

Language: A Preview

- Language is a *system of conventionalized symbols* by which we communicate.
- Property #1: arbitrariness
- Property #2: symbolism
- Property #3: creativity

Arbitrariness

- The concept ✎ is represented by the word *hand* (English), *main* (French), *Hand* (German), *ruka* (Russian), *käsi* (Finnish), etc.
- The relationship between speech sounds and meaning is *arbitrary*. If you do not know a language, the sounds spoken to you will be incomprehensible.
- Because the relationship between speech sounds and what they represent is arbitrary, different languages have different speech sounds to represent the same thing:

English: *The rice is burning!*

Korean: *Pap thanda!*

Swahili: *Wali inaunguwu!*

Different sounds, same message.

- There is some “sound symbolism” in language: there are words where the pronunciation suggests the meaning.
- Onomatopoeic words
 - the sounds of the words “imitate” the sounds of nature
 Examples: *cuckoo* (English),
 cuco (Spanish),
 kakukk (Hungarian),
 kuckuck (German), etc.

Additional examples: *slurp, hiss, buzz*

- There is only a small group of *onomatopoeic words* in the vocabulary of any language.
- The majority of words in *all* languages is *arbitrary*.

Symbolism

- The relationship between the *words* and *things we experience* is symbolic.

“cat” symbolizes a certain class of quadruped.

“table” symbolizes a certain type of furniture.

Creativity

- Creativity is the characteristic of *all* languages that allows *novel utterances to be created* in response to new thoughts, experiences, and situations.

The dog chased the cat.

The cat chased the dog.

The boy chased the dog.

The cat ate the rat.

- *The twiffer swafed the woff.*
This sentence does not make any sense because the words have *no* meaning; however, its structure conforms to the rules of English.
- * *Cat the chase the boy the.*
– This sentence does *not* conform to the rules of English.

Constraints on Creativity

She *summered* in Mexico.

He *holidayed* in Hawaii.

Summered and *holidayed* are verbs created from time expressions.

Why are the following sentences incorrect?

* It *midnighted* in the park.

* He *nooned* at home.

Midnight and *noon* are points of time rather than periods of time.

- Possible sound combinations in English:

prace

traf

flib

- The following sound combinations are *not* possible in English:

**nbik*

**ftra*

**zmrzlu*

Languages are Rule-governed Structures

- Languages are rule-governed structures. These rules are *not* imposed from the outside. The word *rule* is not a prescription of what to do or not to do.
- The rules reflect the systematic structure of language. They are observed regularities of language behavior.

Grammar

- ELEMENTS
speech sounds, words, etc.
- RULES
 - combine these elements

Characteristics of Grammar

- Grammar = *Elements* and *Rules*
- *Linguistic Competence* = knowledge of language
- *Linguistic Performance* = how people use their knowledge of language (=grammar) in comprehension and production.

- All languages have a grammar. They are more or less *equal* in complexity
- Do we need *speech* for communicating with language?
NO, speech \neq language.

Modes of Communication

- There are different modes that involve communicating with LANGUAGE (= linguistic communication):
 - speech (most common)
 - writing
 - signing

Misconceptions

“Grammatical rules are supposed to be *logical*”.

Example

I don't have none.

Arguments

ungrammatical: the two negatives cancel each other out.

Not logical!

grammatical: the use of double negatives reinforce each other.

Logical!

- Spanish
 - Juan no vió nada.
 - J. not saw nothing
 - *J. did not see anything.*

- Hungarian
 - János nem látott semmit.
 - J. not saw nothing.
 - *J. did not see anything.*
- English: I don't have none.
 - This sentence was grammatical until the 18th century.

COMPONENTS OF GRAMMAR

- Phonetics
 - *the articulation and perception of speech sounds*
- Phonology
 - *the patterning of speech sounds*
- Morphology
 - *word formation*
- Syntax
 - *sentence formation*
- Semantics
 - *the interpretation of words and sentences*

PROPERTIES OF GRAMMAR: 1.

Generality

- Generality
 - all languages have a grammar; they are more or less equal in complexity.*

Misconception

“Not *all* languages have a grammar.”

Example

- Two dogs now see several kangaroos.

In Walbiri, an aboriginal language of Australia, there are five ways to say the English sentence above. Word order is not restricted as it is in English:

- a. Dogs two now see kangaroos several.
 - b. See now dogs two kangaroos several.
 - c. See now kangaroos several dogs two.
 - d. Kangaroos several now dogs two see.
 - e. Kangaroos several now see dogs two.
- There are different grammatical rules in Walbiri: the ending *-lu* (=subject marker) indicates the desired interpretation.
 - WALBIRI *does* have a grammar. It is different from English in certain respects.

2. Parity

- Parity

all grammars are equal

Misconception

“Some languages have grammars that are radically simpler or more *primitive* than those of other languages.”

Example:

a)	English	French
	<i>the book</i>	<i>le livre</i>
	<i>the books</i>	<i>les livres</i>

- b. ENGLISH
- He is listening to music.*
- He listens to music.*

FRENCH

Il écoute la musique.

3. Universality

Universality

Grammars are alike in basic ways.

- linguistic property that is common to all languages
- universal grammar
 - identifies the *possible* forms of grammars
- universal tendencies

4. Mutability

• Mutability

grammars change over time

- All living languages change with time.

• Example

a) prior to 1200

“Ic ne seye not.”

Modern English

“I don’t say”.

b) change of the negative construction in English

– see the example on pp. 8,9.

5. Inaccessibility

Inaccessibility

Grammatical knowledge is subconscious.

Misconception

“People must be taught the grammatical rules of their language.”

Example

- a. *t*op [t^h] b. *book*s [s]
*s*to

stop [t] *dog*s [z]

Grammatical knowledge is subconscious : no instruction is needed for the acquiring of the grammar.

LINGUISTICS

- a scientific inquiry into human language
- linguists *describe* grammars

↓
descriptive grammars

DESCRIPTIVE GRAMMARS:

- Research that aims at *describing* language and not to *prescribe* preferences for certain aspects of linguistic communication.
- The sentence below is acceptable to some speakers of English:

You was in the theatre last night.

(Prescriptive rule: the form of the verb should be *were* when the subject is *you*).