Ling 101, Fall 2006: Introduction

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1 Introduction to Linguistics

1. What is linguistics?
   - The scientific study of language.
2. What is language?
   - A cognitive system.
   - A conventional system of communication.
   - Figuring out exactly what language is will be part of the focus of this course!
3. Natural language: language that develops naturally in normal humans (vs. artificial language).
4. Linguistics is NOT:
   - Learning to speak many languages;
   - Telling people their grammar ain't no good;
   - Literature or style;
   - Or anything else—it is the scientific study of language.
5. Linguistics is the *scientific study of language*.
   Scientific study =
   - Observation;
   - Hypothesis formation;
   - Hypothesis testing;
   - Amending hypothesis.
6. Scientific Observation vs. Judgement
   - Pandas

OBSERVATION	JUDGEMENT
Pandas only eat bamboo	Pandas are finicky
Pandas cannot digest plants	Pandas are poorly evolved
Pandas may only mate for 2-3 days per year	Pandas deserve to be extinct
   - (Compare to Navajo relocation/foster parents)
   - Language judgements

- Judgement on languages deserving to become extinct

OBSERVATION	JUDGEMENT
Many lang's use double negatives	2 negatives = 1 positive
Don't you eat no cookies!	must mean *Eat cookies!*
Some dialects don't use 3S Agr	These speakers are ignorant.
He don't know that.	
Hawaiian Creole distinguishes completed	Standard English is weak
from uncompleted purpose clauses	in expressive power?
John bin go Honolulu go see Mary. (did)	
vs. *John bin go Honolulu for see Mary.* (didn't or unknown)	
Some dialects drop plural marker	Standard English is redundant?
I walked three mile.	

2 Some Initial Observations

1. Acquiring language:
   - All normal humans acquire a language.
   - Other animals do not appear to acquire language.
   - Any human infant will acquire any language it is exposed to.
   - There do not appear to be any differences in how fast particular languages are acquired by children.
   - Conclusion: All human languages are equal in complexity and learnability; all humans are genetically endowed with the ability to learn a language.
2. Some Non-Observations
   - Eskimos have several hundred words for snow.
     see Pullum, G., *The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax*.
   - German is much harder to learn than English.
   - Kids today are, like, corrupting good English.
   - English is in danger of being displaced by the languages of immigrants from other countries.
3. Language Universals: Languages are remarkably similar.
   - They all have basic grammatical categories like nouns and verbs;
     English SVO, Japanese SOV, Arabic VSO, Passamaquoddy any, but all have S,V,O
   - They all distinguish contentful words (*computer*, *to email*) from grammatical ones (*for*, *should*);
   - They all draw from a limited repertoire of syntactic devices and constructions.
     example: English question formation:
     You can understand Cousin It →
     Can you understand Cousin It?
     logically possible alternative—Reverse Order:
     It Cousin understand can you?
     no language uses Reverse Order, many languages use inversion