Basic Concepts of Linguistics

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Introduction to Linguistics
- Language and Languages
- Speech vs. Writing
- Approaches to language: Descriptive vs. Prescriptive
- Grammar and its parts
- Arbitrariness (conventionality)
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, cryptanalysis, etc.
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However: How about instant messaging, quick e-mails?
Spelling is more uniform across different individuals, places and times using the same language than is pronunciation.
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However: *Swau lásku slawjk růži pěl – Růžinu gewil wonný wzdech.*
– *Gezero hladké w křowjch stinných* [K.H.Mácha: Mág 1836]

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.
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- 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.
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- 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.
Speech is primary (cont.)

- Writing must be taught, whereas spoken language is acquired automatically.
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- Speech contains information that writing lacks – intonation, stress, voice quality . . .
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.
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?*
Proto je třeba jednoznačně odmítnout a do slušné společnosti nepouštět především hrůzy typu chromozóm či lýzozóm, neboť ty mohou užívat pouze málo gramotné osoby neznalé základu ”sōma-sōmatos”. Stejně odpudivá a nepřijatelná je ale např. i dizertace.

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Don’t use mistička, use the correct mištička [1930’s]
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.
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Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism

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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.
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.
Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism: An Analogy

- Physicists:
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  - 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* or *bysme* ‘colloq. would₁₉₇’
  - 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.)
Grammar is a language system, a set of principles (rules) that underlie a language.
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Mental Grammar – the knowledge of language that allows a person to produce and understand utterances
Grammar

- phonetics
- phonology
- morphology
- syntax
- semantics
- pragmatics
Phonetics & Phonology

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- Setswana: a consonant is always followed by a vowel: when the speakers adopted the word *Christmas* from English, they pronounce it as *kirisimasi*. 
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- In comparison with many other languages, English has rather simple morphology.
Syntax – phrase and sentence structure
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word order:  The book is on the table.  *Table book on is the the.

agreement:  I am here.  *I are here.

cases:  I like her.  *I like she.

e tc.

An asterisk (*) preceding a sentence marks the sentence as ungrammatical, i.e., not used/accepted by most speakers of that language.
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- What is the meaning of the word *vegetable*?
- How does the word order influence meaning of sentence in English? How about Czech?
Pragmatics – language usage, how context influences the interpretation of utterances (the same sentence can be used to do different things in different situations).

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

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

- **arbitrary (conventional)**
  
  - 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

  **Iconicity**

  - the most extreme example of nonarbitrary form/meaning connection: the form shows a physical correspondence to the meaning and vice versa
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Examples

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  - a “no-smoking” sign (with a crossed-out cigarette)
  - a deer-crossing sign (with a silhouette of a deer)
  - *buzz, bzučení* – ‘sound of the type made by (the wings of) bees’
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But ...
Language is overwhelmingly arbitrary.
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- word meanings would not change over time
  Middle English (before 1500) *girle* ‘child’ $\rightarrow$ Modern English *girl* ‘girl’
  Middle English *nice* ‘ignorant’ $\rightarrow$ Modern English *nice* ‘pleasant’
  Old Czech *letadlo* ‘bird’ $\rightarrow$ Modern Czech *letadlo* ‘airplane’
Limited Exceptions

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

- Onomatopoeia
- Sound Symbolism
Limited Exception: Onomatopoeia

**Onomatopoeia** = words whose sound imitates either the sound they denote or a sound associated with something they denote.
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However, different languages represent the same natural sounds in slightly different ways (English *cock-a-doodle-doo* ≠ Czech *kykyryky*), which shows that they are not completely nonarbitrary, either.
Limited Exception: Sound symbolism

**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.

- Vowels like 
  - 
  - 
  - 
are often used to describe small objects or meanings, such as "teensy-weensy," "wee," "little," and "Tommy" (vs. "Tom").  
- Consonants like 
  - 
  - 
  - 
suggest brightness or shininess, as in "glint," "glee," "glove," "glue," "glum," and "glop".
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- 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.