Basic concepts of linguistics

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Introduction to Linguistics
• Language and Linguistics
• Speech vs. Writing
• Approaches to language: Descriptive vs. Prescriptive
• Grammar and Grammar Levels
• Arbitrariness
Language & Linguistics
Language & Linguistics

• **Language** – a system that associates sounds/gestures with meanings in a way that uses words and sentences.

• **Linguistics** – 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
Speech vs Writing
Speech vs Writing: What is primary?

If linguistics studies language, what should it focus on?

- Speech?
- Writing?

Which one is the primary manifestation of language?
Speech vs Writing: Is writing primary?

• In comparison with spoken texts, written texts tend to
  • be more carefully worded
  • be better organized,
  • contain fewer errors, hesitations, and incomplete sentences,

• because writing is usually
  • planned in advance,
  • subject to fewer time constraints,
  • proofread, etc.
Is writing is primary?

• **Spelling is more uniform** across different individuals, places and times than is pronunciation.
  
  • However: *Swau lásku slawjk růži pěl – Růžinu gewil wonný wzdech. – Gezero hladké w křových 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?
Is writing primary?

• Written texts last and can be preserved for a long time.
  • However: CDs, youtube . . . can preserve speech

• Writing styles change much more slowly than speech styles.
  So writing seems more “permanent” and “authoritative”.
  • However: This can be is also disadvantage – writing lags behind the times.
Speech is primary

• Speech is older than writing
  • writing – (probably) Sumer (Mesopotamia, current Iraq) about 5,500 years ago.
  • language – probably exists for 40,000+ years

• No society uses only writing, many languages are not written

• Most people say more during one month than they write during their entire lives.

• Writing lacks intonation, stress, voice quality . . .

• We learn to speak before we learn to write

• Processing and production of written language is overlaid on the spoken language centers in the brain (plus certain other centers).
Speech is the primary manifestation of language

Writing is a lossy encoding of speech
Descriptive vs Prescriptive Approach
Descriptive approach

Linguists

- observe and **describe** the language
- try to **discover** the principles that govern it
- attempt create a **model of speakers’ mental grammar**
- accept as given the patterns speakers **actually use**
- accept different dialects 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.
English Prescriptive Rules

• 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?*
Czech Prescriptive Rules

• Don’t use mistička, use the correct mišička [1930’s]

• Don’t say flaška `bottle’, say láhev
  • Flaška is from German,
  • and so is taška `bag’ (which is considered correct)
  • and so is láhev …

• Don’t say vyjímka, use the correct výjimka `exception’
  • vyjímat `také out’ > výjimka `exception
Czech Prescriptive Rules

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 "somnia-somatos". Stejně odpudivá a nepřijatelná je ale např. i dizertace.

Jaroslav Hořejší: Plác jazyka českého. 1 Feb 2010
Prescriptive Approach

• The people who prescriptive grammar make up the rules of the grammar.

• So-called prescriptive grammar usually focuses only on a few issues and ignores the rest of the language. From the linguistic point of view, this is not grammar at all.
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.
Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism: 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* or *bysme* ‘colloq. would₁^{pl}’
  • simply observe that some people in certain situations do use *ain’t* or *bysme*
Grammar & Levels of Grammar
Grammar

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

- [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/system of a particular language, language sounds as abstract entities

- Czech: a word never ends with a voiced obstruent 
  \(zubu\) [zubu] ‘tooth\textsubscript{gen}’ but \(zub\) [zup] ‘tooth\textsubscript{nom}’

- English: a word never starts with [kn] while in German it is possible (e.g., \(Knabe\) ‘boy’)

- Setswana: a consonant is always followed by a vowel: the word for Christmas, from English, is pronounced [keresemese]
Morphology – the word structure and systematic relations between words.

Morpheme – the smallest linguistic unit that has a meaning or grammatical function. Words are composed of morphemes (one or more):

- Sing-er-s answer-ed un-kind-ly
- uč-i-tel-k-u ‘she-teacher_{acc}’
**Syntax** – phrase and sentence structure

- 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.*
- etc.

An asterisk (*) preceding a sentence marks the sentence as ungrammatical, i.e., not used/accepted by most speakers of that language.
**Semantics** – the literal meaning of sentences, phrases, words and morphemes.

- What is the meaning of the word *vegetable*?
- How does the word order influence meaning of sentence in English?
  - *Tigers ate tourists.*
  - *Tourists ate tigers.*
- How about word order in Czech?
Pragmatics – language usage

- **Context** influences the interpretation of utterances – the same sentence can be used to do different things in different situations.
  - *Gee, it’s hot in here!*
  - *The wash machine is broken.*
**Pragmatics** – language usage

- **Context** influences the interpretation of utterances – the same sentence can be used to do different things in different situations.
  - *Gee, it’s hot in here!*
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Simply put:
- semantics is the **literal** meaning and
- pragmatics is the **intended** meaning.
Phonetics
- speech sounds as physical entities

Phonology
- sound patterns

Morphology
- word structure

Syntax
- sentence structure

Semantics
- literal meaning

Pragmatics
- intended meaning
Arbitrariness
Arbitrariness

Meaning

Arbitrary / non-arbitrary

Form
Arbitrariness

Meaning

Form

Arbitrary

- the meaning is not deducible from the form
- the form is not deducible from the meaning
- form-meaning connection must be learned via memorization
Arbitrariness

Meaning

Form

Nonarbitrary: The meaning is derivable (at least partly) from the form, and vice versa
KONĚ
Language is overwhelmingly arbitrary
If language were not arbitrary, then:

- languages would use **the same words for the same thing:**
  - English *tree*, Czech *strom*, French *arbre*, German *Baum*,
    Japanese *ki*, Korean *namu*.

- there would be **just one language**

- 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*
  - Middle English *nice* ‘ignorant’ → Modern English *nice* ‘pleasant’
  - Old Czech *letadlo* ‘bird’ → Modern Czech *letadlo* ‘airplane’
Arbitrariness: Exceptions

Two limited and partial exceptions to the arbitrariness of language:

• Onomatopoeia

• Sound Symbolism
Arbitrariness: Exceptions

**Onomatopoeia** = words whose sound imitates the sound they denote, or a sound associated with something they denote.

Not entirely arbitrary.

Not entirely nonarbitrary: Different languages represent the same natural sounds in slightly different ways (English *cock-a-doodle-doo* ≠ Czech *kykyryký*).
Arbitrariness: Exceptions

**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*

- to English speakers, *gl*- suggest brightness:
  - *glint, glitter, gleam, glow*
    - but: glove, glue, glum, glop
Language is overwhelmingly arbitrary