

LNGT0101

Introduction to Linguistics



Lecture #4
Sept 17th, 2014

Announcements

- Any questions on Homework 1?
- Spencer's question: Forager bees do sleep at night.

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Presentation and discussion

- Myth 16: "You shouldn't say 'It is me' because 'me' is accusative."

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Some fun links

- The barbarians have done it.
- Weird AI:
■ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Gv0H-vPoDc>

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And a joke



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What is 'grammar'?

- The word 'grammar' can have different meanings.
 - Prescriptive grammar.*
 - Descriptive grammar.
 - Mental grammar.

*We'll revisit the effects of prescriptive grammar on language attitudes in a society later in the semester. So, we'll get back to this.

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Linguistic knowledge is largely unconscious

- Why do we think there is anything called a mental grammar?
- Because we know far more about our language than what prescriptive grammarians talk about in their grammar books.
- And what is amazing is that we happen to have that knowledge even without knowing how or why. Let's consider some examples.

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Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it.
So, how did you know it?

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Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

“klib” vs. “mglā”

- Which one do you think can be a name of a new kind of edible CDs in English?

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Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

- And consider your pronunciation of the plural -s in the following words:
 - cats*
 - dogs*
 - kisses*
- You may or may not have noticed that before, but the -s is actually pronounced differently in each case. You know that, even though it's something you were never taught.

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Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

- I ate a turkey sandwich.
- I devoured a turkey sandwich.
- Now:
 - “Would you like to join us for lunch?”
 - No, thanks. I just ate.
 - *No, thanks. I just devoured.

(Note that a star is linguists' convention to indicate that a language form is bad.)

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Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

- How about the following two sentences? What does each one mean to you?
 - Anne hit the man with an umbrella.*
 - Visiting relatives can be a nuisance.*

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Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it?

- Again, this sentence has two meanings:
Anne hit the man with an umbrella.
- Now, let's form a question:
What did Anne hit the man with?
- Is the question still ambiguous between two meanings?

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Stuff that you know, even though you don't know that you know it. So, how did you know it

- We can go on listing tens of examples like these. Refer also to the example about question-formation in English in Myth 12.
- But the moral is the same: We know far more about our language than what our linguistic experience (or language teachers) could have possibly provided us with.

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Plato's paradox

- This remarkable feat of language acquisition by children raises an interesting question, what Chomsky refers to as *Plato's paradox*:
"How can a system of knowledge with such complexity and abstractness arise in the mind when the stimulus bearing on that system is so impoverished?"

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The poverty of the stimulus

- One possible answer: It must be that part of our linguistic knowledge is "built-in".
- This argument for the biological basis for language is typically referred to as the "*poverty of the stimulus*" argument.
- Cognitivist vs. behaviorist approaches to language acquisition.

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But ...

- There is a debate as to whether we have a separate faculty for language, or if language is simply part of our general intelligence as human beings.
- We discuss this and other issues related to the biological basis of language in the rest of today's class.

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Language and intelligence

- The main argument typically cited against language being part of our general intelligence is the so-called "*double dissociation*" argument.
- Put simply, there are cases where general intelligence is affected but language ability remains intact. And there are cases where linguistic ability is affected, but other cognitive abilities remain intact.

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Language and intelligence

- **Turner's Syndrome and Williams Syndrome.**
- **Savants:** Cf. the discussion of the cases of Laura and Christopher in the textbook.
- **Specific language impairments (SLIs):** The case of the KE family (first studied by Myrna Gopnik and associates).

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The KE family

Grandparents		F(76)—M (deceased)			
Parents	F(48)—M	M(47)—F	F(45)—M	M(42)—F	F(40)—M
Children	F(19) M(18) F(14) M(10)	M(22) F(20)	F(23) F(19) F(14) F(13) M(10)	M(12) F(9) F(7) F(4)	M(19) M(17) M(16) F(14) M(12) M(10) F(9) M(8) F(8)

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The KE family

- The linguistic performance of members of the KE family who had the SLI was characterized by:
 - Slow speech,
 - frequent stoppage for corrections, and
 - absence of inflections like plural and tense.
 - The boy *eat* three *cookie*.
 - Every day he walks 8 miles. Yesterday he ...
Response: *Walk*.
- Language therapy did not help.
- Notice, however, that all cognitive abilities remained intact.

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Uniformity of language acquisition

- Children go through the same language acquisition stages across different languages: babbling, one-word stage, two-word stage, telegraphic speech, until they eventually converge on the “adult” grammar.
- English children typically drop function words during the **telegraphic speech** stage.

Cat stand up table.

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Uniformity of language acquisition

- Similarly, children go through similar stages in their acquisition of negation in English:

no Fraser drink all tea

He no bite you.

I can't catch you.

I don't like it.

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Uniformity of language acquisition

- Children also overgeneralize, again showing they're trying to figure out a “mental” grammar:
 - comed, goed, bringed,*
 - mans, foots*
- Notice that these forms do not occur in the linguistic environment of the child (contrary to what we expect under behaviorist theories of language learning).

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Reinforcement goes by unnoticed

- Even worse for the behaviorist approach is that it predicts that children should actually respond positively to correction of their utterances.
- But there is good evidence to the contrary: children typically resist (or simply ignore) correction of their language.
- Let's look at a couple of famous anecdotal child-parent exchanges.

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“Incorrigible” children

- *Exchange #1 (from Braime 1971):*
Child: Want other one spoon, daddy.
Parent: You mean, you want the other spoon.
Child: Yes, I want other one spoon, please Daddy.
Parent: Can you say 'the other spoon'?
Child: Other...one...spoon
Parent: Say 'other'
Child: Other
Parent: 'Spoon'
Child: Spoon
Parent: 'Other spoon'
Child: Other...spoon. Now give me other one spoon.

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“Incorrigible” children

- *Exchange #2 (from McNeill 1966):*
Child: Nobody don't like me.
Parent: No, say 'nobody likes me.'
Child: Nobody don't like me.
[repeats eight times]
Parent: No, now listen carefully; say 'nobody likes me.'
Child: Oh! Nobody don't likes me.

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Why do children have it easy?

- Ever wondered why you're having hard time learning a foreign language, even though you had no trouble whatsoever learning your first language?
- A critical period?

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cuckoo



Bullfinch



chaffinch

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A critical period for language acquisition?

- So, if language has a biological component, we have an answer: Certain biological abilities follow a timetable and then get either “turned off” or “degrade” considerably, as Eric Lenneberg suggested for language in 1967.
- How do we test this hypothesis?

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A critical period for language acquisition?

- The cases of “wild children”.
- **Isabelle** discovered at the age of 6 with no language skills, but within a year she learned to speak and was able to function normally in school.
- **Genie** discovered at the age of 13, but her language development never matched what normal children do (“bathroom have big mirror”).
- **Chelsea** misdiagnosed as mentally ill, fitted with hearing aids at 31, but after 12 years of training her language level remained that of a 2 and ½ year old (“hit ball,” “cupboard put food”).

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So, ...

- We thus seem to have good evidence for:
 - Dissociation between language and intelligence.
 - Uniform acquisition of language by children.
 - A critical period for learning a language natively (with the caveat we mentioned in discussion).

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Next class agenda

- Finishing our discussion of language and brain.
- Introducing morphology. Read Chapter 2, pp. 33-49.

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