

# Ling 101, Fall 2006: What Is Language?

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## 1 Some Current Issues

### 1.1 Language Policies

- Bigger problem outside the US, where minorities with distinct languages live within a country where majority speak different language (Catalan in Spain, Basque in Spain and France, etc.).
- English-First Movement—some points made by Pullum:
  1. English has never been in any danger: Rapidly spreading as the lingua franca of the world; for generations immigrants from all over the world have completely switched to English.
  2. Complaints about voting and ballots, drivers' licenses, aren't about English at all; aren't even related to English. These are attacks on immigrants.
  3. Movement is completely illogical and self-contradictory, just uses inflammatory imagery.
- Point not made by Pullum: Bilingual education works, by all measures, in helping to assimilate immigrants. Cuts to funding are just mean-spirited: don't want to help immigrants.

### 1.2 Bilingualism

- Throughout the history of the world multilingualism has been the norm.
- Only in modern empires has monolingualism suddenly become prevalent.
- All studies show that children are not hampered in any way by learning more than one language.

### 1.3 Illogic and Irrationality

Shoddy thinking about language prevails, as “The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax” illustrates. Even in supposedly well-researched textbooks:

- From *The Story of English*, by Robert McCrum, William Cran, and Robert MacNeil, page 49:

The importance of this cultural revolution [conversion to Christianity] in the story of the English language is not merely that it strengthened and enriched Old English with new words, more than 400 of which survive to this day, but also that it gave English the capacity to express abstract thought. Before the coming of St. Augustine, it was easy to express the common experience of life—sun and moon, hand and heart, sea and land, heat and cold—in Old English, but much harder to express more subtle ideas without resort to rather elaborate, German-style portmanteaux like *frumweorc* (*fruma*, beginning, and *weorc*, work = creation). Now, there were Greek and Latin words like *angel*, *discipline*, *litany*, *martyr*, *mass*, *relic*, *shrifft*, *shrine*, and *psalm* ready to perform quite sophisticated functions.

1. Pretends to be learned but can't even get linguistic terms right: *frumweorc* is a compound, not a portmanteau;
2. Contradicts itself: Old English can't express abstract thought, but then it gives an example of an abstract concept, *frumweorc*, 'creation'.
3. What is its metric of simplicity? *Frumweorc* consists of two morphemes, so does *creation*.
4. Insulting to Germans. Apparently they can't express subtle ideas unclumsily. But English has borrowed some German words like *schadenfreude*, *zeitgeist*, which are considered quite sophisticated.
5. Seems to have underlying bias: Latin and Greek are more sophisticated, more able to express "subtle" ideas.
6. So really the passage is describing two separate things: Cultural shift in conversion to Christianity; and massive borrowing from Latin (and Greek).
7. But these two things are separable: don't need to borrow a language to borrow a religion. Some words from Eliot's Bible in the language Massachusett or Wampanoag (i.e., all languages have equal capacity to express thought):

- (1) a. nohtompeantog            michemohteau chepiohkomuk  
       lead-pray-do.habitually be.forever  
       'minister' 'eternal' 'hell'

- Language and thought are separate (next lecture). All languages have means for expressing new ideas:

1. Circumlocute (*transmigration*: "being reborn in another body")
2. Adapt an existing word (Arabic *haatif*, 'telephone', originally 'disembodied voice')
3. Create a new word from existing pieces (*stick-to-it-iveness*)  
 Massachusett *wu-mannittoo-m-i-tch-eg* 'those who have him as god' = 'Christian'
4. Borrow (*moose*, *toboggan*, *alcohol*, *menage a trois*, *schadenfreude*)

## 2 Some Initial Observations

Compare to walking: natural state of humans is bipedal, infants achieve it universally without instruction.

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; no connection between race/ethnicity and 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*

### 4 Linguistic Knowledge

What do we know when we know a language?

1. Sounds (or signs)—*phonetics* and *phonology*;
  - Legitimate English combinations  
Jabberwocky, brillig, mimsey vs. hringbroyt, xolotl, pskihkw, čkuwi
  - accents  
zis and zat, Japanese r and l
2. Words and their meanings—*morphology, lexical semantics*;
  - Words = arbitrary pairings of sounds to meanings (lorry vs. truck, toboggan)
  - Grammatical properties (e.g., category)  
I sing, you sing, she sings; I sang; I have sung
3. Ways to combine words (and other units) into meaningful combinations—*morphology, syntax, semantics*.
  - Language is infinitely creative.  
*Most of the sentences in this lecture you've never heard before.*  
*Most of the sentences you utter you've never uttered before.*  
*... it was nonetheless another ridiculously subjective attempt to convert into a mental event of the kind I was professionally all too familiar with what had once again been established as all too subjectively real. —Roth, Operation Shylock*  
can always add: I should have known that it was nonetheless. . .  
or: She told me that I should have known that it was nonetheless. . .
  - If I give you any novel sentence, you can form a question from it:  
*Those who shave in the yard should at least wear bathrobes. →*  
*Should those who shave in the yard at least wear bathrobes?*
  - Infinite capacity from finite means
  - Rule-governed (e.g., question formation)  
*\*Shave those who in the yard should at least wear bathrobes?*

## 5 Knowledge of English

Your knowledge gives you the capacity described above. It also tells you what is and what is not English (taupe skittles example).

- (6) Should those who shave in the yard at least wear bathrobes?
- (7) \* Shave those who in the yard should at least wear bathrobes?

Intuition: Sentence (7) is not English. Signify this with the “\*”.

1. **Mental Grammar** of English: A system of knowledge and rules that enable you to understand and produce English.

- *Grammar* is now a technical term. It is a system of knowledge and rules that enable you to understand and produce English.

2. Models of this mental grammar: also called “grammars.”

- Our models and hypotheses about grammatical rules are purely *descriptive*, in the sense that they aim to describe the actual knowledge of a speaker of a language.

3. Descriptive vs. Prescriptive

- *Prescriptive*: To wantonly split one’s infinitives is to flaunt proper English.
- *Descriptive*: It sounds unnatural to many speakers to not split infinitives.
- *Descriptive*: For most speakers, \**I are* is ungrammatical except in the following context: *Aren’t I the best?* vs. \**I aren’t the best.*
- *Prescriptive*: Don’t end sentences with prepositions.
- *Descriptive*: Prepositions must be stranded in the following context: *This is a good book for you to curl up with.* vs. \**This is a good book with which for you to curl up.*
- *Prescriptive*: Don’t end sentences with prepositions.
- *Descriptive*: *What for* can only mean ‘why’ when *for* does end a sentence: *What did you do that for?* vs. *For what did you do that?* (≠ ‘why’)

4. Some terminology:

- Grammar: mental system of rules
- Grammatical: consistent with the mental grammar
- Ungrammatical: inconsistent with the mental grammar

5. Cognitive Science

- Language is a grammar in an individual’s mind.
- “English” is a cover term for the overlap in our grammars, which enables us to communicate. (Can you point to English?)
- Linguistics as cognitive science: seeks to understand and model the cognitive capacity for language.

6. Goal of Linguistics

- Goal of physics: To discover the laws of the physical universe.
- Goal of Linguistics: To discover the laws of human language.

7. Thought question: Is the “purpose” of language communication?