

Introduction to Linguistics

Overview.

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At home for the next class: What can you do for a job/living if you are a linguist and/or want to work with (a) human language? Try to come up with two or three options. We will discuss this together in class.

1 Language

Language is the human capacity for acquiring and using complex systems of communication, and a language is any specific example of such a system. (Wikipedia)¹

Language in a **broad sense** – a system of communication:

Animal languages: Campbell's monkey alarm calls (they appear to use separate 'words' and syntactic/semantic rules to combine them together and to interpret 'phrases').

Other examples: 'waggle dance' of bees, bird vocalization, etc.

Are we that different from other animals? What is the difference between human language and systems of communication used by animals?

Human languages:

- Compositionality,
- Complexity,
- Infinite number of possible combinations.

Language as a **system of signs**

sign = signifier (shape) + signified (mental concept) (Ferdinand de Saussure)

sign = symbol (exponent) + referent (real object; denotation, denotata) + thought of reference (meaning) (triangle of reference, C.K. Ogden & I.A. Richards)

sign = Form + Bedeutung + Sinn (Friedrich Frege)

Signs: proper symbols, icons, symptoms (indexes).

Can you think about an example of a symbol/icon/index, in the world around you and in human language?

How do we decide to pair a meaning and a symbol?

→ Naming problem (cf. Cratylus dialogue, Plato) → convention, arbitrariness (for symbols) vs. nature (for icons, indexes)

¹Warning! Do NOT refer to Wikipedia in your paper/essay/thesis, etc.

2 Rules

Language is not only words (signs). We need rules to combine them into larger constituents.

Syntactic rules + rules of interpretation, semantic rules.

Syntactic rules = grammar

Earliest linguistic traditions: First linguistics – Babylonia, 2000 BCE.

To learn the Sumerian language, spoken in Mesopotamia: lists of words + forms and patterns of derivation.

In general, early linguistic traditions:

- Often considering only one language,
- Applied: often prescriptive grammars, to preserve the "pure" language,
- Applied: teaching this language as L2,
- Related to rhetoric

However, **India**: early etymology – Yāska (c. 5th century BCE), early semantics – Śākatāyana (before c. 500 BCE). **Pāṇini**'s grammar (4th century BCE): a rule-based description of the Sanskrit language (compositional rules; already generative and descriptive!).

Prescriptive vs. descriptive rules

Prescriptive rules – how a language should be used (for instance, how to speak 'proper' English).

→ 'correct' sentences

Descriptive rules – how a language is used.

→ grammatical, acceptable sentences

Descriptive rules ← actual language data: corpora / elicitation.

As linguists, what rules are we mostly interested in?

3 Speaking a language

Universal grammar: All human languages share some core properties.

→ (Universal) Principles and (language-specific) parameters (see M. Baker 'Atoms of language')

Can you think about an argument supporting the idea of Universal Grammar?

Language acquisition: all children inherent language abilities, they share the universal grammar.

Principles: general principles concerning language, universal.

Parameters: different options given by the principles. Different parameter-settings lead to differences between languages.

Examples: English prepositions vs Hungarian location affixes

Children make mistakes: *goed*, etc.

Competence vs. performance:

Linguistic **competence** is the system of linguistic knowledge possessed by native speakers of a language. It is distinguished from linguistic **performance**, which is the way a language system is used in communication.