

INTD0111/ARBC0111A

The Unity and Diversity of Human Language

Lecture #1
Sept 12th, 2006

Introduction to the course (including administrivia)

- Let's just click [here](#) and see what's on the course website.

What's this course about?

- As the title indicates, this is a course ...

What's this course about?

- "Hi, Mr. Linguist. I'm Mr. D. Advocate and I'd like to attend your class."
- "OK, no problem! So, where was I? Yes, ..."

What's this course about?

- As the title indicates, this is a course about unity and diversity of human languages.
- "Unity" means we'll be looking at how languages are similar (not quite obvious on the surface), and "diversity" means we'll be looking at how languages are different (pretty obvious to everyone, right?).
- But we will also go beyond the "descriptive" level to seek explanation for why there's unity and why there's diversity in human language.

What's this course about?

- The study of unity and diversity in human language is known as "linguistic typology".
- Linguistic typologists are mainly concerned with characterizing what is and what is not "a possible human language".

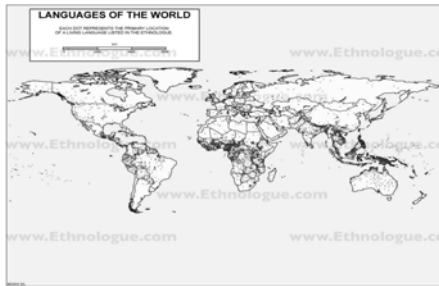
Mr. D. Advocate interrupts:

- “Excuse me Mr. Linguist. Can I ask you a question?”
- “Sure, sure! Go ahead.”
- “Since you’re a linguist, could you please tell me how many languages there are in the world?”
- “Oh, well, ... this is actually a good question. Why don’t we get everybody in the discussion, then?”

How much linguistic diversity is there in the world?

- Well, let’s see, how many languages do you guys think exist in the world?

Languages of the world per ethnologue: close to 7000



Distribution of languages over the world

(from Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, based on Ethnologue and a few other sources)

Europe and the Middle East	appr. 275 (4%)
America	appr. 1000 (15%)
Africa	appr. 2000 (30%)
Asia (excl. former USSR)	appr. 2200 (32%)
Pacific	appr. 1300 (19 %)

Some countries are more linguistically diverse than others

(from Skutnabb-Kangas 2000)

Papua New Guinea	850
Indonesia	670
Nigeria	410
India	380
Cameroon	270
Australia	250
Mexico	240
Zaire	210
Brazil	210

Mr. D. Advocate:

- “So, you guys study language for living, and can’t count how many languages there are in the world. Shouldn’t you be working harder than this?”
- We’re definitely doing the best we can Mr. D. Advocate, but there are a couple of reasons why we do not know exactly how many languages there are in the world.

First, it's a wide wide linguistic world

- There's still so many areas in the world waiting for linguists to study their languages. Until we have enough linguists to do that job (maybe you should consider this as a career Mr. D. Advocate), we won't know for sure the exact number of languages in the world.
- To make things worse, many of these languages are on the verge of extinction, which means that by the time we're ready to study them, they won't have any native speakers left any more.

Second, it all depends on what we actually mean by "language"

- In other words, when do we count a system of communication as "language" and when not.
- For example, are New England English and the English spoken in the South two different languages or two different dialects of the same language? What about Australian English, or Indian English?

Second, it all depends on what we actually mean by "language"

- Are the forms of Spanish spoken in Buenos Aires, Mexico City, or Barcelona, separate languages or different dialects of the same language?
- What about Brazilian and European Portuguese?
- Is Moroccan Arabic a language or a dialect?

The "mutual intelligibility" basis for the language-dialect distinction

- The common answer to all these questions is based on the criterion of "mutual intelligibility":
- If speakers of two different systems of communication can understand one another, then they're speaking two dialects of the same language.
- If mutual intelligibility is not possible between speakers of two systems of communication, then it must be that they're speaking different languages.
- Makes sense, huh?

The "mutual intelligibility" basis for the language-dialect distinction

- Not quite. Consider what Stephen Anderson says in one of the readings for today's class:
- "Suppose you were to start from Berlin and walk to Amsterdam, covering about ten miles every day. You can be sure that the people who provided your breakfast each morning could understand (and be understood by) the people who served you supper that evening. Nonetheless, the German speakers at the beginning of your trip and the Dutch speakers at its end would have much more trouble, and certainly think of themselves as speaking two quite distinct (if related) languages."

The "mutual intelligibility" basis for the language-dialect distinction

- Same goes for:
- Hindi-Urdu,
- Macedonian-Bulgarian,
- post-Yugoslavia Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian "languages", and
- Nembe-Kalabari in Nigeria.

The “mutual intelligibility” basis for the language-dialect distinction

- But it gets worse for the “mutual intelligibility” criterion:
- Mandarin and Cantonese are by no means mutually intelligible, yet somehow they’re still considered two “dialects” of Chinese.
- Several dialects of today’s Arabic are not mutually intelligible either, yet none of their speakers will ever say that they speak any language but Arabic.

So, what’s the difference between a language and a dialect, then?

- Linguistically, none.
- Rather, the difference is sociopolitical, or, as Max Weinreich used to say, “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”

I hear a question coming. Yes, Mr. D. Advocate.

- Mr. D. Advocate: “Ok, I see your point. But if we do not know the exact number of languages, how can you study linguistic unity and diversity, then? Shouldn’t you guys be considering a career change or something?”
- “Well, actually that’s a very good question, and no, we’re not considering a career change. So, let’s discuss this with everyone.”

Methods for the study of linguistic typology

- The answer to Mr. D. Advocate’s question is really not different from what scientists do in the study of any natural phenomenon. The key word is SAMPLING.
- Take a representative sample of languages and see if you can draw generalizations on the basis of that sample for the rest of human languages.

Your assignments for the day

- Fill in the questionnaire and hand it in via the course dropbox. Notice that the course folder might still be called ARAB0111A, but I’m trying to get them to change it to INTD0111A/ ARAB0111A. So, don’t get confused.
- Visit [ethnologue](#) and browse through the site.
- Follow the links on the [syllabus](#) webpage and do the readings. Most of them are easy to follow and full of interesting information about human language.

Next class agenda

- Kinds of similarities among languages (O’Grady *et al*).
- Universals in human languages: absolute and implicational. (Whaley 1,2)
- Explaining language universals: the formalist-functionalist debate