

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 ( $\theta$ ,).
- **Alveolar**: Right behind Teeth (*t, d, s, z, n, l*).
- **Post Alveolar**: Right behind Alveolar (*ʃ, ʒ*).
- **Palatal**: Palate (*j*).
- **Velar**: Velum / soft palate (*k, g, ɳ*).
- **Glottal**: Glottis / vocal folds (*h*,).

### 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, ɳ*).
- **Fricatives**: Narrow constriction causing friction (*f, v, θ, , s, z, ʃ, ʒ, h*).
- **Affricates**: Begins as plosive, ends as fricative (*t ʃ, dʒ*).
- **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] → [ɛ]). 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 [r].
- **Singlish:** Vowel mergers (e.g., [i] and [ɪ] → [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, [ɾ] 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 → must be Y (*Alive, Dead*).
  - **Gradeable:** Not X → 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 → 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).