L. Everett, *Language: The Cultural Tool*. Random House, 2012)

Hockett on Duality of Patterning

* "[Charles] Hockett developed the phrase 'duality of patterning' to express the fact that discrete units of language at one level (such as the level of sounds) can be combined to create different kinds of units at a different level (such as words)... According to Hockett, duality of patterning was probably the last feature to emerge in human language, and it was critical in separating human language from other kinds of primate communication...  
  "The most difficult bit to figure out is how and when duality of patterning could have emerged. How did individuals manage to isolate various bits of calls so that they could be endlessly combined into arbitrary [symbols](https://www.thoughtco.com/symbol-language-and-literature-1692170)? Hockett thought that if two calls each had two distinct parts, then perhaps something in the [blending](https://www.thoughtco.com/blend-words-1689171) process might alert individuals to the existence of discrete units. If you can combine *breakfast* and *lunch* into *brunch*, then does that alert you to the possibility that *br* is a distinct unit of sound that is combinable with other distinct units of sound? Solving this puzzle remains one of the thorniest of the problems in determining how language became possible."  
  (Harriet Ottenheimer, *The Anthropology of Language: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology*. Wadsworth, 2009)