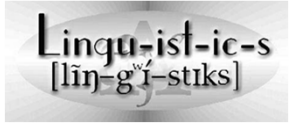


LNGT0101

Introduction to Linguistics



Lecture #1
Sept 12th, 2011

Introduction to the course (including administria)

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

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So, what's linguistics about?

- Linguistics is defined as **the scientific study of human language**.
- But how do we study language scientifically?

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Forming plural in Samoan

Singular verb	English translation	Plural verb	English translation
nofo	'he sits'	nonofo	'they sit'
moe	'he sleeps'	momoe	'they sleep'
alofa	'he loves'	alolofa	'they love'
savali	'he walks'	savavali	'they walk'
maliu	'he dies'	maliliu	'they die'
atama?i	'he is intelligent'	???	'they are intelligent'

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Forming definite nouns in Lyele

In Lyele, vowels can bear one of three tones, e.g., [a] is mid tone; [á] is high tone; and [à] is low tone

Indefinite noun	English translation	Definite noun	English translation
kúmí	'bird'	kúmíí	'the bird'
yá lá	'millet'	yá láá	'the millet'
kùlí	'dog'	kùlíí	'the dog'

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Forming definite nouns in Lyele

In Lyele, vowels can bear one of three tones, e.g., [a] is mid tone; [á] is high tone; and [à] is low tone

indefinite noun	English translation	definite noun	English translation
nà	'foot'	náá	'the foot'
yíjì	'church'	yíjìí	'the church'
ya	'market'	yaá	'the market'

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OK, but what's "language"?

- Language is a communication system.
- But what does a communication system consist of?

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Signs

- A sign is a pairing of a form and a meaning.
- Signs can be iconic or symbolic.
- But is the sign system of human language different from other communication systems?
- Let's take a look.

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Communication systems

- All communication systems have some features in common:
- A mode of communication: vocal-auditory (humans and most animals), gestural (apes), tactile (bees), or even chemical (moths).
- Semanticity: Signals have meaning.
- Pragmatic function: Signals have a purpose, e.g., helping the species survive or influence others' behavior.

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"Design features" of human language

- But human language also exhibits a set of features that sets it apart from other communication systems.

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Interchangeability

- Interchangeability: Humans can both send and receive messages. This is not always the case with animals, e.g., *bombyx mori* (silkworm) moth uses a chemical communication system that is available only to females, but not to males.

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Cultural transmission

- Cultural transmission: For humans to learn language, they have to be exposed to it. No exposure means no language will be learned.
- For most organisms, by contrast, the actual signal code itself is innate or genetically programmed.

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Arbitrariness

- Arbitrariness: The relationship between form and meaning is arbitrary in human language, but largely iconic in animal communication systems.
- Can you guess what 'baab' means in Arabic?

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Discreteness

- Signs in human language can be decomposed into discrete “meaningless” units, which in turn can be recombined to create new signs with different meanings.
spot [s-p-o-t]
tops opts pots
- This is not the case with signals in other communication systems, though (e.g., a birdsong or a bee dance).

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Displacement

- Humans can use language to talk about things not present in space or time. Animal communication systems are tied to “the here and now.”

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Creativity/Productivity

- Creativity: Humans are creative with language. We can always add new words and expressions, e.g., *e-mail*, *youtubification*.
- We are also able to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences.
- Well, how many of the sentences on these slides have you seen before? How many of them have you been able to understand?

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Discrete infinity

- Human language also exhibits the so-called discrete infinity (also known as *recursiveness*) property: In theory, we can have signals of an infinite length.

John loves Mary.

Bill says that John loves Mary.

Sue believes that Bill says that John loves Mary.

Harry claims that ...

- Where do we stop?

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Discrete infinity

- We are able to ‘embed’ a sign inside a sign of the same type:

He’s a very nice man.

He’s a very, very nice man.

He’s a very, very, very nice man.

- Or this example from the textbook:

This is the dog that worried the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

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Knowing vs. Using

- Infinity of language is true in theory, but not in reality. Why?
- Despite their interconnectedness, our 'knowledge' of a linguistic system can actually be distinguished from our 'usage' of that system at a certain level of analysis: The so-called **competence-performance** distinction.

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Questions to think about till Wednesday

- How about animals that were reported to have learned and used human language? Isn't that counterevidence to the 'distinctiveness' of human language?
- And, assuming we're right about the distinctiveness of some of the design features of human language, why should that be so? Is there a reason, or is it just our humano-centric view of the universe?
- We talk about this and more on Wednesday.

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Next class agenda

- More about language and linguistics. Chapter 1 cont.
- Read Numberg's and Wasow's LSA overview article of the field of linguistics. Link available on the syllabus table on the course website.
- Also read Jackendoff's chapters available on the syllabus table on the course website.
- Do the **questionnaire** (link is in the cell for today's class on the syllabus table) and send it to me by e-mail.

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