

Introduction

HUL 243

22nd Jul 2024

We are effortless language users

- We produce (and understand) hundreds of utterances every day, all of which are meaningful
- Language in human beings is used to share complex knowledge across individuals, co-ordinate joint activities

What about Linguistics?

- Modern linguistics as a discipline grew out of *philology* i.e. the study of language in historical texts
- Ferdinand de Saussure's posthumously published book in 1918 made the distinction between *diachronic* and *synchronic* studies of language
- While *diachronic* studies look at language's development over time, *synchronic* studies examine language at a particular point in time
- Saussure argued that both types of studies are important for the study of language

- We can define modern linguistics as a systematically organized body of knowledge on language
- What characterizes the study of linguistics today is the goal of **explaining** our specialized linguistic ability and knowledge
- This knowledge is largely *unconscious*- we do not think about rules of grammar when speaking
- Moreover, this kind of unconscious ability is not limited to language- we learn to walk without being aware of the principles of balance and support

- Popular myths about the study of language-
 - ▶ Knowing multiple languages (being a polyglot)
 - ▶ Search for word origins (etymology)
 - ▶ Finding the 'perfect' language (no such thing!)
 - ▶ Finding the most 'scientific' language (all human languages are systematic)
- These are not the kinds of questions linguists focus on !

- The study of language often involves finding the 'weird' in the normal
- What we understand as linguistic knowledge can be tested by communicating with others
- This need not be restricted to writing or even speech! Sign languages are equivalent to spoken languages, and differ only in their modality
- The ability to carry out the simplest act of communication requires knowledge that can be analyzed at various **levels**

Sound System

- When you know a language's sound system, you are also familiar with its inventory of sounds
- We are aware of discrete sounds that are a part of the stream of speech for a language
- With borrowed words, *croissant* we use sounds not part of the English sound system
- English speakers learning German will find it challenging to produce *pf* in *pfannen* as the consonant cluster is not in English

- Knowing the language also means relating certain sequences of sounds to their meanings in the world
- ☀ → *sun* (Eng) or *suraj* (Hin)
- If I want to learn a new language, these relationships will remain opaque until they are internalized ☀ → *le soleil*

the little star's beside a big star

* the little star's beside for a big star

* little the's beside a star big

- As speakers of a language, we have knowledge about sentences and non-sentences
- We can make *judgements* about certain strings as being grammatical, others ungrammatical
- Not every string of words in language can be well-formed; it should conform to the rules that govern sentence formation
- These are the rules we acquire when we learn a language

- At each level of analysis we can demonstrate how smaller units combine to form larger structures

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sound structure

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ðə lɪd-əl stɑ-rz bə-saɪd ə bɪɡ stɑː
syllable structure

- Words themselves are built up of individual **morphemes**, which have specific meanings

stars = star + s

premature = pre + mature

- At the level of a sentence, words belong to particular categories, or parts of speech
- In the example below, we have determiner, adjective, noun, verb, preposition

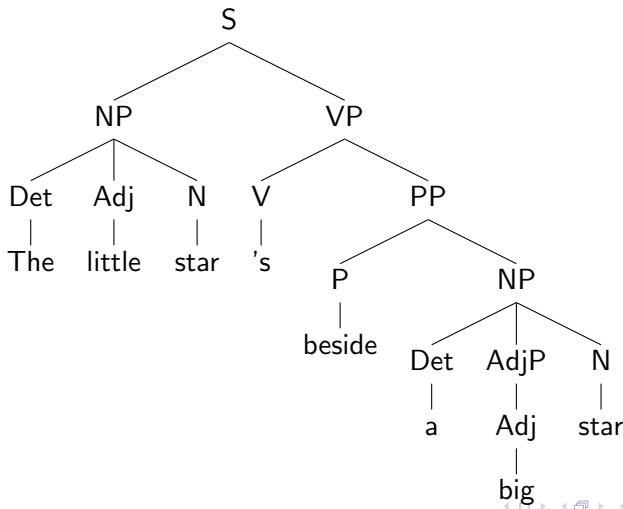
(1) The little star 's beside a big star
Det Adj Noun Verb Prep Det Adj Noun

- At the level of the sentence, each word is grouped together into chunks or constituents
- We can see examples of a noun phrase *The little star*, a prepositional phrase *beside a big star*, which contains a noun phrase within it

(2) (The little star) (('s) (beside (a big star)))
Det Adj Noun Verb Prep Det Adj Noun

Sentence

- The entire sentence is composed after combining these smaller chunks
- S(NP (The little star) VP(('s) PP(beside NP(a big star))))



Levels of linguistic analysis

- **Phonetics and Phonology**: sounds and sound systems (of a language)
- **Morphology** (and Morpho-phonology): word formation and the knowledge of words
- **Syntax**: sentence and phrase formation processes
- **Semantics**: how sentences are connected with things in the world
- **Discourse and Pragmatics**: how all levels of language are used to communicate

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Focus in this class

- **Semantics**: the study of meaning communicated through language
- **Discourse** and **Pragmatics**: the role of context (speaker and listener) in understanding meaning

References

- Fromkin et al, Ch 1 What is Language?
- Ray Jackendoff: Foundations of Language, Ch 1 (Example 'The little star's beside the big star' taken from pg6)