

INTD0111A/ARBC0111A

The Unity and Diversity of Human Language

Lecture #24
Dec 7th, 2006

Reminders

- Assignment 4 is due on Monday Dec 11, by 5pm.
- LAP project report is also due on Monday Dec 11, by 5pm.
- Final Exam will be posted Tuesday Dec 12, and is due Dec 19 by 5pm.
- I know I'm a bit late with grading of Assignment 3 but scores should be updated this weekend.

The Grand Finale

- So, what did we exactly accomplish in this class?
- Believe it or not, we accomplished a lot, bearing in mind it's only a 12-week term.
- Let's have a look at the highlights.

Linguistic Diversity

- We've seen how ours is "a diverse diverse world—linguistically."
- But underneath this diversity we found a common core of "sameness"—one that we share only by virtue of being "human."
- Languages, no matter who speak them or where, are, at one level of abstraction and analysis, pretty much the same.

Head-directionality

- Japanese-type languages and English-type languages might look dramatically different on the surface, but at a deeper level of analysis, they are actually nothing but a manifestation of a simple binary choice: Should my heads go left or right?

Verb placement/Subject placement

- Irish-type languages and English-type languages differ in whether their V move up to Aux or their Aux move down to V, and whether their subject is located "high" or "low."
- An intermediate case would be French, where V moves to Aux and the subject is high.
- But we also saw how German/Dutch/Scandinavian can fit into the picture if V is allowed not only to move to Aux, but also all the way up to C.

Rare word orders/Serial verbs

- To account for VOS/OVS/OSV languages (Malagasy/Hixkarayana/Nadëb, respectively), we needed extra assumptions (the Subject Side parameter and VP movement).
- But this wasn't too bad. After all, these are all "rare" language types, so we should expect them to follow from rare linguistic properties.
- We also saw how some languages verb-serialize, while others do not. And the link with verb attraction is an interesting observation.

Polysynthesis

- Then, we delved into the fascinating polysynthetic world, getting a taste of the grandeur of Mohawk, in particular: complex word structure, noun and verb incorporation, freedom of word order, subject and object drop.
- And as with other cases of diversity, our theory of grammar provides a principled account for why Mohawk is the way it is.

More diversity

- And then we saw some "hybrid" cases: Languages where both polysynthesis and head-directionality is relevant. Chichewa and Slave.
- Then more parametric variation still: Adjective Neutralization; ergative-absolutive vs. nominative-accusative systems; wh-fronting vs. wh-in-situ; and the anaphor domain parameter.

Morphological diversity/Baker's Parameter Hierarchy

- We also saw how languages are diverse in their morphology: tense, aspect, mood, modality, animacy, evidentiality, etc.
- We also discussed the interesting proposal by Mark Baker concerning the interaction between parameters: the so-called parameter hierarchy approach.
- We might not know why parameters exist, or why human language is the way it is, but we raised interesting questions that we hope will have answers in the future.

Language change: How and Why?

- Then it was time to look at diversity over time: language change.
- We looked at how languages change, lexically, semantically, morphologically, phonologically, and syntactically.
- We also looked on how linguists go about reconstructing ancient languages from current languages.

Language change: How and Why?

- But we also discussed why languages change, giving an interesting analysis from the parametric approach in terms of how children can re-set the values of particular parameters if the PLD produced by adults are different.

Sociolinguistic diversity

- Then it was time for another kind of diversity: diversity over space.
- We revisited the language-dialect debate, showing how mutually intelligible varieties exhibit systematic differences in their lexicon, phonology, morphology, and syntax.

Sociolinguistic diversity

- We also spent time showing the absurdity of notions such as “a particular language is better than another” or “a particular dialect is better than another.”
- A standard dialect is a sociopolitical entity, nothing more.
- A nonstandard dialect is not inherently inferior or deficient. It’s a variety of speech that just happens not to be the variety of the people in power and on TV.

Sociolinguistic diversity

- And we have shown how African American English and Chicano English for example differ from the so-called Standard American English in the same systematic ways that other dialects of English differ from SAE.
- Then we ended this part on sociolinguistic diversity by a discussion of how language varies depending on the situation (style/register), the field (jargon/argot), or the gender of the speakers.

Language emergence: pidgins and creoles

- Then it was time to look at the remarkable phenomenon of language emergence: the case of pidgins and creoles, where we saw how a full-fledged linguistic system arises on the basis of non-language input.
- We looked at the case of Hawaiian Pidgin English and also Nicaraguan sign language.

Sign languages

- Then we had to look at a diversity of another kind: diversity of the modality used in communication, that is, the manual-visual modality of sign languages.
- We saw how sign languages are full-fledged linguistic systems like spoken languages with a lexicon, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics.

Language death: moribund and endangered languages

- And yesterday we discussed the sad story of language death/extinction/loss, but we also explored courses of action that both linguists and non-linguists can take to preserve as many human languages as possible, not just for their linguistic value, but for their great importance for our cultural heritage as human beings.

Looking back, ...

- I do think this class has to rank high among the so many I've taught before.
- Now, "Where does this rank on your list?" is a question for you to answer on your own. But I definitely hope you enjoyed it.

And now, I guess it's time to say ...

FAREWELL, EVERYONE!