LNGT0101
Introduction to Linguistics

Announcements

• If you haven’t sent me the questionnaire yet, please do this today.

• How was the reading?

Definition from last class

• Linguistics is the **scientific** study of human **language**.

• Two questions:
  - What is ‘scientific’?
  - What is ‘language’?

How is linguistics scientific?

Collect data

↓

Identify patterns in the data

↓

Develop hypotheses to explain the patterns

↓

Test our hypotheses by going back to step 1

Which English do you speak?

• What do you call the thing from which you might drink water in a school?
• What is your generic term for a sweetened carbonated beverage?
• How do you pronounce the ’c’ in grocery?
• Fill in the blank with the past verb form of ‘drag’:

  ___ I ______ her lifeless body from the pool.

• Can you say ”I used to could do that” to mean ”I used to be able to do that”?

Variation in vowels on Martha’s Vineyard
Variation in vowels on Martha’s Vineyard

- Some speakers on the island had a distinctive pronunciation of the two vowels, /ɔɪ/ and /ɔʊ/ (phonetically called diphthongs), in words such as “like, while, might” and “house, out, trout.”
- This linguistic feature was characteristic of people living on the island (as opposed to summer tourists), hence it was a regional feature.
- The puzzle was that, within the island population, some residents had it more frequently in their speech than others.

Variation in vowels on Martha’s Vineyard

- This specific pronunciation on Martha’s Vineyard thus acted as a marker of group identification.
- How closely speakers identified with the island, wanted to enter into the mainstream, saw themselves as Vineyarders and were proud of it, was positively correlated with the degree of occurrence of that particular pronunciation of vowels.
- Great, but how do we test this hypothesis?
- This became obvious when Labov partitioned his informants in terms of their attitude towards the island.

Pronunciation and attitude towards Martha’s Vineyard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persons</th>
<th>/ɔɪ/</th>
<th>/ɔʊ/</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40 (Positive)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 (Neutral)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (Negative)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So, …

- Linguists study language using the scientific method:
  - They try to figure out the underlying system regulating the language (e.g., Samoan plural verb conjugation).
  - They collect and classify linguistic data (e.g., Bert Vaux’s US English dialect maps).
  - They try to explain linguistic patterns (e.g., Labov’s study of Martha’s Vineyard’s speech).
  - They can also design experiments to study linguistic behavior (as we’ll discuss later).

So, …

- The one thing shared in common by all the examples we have talked about so far is that they involve Language.
- Which leads us to the question: What is language after all?
Language

• Ferdinand de Saussure (1916): No subject has generated “more absurd notions, more prejudices, more illusions, more fantasies” than the study of language.

• So, let’s engage in some group discussion about this: What is language? [No need to fight each other, though!]

Language

• Pretty much everyone agrees that language is a communication system.

• But what does a communication system consist of?

Signs

• A sign is a pairing of a form and a meaning.

• Signs can be iconic or symbolic.
Signs

- Language is a means of communication that relies on a system of signs.
- What are the signs in language?
- But is the sign system of human language different from other communication systems?

Communication systems

- All communication systems have some design features in common:
  - A mode of communication: vocal-auditory (humans and most animals), gestural (apes), tactile (bees), or even chemical (moths).
  - Semantics: Signals have meaning.
  - Pragmatic function: Signals have a purpose, e.g., helping the species survive or influencing others’ behavior.

Spiders

- For instance, spiders use a complex system of gestures for courtship.

Fiddler crabs

- The same is true of fiddler crabs’ “claw-waving” movement.

Vervet monkeys

- Image of vervet monkeys in specific positions.
Charles Hockett’s Design features

• The linguist Charles Hockett described human language in terms of a set of design features, some of which are shared by some animal communication systems, while some seem to be human-language-specific.
• We discuss that next class.

Next class agenda

• Finish reading Chapter 1, pp. 1-21, if you haven’t already.
• Read Chapter 9, pp. 394–397 and pp. 422-425.