Formal Foundations of Linguistics (Linguistics 680)
General Facts about Language

- The system of knowledge (**competence**) that a speaker has of his/her language is almost entirely unconscious. (See handout "You didn't learn this in school").

- No two members of a speech community make exactly the same grammaticality judgments, but the amount of agreement on seemingly subtle points is surprising. (See same handout again.) That is, competence is largely *shared* across a speech community.

- The competence system is extremely complex: it involves knowing (among a great many other things) :

  - which sounds the language uses;
  - how the realization of these sounds is determined by the environments in which they occur;
  - which sequences of sounds are possible pronunciations of meaningful expressions;
  - how minimal meaningful elements can be combined to form words;
  - how the pronunciation of words depends on the environments in which they occur;
  - how words can be combine to form larger meaningful expressions;
  - how the meanings of these larger expressions are determined from the meanings of their parts and the ways that they are combined;
  - how the stress and intonation patterns of these larger expressions are related to the ways that they are combined;
  - how the context of utterance affects the interpretation of utterances.

- Languages are *diverse*, differing from each other not just in which words they have, but in the details of all the aspects of competence just mentioned.

- "Can't see the forest for the trees": the very complexity makes the systematicity of competence hard to see (much of what linguists do is try to uncover and describe this systematicity).

- Despite the complexity, all normal humans master the system by age five without explicit instruction (like learning to walk, but it takes longer), suggesting to many linguists that much of the system is innate (inborn, not learned).

- Much of the systematicity is shared across all languages (**linguistic universals**), e.g.

  - All languages have at least three vowels;
  - If a language has exactly three vowels, they are /i a u/;
  - If a language has voiced stops, it has voiceless stops;
  - If a language has dual pronouns, it has plural pronouns;
  - No language forms yes-no questions by reversing the order of the words in the corresponding declarative sentence.

- Every normal adult speaker commands a range of distinct **registers** of his/her native language (how to talk to babies; to children; to close friends; to an employer; to an audience; etc.), and knows unconsciously which kinds of situations to use them in.

- All languages change through time as a normal and inevitable process; this is not a sign of moral decay or cultural decline. We are mostly unaware of the change, and powerless to stop it.