

Beginning Concepts

Ling/Psych 371N
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Language is taken for granted
(Aitchison, Ch. 1)

- People usually don't spend time observing language
- Because people are so good at talking, they think they know more about language than they do.

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A Web of Worries

- Worry about language change
 - Language changes every day
 - Is this good or bad?
- Do you speak in the same style all of the time?

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Invented Rules vs. Genuine "Rules"

- Invented Rules: some examples:
 - Do not split infinitives
 - "...to boldly go where no one has gone before"
 - Do not end sentences with a preposition
 - "Her temper is a quality up with which I would not put."
 - "Her temper is a quality I would not put up with."
- Why do we have invented rules?
 - Allows people from different speech communities to have a common set of conventions for communication.

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The Genuine Rules

- The genuine rules describe how people really speak. Some examples for English:
 - The subject of the sentence usually comes before the verb.
 - The verb of the sentence usually comes before the object.
 - "Her temper drives me crazy."
 - SUBJ V OBJ
 - Subjects must be articulated.
 - "She has a short fuse." vs. "Has a short fuse."

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Types of Worrying over Change

- The Damp Spoon Syndrome
 - Language changes because people are lazy.
- The Crumbling Castle View
 - Language is a beautiful building which must be preserved as is. How would we coin new words?
- The Infectious Disease Idea
 - Social contact can influence change

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Prescriptive vs. Descriptive Grammar

- Prescriptive Grammar:
 - Invented rules
 - Learned in school
 - Nobody speaks this way all of the time
- Descriptive Grammar
 - Genuine "Rules"
 - Descriptive generalizations of patterns in speech

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Goal

- To understand grammar, not to control it.
- In this class, focus on **descriptive** grammar.
- When talking about "rules," we will be referring to descriptive rules.

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Psycholinguistics (Cairns, Ch. 1)

- Psycholinguistics combines linguistics and cognitive experimental psychology.
- Goal: to understand how people
 - Use language
 - Produce language
 - Comprehend language
 - Acquire language

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What is Language?

- It is not the same as speech or sign.
- Speech = the acoustic signal that people produce when they talk.
- Sign = the physical movements made with the hands face and upper body

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What is Language, contd.

- It is not the same as thought.
 - Any thought can be conveyed in any language.
 - Any phrase can be translated into another languages
- It is not the same as its written representation
 - Some languages do not have written forms

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What is Language, contd.

- It is not the same as intelligence
- Language seems to be a separate cognitive system:
 - Specific Language Impairment (SLI)
 - Children with SLI have good non-verbal intelligence
 - Williams Syndrome
 - Patients have excellent language skills, but otherwise are developmentally delayed.

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So, what IS language?

- The communication **system** of humans – a linguistic system.
- We use it to convey information, though it is not always informative (poetry, small talk).

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Characteristics of a Linguistic System

- Pair sound or sign with meaning.
 - Sound = “phonological representation”
 - Meaning = “semantic representation”
- Language production:
 - Begin with semantic representation and **encode** it into sound or sign, a phonological representation
- Language comprehension:
 - Listen to the phonological representation, and **decode** its meaning (semantic representation)

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All Linguistic Systems Share Defining Characteristics

- All languages, including signed languages, have five common characteristics.
- It is possible to refer to language in general as **human** language.

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Common Characteristics of All Languages (All Linguistic Systems)

- 1. Creativity
 - We understand novel sentences throughout our lives.
 - We can create and produce novel sentences with no conscious effort.

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Common Characteristics, contd.

- 2. Arbitrariness (not in your books!)
 - Words do not sound like what they mean.
 - There is no intrinsic relationship between a word or sign and what it means.
 - Exception: onomatopoeia, animal sounds.

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Common Characteristics, contd.

- 3. Duality of Patterning
 - Finite number of meaningless elements
 - The meaningless elements can be combined to generate an infinite number of meaningful elements.

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Common Characteristics, contd.

- 3. Duality of Patterning, contd.
- Spoken language:
 - Meaningless elements: Sounds
 - Can only be combined in certain ways, depending on the language.
 - Meaningful elements: Words

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Common Characteristics, contd.

- 3. Duality of Patterning, contd.
- Signed language:
 - Meaningless elements: Parameters of Sign:
 - Hand configuration
 - Place of articulation
 - Movement
 - Meaningful elements: Signs

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Common Characteristics, contd.

- 4. Lexicon
- Mental dictionary: inventory of words
- Signed Languages: inventory of signs

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Common Characteristics, contd.

- 5. Grammar (descriptive grammar)
- Set of rules (=descriptive generalizations)
- Rules tell you how:
 - Sounds are combined to form words
 - Parts of words are put together to form new words
 - Words are combined to form sentences

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Common Characteristics, contd.

- 5. Grammar, contd.
- Phonological rule system
 - Describes how to combine sounds
- Morphological rule system
 - Describes how to combine parts of words
- Syntactic rule system
 - Describes how to combine words into sentences.
- Semantic representation depends on words and how they are arranged.

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Competence vs. Performance

- Linguistic Competence
 - Your knowledge of a linguistic system (lexicon, grammar)
 - Knowing a language means that you know the lexicon and grammar of that language.
- Linguistic Performance
 - How you **use** your knowledge in producing and understanding speech.
 - Examples: speech errors, ambiguous words

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