Introduction to the Course

Ling 201
Introduction to Linguistics

Professor: Dr. Storoshenko
Reading: CLA 1.1-1.2, Jackendoff p8-10

Sept 9, 2013

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Plan for the Day

- Administrative Details
- What is Linguisitcs?

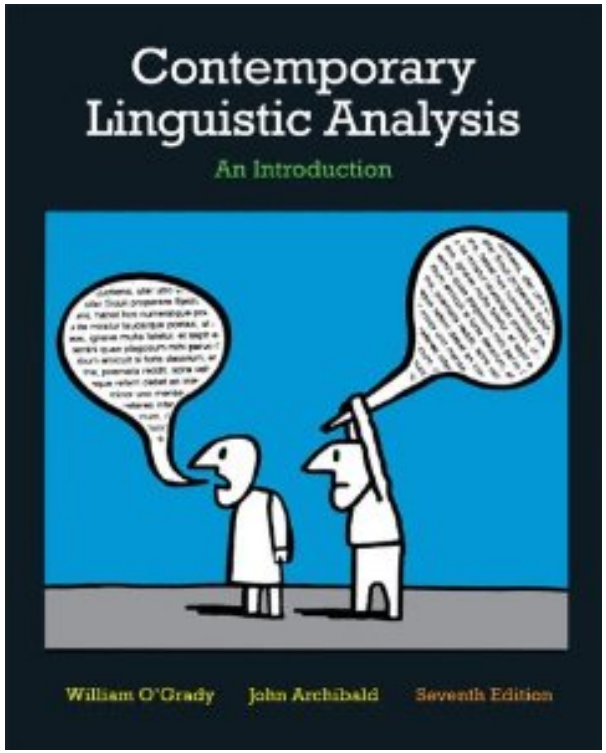
Course Components

- Lectures
  - Quizzes
- Assignments
- Exams
  - Midterm Oct 21
  - Final Exam TBA
- Extra Credit

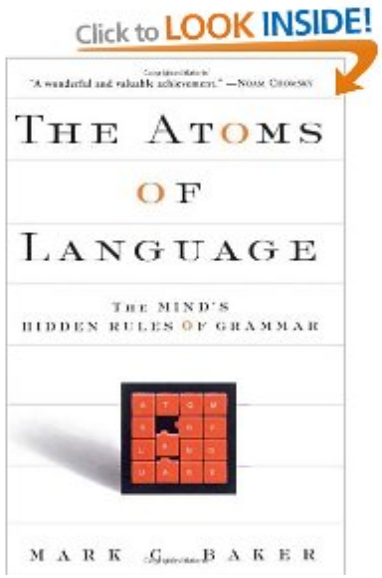
Need Help?

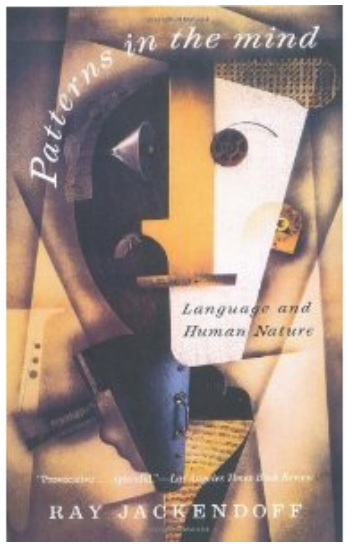
- My Office Hours
  - Mondays & Thursdays 11am - 12pm
- TA Office Hours
  - Sarah: Wednesdays 10am - 11am
  - Joey: Fridays 1pm - 2pm
- Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)
  - PASS Leader: Saskia Lorek `slorek@ucalgary.ca`

Readings (Required and Otherwise)



- Required Text
- Optional Study Guide
- Textbook Website
- Two Additional Readings on Blackboard





What is Linguistics?

The Short Answer

The scientific study of language.

Another (perhaps better) Question

What is **Language**?

A Communication System?

- A first approximation is to call language a communication system.

Question

Is it possible to communicate without language?

Some Communicators

Animal images from Wikimedia Commons; Communicator image from thinkgeek.com

Design Features of Language

- These all communicate, but they are not said to be using language.

Language (as opposed to mere communication) has a set of defining criteria. We'll look at some of these.

Creativity

- New words can be created, for example making verbs out of proper names:

Example

The hipsters all **Instagrammed** their cocktails.

The writers tried to **Whedon** the dialogue.

Question

What's going on here:

Example

They **brunched** at Red's Diner.

Snowbirds **winter** in Arizona.

Unbounded Creativity?

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Example

* The kids **four o'clocked** in the park.

? Joe **Fridays** at home.

- It's not a free-for-all; there are some rules behind this.
- The same applies when we look at smaller and larger units too.

Sound Combination

- These could be English words:

Example

frib, strarfle, klim

- These could not:

Example

slkar, dzow, mbira

A Sentence for Every Occasion

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- A language must be able to encode any message, even if nobody has ever needed to encode such a message before:

Example

Lee says it's not the first time the toe has been swallowed but he believes this is the first time it was deliberate.

`http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/story/2013/08/27/north-sourtoe-eaten.html`

- This too is constrained:

Example

* Berries to eat bears beside like trail the.

A language must expandable (new words), able to express new ideas/concepts, but only within certain constraints.

Arbitrariness

- The connection between a token and its referent should be arbitrary.

Figure: ??? (Wikimedia Commons)

Example

- goat
- yeomso
- mbudzi
- ...

Question

Are all words in English (or any other language) arbitrary?

A Few More

- Displacement
  - Users of the system can refer to events remote in space and time.
- Prevarication
  - The system enables users to talk nonsense or lie.
- Learnability
  - A user of a system can learn other variants.
- Reflexiveness
  - The ability to use the system to discuss the system.

The Big Picture

- Language is made up of discrete units (of various sizes)
- The connection between units and referents is arbitrary
- These units can be combined only in a rule-determined set of ways
- There is still room within those rules for infinite expansion
- Language allows us to talk about remote entities, times, ideas, even itself

So Linguistics is be the scientific study of such systems. To see what kind of science, we'll look at some early examples of linguistic inquiry.

The Forbidden Experiment

Figure: Psamtik I 664-610 BCE (Wikimedia Commons)

- Interested in discovering the origin of human language.
- Gave two newborns to a shepherd with instructions that they be fed and cared for, but never spoken to.
- Then, listen for first words.
- One child said *becos*, the Phrygian word for bread, so the conclusion was that Phrygians were an older people than the Egyptians.

Question

What is the assumption that underlies this conclusion?

Pāṇini

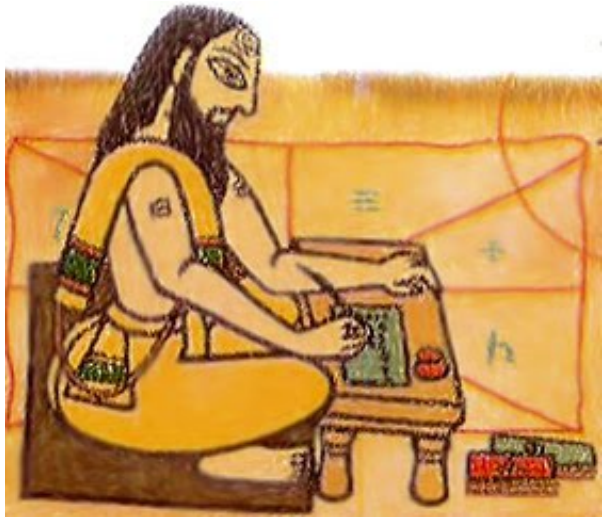

Figure: Pāṇini 4thC BCE

(Wolfram Alpha)

- Northwestern India (now Pakistan post-1947)
- Descriptive grammar of Sanskrit, notable for its use of variables and re-write rules.
- Now considered to be the first use of formal rules usually attributed to Gottlob Frege and later applied by Alan Turing to computational problems.
- Brought to Europe ca. 1600, equally sophisticated grammars of western languages would not emerge until early 20th C.

The Classics

- Aristotle (384 BCE-322 BCE) begins the (western) trend of classifying words.
- Dionysius Thrax (170 BCE-90 BCE) produces a small Greek grammar and gives us the eight parts of speech.
- Around 47-45 BCE Marcus Varro uses binary features delineate four major classes in Latin
- Priscian (5th C. CE) gives rules for inflection, predicated on the notion of changing endings
- The dominant view is that words have varyingly "flexible" endings.

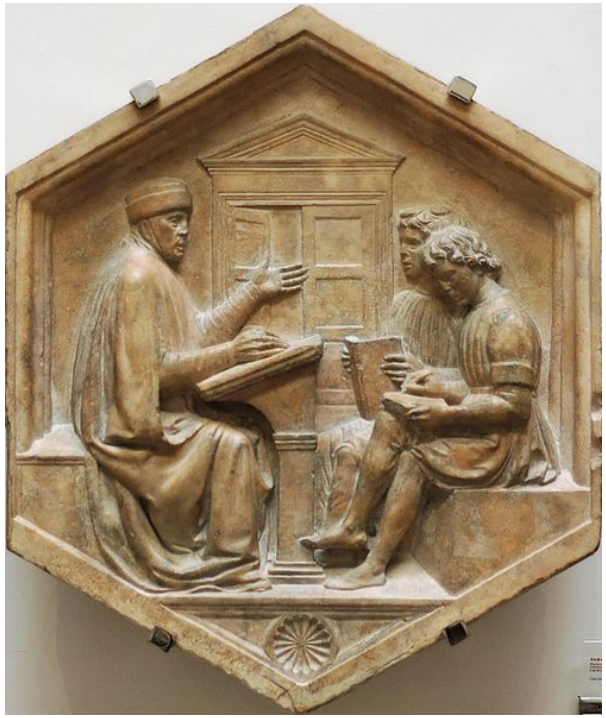

Figure: Priscian (Wikimedia Commons)

A Unique Alphabet

Figure: Hangul Sample

(Wikimedia Commons)

- In 15thC Korea, a new alphabet is invented to improve literacy.
- Vowels are designed around humans mediating between sun and earth.
- Consonants are designed around common anatomical or airway features.
- While some symbols have more than one pronunciation, all alternations are predictable.

The Story So Far

- The atoms of language can be of various sizes, and classified based on different criteria.
- The rules of a language can be given a formal definition that calls on that classification.

One view of linguistics then is that we seek to define those rules for a given language. But there's more to it than that.

Loose End Number One

There's still that bit about it already being inside us, which will tie into learnability. We'll get back to this next time.

Loose End Number Two

Next Time

Grammars. Formal, Universal, Prescriptive, Descriptive, and so on.

To Read

CLA 1.3, and the rest of the Jackendoff chapter if you have not already read it.