

LNGT0101 Introduction to Linguistics



Lecture #3
Sept 15th, 2014

Announcements

- Homework #1 is now posted in both .doc and .pdf formats on the course website.
- It's due **Monday September 22** by e-mail no later than **5pm**; however, if you plan to submit a hard copy, then you do have to turn it in in my mailbox at Farrell House **by 5pm** on that same day.
- The assignment involves reading some articles as well as watching a 60-minute movie. So, start working on it early! Don't procrastinate!

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Announcements

- Delay policy applies as described on the syllabus and class website:
 - 5% off if turned in after the deadline on the day it's due (that means prior to midnight).
 - 10% off if turned in on the next day after the deadline.
 - 20% off if turned in later than that.
 - Not accepted after I post the solutions.
- Please make sure to spend a few minutes reading the [Guidelines](#) to answering questions on assignments.

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Prof. Deborah Cameron's talk

- Mark your calendar for this talk. You are required to go and there will be at least one homework question on the talk.
- "Sex, Lies and Stereotypes: Do We Ask the Right Questions About Language and Gender?," a public talk by Deborah Cameron, Professor of Language and Communication (University of Oxford).
- **October 30th at 4:30 in the Robert A. Jones '59 Conference Room.** Refreshments will be served.

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Questionnaire

- Thanks for filling in the questionnaire, with several interesting suggestions and comments. Here's a summary:

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Topics of interest

- I'm interested in why people have so much difficulty pronouncing sounds that are not part of their native languages. If everyone has the same muscles in their mouths, it seems a little strange to me.
- I really hope that we can cover the movement of language geographically. Also, I am hoping to learn about the processing in the brain that creates and understands language.

Topics of interest

- I wanted to learn more about languages and the way language works in general.
- I hope that in this course we learn about how different languages or accents are formed over time.
- I am fascinated by the enormous connection between our brain and language, and how our language affects our thought and the way we perceive things. However, I want to learn more about the sound system of a language.

Topics of interest

- The role politics plays in developing language.
- Professional Jargon.
- Diglossia, SOV vs. SVO and other word orders, creole and pidgin languages
- The neuro-psychological aspects of how languages have come to be used how they are and how languages can affect our brains so strongly.

Topics of interest

- I hope that the course will cover the origins of language and how different languages have evolved and changed.
- I'm very interested in the debate over the "correctness" of ebonics.
- I hope this course will cover variation in languages across countries, untranslatable words, as well as the creation of dialects within languages.

Topics of interest

- I'm interested in knowing how languages decide on which sounds they will use.
- Learning about languages and how words mean different things and the different types of sentence structures. Also, I am interested in neuroscience so I'm curious how we develop a language.
- I hope to learn why some people have a harder time understanding and developing languages than other people.

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Topics of interest

- Gender in languages, phonology, etymology.
- Phonology.
- I am very interested in learning how languages have evolved over time, and how their presence has come to affect and influence thought.

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Topics of interest

- I hope this course will cover some sociolinguistics.
- I am quite intrigued by the Whorfian hypothesis and would like to explore more arguments for and against it.

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Topics of interest

- How culture/environment/geography/society affect language and vice versa
- Endangered/obscure languages
- A little bit of neurobiology behind learning and processing language
- Experiments/case studies

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Topics of interest

- I would love to talk about how language changes with geography, how languages have evolved over time; I took Latin for 6 years, and I now take Spanish and Italian and I think it would be very cool to study how the changes evolved between the three current Romance languages.
- I hope this course will cover the evolution of language from gesturing, to writing (perhaps on cave walls), to grunting, to the actual formation of words.

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Topics of interest

- I would be interested in how the use of slang and phrases developed. I find it interesting that slang can be created in a language based on a play on words, and often these phrases can be untranslatable. Having a discussion about the history and development through time of slang would be interesting to be a part of.

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Today's agenda

- Communication systems that seem to have human-language properties.
- Can animals learn human language?
- Presentations from *Language Myths*:
 - Myth 12: 'Bad grammar is slovenly.'
 - Myth 16: "You shouldn't say 'It is me' because 'me' is accusative."

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Transition from last class

- Human language has some design features that do not seem to be available in other communication systems: Displacement, creativity, and discrete infinity.
- This can be refuted in one of two ways:
 - Find an animal communication system that has these features.
 - Teach animals to use human language.

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The dances of bees: An exception?

- Bees interact via a "dance" signaling system whereby they communicate to one another the distance, direction, and quality of a food source. [WATCH](#).

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Bees

- But why is this challenging?
- Displacement?
- Or maybe not.
- For one thing, even if it does have displacement, it is definitely restricted to a particular domain. It is frozen and inflexible.

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Bees

- Also, we can represent the bees' messages in a number of ways. It could be that the signal is "*There's a food source 40 feet from the hive at a 45° angle from the sun,*" in which case it does exhibit displacement.
- But the signal could also be represented differently, as in "*Fly 45° for 2 minutes.*"

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Bees

- Does the bee dance system have creativity?
- If put under special circumstances (walk, stop several times, strong light source), a bee has no way of conveying that to other bees.
- Totally genetic? Most likely, given cases of cross-breeding.

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So,

- It seems, then, that human language is qualitatively different from other communication systems, particularly with regard to displacement, creativity, and discrete infinity.
- But if this is case, then now the question becomes: "Why is this so?"

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So, why is human language different?

- The answer given by most modern linguists, and most notably by **Noam Chomsky**, to this question is: *Biology*.
- We learn and use language for the same reason birds fly and fish swim: We are genetically endowed with a species-specific ability, called "the language faculty," that allows us to do so.

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Counter-evidence?

- How can we falsify this claim?
- Get animals to learn human language and use it.

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Primate studies

- 1930s: Gua
- 1950s: Viki
- 1965-1972: Allen and Beatrice Gardner trained Washoe, a female chimpanzee, to use American Sign Language. Washoe learned 132 signs at five years of age, sometimes creating novel combinations, e.g., WATER BIRD (for a duck) and BABY IN MY CUP (for toy doll in a dirking cup).

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Primate studies

- 1972: Koko, like Washoe, learned several hundred signs, and created new ones, e.g., FINGER BREACELET (for ring). [Koko's website](#).

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Nim Chimpsky

- Then came Nim Chimpsky in the late 1970s. [Project Nim](#)
- Nim was trained by Herbert Terrace, and by age four, he had acquired 125 signs.
- Examination of the videotapes of chimp and trainer, however, showed many dissimilarities between Nim's and a human child's acquisition of language.

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Nim Chimpsky

- Nim never initiated signing.
- Only 12% of his signs were spontaneous, whereas 40% were mere repetitions of the trainer's signs.
- Nim's signing was typically a request for food or social reward. He never asked questions.
- Nim did not seem to know any grammar. He rarely went beyond the two-word combinations, and when he did, the additional signs added no new information: *give orange me give eat orange me eat orange give me eat orange give me you*.

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Nim Chimpsky

- Tapes of Washoe and Koko showed the same thing.
- Terrace thus concluded that these chimps never actually learned human language.
- Chimpanzee signing and symbol manipulation is more likely the result of response-reward association and/or trainers' cueing (known as **dressage**).

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Moral of the Great Ape Debate

- Among linguists, the general belief today is that animals' communication systems, while rich, sophisticated, and subtle, are *qualitatively* different from human language.
- Biology just happened to have it this way.

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Nature + Nurture

- Notice, crucially, that the human language faculty is NOT our ability to learn a *particular* language; rather, it is our ability to learn *Language*.
- Learning a particular language is obviously the result of interaction between nature (the language faculty) and nurture (the linguistic environment).

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But ...

- Why does there have to be a separate faculty for language? Why can't that ability be part of our general intelligence as human beings?
- We discuss this and other issues related to the biological basis of language on Wednesday.

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Presentation and discussion

- The debate about prescriptivism.
 - Myth 12: 'Bad grammar is slovenly.'

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Next class agenda

- More on prescriptivism vs. descriptivism (Read Myth 16).
- Language and brain. Finish reading the relevant sections in Chapter 10, if you haven't done that already.

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