

# Ling 201 – Basic Concepts of Linguistics

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## Overview of topics

- Language and Languages
- Speech vs. Writing
- Approaches to language: Descriptive vs. Prescriptive
- Grammar and its parts
- Arbitrariness (conventionality)

What to remember:

Language, linguistics, grammar (language system), mental grammar, descriptive approach, prescriptive approach, phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, arbitrary (conventional), iconic, onomatopoeia.

e.g. You should be able to explain what the descriptive approach is.

**Concepts:** The privileged role of speech.

You should be able to explain why is speech primary and writing is secondary.

## 1 Language

**Language** is a system that associates sounds (or gestures) with meanings in a way that uses words and sentences.

**Linguistics** is the scientific study of human language. It tries:

- first, to observe languages and to describe them accurately,
- then, to find generalizations within what has been described,
- finally, to draw conclusions about the general nature of human language.

**Applied linguistics** attempts to make practical use of the knowledge derived from general linguistic research – in order, for example, to:

- improve the ways in which a student's native language is taught
- help people learn foreign language more efficiently
- write better dictionaries
- improve therapy for people with language problems
- search the Internet more efficiently and successfully

Linguistics overlaps and (ideally) cooperates with: psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, logic, mathematics, computer science, speech pathology, acoustics, music, crypt-analysis, etc.

## 2 Speech vs. Writing

### 2.1 Why it is sometimes claimed that writing is primary

- Written texts tend to be more carefully worded and better organized than spoken texts, they contain fewer errors, hesitations, and incomplete sentences, because writing is usually planned in advance, is subject to fewer time constraints, is proofread, etc.

However: How about instant messaging, quick e-mails?

- Spelling is more uniform across different individuals and places using the same language than is pronunciation.

However: UK: *tyre, draught, colour, dialogue, penalise, centre, defence, ...*

USA: *tire, draft, color, dialog, penalize, center, defense, ...*

Moreover: Is uniformity the same as primacy?

- Written texts last and can be preserved for a long time.

However: CDs, tapes, ... can preserve speech

- Writing styles change much more slowly than speech styles, and so writing seems more “permanent” and “authoritative”.

However: This can be is also disadvantage – writing lags behind the times.

### 2.2 Linguists’ reasons for claiming that speech is primary

- Historically, spoken language existed much earlier than writing.  
Writing was invented in Sumer (Mesopotamia, current Iraq) about 6000 years ago.
- There are many societies which only speak their language and do not write it. And no society uses only a written language (with no spoken form).
- We learn to speak before we learn to write.
- Most people say more during one month than they write during their entire lives.
- Writing must be taught, whereas spoken language is acquired automatically.
- Psycholinguistic evidence suggest that the processing and production of written language is overlaid on the spoken language centers in the brain (plus certain other centers).
- Speech contains information that writing lacks – intonation, stress, voice quality ...

## 3 Descriptive vs. Prescriptive Approach to Language

### 3.1 Descriptive Approach

- Linguists attempt to *describe* the grammar of the language that exists in the minds of its speakers, i.e. to create a model of speakers' mental grammar.
- The resulting descriptive grammar describes person's basic linguistic knowledge. It explains how it is possible to speak and understand and it summarize what speakers know about the sounds, words, phrases and sentences of their language.
- Creating a descriptive grammar involves observing the language and trying to *discover* the principles or rules that govern it.
- Descriptive rules accept as given the patterns speakers actually use and try to account for them. Descriptive rules allow for different dialects of a language and even variation within one dialect.

### 3.2 Prescriptive Approach

- Prescriptivists tell you someone's idea of what is "good" or "bad".
- Prescriptive rules make a value judgment about the correctness of certain utterances and generally try to enforce a single standard. For example:
  - Don't split infinitives; don't say: *to easily understand*
  - Don't end a sentence with a preposition; don't say *Where are you from?*
  - Don't use *me* in a subject of a sentence; don't say *You and me went to the store.*
  - Don't use *ain't*; don't say *Ain't it the truth?*
- The people who prescriptive grammar *make up* the rules of the grammar.
- They attempt to impose the rules for speaking and writing on people without much regard for what the majority of educated speakers of a language actually say and write.
- So-called prescriptive grammar usually focuses only on a few issues and leaves the rest of a language undescribed (unprescribed?). In fact, from the linguistic point of view, this is not grammar at all.

### 3.3 Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism

In summary: Linguists **describe** language, they do not **prescribe** it.

As a science, linguistics:

- is not in the business of making value judgments about language use.
- studies how language really is used and then attempts to **describe** the facts, in order to analyze and, eventually, explain them.

An Analogy:

- Physicists:
  - don't complain that objects fall to earth
  - simply observe and describe the fact of falling, then try to discover the laws that are behind it.
- Linguists:
  - don't say that people shouldn't use *ain't*
  - simply observe that some people in certain situations do use *ain't* (without judging, although they do note any systematic correlations of such use with particular groups, regions, situations, styles, etc.)

## 4 The parts of Grammar

**Grammar** is a language system, a set of principles (rules) that underlie a language.

**Mental Grammar** – the knowledge of language that allows a person to produce and understand utterances

Grammar can be described as having different parts:

- phonetics
- phonology
- morphology
- syntax
- semantics
- pragmatics

Since linguists study all of these, the terms are also used to refer to subfields of linguistics.

### 4.1 Phonetics & Phonology

**Phonetics** – the production and perception of speech sounds as physical entities.

E.g., [v] is pronounced by bringing the lower lip into contact with upper teeth and forcing air out of the mouth while the vocal folds vibrate and nasal cavity is closed off.

**Phonology** – the sound patterns (the sound system of a particular language) and of sounds as abstract entities.

In English, a word never starts with [kn] (note that *knife* starts with [n] not [k]), while in German it is possible (e.g., *Knabe* 'boy')

In Setswana (a language of southern Africa), a consonant is always followed by a vowel – when the speakers adopted the word *Christmas* from English, they pronounce as *kirisimasi*.

## 4.2 Morphology

**Morphology** – the word structure and of systematic relations between words.

**Morpheme** – the building-blocks of words, the smallest linguistic unit which has a meaning or grammatical function.

Words are composed of morphemes (one or more).

*Sing-er-s answer-ed un-kind-ly*

In comparison with many other languages, English has rather simple morphology.

## 4.3 Syntax

**Syntax** – phrase and sentence structure

Syntacticians try to discover rules that govern:

word order:	<i>The book is on the table.</i>	<i>*Table book on is the the.</i>
agreement:	<i>I am here.</i>	<i>*I are here.</i>
subject/object forms (cases):	<i>I like her.</i>	<i>*I like she.</i>
etc.		

Note: In linguistics, placing an asterisk (\*) before a sentence marks that sentence as ungrammatical, i.e., not of the kind normally used by most speakers of a particular language.

## 4.4 Semantics

**Semantics** is the literal meaning of sentences, phrases, words and morphemes.

E.g., What is the meaning of the word *vegetable*?

E.g., How does the word order influence meaning of sentence in English? How about Russian?

## 4.5 Pragmatics

**Pragmatics** studies language usage, especially how context influences the interpretation of utterances – the same sentence can be used to do different things in different situations.

E.g., *Gee, it's hot in here!* can be used either to state a fact or to get someone open a window.

Simply put: semantics is the literal meaning and pragmatics is the intended meaning.

## 5 Arbitrariness

The relation between form and meaning in language can be either:

- **arbitrary (conventional)**, in which case:
    - the meaning is not deducible from the form
    - the form is not deducible from the meaning
    - the connection between the form and meaning must be learned via memorization
  - **nonarbitrary**
    - the meaning is (at least partly) derivable from the form, and vice versa  
E.g., *buzz* ‘sound made by (the wings of) bees’
- iconicity** – the most extreme example of nonarbitrary form/meaning connection: the form shows a physical correspondence to the meaning and vice versa

Non-language examples:

- arbitrary: traffic lights, tornado warning siren
- nonarbitrary: a “no-smoking” sign (with a crossed-out cigarette), a deer-crossing sign (with a silhouette of a deer)

Language is overwhelmingly arbitrary.

If language were not arbitrary, then:

- different languages would not use different words for the same thing (in fact, there would be just one language), as they obviously do:  
English *tree*, French *arbre*, German *Baum*, Russian *derevo*, Japanese *ki*, Korean *namu*.
- word forms would not change over time.  
Old English (before 1100) *hūs* → Modern English *house*
- word meanings would not change over time  
Middle English (before 1500) *girle* ‘child’ → Modern English *girl* ‘girl’  
Middle English *nice* ‘ignorant’ → Modern English *nice* ‘pleasant’

### 5.1 Limited Exceptions: Onomatopoeia and Sound Symbolism

There are two very limited and partial exceptions to the arbitrariness of language:

- **Onomatopoeia** = words whose sound imitates either the sound they denote or a sound associated with something they denote. These words are not entirely arbitrary. However, different languages represent the same natural sounds in slightly different ways (e.g. English *cock-a-doodle-doo* ≠ German *kikeriki*), which shows that they are not completely nonarbitrary, either.

- **Sound symbolism** refers to the very vague, elusive way in which certain sounds “feel” more appropriate for describing certain objects or meanings than do other sounds.
  - the vowels [i] or [ɪ] seem to suggest smallness  
*teensy-weensy, wee, little, Tommy* (vs. *Tom*), *squeak*; **but:** *big*
  - the vowels [a, o, u] suggest largeness  
*large, humongous*; **but:** *small*
  - to English speakers, *gl-* suggest brightness:  
*glint glitter, gleam, glow*; **but:** *glove, glue, glum, glop*
  - to English speakers, *-ash* suggest sudden action:  
*bash, brash, crash, clash, flash, dash, flash, mash, slash, smash, splash*

## 5.2 Why is arbitrariness an advantage?

- It allows user of a communication system to adopt the most convenient means available for communicating, since it obviates any need for the forms of signs to bear an inherent relationship to their meanings.
- It also makes it much easier for users of a communication system to refer to abstract entities, since it is hard to find a combination that involves an inherent link between a form and an abstract meaning.