



# ENG423A: Current Issues in Linguistics

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## GENERATIVE LINGUISTICS

# What is generative grammar?

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The starting point for Generative linguistics:

Born out of the **discovery** in the mid 1950s that language is a set of algorithmic procedures – **generating infinite strings through finite means.**

A reaction to the **descriptive linguistic tradition** of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The **descriptive linguistic tradition** was focused on structural descriptions of existing languages and the question of what individuates a language.



# Descriptive Linguistics

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Two parallel developments that had set the field of Linguistics free from

- a) Prescriptivism of early linguistics (resistance to change)
- b) The historicism of comparative philology aimed at tracing the genealogical relationships between languages (acceptance of change as desirable/inevitable)
  - 1) Emergence of Anthropological Linguistics in the two continents in America [Franz Boas, Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir]
  - 2) Saussurean distinction between synchronic and diachronic approaches to the study of language and the notion of primacy of spoken form

Constructing structural description of each language on its own terms

# Generative linguistics: Immediate intellectual context

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Empiricism in Philosophy: Problem of Knowledge



Behaviourism in Psychology: Behaviour as stimulus response associations



Logical positivism in scientific theory construction: verifiability as the testing ground for scientific theories



Corpus based descriptive linguistics: Unpredictable differences between languages

# Challenging the intellectual climate: Noam Chomsky

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| 1. Empiricism in Philosophy  | 1. Rationalism in Philosophy  |
| 2. Behaviourism in Psychology  | 2. Cognitivism in Psychology  |
| 3. Logical positivism in scientific theory construction                  | 3. Three levels of adequacy in scientific theory construction         |
| 4. Corpus based linguistics: Unpredictable differences between languages | 4. Generative linguistics: An invariant core underlying all languages |



Epistemology – a subfield of Philosophy



What is epistemology?



The branch of philosophy that studies the nature, origins, and limits of knowledge, referred to by the philosophers and epistemologists as **The problem of knowledge.**

# Empiricism in Philosophy

## The epistemological disquietudes

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Two major anxieties of epistemologists:

- a) Our knowledge of the external world
- b) Our knowledge of other minds

# Our knowledge of the external world

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(a) Rests on two issues:

- (i) Does reality exist independently of the individual's perception of it? If the evidence we have for the existence of anything is that we PERCEIVE, how can we know that anything exists unperceived?
- (ii) How can we know what anything is REALLY like, if the perceptual evidence we have is conflicting?



# The other minds problem

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(b) How do we 'know' the other mind?

I can conjecture that you are undergoing certain sensations but do I 'know' it?

Is the domain of private human experience resistant to all enquiry?

# Implications for epistemology

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1. Both (a) and (b) force one to distinguish between the way things APPEAR and the way they REALLY ARE - the well-known distinction between appearance and reality.

2. What is meant by knowledge?

Can we know anything at all?

Or, are we doomed to ignorance about the most important subjects of life? [Skepticism]

3. How do we obtain/acquire knowledge?

# What is knowledge?

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Knowledge entails truth.

To claim to know X is to claim to possess a truth.

But we may be wrong about our knowledge claims.

We often believe falsely that we know.

Sometimes the evidence on which we base our knowledge claim is inadequate.

Sometimes we misperceive.

Sometimes our knowledge claims are contradicted by others.

# Knowledge is justified belief

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Knowledge involves possessing the truth but includes more than having a belief – the *knower* (as against a *believer*) has an adequate justification for claiming truth.

Nature of justification: either rational or empirical.

# Nature of justification

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Rational justification: the human mind is endowed with a set of a priori truths; other truths are derived from these [Rationalism].

Empirical justification: truth is based upon our experience of reality [Empiricism]

[Empiricism: Realism/Relativism – we have an objective perception of reality or each perceives reality his/her own way].

## Epistemology vis-à-vis other kinds of philosophy

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Epistemology and other branches of philosophy – metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science etc.

Epistemology stands in a special relation to each of these – the desire to arrive at the truth about that with which they are concerned.

## Epistemology runs into every field of knowledge

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The fundamental ingredients of the world:

Can we have sufficient evidence to justify our belief in  
physical objects

other minds

metaphysical propositions such as existence of God or in  
free will

nature of good life,

nature of language,

nature of scientific truth etc. ?

# Distinctions in epistemology

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Truth:

A priori vs. a posteriori

Necessary vs. contingent

Logical vs. factual

Analytic vs. synthetic ?

Universal vs. particular

All husbands are married (definitional)

All husbands are loving (empirical investigation required)

Pediatricians are children's doctors.

Pediatricians are rich.



# Necessary Truths

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1. If Ram is married to Sita, then Sita is married to Ram.
2. Anyone who's an ancestor of an ancestor of Ram is an ancestor of Ram.
3. If x is bigger than y, and y is bigger than z, then x is bigger than z.
4. If something is red, then it's colored.

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## NECESSARY TRUTHS

1. All doctors that specialize on children are pediatricians.
2. All pediatricians are doctors.
3. All bachelors are unmarried.
4. People who run move their bodies.
5. If Holmes killed Moriarty, then Moriarty is dead.

## CONTINGENT TRUTHS

1. Some doctors that specialize on children are rich.
2. Some ophthalmologists are rich.
3. Many bachelors are pediatricians.
4. People who run damage their bodies.
5. If Holmes killed Moriarty, then Watson must be dead.