

Grammar When a linguist uses the term GRAMMAR we are usually referring to the mental system inside individuals' brains that determines the structure of the language that they speak.

Prescriptivism/Descriptivism Prescriptivists believe that there is a correct way to speak a language. They prescribe rules such as "don't end sentences with prepositions." Linguists disagree with prescriptivists because their rules do not describe what real people find acceptable and unacceptable. We take a descriptive approach to language and attempt to formulate theories about the GRAMMAR's (see above definition) of speakers of a language or dialect.

Competence/Performance The real-world use of language is the PERFORMANCE aspect of language. Language COMPETENCE is a speaker's knowledge of the grammar of the language(s) they speak. For example, it's what allows English speakers to know that *prasp* is a possible English word, but **psripwv* is not. We might make slips of the tongue (i.e., performance errors) but that doesn't reflect our linguistic competence.

Inaccessibility of grammar We say that the grammar of an individual is inaccessible because our linguistic competence is subconscious and not accessible through introspection. For example, we can't figure out when the *-ed* in 'slipped' is pronounced as a [t] but in 'buzzed' it's a [d] by trying to think about the *actual mental processing* that goes on in our minds/brains. We have to get at this knowledge indirectly; by compiling lists of words with the *-ed* suffix, categorizing them, and making generalizations and testable hypotheses. If the hypothesis is that when *-ed* attaches to a word that ends in a voiceless sound, the suffix will be pronounced as a [t], then in a made up verb like 'tiss', we should all agree that its past tense form would be [t^hist].

Dialect vs. Language The distinction between a dialect and a language is fuzzy and mostly depends on speakers' attitudes about their own language/dialect, which is influenced by politics and geography. For example, Mandarin is a language variety that is often considered a dialect of Chinese, but many linguists believe that because Chinese is so diverse and that many varieties are not mutually intelligible the Chinese "dialects" could be considered "languages" unto themselves. The reverse is true of the Scandinavian languages. Norwegian, Danish and Swedish are quite similar and in some cases mutually intelligible, but we consider these three varieties to be three different languages, mostly because they are spoken in three different countries. The distinction is not crucial for the linguistic analysis of language.

The Arbitrariness of Signs We call the smallest unit of meaning a SIGN. In human language, the way we represent a sign (with sounds) is ARBITRARILY related to the meaning. That is, for most words in human languages, there's no inherent reason why a word means what it does other than the fact that the people who speak that language mutually agree to use that word in that way. Sometimes words in different languages resemble each other, for example *cat* (English), *chat* (French), and *köttur* (Icelandic). This is an historical accident. English, French and Icelandic are all Indo-European languages, and thus, developed out of some shared earlier language.