

EL1101E The Nature of Language
AY24/25, Y2S1
Notes

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1 Course Admin

1.1 Assessment

- Lecture PollEv (15%)
- Tutorial Participation (10%)
- Peer Assessment (15%)
- Problem Set Attempts (10%)
- Finals (30%)
- Essay (20%)

2 What is Linguistics

2.1 Definition

Linguistics is the **scientific study of how human languages work**.

- It develops scientific explanations for language phenomena across languages using Qualitative and Quantitative Methods.
- It addresses questions like how languages are similar or different, what happens in the brain, how social factors influence language, and if speakers of different languages think differently.

2.2 Design Features of Language

All communication systems possess certain features. Human languages contain **all** of these features.

- **Mode of Communication:** Means by which messages are transmitted or received.
- **Semanticity:** Signals in the system have meaning or function.
- **Pragmatic Function:** The system serves a useful purpose (e.g., influence, information, relationships).
- **Interchangeability:** Individuals can both transmit and receive messages. (E.g., Female whistling moths cannot produce sounds).
- **Cultural Transmission:** Acquired through interaction with other individuals (not innate). (E.g., Cowbirds produce cowbird calls, not foster family calls).
- **Arbitrariness:** The connection between form and meaning is arbitrary. (E.g., duration of a bee dance is non-arbitrary).

- **Phonesthemes:** Words that are similar in sound and meaning (e.g., *Glitter*, *Glimmer*, *GListen*).
- **Discreteness and Compositionality:** Messages are composed of smaller, distinct, functional parts (e.g., Phones, Morphemes, Words, Phrases, Sentences).

2.2.1 Unique to Human Languages

- **Duality of Patterning:** Creating meaning from meaningless elements.
- **Displacement:** Ability to communicate about things, actions, or ideas not present in space or time.
- **Productivity / Compositionality:** Small inventory of discrete elements recombined to generate infinite numbers of messages.

2.3 Importance of Language

- Human Languages evolve naturally in a speech community (not formal logic or constructed languages).
- **Uniquely Human:** Creative and complex. Understanding language is key to understanding humanity.
- **Social Role:** Reflection of a speaker's individual identity and the social/cultural aspects of that society.
- **Practical:** Develop tools for education, treat speech/language disorders, advertising, cryptology, speech synthesis, and recognition.

3 Phonetics

3.1 The Study of Speech Sounds

- ****Phonetics**** is the study of the minimal units that make up language.
- Speech is more basic than writing (acquired naturally, some languages lack writing).
- **Articulatory Phonetics** studies how sounds are produced in the vocal tract.
- Spelling is ignored due to lack of correspondence between letters and sounds in English.

3.1.1 International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

- Defined by how a sound is produced articulatorily.
- **1-1 Correspondence** of sounds and symbols (no ambiguity).

3.2 Consonants

Consonants constrict airflow. Described by: **Place**, **Manner**, and **Voicing**.

3.2.1 1. Place of Articulation

- **Bilabial**: Lips (p, b, m).
- **Labio-Dental**: Lips and Teeth (f, v).
- **Interdental**: Teeth (θ, δ).
- **Alveolar**: Right behind Teeth (t, d, s, z, n, l).
- **Post Alveolar**: Right behind Alveolar ($\int, 3$).
- **Palatal**: Palate (j).
- **Velar**: Velum / soft palate (k, g, η).
- **Glottal**: Glottis / vocal folds ($h, \text{ʔ}$).

3.2.2 2. Manner of Articulation

- **Stops / Plosives**: Complete closure, then release of pressure (p, t, k, b, d, g).
- **Nasals**: Air escapes through nasal cavity (m, n, η).
- **Fricatives**: Narrow constriction causing friction ($f, v, \theta, \delta, s, z, \int, 3, h$).
- **Affricates**: Begins as plosive, ends as fricative ($t\int, d3$).
- **Approximants**: Slight constriction.
 - **Central**: Air flows through center (w, j, r). (w, j are glides/semivowels).
 - **Lateral**: Air flows through sides (l). (l, r are liquids).
- **Flaps / Taps**: Tongue briefly taps roof of mouth (r).

3.2.3 3. Voicing

- **Voiced**: Larynx vocal folds vibrating (folds gently touching).
- **Voiceless**: No vibration (folds encased).
- Consonants are described as: **voicing** → **place** → **manner**.

3.3 Vowels

Vowels have an unobstructed vocal tract and are usually voiced. Described by: **Height**, **Backness**, **Tenseness**, and **Rounding**.

3.3.1 Parameters

- **Height:** Distance between tongue and top of mouth (High, Mid, Low).
- **Backness:** Position of tongue (Front, Central, Back).
- **Rounding:** Rounded or Unrounded/Spread (in English, all round vowels are at the back).
- **Tenseness:** Tense (higher, less centralized, longer) vs Lax (lower, more centralized, shorter).

3.3.2 Types

- **Monophthongs:** Relatively constant tongue position (single sounds).
- **Diphthongs:** Movement of tongue body from one position to another (vowel-glide or vowel-vowel). E.g., [a] 'cry'.
- **Diphthongized:** Slight movement (e.g., [e] → [e]). Removing movement does not change the word.

3.3.3 Accents

- **US English:** Rhotic (pronounce R's even if no vowel follows).
- **UK English (RP):** R-dropping. Includes [ɹ] and [ɹ̥].
- **Singlish:** Vowel mergers (e.g., [ɪ] and [i] → [i]), mostly r-dropping, final consonant devoicing (*Peace/Peas*).

4 Phonology

4.1 Phonemes and Allophones

- **Phoneme:** Abstract entity, enclosed by / /.
- **Allophone:** Actual sound, enclosed by [].

4.1.1 Distinguishing Sounds

- **Contrastive:** Different allophone → different word → different phonemes. Look for **Minimal Pairs** (words differ by exactly one feature, different meaning).
- **Non-Contrastive** (Allophones of same phoneme):
 - **Complementary Distribution:** Sounds do not occur in the same phonetic environments (e.g., Spanish [d] word-initially, [d̪] never word-initially).

- **Free Variation:** Non-contrastive and non-complementary. Not determined by phonetic environment.

5 Morphology: Internal Structure of Words

5.1 Morphemes

- **Morpheme:** Minimal Unit of Meaning.
- **Free Morphemes** are words on their own (*do*).
- **Bound Morphemes** are not words on their own (*un-*).

5.1.1 Allomorphs and Affixes

- **Allomorphs:** Slightly different forms of the same morpheme based on pronunciation (e.g., *a* [ə] vs *an* [æn]).
- **Inflectional Morphemes:** Do **not** change core meaning/word class (e.g., *s*, *ing*, *ed*). English has only 7/8.
- **Derivational Morphemes:** **Change** core meaning or word class.

5.2 Complex Words

- **Simple / Monomorphemic:** One morpheme.
- **Complex / Polymorphemic:** More than one morpheme. Has a hierarchical structure (every step must produce a well-formed word).
- **Order:** Root → Derivational Affixes → Inflectional Affixes.

5.2.1 Affix Types

- **Prefixes:** Before stem (*undo*).
- **Suffixes:** After stem (*did*).
- **Infixes:** Within stem (*fumikas*).
- **Circumfixes:** Around stem (*gebergte*).

5.3 Word Formation Processes

- **Affixation**
- **Clipping:** Removing part of a word (*Brother* → *Bro*).
- **Back Formation:** Removing what looks like an affix (*editor* → *edit*).

- **Blending:** Combining a clipping and a stem (*bromance*).
- **Compounding:** Combining two or more free stems (*manspread*).
- **Borrowings:** Words from another language.
- **Eponyms:** Words from names (*Google* → To *google*).
- **Conversion:** Changing word class without adding/removing anything (*Google* (N) → To *google* (V)).
- **Initialism:** Initials pronounced as letters (*MRT*).
- **Acronyms:** Initials pronounced as a word (*SCUBA*).

6 Word Classes (Parts of Speech)

Words in the same class share morphological possibilities, distribution, and function.

6.1 Open Classes (Lexical / Content Words)

- **Noun, Verb, Adjective, Adverb.**
- Constantly created, have concrete meanings.

6.1.1 Key Characteristics

- **Nouns:** Can be pluralised, take possessive 's. Preceded by determiners/adjectives.
- **Verbs:** Marked for tense, exhibit agreement with subject (SVA). Can be negated with [do not], appear after auxiliary verbs.
- **Adjectives:** Modify nouns. Inflected for comparative/superlative. Can occur between determiner and noun, or follow copula/linking verb.
- **Adverbs:** Modify everything except nouns. Can occur almost anywhere without changing meaning.

6.2 Closed Classes (Function / Grammatical Words)

- **Determiner, Preposition, Pronoun, Conjunction.**
- Rarely get new words, convey functional meanings.

6.2.1 Key Characteristics

- **Determiners:** No morphological change. Precede noun in noun phrase (NP). Types: Possessive (*my*), Quantificational (*the*), Demonstrative (*this*).

- **Pronouns:** Replace NP (*I, he, them*).
- **Prepositions:** Precede NP or pronoun.

7 Semantics: Linguistic Meaning

7.1 Word Relations

- **Synonyms:** Approximately the same meaning.
- **Antonyms** (Opposites):
 - **Complementary:** Not $X \rightarrow$ must be Y (*Alive, Dead*).
 - **Gradeable:** Not $X \rightarrow$ may or may not be Y (*Wet, Dry*).
 - **Reverses:** Have an opposite action (*Ascend, Descend*).
 - **Converses:** Opposite only in context (*Student, Teacher*).
- **Hypernyms** (Superset) and **Hyponyms** (Subset).
- **Holonyms** (Whole object) and **Meronyms** (Part).

7.1.1 Ambiguity

- **Polysemes:** Same word, multiple **related** meanings (*book* N/V).
- **Homonyms:** Same word, **unrelated** meanings (*mole* spy/mark on skin).
- **Homophones:** Pronounced the same, unrelated meanings (*board, bored*).
- **Homographs:** Spelled the same, unrelated meanings (*bow*).

7.2 Sentence Relations

- **Paraphrase:** $A \leftrightarrow B$.
- **Contradiction:** $A \text{ NAND } B$.
- **Entailment:** $A \rightarrow B$. Relation lost when A is negated.
- **Presupposition:** B is the background truth of A . B remains true when A is negated.

7.3 Denotation, Connotation, Extension, and Intension

- **Denotation:** Objective, literal thing a word refers to.
- **Connotation:** Associated, culture/individual specific evoked meanings.
- **Extension / Reference:** The object an expression refers to (can be non-referring).

- **Intension / Sense:** The intrinsic meaning of the expression (exists even if non-referring).

8 Pragmatics: Meaning in Context

8.1 Implicature

- **Implicature:** What the speaker implies but is not part of the utterance. Does not follow logic implication.
- Arrived at due to the **cooperative principle**.

8.1.1 Gricean Maxims

- **Quality:** Information is correct.
- **Quantity:** All required information is there.
- **Relation:** All information is relevant.
- **Manner:** Information is clear and orderly.

8.2 Speech Act Theory

- **Locution:** Actual linguistic form.
- **Illocution:** Speaker's intended purpose.
- **Perlocution:** Effect of utterance on hearer.

8.2.1 Illocutionary Types

- **Representative** (Describe state of affairs).
- **Directive** (Get hearer to do something).
- **Question** (Get information).
- **Commissive** (Commit speaker to something).
- **Declaration** (Change status of something).

8.2.2 Direct vs Indirect

- **Direct:** Illocution matches locutionary type (e.g., Directive \rightarrow Imperative).
- **Indirect:** Illocution must be inferred.
- **Felicity Conditions:** Conditions that must be met for an illocution to be successful.

9 Sociolinguistics: Language and Society

9.1 Language Variation

- **Speech Community:** Coherent group sharing same speech varieties and norms.
- **Dialect:** Must be **mutually intelligible**.
- **Accent:** Phonological differences.
- **Slang** (non-conventional words), **Jargon** (technical words).
- Variation caused by: Geography, Class, Gender, Ethnicity, Social interactions.

9.2 Language Contact

- **Bilingualism:** Contact between speakers of different languages.
- **Diglossia:** Formal and Informal variants used in different settings.
- **Pidgins:** Highly reduced language, develops out of necessity, no native speakers. Gets vocabulary from superstrate, syntax from substrate.
- **Creoles:** When a pidgin is passed on to the next generation to become a first language (e.g., Singlish).
- **Decreolization:** Using more of the "standard" language (Basilect → Mesolect → Acrolect).

9.2.1 Style and Code Switching

- **Style Switching:** Changing speech style based on domain/formality.
- **Code Switching:** Spontaneously switching between languages in the same conversation.

10 Ethnolinguistics: Language, Culture, and Thought

- **Language and Culture:** Language mediates social interaction and reflects cultural values (e.g., Kinship Terms).
- **Linguistic Determinism:** Speakers can **only** think in ways their language allows (generally not accepted).
- **Linguistic Relativity (Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis):** Language **predisposes** you to think in a certain way, but is not deterministic or unidirectional.

11 Other Phonetic Concepts

11.1 Speech Organs

- **Larynx:** Contains vocal folds; responsible for voicing and pitch (Fundamental Frequency).
- **Supraglottal System:** Contains places of articulation (Nasal/Oral Cavity, Lips, Teeth, Tongue, Velum, etc.).
- **Subglottal System:** Provides air (Lungs, Trachea).