Basic Concepts of Linguistics

Jirka Hana

Introduction to Linguistics

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

Language

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

Linguistics

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

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.

Is 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.

Is 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?

Is writing is primary? (cont.)

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

Is writing is primary? (cont.)

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

  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?

Is writing is primary? (cont)

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

Is writing is primary? (cont)

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

Is writing is primary? (cont)

- 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, and so
  writing seems more "permanent" and "authoritative".

Is writing is primary? (cont)

- 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, and so
  writing seems more "permanent" and "authoritative".
  However: This can be is also disadvantage – writing lags behind the
  times.

Speech is primary

- Historically, spoken language existed much earlier than writing.
  Writing was most likely invented in Sumer (Mesopotamia, current
  Iraq) about 5500 years ago. Language probably exists for 40,000 or
  more.

Speech is primary

- Historically, spoken language existed much earlier than writing. Writing was most likely invented in Sumer (Mesopotamia, current Iraq) about 5500 years ago. Language probably exists for 40,000 or more.

- 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).

Speech is primary

- Historically, spoken language existed much earlier than writing. Writing was most likely invented in Sumer (Mesopotamia, current Iraq) about 5500 years ago. Language probably exists for 40,000 or more.

- 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.

Speech is primary

- Historically, spoken language existed much earlier than writing. Writing was most likely invented in Sumer (Mesopotamia, current Iraq) about 5500 years ago. Language probably exists for 40,000 or more.

- 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.

Speech is primary (cont.)

- 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 is primary (cont.)

- 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 . . .

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:

English

- 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

- 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 "sõma-sõmatos". Stejně odpudivá a nepřijatelná je ale např. i dizertace.

    Jaroslav Hořejší: Pláč jazyka českého. 1 Feb 2010
    http://blog.aktualne.cz/blogy/jaroslav-horejsi.php?
    itemid=8790

Czech

- 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
  "sõma-sõmatos". Stejně odpudivá a nepřijatelná je ale např. i
  dizertace.

  > Jaroslav Hořejší: Pláč jazyka českého. 1 Feb 2010
  > http://blog.aktualne.cz/blogy/jaroslav-horejsi.php?
  > itemid=8790

- Don't use *mistička*, use the correct *mištička* [1930's]

Prescriptive Approach (cont)

- 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.

Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism

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

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.

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. would$_{pl}$'
  - 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

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

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

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

Phonetics & Phonology

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

Phonetics & Phonology

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.

Phonetics & Phonology

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 (the sound system of a particular language) and of sounds as abstract entities.

Phonetics & Phonology

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 (the sound system of a particular language) and of sounds as abstract entities.

- Czech: a word never ends with a voiced obstruent
  zubu [zubu] 'tooth$_{gen}$' but *zub* [zup] 'tooth$_{nom}$'

Phonetics & Phonology

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 (the sound system of a particular language) and of sounds as abstract entities.

- Czech: a word never ends with a voiced obstruent
  zubu [zubu] 'tooth$_{gen}$' but *zub* [zup] 'tooth$_{nom}$'
- In English, a word never starts with [kn] while in German it is possible (e.g., *Knabe* 'boy')

Phonetics & Phonology

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 (the sound system of a particular language) and of sounds as abstract entities.

- Czech: a word never ends with a voiced obstruent
  zubu [zubu] 'tooth$_{gen}$' but *zub* [zup] 'tooth$_{nom}$'
- In 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:
  when the speakers adopted the word *Christmas* from English, they pronounce it as *kirisimasi*.

Morphology

Morphology – the word structure and systematic relations between words.

Morphology

Morphology – the word structure and 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
  uč-i-tel-k-u 'she-teacher$_{acc}$'

Morphology

Morphology – the word structure and 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
  uč-i-tel-k-u 'she-teacher$_{acc}$'

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

Syntax

Syntax – phrase and sentence structure

Syntax

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

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

Semantics

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

- What is the meaning of the word *vegetable*?

Semantics

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?
  How about Czech?

Pragmatics

Pragmatics – language usage, how 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!* – stating the fact? asking somebody to open a window?

Pragmatics

Pragmatics – language usage, how 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!* – stating the fact? asking somebody to open a
  window?

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**)

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

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**

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

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

Examples

- arbitrary:
  - traffic lights
  - warning siren

Examples

- arbitrary:
    - traffic lights
    - warning siren
- nonarbitrary:
    - 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'

Examples

- arbitrary:
  - traffic lights
  - warning siren
- nonarbitrary:
  - 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'

But ...

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:

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*, Czech *strom*, French *arbre*, German *Baum*, Japanese *ki*, Korean *namu*.

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*, Czech *strom*, French *arbre*, German *Baum*, Japanese *ki*, Korean *namu*.
- word forms would not change over time.

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*, Czech *strom*, French *arbre*, German *Baum*, Japanese *ki*, Korean *namu*.

- word forms would not change over time.
  Old English (before 1100) *hūs* → Modern English *house*

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*, Czech *strom*, French *arbre*, German *Baum*, 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

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*, Czech *strom*, French *arbre*, German *Baum*, 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'
  Old Czech *letadlo* 'bird' → 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.
Not entirely arbitrary.

Limited Exception: Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia = words whose sound imitates either the sound they denote or a sound associated with something they denote.
Not entirely arbitrary.
However, different languages represent the same natural sounds in slightly different ways (English *cock-a-doodle-doo* ≠ Czech *kykyryký*), 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.

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.

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.

- the vowels [i] or [ɪ] seem to suggest smallness
  teensy-weensy, *wee*, *little*, *Tommy* (vs. *Tom*), *squeak*;

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.

- the vowels [i] or [ɪ] seem to suggest smallness
  teensy-weensy, *wee*, *little*, *Tommy* (vs. *Tom*), *squeak*; **but:** *big*

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.

- 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*;

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.

- 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*

Why is arbitrariness is 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.

Why is arbitrariness is 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.