Lecture 1:
What is Language?

INDV 101 -- Mind, Self and Language
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Some basic questions for today:
- What is language?
- Does it belong to human only?
- What is it composed of?
- How did it come to us?
- How are we able to speak and listen?
- How do we decide when to say what?
- What do we know when we know a language?

What do we know when we know a language?
- What sounds belong and don’t belong to our language
- What sounds can begin or end a word
- What sounds can be combined together

Is the following an English word?
- ksoob
- msgon
- bosk
- smong
SOUNDS

What sounds belong and don’t belong to our language

Example: carro, ferrocarril (Spanish)

English doesn’t have the rolled [r] sound.

Bonjour! (French)

The sounds can begin or end a word

Ex: /ng/ never begins a word in English, but may end a word: SING

Opposite with [dw] dwindle, dweeb but no words ending in [dw] … or [str] etc.

We also know ...

Words
Slang
Idioms

We know what sounds can be combined together

Example: No same syllable consonant clusters in Japanese: CVCV

Yamaha Honda Suzuki besoburo

SOUNDS

We also know the grammar

What are the sentences & non sentences of English.

We know when a sentence isn’t English even if we can’t say why it is not. We know the rules subconsciously.

This is our native speaker intuition.

Vocabulary

Not only do we know the basic words of our language, we know how to play with them through humor and sarcasm. Plus, we know how to derive which meaning of a word’s possible meanings we need for a context.
Is this an English sentence?

The early get up man early went home.

‘The man who got up early went home early.’

We understand ambiguity - more than 1 meaning and can figure out the right meaning...

Most of this is unconscious

It’s amazing the quantity of information that we have to know to use a language, and we’re mostly unaware of it until we have to learn a second one.

Language is both arbitrary and systematic

How is language arbitrary?

Relation b/w sign and meaning/referent

A sign is iconic when it bears a physical relationship with its referent.

Relation b/w sign and meaning/referent

When there is no necessary relationship b/w the sign and its meaning, the relationship is symbolic and arbitrary.
Arbitrariness in Language

- The relation b/w FORM & MEANING:
  - Arbitrary (symbolic)—no direct relation
  - E.g.

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rose   rosa   玫瑰 (meigui)
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Other examples of nonarbitrariness:

- Onomatopoeia (see LF p.17)
- Sound symbolism
  - SMALL: small, little, teeny, micro (English), petite (French), xiao (Mandarin), -ito (Spanish)
  - BIG: large, grand (English), da (Mandarin), gros, grand (French)
  - Exceptions: big
- Order of events in a sentence (LF p.20 #7)

ARBITRARINESS -1

The relationship between an object and its name is not inherent. That is why there are so many different words for things across languages.

Example: dog, perro, chien.

ARBITRARINESS - 2

Even the onomatopoetic words of other languages are not the same or even understood by speakers of other languages.

Example: cockadoodledoo, kukuriku, krikrikrikri
ARBITRARINESS - 3
The mouth can make many sounds - why don’t all languages have them all?
   a. Why does English not have a rolled [r] sound like Spanish?
   b. Why do Spanish, French, or Asante not have the [th] sound?
   c. Why does Japanese not have the [r] sound?

ARBITRARINESS - 4
Language changes over time. If something is inherent about language forms, it would not change or all languages should become the same.
For example, dialects of a language change differently. Accents of English speakers in the USA, Canada, Nigeria, India, & Australia aren’t the same.

ARBITRARINESS - 5
The way of expressing meaning in a language is different in another.
Example:
   Spanish:  Tengo calor.
           (I have heat)
   English:  I am hot.

ARBITRARINESS - 6
The normal word order for sentences is different from language to language.
English word order is usually: subject, verb, object
   I like Bob.
However, most world languages are subject, object, verb, Japanese, Finnish, Swahili.
   I Bob like.

ARBITRARINESS - 7
The grammar of languages differ.
Example 1: some languages (i.e., Chinese and Japanese) do not use articles (words like a, an, the).
Example 2: English does not have a true future tense like Spanish or French (no special ending like -ed).

How is language systematic?
The usage of sounds, words, and grammar is systematic.
Ex: The formation of the past tense is rule governed: That is why we know how to make the past tense of new words like:
   xerox -> xeroxed
Language vs. Dialect

All languages are dialects and all dialects are languages.

What’s the difference?
It’s a matter of power: military, political, or economic.

Equality of Varieties

To linguists all varieties of language are created equal. There are no primitive languages.

There are no languages that cannot express all the possible meanings a people need. We just do it differently.

For example …

English is pretty simplistic in many aspects compared to other languages. We have fewer tenses, fewer classes of nouns (gender) etc.

French/Spanish have 2 genders, German 3, and many of the Niger Congo Languages of West Africa have more than 15.

Our topic

This class will be looking at what real people do with language not what your 8th grade English teacher told you was the “RIGHT” way to speak English.

What is Grammar?

- Descriptive Grammar
  - Created by linguists as a model of speakers' linguistic competence.

- Prescriptive Grammar
  - It tells you how to speak or write according to someone’s idea of what is “good” or “bad.”

LANGUAGE CHANGE

- How are languages related to each other? When and where did human language originate?
How did language come to me, or did it ever?

- How are we equipped with the ability to speak?
- How does a child learn to speak a language within a few years?
- What happens when we see a word?
- Can we still speak if a part of the brain is damaged?

Some misconceptions about language:

- Some languages are more complex than others.
  - This is like saying that some cultures are more sophisticated than others.
- Speakers of certain languages think better than others.
  - This is like saying that people in the capitalist world are better thinkers than hunter-gatherers.

- Language (e.g. English) is becoming misused, and this is to be prevented.
  - If this is true, why are we so proud that we have evolved from our primate ancestors?
- Some people can't speak grammatical English because they are stupid.
  - Maybe you are the one who can't speak properly from their viewpoint!

Japanese speakers are born to learn Japanese.
- Try to raise your child in Japan and see whether s/he speaks Japanese.
- Everyone in the world should speak the same language to make it a better world.
  - Aren't there wars between nations that speak the same tongue?

Some general concepts about language that I agree with:

- All languages are complex.
- Language is systematic. It is rule-governed. The systematicity can be found at different levels and components.
- Universal Grammar (UG) exists. There are universal properties that all languages share. This is what linguists study.

Languages change all the time. There is nothing good or bad about this.

Languages vary systematically from person to person, area to area, and situation to situation.
People have different attitudes about different languages that are not related to languages per se, but related to the ideology associated with people who speak those languages.