

Introductory Matters

Seminar *Introduction to Linguistics*, Andrew McIntyre

1. About this course

- It goes with the lecture *Introduction to Linguistics*. Main difference: this course treats fewer sub-areas of linguistics in more detail, with more exercises, discussion.
- Sub-areas of linguistics dealt with:
 - Phonetics/phonology
 - Morphology
 - Syntax
 - Semantics

2. What is linguistics?

- The scientific study of language.
- Examples of problems (among thousands of others):
 - How do children manage to learn languages without being taught?
 - How did language evolve?
 - How/why do languages change over time?
 - What are possible differences between languages, and what do all/most languages have in common?
 - How does the brain so effortlessly understand people speaking at 200 words per minute? Note the multitasking involved:
 - Phonology: Air vibrations converted into sounds of a language
 - Lexical access: matching groups of sounds with items in the *mental lexicon* (the 'dictionary in our heads' with tens of thousands of entries).
 - selecting relevant senses of those words despite that fact that most words have more than one sense (evidence for this on every page of a dictionary)
 - Syntax: finding grammatical relationships between words, serving as basis for interpretation of sentence:
- (1) *The dog was bitten by the cat.*
 - Pragmatic reasoning: find an interpretation that fits context, general knowledge:
- (2) *No mistake is too small to ignore.*
 - Multitasking means that our knowledge of language must be unconscious. If we had to think about phonology, meaning and grammar *consciously*, we would not be able to process sentences we hear with such rapidity.

3. Some benefits of studying linguistics

- It helps you to learn (and teach) English and other languages better.
- Practice in general thinking, problem solving skills
- Thinking about linguistic problems makes one more aware of language, helping one to communicate better, e.g. avoidance/exploitation of ambiguities, presuppositions:
 - (3) Someone at this university {caused/has caused} serious problems.
 - (4) It was not because you are an abject loser that I didn't ring you.
 - (5) Avoid Australians(.) who drink too much beer.
 - (6) inflammable liquids
- Studying linguistics is inherently interesting because...
 - language is invaluable to us
 - to study language is to study how the human mind works
 - linguists have learnt many interesting things about language
 - many fascinating problems still need to be solved
- Correction of (often harmful) misconceptions about language, e.g. those in next section.

4. Examples of common misconceptions regarding language

- Confusing *etymology* with *what a word means now for the speaker using it*. E.g.
 - A claim: 'It is not sexist to call a woman a *chairman*, since the word comes from French *main*, not from *man*.' Reply: The etymology is irrelevant, since the word sounds like it is from *man* (hence the plural *chairmen*).
 - A Myth: 'To learn a modern European language well you must learn Latin.' Reply: Many words (including Latin-derived ones) change their meanings over time. E.g. *arrive, table, street, castle*, German *Abitur, Mensa*
- Certain **prescriptivist (normativist, purist)** criticisms of linguistic practices (or of whole dialects/languages) as 'bad' ('lazy', 'stupid', 'ugly'...). The linguistic phenomena below (and the people that use them) have all been subject to criticisms that can be refuted by any properly prepared linguist.
 - (7) Singular *they*: *She tries to help a student if they can't do their homework.*
[This is not confusion of singular and plural (hence: *she tries*). This is not the plural use of *they*, but a distinct use as a gender-neutral singular pronoun. There is nothing wrong with pronouns with two functions, cf. *I bought her books; Ich mag sie*]
 - (8) *-ing* pronounced as [ɪn] in some dialects: *Are they goin'?*
[Criticising this as 'lazy' is plain ignorant. The pronunciation is not the *omission* of a sound, but the replacement of one sound [ŋ] with another sound [n].]
 - (9) Negative concord (many English dialects): *They didn't get nothing.*
[The common criticism that this is illogical 'double negation' implies that speakers of French, Greek, Russian, Hungarian and Japanese negation can't think clearly.]
 - (10) Preposition stranding: *Who did Elvis appear to next?*
 - (11) Non-standard inflection: *He don't claim they done it.*
 - (12) Plural marking on *you*: *Youse aren't listening.*
 - (13) Non-Latin-style accusative: *It is me.*
- Caveat: Prescriptive advice is not always bad:
 - Foreign language teaching:
- (14) *There exist two possibilities to spread these informations.*
 - Warnings that some linguistic phenomena in some situations will have adverse social consequences. E.g. non-standard dialects in academic discourse, colloquial language in a funeral speech.
 - Criticism of offensive language use:
- (15) *Since the dawn of time, men have wondered what life means.*
 - Advice on averting miscommunication:
- (16) a. PROSECUTOR: *Did you manage to put poison in Mr Smith's drink?*
b. DEFENDENT: *No.* [presupposes evenenomination attempt]
- (17) *inflammable liquids* [not flammable?]
- (18) *Employees may only wear black shoes.* [better find another job in winter...]
- (19) PILOT TO AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER: *Climb [tu] five zero* [two or to?]