

permit us to form and understand an infinite set of new sentences. They also enable us to judge whether a sequence of words is a well-formed sentence of our language or not. These rules are not determined by a judge or a legislature, or even taught in a grammar class. They are unconscious rules that we acquire as young children as we develop language and they are responsible for our linguistic creativity. Linguists refer to this set of rules as the **grammar** of the language.

Returning to the question we posed at the beginning of this chapter—what does it mean to know a language? It means knowing the sounds and meanings of many, if not all, of the words of the language, and the rules for their combination—the grammar, which generates infinitely many possible sentences. We will have more to say about these rules of grammar in later chapters.

## Linguistic Knowledge and Performance

“What’s one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one?” “I don’t know,” said Alice. “I lost count.” “She can’t do Addition,” the Red Queen interrupted.

LEWIS CARROLL, *Through the Looking-Glass*, 1871

Speakers of all languages have the knowledge to understand or produce sentences of any length. Here is an example from the ruling of a federal judge:

We invalidate the challenged lifetime ban because we hold as a matter of federal constitutional law that a state initiative measure cannot impose a severe limitation on the people’s fundamental rights when the issue of whether to impose such a limitation on these rights is put to the voters in a measure that is ambiguous on its face and that fails to mention in its text, the proponent’s ballot argument, or the state’s official description, the severe limitation to be imposed.

Theoretically there is no limit to the length of a sentence, but in practice very long sentences are highly improbable, the verbose federal judge notwithstanding. Evidently, there is a difference between having the knowledge required to produce or understand sentences of a language and applying this knowledge. It is a difference between our knowledge of words and grammar, which is our **linguistic competence**, and how we use this knowledge in actual speech production and comprehension, which is our **linguistic performance**.

Our linguistic knowledge permits us to form longer and longer sentences by joining sentences and phrases together or adding modifiers to a noun. However, there are physiological and psychological reasons that limit the number of adjectives, adverbs, clauses, and so on that we actually produce and understand. Speakers may run out of breath, lose track of what they have said, or die of old age before they are finished. Listeners may become tired, bored, disgusted, or confused, like poor Alice when being interrogated by the Red Queen.