

Lecture 1: What is language? What is linguistics?

William Johnston

LIN1130: Language Awareness for ESL Teachers
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About me

- Name: William Johnston
- Position: Postdoctoral researcher, Department of linguistics
- Doctorate: McGill University
- Research: Syntax, semantics, grammar of the White Hmong language
- Teaching: Typology of languages, semantics...

About the course

This course will introduce you to **linguistics**, the scientific study of human language.

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- What elements make up a language?
- How are those elements organized?
- What properties do languages share? In what ways can languages differ?
- What grammatical rules do languages follow?
- How and why do languages change?
- How do dialects, accents, and language usage relate to society?
- Why do babies learn languages easily, when adults have so much trouble?

Course information (temporary):



<http://williamjohnston.github.io/lin1130>

william.johnston4@mail.mcgill.ca

① What's a language?

② What is Language?

③ What is linguistics?

Prescriptive and descriptive grammar

Major topics in linguistics (and this course)

What is a language?

“A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”

– Max Weinreich

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Canadian English and British English have different grammatical properties. Are they different languages? Or two **dialects** of one language?

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- Does this matter?

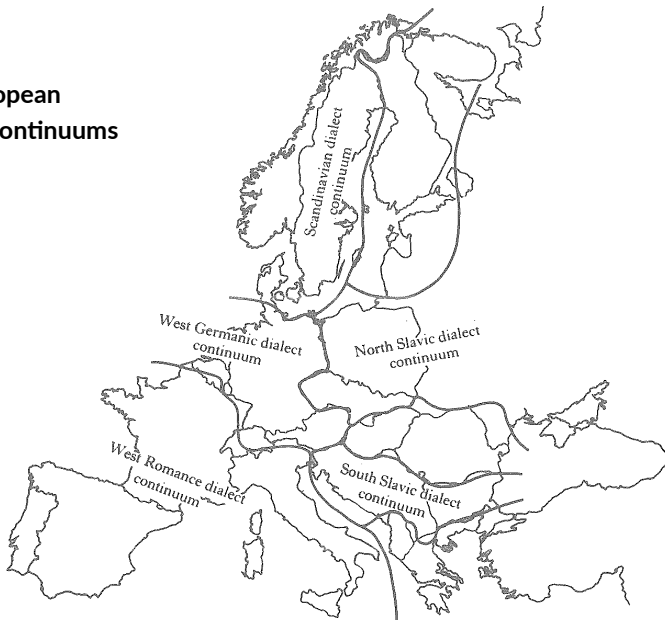
What is a language?

Definition:

A **dialect continuum** is a range of dialects spoken across a continuous geographic space. Neighbouring dialects are quite similar to each other, but dialects on opposite ends might not be mutually intelligible.

What is a language?

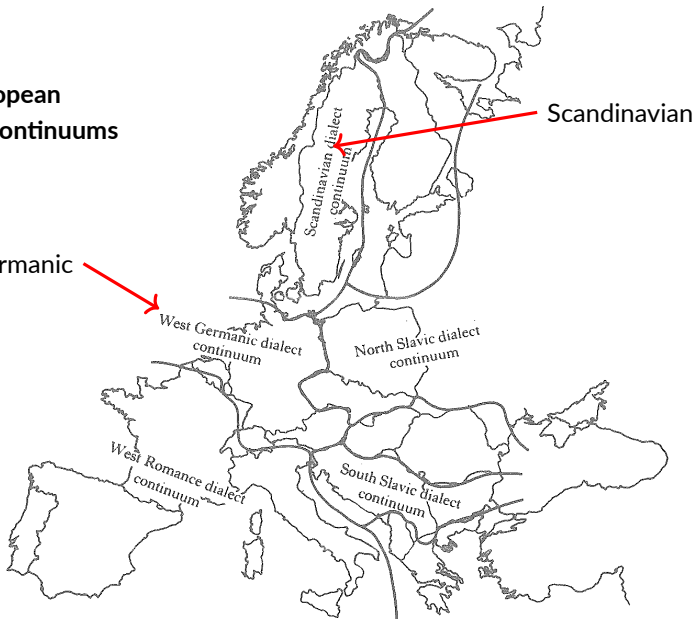
European Dialect Continuums



What is a language?

European Dialect Continuums

West Germanic



What is a language?

- Scandinavian
- West Germanic



What is a language?

- Scandinavian
- West Germanic



(1) a. I går var det mus i badekaret
Yesterday were there mice in the-bathtub

(Norwegian)

b. I går var der mus i badekarret
Yesterday were there mice in the-bathtub

(Danish)

c. I går var det möss i badkaret
Yesterday were there mice in the-bathtub
'Yesterday, there were mice in the bathtub.'

(Swedish)

What is a language?

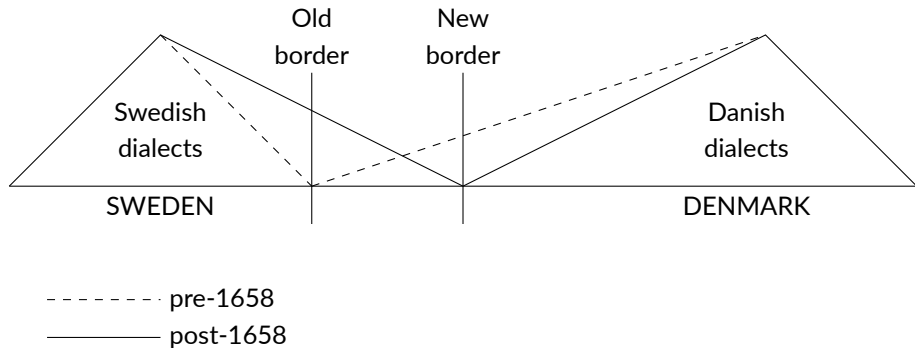
Danish? Swedish?

- This area was formerly part of Denmark.
- Now part of Sweden.
- Do they speak Danish or Swedish?

(Chambers and Trudgill 1998)



What is a language?



What is a language?

Low Franconian/Netherlandic varieties:

1. Central Dutch
2. West Flemish
3. Brabantic
4. Limburgian
5. Lower Rhenish

Frisian varieties:

6. West Frisian
7. Saterlandic
8. North Frisian

Low Saxon/Low German varieties:

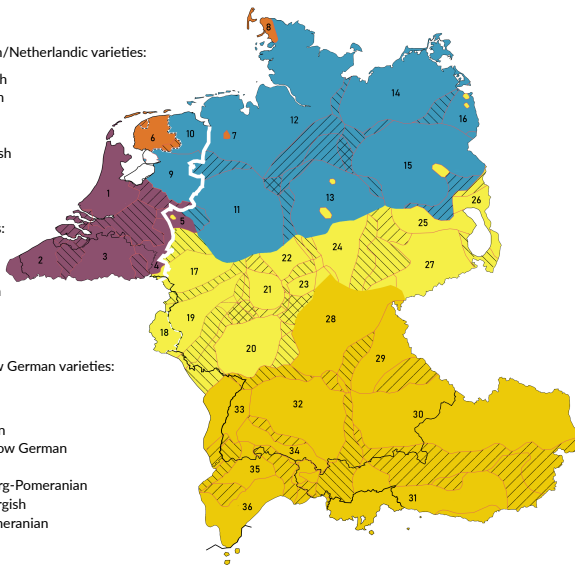
9. Overijssels
10. Gronings
11. Westphalian
12. Northern Low German
13. Eastphalian
14. Mecklenburg-Pomeranian
15. Brandenburgish
16. Middle Pomeranian

Middle German/ Central German varieties:

17. Riparian
18. Luxemburgish
19. Moselle Franconian
20. Rhine Franconian
21. Central Hessian
22. Northern Hessian
23. Eastern Hessian
24. Thuringian
25. Northern Upper Saxon
26. South Märkisch
27. Upper Saxon

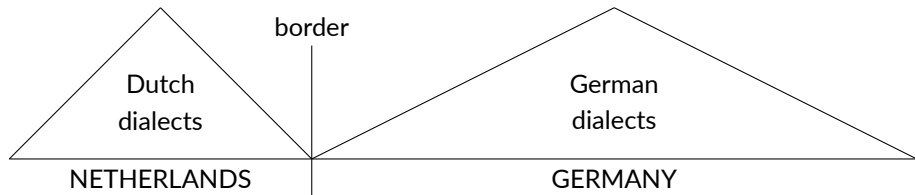
High German/ Upper German varieties:

28. Upper Franconian
29. North Bavarian
30. Central Bavarian
31. South Bavarian
32. Swabian
33. Low Alemannic
34. Middle Alemannic
35. High Alemannic
36. Highest Alemannic

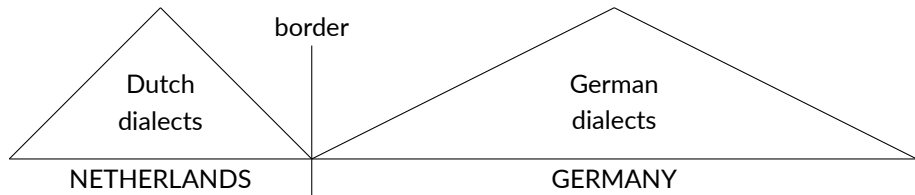


(Wikimedia Commons)

What is a language?



What is a language?



The dialects across the Netherlands and Germany have lots of variation.

What is a language?

- (2) **German:** Lieber ein Bauch vom Essen, als ein Rücken vom Schaffen.
Swabian: Liabr en Ranza vom Essa als en Buckl vom Schaffa.
'Rather a round belly from eating well than a round back from working too hard.'
- (3) **German:** Mein Luftkissenfahrzeug ist voller Aale
Low German: Mien Lüchtpöukaan ist vull von sük aalen
Dutch: Mijn luchtkussenboot zit vol paling
'My hovercraft is full of eels!'

What is a language?

The distinction between a language and a dialect is fuzzy—and for a linguist, not very useful!

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But... what is Language?

Languages can have different sounds, vocabulary, word order, types of affixes, and other properties...but they all have a common set of traits.

What makes a language “Language”?

- Used to communicate
- Arbitrary
- Hierarchically organized
- Produced and perceived
- Quintessentially human
- Genetically endowed
- A constrained but creative system

Language is used to communicate

A language can communicate intentions and concepts from one speaker's mind to another's.

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- Every language uses a system of **signs** that are associated with **meanings**.

Language is used to communicate

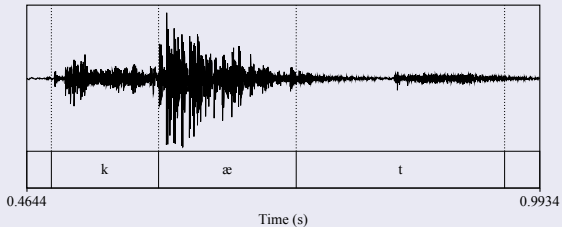
A language can communicate intentions and concepts from one speaker's mind to another's.

- Human languages have the ability to convey meaning.
- Every language uses a system of **signs** that are associated with **meanings**.
 - A **sign** is a discrete unit of meaning.
 - A **conventional sign** is a sign that all members of a language community (e.g., all English speakers) agree to use with a certain meaning.

Language is used to communicate

a sign...

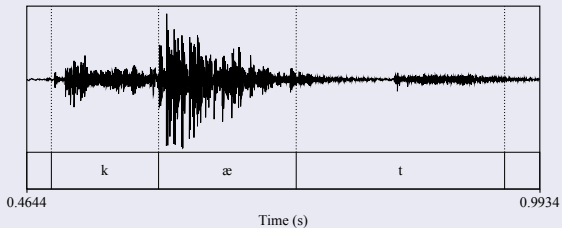
'cat'
/kæt/



Language is used to communicate

a sign...

'cat'
/kæt/



...and a meaning



Signs are arbitrary

Different languages have **different sets** of conventional signs:



English: *cat*

French: *chat*

Vietnamese: *mèo*

Hawai'ian: *pōpoki*

Finnish: *kissa*

Innu: *minush*

Madarin: *mao*

Japanese: *neko*

Hmong: *miv*

Icelandic: *köttur*

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Different languages have **different sets** of conventional signs:



/ki/

English: *cat*

English: 'key'

French: *chat*

French: 'who'

Vietnamese: *mèo*

Japanese: 'tree'

Hawai'ian: *pōpoki*

Hmong: 'to break off'

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The relationship between a sign and its meaning is arbitrary

Signs are arbitrary

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What's the generic term for a sweetened carbonated beverage?

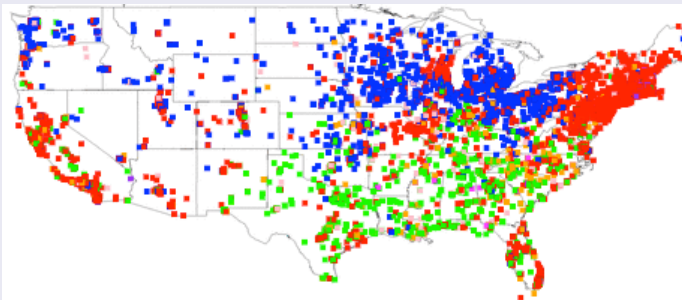
- ☐ A pop
- ☐ B soda
- ☐ C soft drink
- ☐ D coke
- ☐ E tonic
- ☐ F fizzy drink
- ☐ G other

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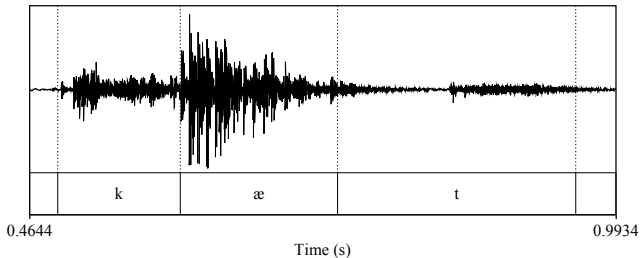
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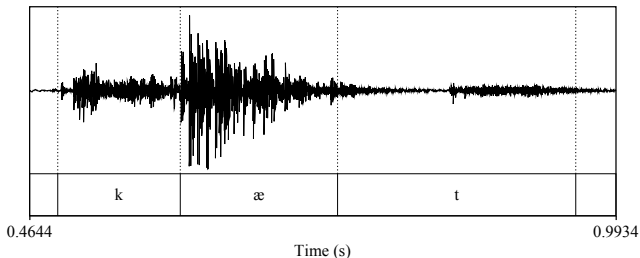
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These elements are assembled according to the rules of that language's **grammar**.

All languages systematically combine discrete elements into larger elements, arrange elements in a particular order, and substitute elements for each other.

Language is hierarchically organized

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- **Words:** Syllables are combined to form words. Some have only one syllable (*cat*, *tack*, *act*) while others contain two or more syllables (*lin.guis.tics*, *ba.na.na*, *re.e.val.u.a.tion*)

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- **Phrases:** Words are combined into phrases. For example, the words *the*, *fat*, and *doggy* can combine to form the phrase *the fat doggy*.

Language is hierarchically organized

... ..

the fat doggy									Phrases
the		fat			doggy				Words
ðə		fæt			da		gi		Syllables
ð	ə	f	æ	t	d	a	g	i	Sounds

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- **Sentences:** Phrases are combined into sentences. The phrases *the fat doggy*, *ate up*, and *all the food* can combine into the sentence *the fat doggy ate up all the food*.

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- **Sentences:** Phrases are combined into sentences. The phrases *the fat doggy*, *ate up*, and *all the food* can combine into the sentence *the fat doggy ate up all the food*.
- **Groups of sentences/discourse:** Sentences can combine with other sentences to create discourse. For example, we can combine the sentences *the cat chased the squirrel* and *she didn't catch it* in a few ways:
 - *The cat chased the squirrel. She didn't catch it.*
 - *The cat chased the squirrel, but she didn't catch it.*
 - *The cat chased the squirrel, and she didn't catch it.*

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- **Sentences:** *They bought a car and then they had an accident* doesn't mean the same as *They had an accident and then they bought a car*

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- **Sentences:** *Close the window*, *Do you mind if I close the window*, and *It sure is cold in this house!* might all result in the window being closed, but they have a range of subtly different connotations.

Language is produced and perceived

Production

Language is **produced** using the human body.

- Speaking involves the lungs, vocal cords, oral cavity, nasal cavity, tongue, teeth, jaw, lips, and your even your uvula!
- Signed languages use faces, hands, arms, and torsos.

Perception

Language is **perceived** using the human body.

- We perceive speech as sound and our brains are able to make sense of that sound as speech.
- Vision also plays an important role in perception.

Language is quintessentially human

Other animals have communication systems (e.g., bee dances, bird songs), but these systems are limited and can only communicate a handful of messages (e.g., PREDATOR!, FOOD!, MATE?).

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Language is perhaps the key feature separating humans from all other animals.

The origin of human language (between 60 000 and 150 000 years ago) is associated with “the great leap forward” in human evolution.

- Blades, beads, burials, bone toolmaking, etc. (Calvin 2004)
- The start of modern human history.

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- Productivity (the ability to group meanings into categories, and to keep those categories open to receive new meanings).
- Creativity (we can construct and understand an infinite number of new sentences/meanings...even if we have never heard them before).

Language is genetic

All humans have the same, equal capacity for acquiring language.

Children are so efficient at learning language that many believe they are born with an innate **Universal Grammar**:

- UG is a cognitive template of language.
- Children learning a language map sounds and structures (specific to the language they are learning) onto that template.
- UG constrains the diversity of language.

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Evidence

- First language acquisition is fast and easy (from babbling at 6 months to using full sentences at age 3).
- Children go through the same series of steps when acquiring a language, no matter what the language is (including signed languages).
- Extraordinary similarity observed across all languages (we'll see more of this throughout the class).

Language is a creative system

Languages provide the freedom and ability to produce and understand new words and sentences as the need arises.

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- That green dog with a banana tattoo frightened the bald cat that chased the obese mouse.
- *Frightened dog with tattoo banana a green that the cat bald the mouse obese chased that.

Speakers of languages can produce and perceive new words and sentences, and at the same time, they can recognize words and sentences that are not acceptable. This is a special type of knowledge that linguists call **linguistic competence**.

Our competence with the grammar of English allowed us to separate the acceptable examples from the unacceptable examples in the previous slide.

Questions so far?

What linguists mean by **grammar**

A **grammar** is “the mental system that allows human beings to form and interpret the sounds, words, and sentences of their language” (Grady *et al.* 2012).

A grammar has many components:

Component	Domain
Phonetics	articulation and perception of speech sounds
Phonology	patterning and interaction of speech sounds
Morphology	word formation
Syntax	sentence formation
Semantics	interpretation of words and sentences
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What linguists mean by grammar

A linguist's grammar is not a book and it is not concerned with just the form of words and sentences. Rather it is an intricate system of knowledge that encompasses sound and meaning as well as form and structure. It contains the machinery needed to link a thought in the brain to movements of the tongue and lips, and vice versa—which, in the end, is what language is all about.

Grady et al. (2012:6)

Studying languages' grammars is the core of linguistics

Five facts about grammars

- All languages have a grammar.
- All languages' grammars are equal.
- All grammars are alike in basic ways.
- All grammars change over time.
- Grammatical knowledge/competence is subconscious.

All languages have a grammar

All languages and dialects have grammatical systems that govern the structure of sentences, the structure of words, permissible sound combinations etc.

All languages have a grammar

All languages and dialects have grammatical systems that govern the structure of sentences, the structure of words, permissible sound combinations etc.

- Newfoundland English
 - *Derek bees happy.* (=Derek is always happy)
 - *Derek is happy.* (=Derek is happy right now)
- African American Vernacular English
 - *Derek be happy.* (=Derek is always happy)
 - *Derek happy.* (=Derek is happy right now)

All languages have a grammar

All languages and dialects have grammatical systems that govern the structure of sentences, the structure of words, permissible sound combinations etc.

- Walpiri (spoken in Australia)
 - *saw dogs two kangaroos several*
 - *kangaroos several saw dogs two*
 - *dogs two kangaroos several saw*

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Just because a language or dialect is different, doesn't mean that it lacks grammatical rules.

All languages/dialects are equal

There is no such thing as a “primitive language”.

- All languages are equally capable of expressing the full range of human experiences and ideas.
- If a language needs new words to refer to new technology or ideas, it will either make up a word (e.g., English *electricity*, Icelandic *rafmagn*) or borrow one from another language (e.g., French *électricité*, Malagasy *elektrisite*).

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There is no such thing as a “good grammar” or a “bad grammar”.

- The **prestige dialect** of a language is usually associated with culturally or socio-economically powerful groups, e.g. Parisian French, “Received Pronunciation” (Standard Southern British) English, Standard Canadian English...
- Some languages/dialects are associated with less prestigious socio-economic groups, but this has no bearing on the grammar of the language/dialect.
- Prestige is arbitrary. (Think about English dialects that “drop their *r*’s” in words like *Londoner*, *New Yorker*...)

All grammars are alike in basic ways

All languages...

- have more consonants (e.g., *p, t, k*) than vowels (e.g. *u, o, a*).
- use a finite set of sounds.
- have nouns and verbs.
- have pronouns (*I, me, you, her*).
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There are six possible basic word orders...

Subject-Object-Verb	<i>Canadians hockey like.</i>
Subject-Verb-Object	<i>Canadians like hockey.</i>
Verb-Subject-Object	<i>Like Canadians hockey.</i>
Verb-Object-Subject	<i>Like hockey Canadians.</i>
Object-Verb-Subject	<i>Hockey like Canadians.</i>
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No dominant order	–

(World Atlas of Language Systems)

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There are six possible basic word orders... but languages tend to use only three.

Subject-Object-Verb	<i>Canadians hockey like.</i>	41.0%
Subject-Verb-Object	<i>Canadians like hockey.</i>	35.5%
Verb-Subject-Object	<i>Like Canadians hockey.</i>	6.9%
Verb-Object-Subject	<i>Like hockey Canadians.</i>	1.8%
Object-Verb-Subject	<i>Hockey like Canadians.</i>	0.8%
Object-Subject-Verb	<i>Hockey Canadians like.</i>	0.3%
No dominant order	–	13.7%

(World Atlas of Language Systems)

All grammars change over time.

Modern English (1500–present):

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Old English (449–1066):

- “Hordweard sōhte georne æfter grunde, wolde guman findan þone þe him on sweofote sære getēode.” (Beowulf)

Grammatical knowledge is subconscious

We are not aware of the grammatical rules that govern our speech.

- *Wendy saw her.*
 - Can this mean that the person that Wendy saw was Wendy?
 - Why not?


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We don't know the rules consciously—we only know what sounds acceptable and what doesn't!

① What's a language?

② What is Language?

③ What is linguistics?

Prescriptive and descriptive grammar

Major topics in linguistics (and this course)

What is linguistics?

Myth:

Linguists are people who learn a lot of languages.

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Linguists are people who learn a lot of languages.

Reality:

Linguists learn a lot of things about languages, but our goal is not to become polyglots.

- Languages I speak (well): English.
- Languages I speak (badly): French, Spanish, Japanese.
- Languages I've researched as a linguist: White Hmong, Malagasy, English.

This is where linguists come in!

Linguistics uses an elaborate set of methods for studying language (and the capacity for language) systematically and scientifically.

- Our data typically come from three sources:
 - ① **Corpora** of recorded, spontaneous, natural speech.
 - ② **Elicitation** of native speakers' judgments about acceptable and non-acceptable expressions (a guided interview).
 - ③ **Experiments** conducted in a laboratory, measuring aspects of production, perception, and brain function.
- Linguists describe and study language **as it is actually spoken** by people.
- Linguists are interested in **all human languages and dialects**, not just standard/prestige dialects.
 - A sentence might be acceptable in one dialect, but not in another.

Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism

Many grammarians (in the past and in the present) believe that there are certain “educated” and/or “correct” ways of speaking a language.

For English, they propose rules like:

- Don't end sentences with a preposition:
 - *Who are you talking **to**?*
- Don't split infinitives
 - ***To** boldly **go** where no one has gone before.*
- Don't use double negatives. (Or: “two negatives make a positive”.)
 - I **don't** got **none**.
- Don't use “they” to mean one person.
 - I talked to the manager, and **they** gave me a refund.

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These are **prescriptive** rules. They tell people how someone else believes that they should speak.

Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism

Many of these prescriptive rules are arbitrary and ill-formed.

- Prescriptivists say that “double negatives” are illogical and must be avoided...but many languages require two negative elements in certain constructions.

(4) No comí nada.

not I-ate nothing.

‘I didn’t eat anything’

(Spanish)

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(4) No comí nada. (Spanish)
not I-ate nothing.
'I didn't eat anything'

- Speakers of English have stranded prepositions and used singular *they* for hundreds of years...even in great literature.
 - “What’s he got to do with the case?” asked the man he had spoken **with**.
(A Tale of Two Cities, Dickens, 1859)
 - Who is in love with her? Who makes you **their** confidant?
(Emma, Austen, 1815)

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Linguists are just like other scientists: Physicists don't tell planets how to move, chemists don't tell atoms how to combine, anthropologists don't tell people how to live...

I'm done my homework

Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism

	Tor.	Phila.	Verm.	Mont.	LI
I'm done my homework	✓	✓	✓	*	*
I'm done with my homework	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
I've done my homework	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

A descriptive rule

The “*be done* + noun phrase” construction is acceptable in several dialects of English, including those spoken in Toronto, Philadelphia, and Vermont, but the construction is unacceptable to speakers of English in Montreal and Long Island.

Using this sort of rule, we can start to formulate hypotheses about the grammars of speakers of different dialects of English.

- This might lead us to ask other questions, get more data, and test more hypotheses.
- **Linguists use the scientific method.**

Standard vs. non-standard

No grammar/dialect/language is “right” or “wrong”. However, some rules advocated by prescriptivists are based on a **standard** or **prestige** dialect.

- Countries, provinces, territories, and institutions might adopt a certain dialect as the **standard**.
- The reasons why one dialect is considered standard (while others are not) are social and political, not linguistic.
- Standard dialects are usually based on the speech of the capital city, the political elite, or the upper class (e.g.: “The King’s English”).
- There’s nothing inherently better about a standard dialect or worse about non-standard dialects.

Remember: Each dialect has a grammar, and speakers of that dialect follow those rules. Every grammar is equal.

Standard vs. non-standard

- (5) a. Doug saw himself in the mirror.
b. Doug seen hissself in the mirror.

The two sentences **convey the same meaning** but:

- (5a) is considered to be standard and is associated with middle-class, educated or formal speech.
- (5b) is considered to be non-standard and is associated with working class, less educated, or informal (vernacular) speech.

These social meanings are evoked without regard to linguistic content.

- As response to a question, (5b) is no less accurate than (5a).
- As an observation, (5b) is no less true than (5a).

Standard vs. non-standard

- Language is an **arbitrary** system.
- No linguistic principle can predict what's standard or non-standard, only social convention.

Possessive	Reflexive
my	myself
your	yourself
her	herself
his	himself
our	ourselves
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their	themselves

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If standard dialects were based on logic, why don't we have **hisself** and **theirselves**?

Standard vs. non-standard

Why have a standard dialect?

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- The standard variety is often used for certain registers, such as writing.

But...there are also benefits to non-standard dialects/languages.

- Connection to your cultural identity.
- Signals you as a member of a particular social group.
- Signals authenticity (e.g., if you rap like the King speaks, you won't be very convincing).

Prescriptive rules also target informal speech.

- Most (if not all) languages have ways of expressing formality and familiarity in their grammars.
- Just like non-standard dialects, informal speech is not “incorrect”—it just has a different usage from formal speech.
- Informal speech is also **grammatical**:
 - *Goin' to the store, eh?* (grammatical)
 - **The store to eh goin'?* (ungrammatical)

Grammatical vs. ungrammatical

So far, we've seen many acceptable and unacceptable sentences, words, or combinations of sounds.

- From now on, I'll also use the terms **grammatical** and **ungrammatical** interchangeably with acceptable and unacceptable.

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 - **The pilot arrived the passengers.*
 - **Which does he like car?*

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- As we've already seen, we use an asterisk (*) to mark ungrammatical forms.
 - **The pilot arrived the passengers.*
 - **Which does he like car?*
- Grammaticality, in the technical linguistic sense that we're using in this course, is **judged with respect to a particular speaker or dialect**.
 - What is ungrammatical in one dialect/language may be grammatical in another dialect/language.

Grammatical vs. ungrammatical

Importantly, grammaticality is **not** based on:

- **Truth** (or else we could never lie)
- **Reality** (because we can talk about things that don't exist, e.g. unicorns)
- **Meaningfulness** (because we can say nonsensical but grammatical sentences)
 - *Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.*
 - **Green sleep ideas colourless furiously.*

Competence vs. Performance

We must also distinguish between **competence** and **performance**:

Competence is a speaker's tacit knowledge of their language.

Performance is a speaker's actual use of language in real situations.

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Competence is a speaker's tacit knowledge of their language.

Performance is a speaker's actual use of language in real situations.

- Real-world communication is filled with **performance** errors:
 - slips of the tongue, false starts, pauses, stuttering, etc.
 - Being tired or intoxicated can effect our speech.
- Linguists are primarily concerned with **competence**...
 - ...but we often use data from performance to learn about speakers' underlying competence.

Preview: The major topics in this course

Phonetics: the study of how we produce and perceive sounds in language.

- How do we make speech sounds? What types of sounds can we use? What makes different sounds sound different?

Phonology: the study of how sounds are categorized and interact with other sounds.

- How do sounds change? How do sounds affect other sounds? How do stress and intonation work?

Morphology: the study of word formation and structure.

- How are words formed? How do they change? Why are some words ambiguous in meaning (e.g., *unlockable*)?

Syntax: the study of sentence formation and structure.

- How are words put together to make sentences? Why can a sentence be infinitely long?

Preview: The major topics in this course

Semantics: the study of logical meaning.

- Why are some sentences ambiguous? How can we model the meaning of words and sentences?

Pragmatics: the study of implied meaning.

- How can you say one thing but mean something else?

Language acquisition: the study of how we learn to speak languages.

- How do children acquire language so quickly? Why are adults not able to acquire languages as well as children?

Sociolinguistics: the study of how language and society intersect.

- How do dialects of English vary? Why do we have more than one way to the same thing, and what does it mean to use one over another?

Historical linguistics: the study of language change.

- How has English changed over time? How are languages “genetically” related?

Language myths

- There are a LOT of myths out there about language in general, and about English specifically. I plan to address a number of these throughout the course.

For next Monday (16 Sept.):

- Read the posted reading (sections 2.0–2.3 and 2.7)

Course information (temporary):



<http://williamjohnston.github.io/lin1130>

william.johnston4@mail.mcgill.ca