

INTRODUCTION TO LINGUISTICS

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Linguistics 101

OUTLINE

1 WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

- Defining Language
- What Isn't Language?
- Design Features of Language
- Language Miscellanea

2 LINGUISTICS

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- What Do Linguists Examine?
- Competence vs. Performance
- Linguistics Miscellanea

COMMON DEFINITIONS OF LANGUAGE

DEFINITION

“a **systematic** means of communicating by the use of sounds or **conventional symbols**”
(wordnetweb.princeton.edu)

DEFINITION

“a system of **arbitrary signals**, such as voice sounds, gestures or written symbols that encode or decode information. Human spoken and written languages can be described as a system of symbols...and the **grammars (rules) by which the symbols are manipulated**”
(www.phillwebb.net)

CLASS DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE

DEFINITION

- 1 a conventional set of arbitrary signs (called the lexicon)
- 2 a grammar with rules manipulating these signs and constraints on their distribution

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

MISCONCEPTION

- ~~Writing is language.~~

CORRECTION

- Writing is a product of language.
- Language exists without writing.
- Language, but not writing, is learned without explicit instruction.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

MISCONCEPTION

- ~~Language obeys prescriptive grammar.~~

CORRECTION

- Language obeys one's mental grammar.
- Prescriptive grammars attempt to shape language.
- Prescriptive grammars involve largely arbitrary rules.

PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR

- Claims one manner of speech is 'correct', others are 'incorrect'.
- In English, prescriptive rules are often based on Latin.
- So-called 'proper' forms are not always natural.

PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR: EXAMPLES

CLAIM: DOUBLE NEGATIVES ARE ILLOGICAL!

'good': I don't know anything.

'bad': I don't know nothing.

PROBLEM: DOUBLE NEGATIVES ARE COMMON

Je ne sais rien. (French)

I not know nothing

'I don't know anything.'

PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR: EXAMPLES

RULE: 'WHO' IS FOR SUBJECTS, 'WHOM' IS FOR OBJECTS!

'good': Whom did Jeff call?

'bad': Who did Jeff call?

'good': I know whom you called.

'bad': I know who you called.

'good': Whom do you love?

'bad': Who do you love?

PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR: EXAMPLES

RULE: DON'T END SENTENCES WITH PREPOSITIONS!

'good': For whom did you buy beer?

'bad': Who did you buy beer for?

'good': With whom did you go?

'bad': Who did you go with?

'good': From where did you just come?

'bad': Where did you just come from?

PRESCRIPTIVE VS. DESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR

PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR

- 'grammar' as taught in English classes
- dictates how we should speak...according to some bloke

DESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR

- describes how we actually speak
- focus of linguistics

WHAT ARE THE FEATURES OF HUMAN LANGUAGE?

- Modality / Mode of Communication
- Semanticity
- Pragmatic Function
- Interchangeability
- Cultural Transmission
- Arbitrariness
- Discreteness
- Displacement
- Productivity

SOME BASIC FACTS ABOUT LANGUAGE

- All languages are systematic.
- Despite appearances, languages are surprisingly similar.
- All living languages are constantly changing.
- Human infants acquire language quickly despite its complexity.
- Human infants acquire language without explicit instruction.
- Any normal child can learn any human language.

WHAT IS LINGUISTICS?

DEFINITION

the scientific study of language

- Linguistics is not simply the study of foreign languages.
- Linguistics does not preach about so-called 'proper' language.
- Linguistics does focus on describing actual language use.
- Linguistics does attempt to understand how language is represented in the mind.

HOW CAN WE STUDY LANGUAGE?

[EINSTEIN & INFELD, 1938]

“In our endeavor to understand reality we are somewhat like a man trying to understand the mechanism of a closed watch. He sees the face and the moving hands, even hears its ticking, but he has no way of opening the case. If he is ingenious he may form some picture of a mechanism which could be responsible for all things he observes, but he may never be quite sure his picture is the only one which could explain his observations. He will never be able to compare his picture with the real mechanism and he cannot even imagine the possibility of the meaning of such a comparison.”

HOW CAN WE STUDY LANGUAGE?

- Linguists examine language from the outside (our words, sentences, pronunciation, etc.) to discover the internal language mechanism.
- The following are just a few examples of what provides us clues about language.

AMBIGUITY

- (1) I shot the bear in my pajamas.
 - i. I am in my pajamas.
 - ii. The bear is in my pajamas.
- (2) The door is unlockable.
 - i. unable to be locked
 - ii. able to be unlocked
- (3) Everyone loves someone.
 - i. For every person x , there exists some person that x loves.
 - ii. There is some person y such that every person loves y .

UNGRAMMATICALITY

- (4) a. Who did you say he saw ___?
b. Who did you say that he saw ___?
c. Who did you say ___ saw him?
d. * Who did you say that ___ saw him?
- (5) a. Sarah plays the trumpet.
b. What does Sarah play ___?
c. Sarah plays the trumpet and the clarinet
d. * What does Sarah play the trumpet and ___?
- (6) a. Did the Johnsons want to see them?
('them' ≠ 'the Johnsons')
b. Who did the Johnsons want to see them?
('them' can = 'the Johnsons')

SOUND STRUCTURE / INTUITIONS

- (7) Which are possible English words?
- a. blick
 - b. ngaught
 - c. redokz
 - d. twiggle
 - e. bhasa
 - f. wug

SOUND STRUCTURE / MISTAKES

- Mistakes follow specific patterns
- Likely: dear old queen → queer old dean
- Unlikely: dear old queen → near old queed

WHAT WE KNOW, AND WHAT WE DO

- In language, as in other aspects of life, our performance is often not entirely reflective of our knowledge. Linguists find it useful to make the following distinction.

LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

- The lexicon and grammar as it exists in our minds; i.e., 'what we know'

LINGUISTIC PERFORMANCE

- Language as we use it.

LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

- Some examples of what we know about our language:
 - which sounds are / are not in our language
 - which sound patterns are / are not allowed in our language
 - words (i.e. sound-meaning association)
 - what are natural sentences vs. unnatural sentences
 - how to create novel utterances

LINGUISTICS PERFORMANCE

- Our performance is suboptimal in many ways

COMPREHENSION LIMITATIONS

- my great, great, great, great, great...grandmother
- The horse raced past the barn fell.

LINGUISTICS PERFORMANCE

- Our performance is suboptimal in many ways

PHYSICAL LIMITATIONS

- running out of breath
- forgetting the main point
- stuttering
- changing thought mid-sentence
- dying mid-sentence

LINGUISTICS PERFORMANCE

- Our performance is suboptimal in many ways

SLIPS OF THE TONGUE

- Spoonerisms (e.g. Three cheers for our queer old dean!)
- Freudian slips

SUBFIELDS OF LINGUISTICS

WHAT WE WILL STUDY

- phonetics
- phonology
- morphology
- semantics
- syntax
- language acquisition
- sociolinguistics
- psycholinguistics
- neurolinguistics

SUBFIELDS OF LINGUISTICS

WHAT WE WILL NOT STUDY

- pragmatics
- historical linguistics
- applied linguistics
- computational linguistics
- natural language processing
- speech pathology
- ...

JOBS/FIELDS FOR LINGUISTS

- professor
- language education (1st or 2nd)
- language documentation
- publishing of language books
- speech pathologist
- speech therapist
- computational applications
 - speech recognition
 - speech synthesis
 - parsing
 - machine translation
 - artificial intelligence

REFERENCES I



Einstein, Albert & Léopold Infeld (1938) *The Evolution of Physics*.