

Language & the Mind  
LING240  
Summer Session II 2005

Lecture 1  
What is Language?

## Course Info

Class web page:

<http://www.ling.umd.edu/llsp/LING240>

- Syllabus
- Schedule
- Homework
- Readings (protected directory)
  - name: 240summer, password: summer

What is language? Or "English"?

How would you show someone  
what language (or "English") is?

## Baker (2001)

Human languages can be thought of in these two ways as well. Suppose someone were to ask you what English is. You might respond by pointing to examples of written or spoken English. For example, you could hand her this book, open to this page, point to the ink marks and say, "This is English." This would be an extensional characterization of English: You are calling attention to some representative samples of actual English sentences. The other choice is to give your questioner some kind of recipe for forming and recognizing English sentences from scratch. You might say that English is the set of sentences that are constructed by combining the following ingredients (you hand her a massive dictionary that lists all the English words) according to the following rules of grammar (you hand her an equally massive English grammar). If these manuals were written in (say) Japanese, they might

## Baker (2001)

When we speak informally of *English*, we could have either of these two senses in mind. We could be thinking of English-as-recipe, or we could be thinking of examples-of-English. In one sense, English is a procedure for making sentences. This is what we implicitly mean when we say of someone that he *knows* English. We cannot mean by this that he has in mind a list of all possible English sentences. We must mean instead that he can follow the recipe for producing (and understanding) English sentences. Chomsky, who has done much to clarify this distinction, calls this sense of language "I-language," where *I* reflects the fact that it is an *intensional* characterization of language, one that is *internal* to the mind of a speaker. Alternatively, we could be thinking of English as a collection of actual sentences. That might be what we implicitly have in mind when we say of people that they *speak* English. By this we mean that many of the sentences that come out of their mouths are examples of the English language. Chomsky calls this sense of language "E-language," where *E* reflects the fact that it is an *extensional* notion of language, looking at *examples* of language as they exist *external* to the minds of people who speak the language.

## Grammar

What do we mean when we  
talk about a **grammar** of a  
particular language?

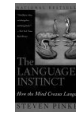
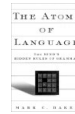


## Prescriptive Grammar



- Typically states what people *should* and *should not do* with a language
- ...according to some "authority"
- It *prescribes*

## Descriptive Grammar



- Describes what people *actually do* with language
- Explaining how the language system works
- It *describes*

## Some Prescriptive Rules of English

- *Don't* split infinitives
- *Don't* use double negation
- *Don't* end a sentence with a preposition
- *Don't* use *who* in place of *whom*
- *Don't* misuse *hopefully*
  - E.g. "Hopefully he will arrive tomorrow."

## Some Descriptive Rules of English

- The subject precedes the verb, the object follows the verb
  - "The goblin stole the child."
  - \*"Stole the child the goblin."
- Auxiliary verbs precede the subject in questions
  - "What has she done?"
  - \*"What she has done?"
- Form the plural of a noun by adding '-s'
  - goblin --> goblins

## Mental Grammar

- The knowledge that is stored in a speaker's head about his/her language
- Words and word order patterns (*syntax*)
- Sounds and sound patterns (*phonology*)
- Ways of constructing meanings (*semantics*)
- Ways of constructing words (*morphology*)
- Most of this knowledge is *unconscious* (cf. vision, walking)

## Mental Grammar

- All speakers have a systematic mental grammar
- Low prestige speech is also systematic
  - "I ain't done nothing"
  - "Done ain't I nothing"
  - "Nothing I done ain't."

## Where do prescriptive rules come from?

- "Tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration." - Samuel Johnson, 1775
- "If we allow standards to slip to a stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy...at school...all those things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose standards there's no imperative to stay out of crime." - Government Official, 1985

## Where do prescriptive rules come from?

"Don't drink too much wine, don't drink from your saucer ... Don't wear diamonds in the morning. Don't neglect the small hairs that project from the nostrils and grow about the apertures of the ears. ...

"Don't say *Gents* for *Gentlemen*. Don't say *pants* for *pantaloons*. ... Don't use a plural pronoun when a singular is called for. ... 'Everybody put on their hats' is a prevalent error. ... Don't say 'It is him', say 'It is he.' "

*Don't: A Manual of Mistakes and Improprieties*  
1880

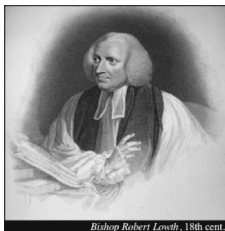
## Where do prescriptive rules come from?

- Rules adopted into English from Latin
- Rules adopted from mathematics
- Speech patterns imposed by speakers with high social prestige
- Word choices of older generation
- Attempts to improve clarity, avoid ambiguity

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## Latin Influence



Bishop Robert Lowth, 18th cent.

## Split Infinitives

"To boldly **go** where no man has gone before."

"To go boldly where no man has gone before."

"I want to quickly **read** the newspaper."

"I want quickly to read the newspaper."

English infinitive = 2 words, *to* + verb stem

## Split Infinitives

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English infinitive = 2 words, *to* + verb stem

Infinitives in Romance languages = 1 word

|        |                 |         |
|--------|-----------------|---------|
| comere | <i>to eat</i>   | Latin   |
| andare | <i>to go</i>    | Italian |
| estar  | <i>to be</i>    | Spanish |
| danser | <i>to dance</i> | French  |

(Bishop Robert Lowth, 1762,

*A Short Grammar of the English Language*)

## Which sounds more natural?

I hope unexpectedly **to win** the prize.

I hope **to** unexpectedly **win** the prize.

I hope **to win** unexpectedly the prize.

## Prescriptive rules are effortful to follow

“The English-speaking world may be divided into

- (1) those who neither know nor care what a split infinitive is
- (2) those who do not know, but care very much
- (3) those who know and condemn
- (4) those who know and approve
- (5) those who know and distinguish

Those who neither know nor care are the vast majority, and are a happy folk, to be envied.”

– H. W. Fowler, *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*

## Sentence-final Prepositions

“What did the president talk **about**?”

“About what did the president talk?”

“Who did you sit **with**?”

“With whom did you sit?”

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“With whom did you sit?”

Stranding of prepositions is *descriptively* impossible in *Romance* languages, e.g. Latin, Italian, French, Spanish

\* “Quien Juan ha hablado **con**?”

“This is a rule **up with which** we should not put.”

(Winston Churchill)

## Sentence-final Prepositions

The bed had not been slept in  
vs. **In the bed had not been slept.**

Something to talk about  
vs. **About something to talk**

What are you looking for?  
vs. **For what are you looking?**

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## Double Negatives

### English

- "I **didn't** see **nothing**."
- "He **didn't** **never** say **nothing** like that."

Mathematicians may object, but ...

### Spanish

"No vi **nada**."

*I didn't see nothing.*

*Not saw-I nothing.*

### French

"Il n'a jamais dit cela."

*He hasn't never said that.*

*He not-has never said that.*

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## The case of ain't

|     | 1700s  | Later<br>(some dialects) | Today  |
|-----|--------|--------------------------|--------|
| 1st | ain't  | ain't                    | —<br>↑ |
| 2nd | aren't | ain't                    | aren't |
| 3rd | isn't  | ain't                    | isn't  |

## Norms of Socially Dominant Group

- US: white, northern, wealthy class
- UK: southern upper-class English
- Latin America: Castilian Spanish (past)
- Brazil: European Portuguese (past)
- Ireland & US: British English (past)
- ...marker of social identification/allegiance

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## Hopefully...

- "The Jamaicans entered the bobsled competition hopefully and optimistically"
  - "Hopefully the Jamaicans will win the gold medal in the bobsled competition"
- = the speaker hopes

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## ambiguous Adverb Placement

- Students who seek advice from their TA often can improve their grades
- Students who often seek advice from their TA can improve their grades
- Students who seek advice from their TA can often improve their grades

## Adverb Placement

- He only juggled five crystals.
- He juggled only five crystals.



## Status of Prescriptive Grammar

- Individuals can consciously choose whether or not to follow it
- Can substantially affect how an audience judges a speaker or writer
- Sometimes aids clarity, sometimes not
- Typically associated with *social* prestige and education
- No scientific basis for its prestige

## Where might descriptive rules come from?

- Saying what 'makes sense'?
- Saying what is easily understandable?
- ...or it's just the way that English (French, Swahili, Ojibwa...) works

## What makes sense?

gave  
donated  
The millionaire { bought } the museum a painting.  
offered  
sent  
obtained  
presented

## What makes sense?

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

'Twas brillig and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

## What makes things easily understandable?

**The subject precedes the object (in English)**

"The fox bit the boy."

"The boy bit the fox."

Absent in German - case markers show subject and object

"Der Fuchs hat den Junge gebissen."

*The fox-nom has the boy-acc bitten.*

"Den Junge hat der Fuchs gebissen."

*The boy-acc has the fox-nom bitten.*

## What makes things easily understandable?

**The object follows the verb**

"I know that the goblin stole the child."

"I know that the goblin the child stole."



**The verb agrees with the subject**

"Hoggle likes Sarah."

"Hoggle like Sarah."



## What makes things easily understandable?

| This one is... | This one is <b>even</b> ... |
|----------------|-----------------------------|
| big            | _____                       |
| sad            | _____                       |
| sexy           | _____                       |
| black          | _____                       |
| delightful     | _____                       |
| cerulean       | _____                       |

## Descriptive rules just *are*

- Most descriptive rules do not aid clarity or comprehension  
...they are just the way they are
- Most descriptive rules are not included in standard grammar books  
...and they don't need to be

## Variation in Descriptive Rules Across Languages

- Some descriptive facts about languages are idiosyncratic
- Others come up again and again

## Pronoun Interpretation

- Restrictions...

While Sarah was on her quest, she ate a peach.  
Sarah ate a peach while she was on her quest.

While she was on her quest, Sarah ate a peach.  
\*She ate a peach while Sarah was on her quest.

(While on her quest, Sarah ate a peach.)

## Question Formation

- All languages have a way of turning statements into questions, and they do it in just 1 of 2 ways
- Declarative: Sarah ate a peach a moment ago.
- Option A: What did Sarah eat a moment ago?
- Option B: Sarah ate what a moment ago?
- Unattested: Sarah ate a moment ago what?  
(No language uniformly moves the wh-word to the end)

## Some or Any?

- Yesterday, the goblins didn't steal \_\_\_\_ children.
- Yesterday, the goblins *did* steal \_\_\_\_ children.
- Hoggle rescued Sarah after \_\_\_\_ fireys teased her.
- Hoggle rescued Sarah before \_\_\_\_ fireys teased her.
- One crystal had \_\_\_\_ dreams in it.
- Only one crystal had \_\_\_\_ dreams in it.
- Every goblin who stole \_\_\_\_ children got ale.
- Every goblin who stole children got \_\_\_\_ ale.

## Other Negative Polarity Items in English

- ever
- give a flying f\*\*k
- give a sh\*t
- budge an inch
- a damn thing
- worth a red cent

## The Status of Descriptive Rules

- Not a personal choice whether or not to follow it – it's automatic
- Doesn't require explicit teaching (for children, at least)
- Social prestige is *irrelevant*
- "Ungrammatical" is different from "Incomprehensible"



## Ungrammatical vs. Incomprehensible

Ungrammatical, but comprehensible:

\*“The king donated the museum a priceless heirloom.”

Incomprehensible, but grammatical:

“The goblin who the king who the girl conquered snarled at ran away.”

(Conforms to the descriptive rules of grammar.)