CHAPTER 1. LANGUAGE: A PREVIEW

The following are some of the important concepts found in this chapter. Make sure you are familiar with them.

1. Specialization
2. Creativity
3. Linguistic Competence
4. Grammar

SPECIALIZATION

Humans are specialized for language. The characteristics below illustrate some of the aspects of our special capacity for language.

1. Speech Organs

Our lungs, vocal cords, tongue, teeth, lips, and nasal passages are used both for survival (e.g., breathing and eating) and for producing the sounds of our language.

2. Speech Perception

We are also equipped for speech perception, and we have this ability at birth. Studies have shown that newborns are able to perceive subtle differences between sounds, even sounds they have never heard before.

3. The Human Mind

Our minds form words, build sentences, and interpret meanings in ways not found in other species.

This specialization for language sets us apart from all other creatures!

CREATIVITY

Human language is creative. That is, language does not provide us with a set of pre-packaged messages. Rather, it allows us to produce and understand new words and sentences whenever needed. However, there are limitations on both the form and interpretation of new words and sentences. Linguists attempt to identify, understand, and explain these limitations.

Exercise!   Think about the limitations on the creativity of language while answering the following questions.

1. Put a checkmark beside those words that are possible English words.

    a. tlim _____   e. plog _____

    b. stuken _____   f. skpit _____

    c. tseg _____   g. ngan _____

    d. fomp _____   h. breb _____

    Think about why some of the above are not possible English words. (HINT: Look at the combination of sounds found at the beginning of the words.)

2. Put a checkmark beside those words that are possible English words.

    a. speakless _____   d. reglorify_____

    b. beautifulness _____   e. horseable _____

    c. unrug _____   f. weedic _____

    Think about why some of the above are not possible English words. (HINT: Think about the prefix or suffix and its contribution to the meaning of the word.)

3. Put a checkmark beside those sentences that are possible English sentences.

    a. The building was tossed yesterday away.   _____

    b. The building is swept every morning.   _____

    c. Every child should obey parents his.   _____

    d. Somebody left their gloves in the theatre.   _____

    e. George surprised Mary with a party.   _____

    f. Joe surprised the stone.   _____

    For those that are not possible English sentences, try to explain why.

4. Now try this!

    a. Arrange the words "bird", "worm", "catches", "early", "every", and "a" into an English sentence.

    b. Think of other arrangements of the same words that result in different sentences from the one you just put together.

    c. How could you arrange the words so that the sentence you create is not an acceptable English sentence?

LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

Linguistic competence can be defined as subconscious knowledge that enables the native speakers of a language to produce and understand an unlimited number of both familiar and novel utterances. The native speakers of a language are those who acquired it as children in a home rather than in a classroom.

Linguists divide the subconscious knowledge that the native speakers of a language share into the following fields of study:

1. Phonetics: the study of the articulation and perception of speech sounds

2. Phonology: the study of how speech sounds pattern in language

3. Morphology: the study of word structure and word formation

4. Syntax: the study of sentence structure

5. Semantics: the study of the meaning of words and sentences

This subconscious knowledge allows the speakers of a language to produce an infinite number of sentences, many of which they have never uttered or heard before. We don't memorize language: we create it.

Go back to the exercise on creativity. For each data set, determine which aspect of your linguistic competence allows you to decide which are possible English words and sentences.

GRAMMAR

Grammar, to a linguist, refers to all the elements of our linguistic competence: phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. In very general terms, grammar can be defined

as the mental system of knowledge needed to form and interpret the sounds, words, and sentences of our language. The study of grammar is central to understanding language and to what it means to know a language. This is because all languages have sounds, words and sentences, all grammars allow for the expression of any thought, all grammars share common principles and tendencies called universals, all grammars are equal, and all grammars change over time. However, our grammatical knowledge is subconscious: we can decide what sounds right and what does not, even though we may not be sure why this is so.

There are two perspectives on grammar: prescriptive and descriptive. A prescriptive grammar gives the socially accepted rules for language use, while a descriptive grammar is an objective description of the knowledge that native speakers share. Examine the table below and see if you can tell which type of grammar is being exemplified.

"Between you and I …" is **WRONG.**	My friend Malvolio says, "Many believe that there's an enormous rivalry between Orsino and I." That may sound correct, but the pronoun *I* is wrong here.
"Between you and me …" is **RIGHT.**	*Between* is a preposition, and prepositions are followed by objects. *I* is a subject or nominative pronoun. Objective pronouns which follow a preposition are *me, you, him, her, us,* and *them.*

"She is older than me" is **WRONG.**	The word *than* is a conjunction. It joins two sentences, words, or phrases. There are two sentences here: (1) "She is older" and (2) "I am."
"She is older than I" is **RIGHT.**	In a comparison joined by *than* or *as*, complete the sentence with *am* as in sentence two, above. You wouldn't say "She is smarter than me am," so it must be "She is smarter than I."

"Who do I ask?" is **WRONG.**	*Who* and *whom* will never cause you trouble if you remember that *who* is generally appropriate whenever you use *he, she,* or *they*, and *whom* acts as a substitute for *him, her,* or *them*.
"Whom do I ask?" is **RIGHT.**	It helps to recast a question into a statement. In this example, you would not say "I ask he," so the correct wording is "Whom do I ask?" (Yes, that sounds stuffy—which is why the incorrect "Who do I ask?" is sometimes used in informal speech.)

"The list of home upgrades such as cabinets and appliances were unchanged from the previous list" is **WRONG.**	Matching a plural verb with a singular subject is a mistake. The subject of the sentence, *list*, is singular, but it is separated from the verb by the plural phrase *such as cabinets and appliances*.
"The list of home upgrades such as cabinets and appliances was unchanged from the previous list" is **RIGHT.**	Distraction by particulars may cause you to forget that you were speaking in the singular and lead you to use a plural verb. Keep your mind on what you're talking about (the subject).

The preceding are all examples of a prescriptivist view of language. While a prescriptivist grammar is useful in helping people learn a foreign language, in that it contains the socially accepted rules for language use, linguists are more interested in descriptive grammar.

Spot the Difference! Each of the following aspects of linguistic competence contains two statements. See if you can identify which statement is prescriptivist and which is descriptivist. Do this by writing either D.G. (Descriptive Grammar) or P.G. (Prescriptive Grammar) beside each statement.

1. Sounds

_____   The English words *Mary, merry*, and *marry* should be pronounced differently because they are spelled differently.

_____   English contains over twenty different consonant sounds.

Think about how many different vowel sounds are found in English.

Do all languages have the same consonant and/or vowel sounds? Think of a language that has different vowel or consonant sounds from English.

2. Words

_____   The use of *thunk* and not *thought* as the past tense of the verb *think* is an example of how change is causing the English language to deteriorate.

_____   Many nouns in English are formed by adding the suffix *-ment* to words (e.g., achievement, government, judgment).

Think about why no English speaker would construct the word *chairment*.

3. Sentences

_____   There are at least two ways in English to make a sentence refer to the future.

_____   The auxiliary *will* should be used with the 3rd person singular (i.e., *he, she, it*), whereas *shall* should be used for all other persons (e.g., He will go, but we shall stay.).

Think of how to change the sentence *The horses eat hay* to refer to the future.

Think about how other languages make statements refer to future time.

4. Meaning

_____   The word *cool* should only be used to refer to temperature.

_____   Many words in a language often have opposite meanings (e.g., hot/cold, light/dark).

Think about how the meaning of a sentence is different from the meaning of the words that it is composed of.

QUICK REMINDER!

Linguistics is the study of the structure of human language, and linguists attempt to describe and explain, in an objective and non-judgmental fashion, the internalized and unconscious knowledge that the native speakers of a language share and that allows them to both speak and understand their language. While the primary focus of this guide is on Canadian English, many of the principles and theories discussed apply to all other languages as well.

REVIEW EXERCISE

Each of the statements below illustrates a concept found in Chapter 1. For each statement, determine which concept is being illustrated. Write the number of the concept beside the appropriate statement. The first is done for you.

<u>Concepts</u>:

1. Linguistic competence
2. Prescriptive grammar
3. Descriptive grammar
4. Universal (i.e., something common to all languages)

<u>Statements</u>:

_____4_____   All languages have a way of making negatives.

_____   Speakers of Canadian English know that one way to make questions is to move an auxiliary verb to the position before the subject noun phrase.

_____   Many nouns in English are formed by adding *-ness* to an adjective: for example, sadness, silliness, and happiness.

_____   'Brung' should never be used as the past tense of 'bring'.

_____   Every language has a set of vowels and consonants.

_____   Speakers of any language are capable of producing an unlimited number of novel sentences.

_____   In English, there is theoretically no limit on the number of adjectives that can occur before a noun.

_____   In the sentence "My friend is smarter than me", 'me' is incorrect because it is an object pronoun and this comparative construction requires the subject pronoun 'I'.

_____   In English, the plural is formed by adding either [-s], [-z] or [-əz] to the end of nouns.

_____   Every language has a way of forming questions.

_____   Speakers of Canadian English know that the different vowel sounds in the words *bat, bet, but,* and *bit* are crucial to their meanings.

REVIEW! REVIEW! Make sure you understand the terms listed below.

- – creativity
- – descriptive grammar
- – generality
- – grammar
- – the human mind
- – inaccessibility
- – linguistic competence
- – mutability
- – native speaker
- – parity

- – prescriptive grammar
- – speech organs
- – speech perception
- – universality

QUESTIONS? PROBLEMS? DIFFICULTIES?

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