

EL1101E: The Nature of Language

AY2024-25, Sem 2

Week 1: Introduction to Linguistics

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Today

- Introducing our teaching team
- Defining linguistics
- Knowledge of language
- Key features of language
- A brief history of linguistics
- Course logistics

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What is this course about?

- This course is mysteriously titled, “The Nature of Language.”
- A clearer (more boring) title would be, “Introduction to Linguistics.”

What is linguistics?

- One definition of linguistics: “the scientific study of language as a system.”

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 - Why “scientific”?

What is linguistics?

- One definition of linguistics: “the scientific study of language as a system.”
 - Why “as a system”?

What is linguistics?

- Another definition of linguistics: “the scientific study of language as a system **and as a social phenomenon.**”

What do we study in linguistics?

- Linguists study various aspects of the structure of language, from sound patterns to narratives.

What else do linguists study?

- How language is acquired
- How it is processed in the brain
- How it can be processed by computers
- How it changes over time
- How it varies by situation
- How it functions in society

Some big questions in linguistics

- Do all languages share a common underlying structure?
- Is the way you think shaped by the language(s) you speak?
- Is language learned and processed in the brain differently from other skills?

Do linguists only study English?

- No. Linguistics is the study of language in general.
- Many linguists are interested in language universals, and therefore study a range of languages to discover patterns.

Will we only learn about English in this course?

- This course will focus primarily on English examples, but will not exclusively discuss English.

Do linguists teach people how to speak properly?

- No. Linguistics is **descriptive**, not **prescriptive**.

Do linguists teach people how to speak properly?

- “Grammar” in linguistics refers to the systematic patterns that constitute any particular language variety.

But, some ways of speaking are
more grammatical than others,
right?

- Actually, no.
- Standard and non-standard language varieties are equally systematic and rule-governed.

Do linguists learn to speak many languages?

- Many linguists do enjoy learning languages.
- But linguistics is not about learning to be a translator, or learning lots of languages.

How do linguists study language?

- Linguistics involves a wide range of **quantitative** and **qualitative** research methods and tools.
- Some examples:
 - Brain imaging (e.g., fMRI)
 - Acoustic analysis software
 - Statistical analysis of corpora
 - Ethnographic fieldwork

What methods will we use in this course?

- Most work for this course will involve **analytical reasoning**: observation of data and identification of patterns.

So, is linguistics in the sciences, social sciences, or humanities?

- Linguistics is at the crossroads of many disciplines. Different universities classify it in different ways.
- Many students are drawn to linguistics because they are interested in both the sciences and the arts!

Summary of key points

- Linguistics is the scientific study of language as a system and as a social phenomenon.
- Linguists investigate language patterns using a range of methods.
- This course will be awesome.

Knowledge of language

- When we say that we know a language, what exactly do we mean that we know?

Knowledge of language

- When we say that we know a language, what exactly do we mean that we know?
- Two common types of answers:
 - Function: knowing how to communicate / express yourself.
 - Form: knowing the words of that language and the rules for putting them together.

Knowledge of language

- Beyond knowing “words”, what else do speakers of a language know about the form of their language?

Sounds

- Where does “sack” stop and “sock” start?



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



Sounds

- Where does “sack” stop and “sock” start?



1

2

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- Although speech sounds exist on a continuum, speakers of the same language break up this continuum into conventionalized units.
 - e.g., the vowel in “sack” vs. the vowel in “sock”

Sounds

- The study of speech sounds is called **phonetics**.

Sound patterns

- Which of these is most likely to be an English word:
 - a) frink
 - b) vlorsh
 - c) kdvo

Sound patterns

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a) frink

b) vlorsh

c) kdvo

Our knowledge of English tells us that “frink” is most likely to be a word, even though “vlorsh” is not inherently impossible to pronounce.

Sound patterns

- The study of sound patterns is called **phonology**.

Word structure

- By the way, this is a frink:



Word structure

- And these are two...



Word structure

- We know that the plural of “frink” is most likely “frinks”, even though we have never seen this word before.



Word structure

- The study of the structure of words and their parts is called **morphology**.

Phrases and sentences

- Which of these sentences is grammatical:
 - a) I yesterday two frinks vargled.
 - b) Yesterday I vargled two frinks.
 - c) Vargled I yesterday two frinks.

Phrases and sentences

- Which of these sentences is grammatical:
 - a) I yesterday two frinks vargled.
 - b) Yesterday I vargled two frinks.**
 - c) Vargled I yesterday two frinks.

None of these sentences are “correct” English, since they contain non-words.

Still, we can identify that one has English sentence structure.

Phrases and sentences

- The study of the structure of phrases and sentences is called **syntax**.

Meaning

- For each of these sentences, is Joy a doctor?
 - a) Joy is pretending to be a doctor.
 - b) I realized that Joy was a doctor.
 - c) I didn't realize that Joy was a doctor.
 - d) I think Joy is a doctor.
 - e) If Joy were a doctor, she'd be a good one.

Meaning

- For each of these sentences, is Joy a doctor?
 - a) Joy is pretending to be a doctor.
 - b) I realized that Joy was a doctor.**
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Meaning

- Some verbs, like “realize”, are factives, meaning they presuppose that something is true.
- Competent speakers of a language understand that certain propositions must be true or false given the truth of an assertion.

Meaning

- The study of language and meaning is called **semantics**.

Meaning in context

- Is it possible to “lie” when making the following statements? Why or why not?
 - a) Thanks so much.
 - b) Delete your account!
 - c) I dub thee Sir Prancealot.
 - d) Your Honour, I move for a mistrial.

Meaning in context

- Is it possible to “lie” when making the following statements? Why or why not?
 - a) Thanks so much.
 - b) Delete your account!
 - c) I dub thee Sir Prancealot.
 - d) Your Honour, I move for a mistrial.
- These are a special type of statement called a “performative utterance.”
- They can perform certain actions, but only when produced in the right context.

Meaning in context

- The study of how context contributes to linguistic meaning is called **pragmatics**.

Summary: Knowledge of language

<i>Phonetics</i>	speech sounds	[s] [l] [aɪ] [d] [z]
<i>Phonology</i>	sound patterns	/slaɪdz/
<i>Morphology</i>	word structure	slide-s
<i>Syntax</i>	sentence structure	“These slides are amazing!”
<i>Semantics</i>	meaning	These slides are a member of the set of all amazing things.
<i>Pragmatics</i>	meaning in context	This is a compliment about the slides.

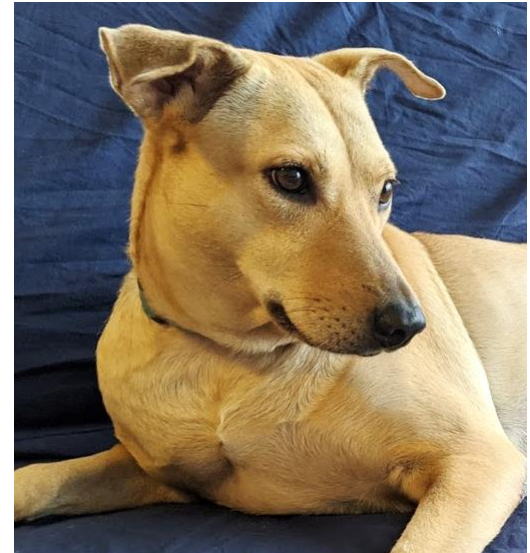
Some key features of language

- Although human languages vary in some respects, they all share several key features.
- Let's review some of the **design features** of communication systems proposed by linguist Charles Hockett (1960).
 - While some of these features are shared by animal communication systems, Hockett proposed that human language is unique in having all of them.
 - Read more here:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hockett%27s_design_features

Some key features of language

Feature 1: Arbitrariness

Is there any inherent connection between the word 'dog' and...



Some key features of language

Feature 1: Arbitrariness

- Note: what about **onomatopoeia**?



Some key features of language

Feature 2: Discreteness

- All languages are made up of discrete units at various levels of structure:
 - Phones [slaɪdz]
 - Morphemes slide-s
 - Words slides
 - Phrases these slides
 - Sentences these slides are amazing.

Some key features of language

Feature 3: Rule governedness

- The discrete units of language combine in **rule-governed** ways – all languages have grammatical patterns.
- For example:
 - “**I am** taller than him” → “**I’m** taller than him”
 - “He is taller than **I am**” → ***“He is taller than I’m”**

Some key features of language

Feature 4: Productivity

- We can use the finite grammar of a language to compose an infinite number of utterances.

“Dr. Starr then astonished the class by producing a sentence that had never before existed in the history of the universe.”

Summary: Some key features of language

- Arbitrariness
- Discreteness
- Rule governedness
- Productivity

A brief history of linguistics

- We've already learned that, in modern linguistics, we primarily study how language works as a system and how it functions in society.
- But when and where did scholars start studying these topics?

Two major approaches to studying language

- We can take a snapshot of a language, frozen in time, and study its structure at various levels. (**synchronic**)
- Or, we can study how features of a language change over time. (**diachronic**)

The origins of linguistics

- The earliest work that we know of on synchronic linguistics was in ancient India.
- Scholars such as Pāṇini were studying the structure of language from approx. the 4th century BCE.
 - Particularly interested in studying the structure of Sanskrit.
- Pāṇini is known as “the father of linguistics.”



The origins of linguistics

- The earliest research in Western linguistics (from the 18th cent.) was primarily diachronic, and focused on how different languages were historically related to each other.
- This type of work is now called **historical linguistics**.

The origins of linguistics

- Prominent scholars in historical linguistics included the Grimm brothers (1785-1863).
- Collected regional German folktales to gather data on the history of European languages.
- The fairytales they compiled (e.g., Cinderella) became hugely influential.



The origins of linguistics

- In their investigations of the historical connections between languages, scholars realized that there was a connection between European and Northern Indian languages.
 - The 'Indo-European' language family
- This prompted an interest in the older work of Sanskrit scholars.



Map of Indo-European languages

The origins of linguistics

- In the 19th c., work by Pāṇini and other Sanskrit scholars was translated and published in Europe, inspiring a turn to studying synchronic linguistics.
- Western linguists began to investigate language as a formal system.



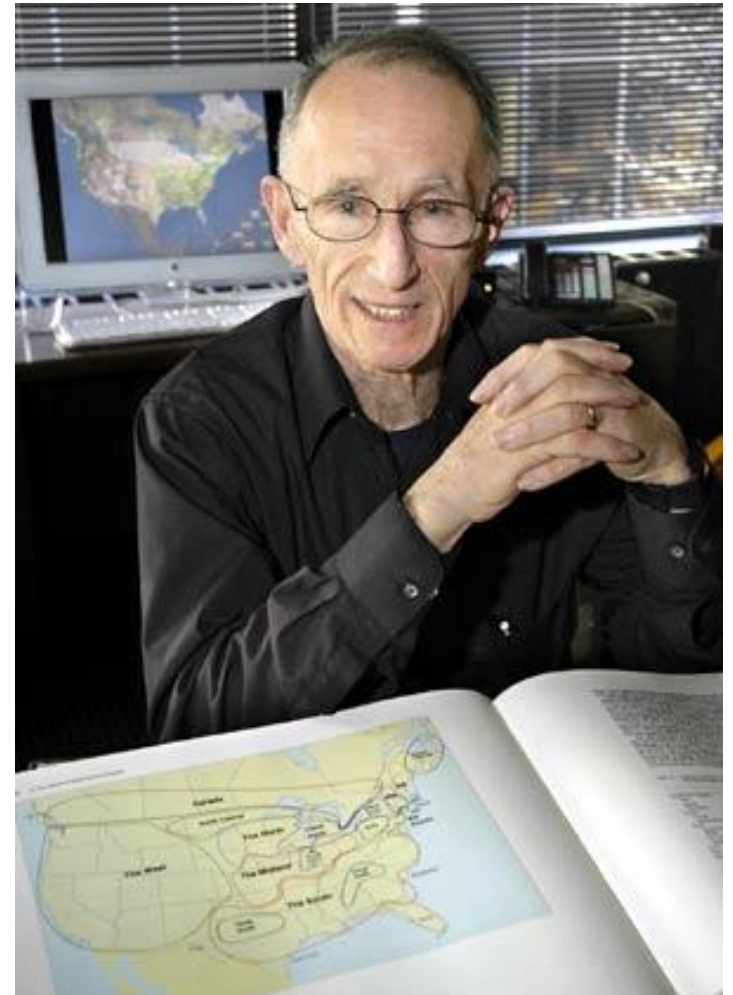
Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913): “the father of modern linguistics.”

The origins of linguistics

- This approach to synchronic linguistics, sometimes called **formal linguistics**, came to dominate the field by the mid-20th century.
- Although scholars in anthropology, philosophy, and psychology continued to study language with other approaches.

The origins of linguistics

- Starting in the 1960s, a new wave of interest in **sociolinguistics**, the study of how language functions in society.
- More linguists began investigating how linguistic structure varies within communities and changes over time.



American linguist William Labov (1927 – 2024): “the father of sociolinguistics.”

Linguistics today

- Today, linguistics is a very diverse field.
- Many scholars around the world study the formal structure of language.
- Others study the social functions of language and how language changes over time.
- Others study language and cognition, language and computing, and other topics.

Linguistics in Singapore

- Singapore is a fascinating place to study linguistics, due to its history of language contact, language planning policies, and multilingualism.
- Singapore may be the country with the most linguists per capita in the world today!



Some NUS linguists at the Sociolinguistics Symposium in Perth, Australia (2024)

Summary: a brief history of linguistics

- Synchronic and diachronic approaches to the study of language.
- Modern study of synchronic linguistics has its roots in Sanskrit scholars of ancient India.
- Early Western linguists interested in historical linguistics, later turned to synchronic linguistics.
- Modern linguistics encompasses formal linguistics, sociolinguistics, other approaches.

Course logistics

- Information about the course, assessments, etc. is all available in the pdf syllabus on Canvas.
- Readings and other materials are also all available on Canvas.
- Some key things for us in the coming weeks...

Course format

- This is a blended learning course.
- Our lectures will be **online** and **asynchronous**, while our tutorials will be in-person.

Lectures

- Video lectures and slides will be posted every Thursday on Canvas at 10 AM.
- If you have any questions about the lecture, please let me know by email or in office hours!

Tutorials

- Tutorials will begin on **Week 4**.
 - Week 3 tutorials are canceled due to CNY.
- In tutorial, we will practice sample problems to apply the concepts learned in class, review the previous homework assignment, and answer student questions.
- Students will be organized into small groups within your tutorial section. Groups will work together on the weekly assignments.

Zooms

- There will be **no** compulsory Zoom meetings for this course.
- However, I will hold optional office hour Zooms every Friday at 2 pm, where I will review practice problems and answer questions.
- Please see Canvas > Zoom for link.

Weekly assignments

- We will have 8 weekly assignments in total.
- These assignments are intended to give you an opportunity to apply what we have learned in class each week to new data.
- Please work on these assignments collaboratively within your small group.
- Assignments will be released on Thursdays at 10 AM and will be due the following Thursday.

Weekly assignments

- The first assignment will have its due date extended by one week due to the CNY holiday.
- Therefore, both Assignments 1 and 2 will be due on the Thursday of Week 5 (13 Feb).

Other assessments

- In addition to the weekly assignments, you will complete:
 - A brief individual essay (Due Week 10)
 - A midterm test (Week 8)
 - A final test (Week 13)
- More information on these assessments is available on the syllabus.

Test timeslots

- We will arrange several timeslots on Weeks 8 and 13 for students to take the midterm and final tests.
 - A survey will be sent to you soon!
- If you cannot make any of the pre-arranged timeslots, we will arrange a make-up time with you.

Communication

- If you have any questions, I am happy to answer email at any time of day!
- Please do check your school email and Canvas regularly for key announcements and updates.

Is this a hard course?

- Because this is a broad survey course, we will cover a wide range of topics, research methods, and concepts, many of which will be new to you.
- It's very likely that you will find some of these areas more intuitive than others.

Additional resources

- In addition to contacting me, the tutors, and checking the readings, here are some other resources you may find useful:
 - **Crash Course Linguistics:** YouTube series made by linguists.
 - (Episode 1) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yLXNzDUH58>
 - **Seeing Speech:** UK site with resources for phonetics.
 - <https://www.seeingspeech.ac.uk/>
 - **All Things Linguistic:** blog with links to resources for linguistics:
 - <https://allthingslinguistic.com/post/164874346205/how-to-teach-yourself-linguistics-online-for-free>

Next week

Phonetics, Part 1

