Language: Some Introductory Remarks

The Structure of Class 1:

1. What is linguistics?
2. Creativity
3. Linguistic Competence
4. All Grammars are Equal
5. Universal Grammar
6. Iconicity vs. Arbitrariness

1. What is linguistics?

- Linguistics is the scientific study of human language.
- This is a growing area of study that has an impact on fields such as education, sociology, language teaching, cognitive psychology, philosophy, computer science, neuroscience, and artificial intelligence.

In what follows, we will review some background assumptions that linguists make when they study language.

2. Creativity

- Knowing a language means being able to produce new sentences never heard before. The creative ability is due to the fact that language use is not limited to stimulus-response behaviour.

  (1) a. Please cc me when you send this report to John.
     b. You should Band-Aid that cut.

- Creativity goes hand in hand with systematic constraints that establish the boundaries within which innovation can occur.

  (2) a. This dog frightened the cat that chased a mouse.
     b. *Frightened dog this cat that chased mouse a.

     b. *Tom midnighted in the streets.
3. Linguistic Competence

- Competence is the knowledge of a language. More precisely, it is the knowledge of rules that allows human beings to form and interpret the sounds, words, and sentences of their language. Linguists often refer to these rules as the grammar of a language. This knowledge is largely subconscious and not accessible to introspection.

(4)  
a. *I no see John.  
b. I don’t see John.

(5)  
a. *Kati tört egy vázá-t.  
    Kati.NOM broke a vase-ACC  
b. Kati el-tört egy vázá-t.  
    Kati.NOM PRT-broke a vase-ACC  
    'Kati broke a vase.'  
c. Kati tört egy darab kenyer-et.  
    Kati.NOM broke a piece bread-ACC  
    'Kati broke a piece of bread (off of a loaf of bread).'

- Performance is the use of a language in actual speech production and comprehension.

(6)  
a. Open the window.  
b. Can you please open the window?

- Linguists distinguish between the following components of a grammar:

(7)  
a. Phonetics: the articulation and perception of speech sounds  
b. Phonology: the patterning of speech sounds  
c. Morphology: word formation  
d. Syntax: sentence formation  
e. Semantics: the interpretation of words and sentences

4. All Grammars are Equal

- There is no such thing as a primitive language. Moreover, there is no such thing as a good (easy) grammar or a bad (difficult) grammar.

- However, there is a distinction that we need to make when it comes to the study of the grammars of languages.

    Descriptive approaches describe the grammar of a language that underlies the way native speakers speak or write that language.
Prescriptive approaches give advice on how you should speak (and write) a language.

There is often a sharp contrast between what forms occur in the language of native speakers, which is what grammars should describe, and what prescriptive grammars teach us.

Let’s examine (8) so that we can have a better understanding of the difference between the two approaches.

(8)  a. It is I.
     b. It’s me.

In this course we will take a descriptive approach to grammar.

5. Universal Grammar

- Universal Grammar is the system of categories, operations, and principles shared by all human languages and considered to be innate.
  - All languages use a small set of contrastive sounds that help distinguish words from each other.
  - All languages provide a means for asking questions and making assertions.
  - All languages have sentences made up of smaller units.
  - Anything we can imagine or think, we can express in any human language.

- Although languages show much variation on the surface, it is believed that they are very similar in form and function and conform to universal principles.

6. Iconicity vs. Arbitrariness

- Signs are nonarbitrary indicators of the things they signal, the things they are signs of.
- Symbols are arbitrary indicators of something conventional.
- Representational symbols or signs of iconicity in language:

  (9)  a. woof, quack, ribbit, moo
     b. o, a, e
     c. If you behave, I’ll bring you some candy.

- In spite of the above, language is fundamentally and essentially arbitrary.
References
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Martin’s.

Homework

Task 1
Consider the following sentences and determine which are possible sentences in English. 
For each unacceptable sentence, change the sentence to make it acceptable, and compare 
the two.

a. Jason’s mother left himself with nothing to eat.
b. Colin made Jane a sandwich.
c. Wayne prepared Zena a cake.
d. Max cleaned the garden up.
e. Max cleaned up the garden.
f. Max cleaned up it.

Task 2
Identify the prescriptive rules that are violated in each case below.

a. There’s twenty horses registered in the snow.
b. That window’s broke, so be careful.
c. Jim and me are gonna campin’ this week.
d. I seen the parade last week.
e. You could have went to the show.

Task 3
Read the excerpt from Noam Chomsky’s book *Reflections on Language* (1975: 3-4) — to 
be handed out in class — and answer the following questions:

- What interests you most about language?
- What do you expect from this course?

Task 4
Read pages 111-127 from O’Grady et al. (2005).