

# 1

## Introduction



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## chapter overview

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This chapter introduces you to human language, but that is a huge thing to study. Some brave linguists catch words from the last speaker of a dying language while others study subtle changes in a language spoken by millions. Although we use knowledge gathered from such studies, we take a broader look at how language works. To do this, we narrow our focus to specific topics about language, including the many different parts that make up language. We tour the small, medium, and large parts of language to explain their qualities and how the language factory in your mind fits them together, like so many nuts, bolts, metal forms, and plastic widgets assembled together to make a car. To prepare for this tour, we must first understand what *language* and *grammar* mean, how a language can be living or dead, and the differences between languages and writing. Importantly, you must also face the language judgments you make on a daily basis: If you consider yourself part of the Grammar Police, be forewarned, many of your assumptions are overturned in this book.

## language, languages, and the people who speak them

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There are more people on earth than ever before, and every place we find humans, we find language. In large cities like Singapore, many languages are spoken, and most people speak more than one. As with most humans, Singaporeans are **multilingual**. In rural areas of some countries, like the state of West Virginia, almost everyone speaks only one language and is **monolingual**. Regardless of the number, we naturally develop language, and even in those

communities where people only speak one language, there will be different pronunciations, different words, and different styles of language.

One of the difficult parts of learning about language is that language is so normal and natural for us: We take it for granted. Like eating or breathing, we use language every day.<sup>1</sup> Most of us focus our attention on talking or listening, not on dissecting how we speak. But like the biology of eating and breathing, the machinery behind language is complex. For language, what we produce and consume is beautifully complex.

There are about 6,900 languages currently spoken on Earth. Those languages can be grouped by similarities into around 128 different families.<sup>2</sup> A wide range of language topics will be considered in this book, primarily with English as the example language. For good or for bad, and most likely for both, English has become a dominant world language. There are at least 350,000,000 speakers of English who learned it as babies. Depending on how you restrict the label *English*, there are probably 1,000,000,000 speakers of some kind of English. With that many speakers, a lot of variation is introduced into English every day, and that diversity provides us with opportunities to examine how language works.

The idea of **language variation** will come up a lot in this book. For example, people in the United States usually call a small, movable room that rises and falls between floors in a building an *elevator*. In England, the same object would be called a *lift*. We say that there is variation in the words because we note the differences in form. Having different sounds for the same object may not happen in any other species, but it is a basic feature of human language. Language variation tells us important information about human language. The chapters in this book often use variation in language to teach about its qualities.

In order to illustrate what is *fully* possible in language, this book would need to use examples from several hundred languages. Such a book would be a daunting task for any reader. With at least a billion speakers, English has a lot of variation. The goal in this book is to understand how language works through illustrations of what humans do with language, and there is enough variation in the Englishes around the world to provide many examples.

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## what is language?

**Language** is the discrete combinatorial system humans use most for communication. *Discrete* means ‘separate’ here, and *combinatorial* means ‘ability to add together.’ We take small separate parts, push them together in specific combinations, and create larger parts of language. For spoken languages, we store collections of sounds together with their associated ideas. We call them words, and they can be short (e.g. *I*) or long (e.g. *Mississippi*), but they are all sets of sounds connected to a meaning. With those words, we build larger phrases such as noun phrases (e.g. *most squids*), verb phrases (e.g. *crushed the daisies*), and prepositional phrases (e.g. *on the kangaroo*). The phrases themselves are discrete parts



in larger constructions such as sentences (a larger kind of phrase) and conversations. Phrases and sentences are discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.

It is important to understand that language is not a thing. It is important, but a difficult task for all of us. Despite the word *language* being a noun, it is not an object: Instead, it is a set of relationships. We produce and consume language naturally, and we do it quite well. Yet, language is a complex activity, and in that complexity is beauty.

Since language itself is not an object but is instead a natural human ability to communicate, it may seem odd to hear about **living languages** and **dead languages**. The label *living language* refers to any language which is used by a community of native speakers; the label *dead language* refers to any language which is not used by a community of native speakers. Living languages like English, Arabic, Spanish, and Mandarin Chinese have many native speakers. Dead languages like Natchez, Kitanemuk, and Wappo were all North American languages, but they no longer have native speakers. Ancient Latin has no native speakers and is also considered a dead language, even though its modern descendants now thrive as Spanish, Italian, French, and Portuguese. You can even get modern texts translated *into* Latin, such as Dr. Seuss's *Cat in the Hat* (*Cattus Petasatus*), but Latin is still a dead language. A small number of languages have actually been revived. Modern Hebrew is a revived language, brought back starting at the end of the nineteenth century from the dead language of Classical Hebrew (which was still used for religious ceremonies). The Celtic language Manx last had a native speaker in 1974, but revival efforts by local enthusiasts are underway to bring it back to living status.

## what are language sounds?

Humans can make a lot of different noises. With our hands, feet, or mouths, we are a noisy species. When you consider all the other tools that make noise, such as guitars, hammers, and dump trucks, our communities contain multitudes of

### Word Play: Sounds and meaning

In languages like English, there are some sets of sounds that do come up in words with similar meanings. Consider the combination <gl> [gl]. What kinds of meanings get associated with <gl> words? How many counter examples can you come up with?

Try to make a language where each sound represents one meaning. Perhaps a <p> represents 'water' and an <o> represents 'horse,' so that <po> would be a decent form for 'seahorse.' Choose ten sounds and ten basic meanings. Can you come up with at least 25 words for your invented language? When does it start breaking down?

sounds. Yet, only some of those are used as small parts in the discrete combinatorial system called language. Sounds of clapping are used in different cultures, but clapping is not used as a language sound. Only some of the sounds that humans make are used as language sounds, and some of these language sounds are used in most languages. For example, the first sound of *pea* is used in many of the world's languages, along with the first sounds of *tea* and *key*. Other sounds are more rare, such as making a short, sharp sound with your mouth, normally called a *click*. Clicking is used meaningfully in numerous cultures, and clicks are used as consonant sounds in several African languages, including Khoisan and Bantu. Despite the enormous diversity of human language, we share a limited set of language sounds.

For these small language parts, we do not connect them directly to meaning. We could imagine a world where every sound had a primitive meaning and both the meaning and form of words were constructed from those meaningful sounds. Take the word *tea*, for example, which has the phonetic transcription of [ti]. The initial [t] sound of *tea* could mean 'wet,' and the vowel sound [i] could mean 'leaves': In this hypothetical construction, the word *tea* might then mean 'wet from leaves.' Good enough for that word, but one of the troubles would be that we would need a lot more sounds to represent all the meanings we have. Plus, think of all the words with [t] that do not have any relation to wetness. In human language, individual sounds are not themselves connected to meaning.

## what are words?

The letter *a* can represent the sounds in *bake* and *nap*, but the letter *a* in *a pencil* represents both a sound and a word. Certainly, the *a* vowel in *bake* does not mean anything like the *a* vowel in the phrase *a pencil*. How do sounds differ from words?

### Words to the Wise: Sounds and the fury

Phonetic symbols like [t] and [k] are different from letters like <t> and <k>. The differences are fully explored in Chapter 2, but for now, just consider the square brackets around [t] and [k] to mean *sound*. The [t] sound is what most English speakers have as the first letter in <top>. The angled brackets indicate regular spelling.

The <t> letter has a name, Tee, but we do not use the *name* Tee when pronouncing a word like <top> unless we are *spelling* the word out loud: Tee- Ow- Pee.

A **word** is a language package containing both form and meaning. For a spoken language like English, the forms of words are sounds; for signed languages like American Sign Language (ASL), the forms are signs.



In either case, the form by itself does not make a word: The form *skrackleblit* is not associated with any meaning at the time of this writing, and it is not therefore a word. It is the combination of the form and the meaning which makes a word. How can a single sound be a word, like the *a* vowel? In the history of English, speakers pared down the word *one* until it was simply a vowel with the function of an indefinite determiner (e.g. *an eye*; *a book*). It is a word because that sound is paired in a relationship with a specific meaning. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, we discuss the nature of those relationships.

## what are phrases?

**Phrases** are combinations of words in structured patterns. As young children, we figure out from the language around us what patterns are used to make certain phrases. For English, we learn that determiners like *the* and *a* come before the noun (e.g. *the squid*) as do most adjectives (e.g. *the calm squid*), but prepositional phrases come after the noun (e.g. *the squid in the tank* rather than *the in the tank squid*). These phrases work like templates which we populate with words. For every type of phrase, there is a different template. Some phrases are sentences, but most are not. This sentence

*The belligerent fan in the stands hit the ref with the water bottle*

has eight phrases inside of it and is also ambiguous. How phrases work is taken up in Chapters 7 and 8.

## what is discourse?

As you may have noticed, we have been building up here from small to big. We started with small parts (sounds), moved to larger yet discrete combinations (words), and then put those together to form phrases. Is there any kind of organization beyond phrases? Yes, there are patterns such as conversations, monologues, arguments, and any type of talking which uses multiple phrases in a context, all of which can be labeled **discourse**. The times you have most likely noticed the structure of discourse is in turn-taking, where people in a conversation tradeoff who has the floor so that everyone is not talking at once. Turn-taking is most obvious in its absence, when someone in the conversation is messing it up, either by not taking their turn (remaining completely silent) or by not giving up their turn (continuing to talk over other peoples' turns). The structures of discourse are discussed in Chapter 9.

## language differences

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The variety of language seems baffling to most of us. With nearly 7,000 languages, there are hugely diverse vocabularies. Think of it: There are thousands of words for what we call a tree. Some of them sound similar to each other, such



**Figure 1.1** Arbitrariness also works for sign languages. In this *Girls with Slingshots* comic, the signs are conventionally connected to their meanings, just like the forms of spoken words. Rollover text: (ASL does not always mean what it looks like it means!): <http://www.girlswithslingshots.com/comic/gws-1058/>. © Danielle Corsetto/www.girlswithslingshots.com



as *el árbol*, *l'arbre*, and *l'albero* for 'tree' in Spanish, French, and Italian. Others are thoroughly different, such as *osisi*, *puu*, and *ki* in Igbo, Finnish, and Japanese. The words do not always identify the same parts. In some languages, such as Igbo spoken in Nigeria, one word, *aka*, covers the body parts referred to in English as *hand* and *arm*. With all these differences goes the sheer number of words. While no one has a clear estimate of the upper bounds of Earth's vocabulary, it is safe to assume that for the 6,900 languages around today, each one might average 10,000 words, so the lowest limit we can figure is 69,000,000. The connection between the form of a word like *tree* and its meaning in the mind is a cultural convention. Yet the natural relationship between form and meaning is considered arbitrary, and this quality is called arbitrariness. The quality of **arbitrariness** allows for all the possible sound combinations to be possibly paired with all the possible meanings, yielding a mind-boggling amount of variation. It allows for humans to create so many different words through cultural choices.

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## language similarities

With all the differences between languages, it might surprise you to learn that languages actually have many similarities. One language quality humans share appears to be nouns and verbs. We are not born with words in our heads, but we are most likely born with empty baskets for word types like nouns and verbs. As children, we learn words quickly and continuously, at least 10 a day in our younger years. While we pick up these new words, we sort them for faster retrieval into baskets for nouns, verbs, and other word types.

Another quality which all languages share is structure in how words and phrases are built. Even when the specific structures differ, they do so in highly constrained ways. With word order, two patterns account for 87% of the world's



languages. As Mark C. Baker describes in *The Atoms of Language*, the organization of phrases is not random. Languages do not have exactly the same patterns, but they do come in definite sets. Languages like English, Edo (spoken in Nigeria), and Indonesian each have a word order of subject-verb-object.

For example: The child   kicked   the ball  
                  subject     verb     object

The majority of languages have subject-object-verb as the word order, including Japanese, Turkish, and Quechua (a native South American language).

For example: The child   the ball   kicked  
                  subject     object     verb

For any two languages, differences exist between them. The vocabularies do not match, and their inventories of sounds are not exactly the same. But, those qualities spread from contact with other languages, and historically none of these languages have enjoyed extensive contact with each other. Patterns of how speakers build sentences are not spread through contact, but instead the genetic blueprints provide either/or choices for word order.

Such choices of how to organize phrases appear to be biologically constrained. Languages like English, Edo, and Indonesian have followed the path where verbs come *before* objects (e.g. *eat the food*), position markers (called *prepositions*) come *before* nouns (e.g. *in the house*), and auxiliaries come *before* main verbs (e.g. *I will run*). In languages like Japanese, Turkish, and Quechua, the opposite is true: verbs come *after* objects, position markers come *after* nouns (called *post-positions*), and auxiliaries come *after* main verbs.

As humans, our biological blueprints allow us to acquire language by building a **mental grammar**. The mental grammar is the part of the mind that *does* language. It languages. For each language we acquire as a child, we develop a mental grammar to understand and produce that language. To be clear, we are not born *with* language, but we are born with the ability to acquire any language (by building a mental grammar for that language). Not too mysteriously, we end up acquiring the ones we encounter and practice. However, the biological blueprints to build a mental grammar are the same for all of us.

## variation through time

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Living languages change. No exceptions have ever been found. English, in its roughly 1,500 year history, has changed dramatically. In the beginning, the first varieties of English were a collection of West Germanic dialects spoken by invaders to Britain. Those varieties, be they spoken or written, are completely unintelligible to untrained audiences today. Yet, as a living language, English is now spoken by vast numbers of people. The language has been



altered over that 1,500 year history. Throughout this book, we explore how the language has changed, from changes in sounds to changes in how sentences are built.

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## variation today

For those languages not on the verge of extinction, language variation is part of daily life. Englishes vary across region, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, and many other human boundaries. Since language is an important part of how we identify ourselves, people systematically mark themselves as different with various levels of language, from sounds to sentences. British speakers pronounce *schedule* with the same initial sound as in *shed*; US speakers use the initial sounds as in *skip*. Whether these differences are “consciously” chosen or not, they are part of the language variation patterns found in all living languages.

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## understanding the world of language

Learning would be simpler if the world were simpler. If there were only a few types of objects in the world, it would be easier to understand how it all works. Instead of the periodic table containing over 100 chemical elements, it could have four: Earth, Water, Air, and Fire. That would certainly be simpler to remember, but working with only those four elements would not allow us to understand any of our modern technology or even life itself.

Speaking of life, instead of our massively complex modern understanding of the human body, we could return to the older understanding of health that was common through much of the history of Western society. The basic idea was that the human body was controlled by four humors: black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm. Those four humors were seen as the key controlling elements in human health from the time of Hippocrates (400 BCE) until the 1800s, when modern medical practice was developed. There was no variation in the humors or room for growth that would allow there to be a fifth humor. Every kind of sickness had to be explained with those humors. During that 2,200 year period, patients underwent all kinds of horrible practices doled out by well-meaning healers. One of these was blood-letting, where a person was drained of some of their blood to balance out their humors. From this simple yet wildly wrong understanding of the human body, untold thousands of people were further injured and killed.

The scientific community eventually improved their understanding of life throughout the 1800s, and medical practice became both safer and more effective. Outside the scientific community, a lot of false information still persists about how the body works, but health education has improved greatly since the 1950s.

A close analogy can be made between our understanding of the human body and our understanding of human language. Since the 1850s, the scientific community has improved their understanding of language, but they have only had partial success in replacing the myths most people hold about language. Some positive steps have been taken in Europe and the United States: It used to be believed that some languages (e.g. Latin) were inherently superior to others (e.g. English). That belief has faded from many people's minds. In contrast, most people still believe that some varieties of any given language are structurally superior to other varieties: that English in the Midwest of the United States is superior to English from the US South, or that British RP<sup>3</sup> simply works better than a Liverpool variety. That belief is also a myth, but the language science community has turned few people away from that one.

## the complex nature of language

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One of the most important and most daunting qualities of language is its complexity. It would be simple if everything in language were uniform: if there were only one language in the world with one set of vocabulary, one pronunciation for each word, only one meaning for each word, and one way to arrange every sentence. It would be even simpler if this one language were perfectly stable over time, with pronunciations and meanings never changing. It would be a simpler world, but the idea is fantasy. If this imaginary scenario were true, we would be a different species and our societies would be completely different. {Future Mad Scientists reading this book may take this imaginary, simpler language as a personal challenge, but what would it be like if we *were* genetically engineered to have a different communication system?} The reality is that our brains create and interpret language variation and complexity as essential qualities. To get rid of language variation, we would need to genetically reengineer our brains so they produced or received a limited set of signals.

How extensive is human language variation? We have approximately 6,900 languages, many of which have numerous dialects, and all of which have wide-ranging sets of vocabulary. A safe guess is that we have at least 10,000 varieties of human language, but that is probably a ridiculously low estimate. All these varieties are changing, either in the pronunciation, in their meanings, or in the ways they put together words and phrases; for example, the Russian language in 2050 will be different from Russian in 2000. At any one time, there is variation between dialects of a language, and across time, there is variation between different stages of the same dialect.

Within any one language, some parts vary more than others. In English, more variation exists between pronunciations than in how sentences are built. To parallel that pattern in this book, there is more discussion about variation within English in the chapters on sounds and more discussion about variation between languages in the chapters on building phrases.

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## judging language

One thing all people do with language is use it to judge other people. Judging people by the language they use is so automatic that it must be part of our basic genetic code, perhaps as a safety mechanism to distinguish in-group from out-group.

There are two basic ways people judge language, either prescriptively or rhetorically. The **Prescriptively Correct Perspective** assumes that one certain form of the language always works better at all times. It also assumes that this unitary correct form must be protected from variation, which is seen as corruption and decay. The **Rhetorically Correct Perspective** judges language as good or bad based on how well that language works for that speaker in that context: Does the speaker's language accomplish the speaker's goals for that situation? In other words, this form of judgment is based on a classic sense of rhetoric as *the art of persuasion*.

Both the prescriptive viewpoint and the rhetorical viewpoint allow all of us to judge any kind of language. Take the two verbs *shall* and *will*. Prescriptively, *shall* should appear with subjects like *I* and *we* (e.g. *I shall leave*), and *will* should appear with subjects like *you*, *she*, *they*, and regular nouns like *wombats* (e.g. *The wombats will dig up the garden*). In regular, modern English usage, the two verbs are often switched, and when contracted, they are indistinguishable (e.g. *You'll be going soon*). Prescriptively, that common modern usage is wrong, no matter when it is used. Rhetorically, it depends. If you are giving a formal speech, it might serve you well to impress your audience with your knowledge of the *shall/will* distinction, as you may persuade your audience you are well educated. If you are at a party, dropping *shall* in a sentence like *I shall drink that* will probably get you stares and give people the impression that you are snooty. The modern usage of *who* and *whom* is much the same story, in that *who* is the common form, but prescriptively the *who~whom* distinction is still made.

For this book, the important difference is that the rhetorical approach works well with linguistic analysis, but the prescriptive approach flounders by denying so much of what language scientists have learned over the last century. The only way to understand how language works is to set the prescriptive approach aside. If you are unable to take up the rhetorical approach to language judgment, you will find it difficult to learn how language works.

Another fundamental difference between the Rhetorically and Prescriptively Correct Perspectives is that the latter does not allow for language variation and change. As you will read throughout this book, language variation and change is part of human language. It is fundamental to who we are. The Rhetorically Correct Perspective can handle that fact, but the Prescriptively Correct Perspective cannot. This conflict will be illustrated throughout the book.

When studying language, the first step is to describe. What is going on with the language, and how does it all work? For this reason, linguists have a firm

belief in the descriptive approach to language study in which all judgment is suspended. In looking at an utterance like “I ain’t going,” the descriptive approach allows the linguist to describe the negative present-tense conjugation of *be*. The prescriptive approach simply says, “*ain’t* is wrong,” since it is out of fashion in modern times. The rhetorical approach would judge the phrase depending on the context: It would be wrong in more formal context but works well in many casual contexts.

All of the language knowledge presented in this book was gathered by many linguists using the descriptive approach. If you want to judge other peoples’ language, the rhetorical approach is the only one which allows you to understand how language works and make your judgment.

## standard Englishes and vernacular Englishes

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Dictionaries are fascinating books, but they are not divinely generated. Whether they are general dictionaries of a language or specialty dictionaries for medicine or law, dictionaries are surveys of usage. It is important to realize that as usage changes, so do dictionaries. Dictionaries survey how people use words, checking the context of the word to see what meanings are intended.

The printing press came to England in 1476, and after that point the perception of English began to change. In previous centuries it had been a “local” language, used in everyday life but kept out of legal and educational contexts where French or Latin were used. With England’s increasing power during the centuries after the printing press, writers and leaders wanted to make English a more respected language. The result was a self-help industry where people followed advice to improve their supposedly sick language. Dictionaries had begun to appear for English after 1600, and people began to view English as a tool for business and literature. The first modern dictionary was published in 1755: Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language*. In that dictionary, Johnson used quotes to illustrate his meanings and provided pronunciation and usage guides.

Most dictionaries survey the usage of words in **writing**, but some specialize in spoken English. Online, contributor-based, dictionaries, such as [UrbanDictionary.com](http://UrbanDictionary.com) and [Wiktionary.org](http://Wiktionary.org), work off the same idea. The difference with them is that no editor comes along and condenses all the opinions. Not all dictionaries are equally well built, but all dictionaries provide a snapshot of the language and society. With the hordes of speakers we have in our modern time, we also have thousands of dictionaries which survey their usage.

From the previous discussion of Rhetorically vs. Prescriptively Correct Perspectives, what do we do with the idea of standard English? Most who have considered the idea of standard English have assumed the idea of an either/or choice: There is or there is not a standard English. For language scholars, the only accurate description is quite different from the one-or-none choice: There

are numerous standard Englishes. Most people new to the study of language are baffled by the idea that there is not just *one* standard English, but *many*. The easiest illustrations are the numerous varieties of national Englishes: American English, Australian English, British English, Irish English, New Zealand English, and Singaporean English, to name a few. Those standards can all be found at the present time. As we look back over time, we realize that different time periods had different standards, so that the standard for any one region has changed over time. Standard English in 1800 in Massachusetts is different from standard English in 2000 in Massachusetts.

There is a **standard~vernacular continuum** for language variation. The term *standard* exists in contrast to the term *vernacular*. They are opposite ends of the scale of language judgment. A standard variety receives no social stigma; a vernacular variety receives social stigma. The term *vernacular* is also used to mean several different things in regards to language, but we only work with one specific meaning in this book: By virtue of being at different ends of the same continuum, **vernacular** means *not standard*. In some ways, that might seem too obvious, but it is accurate for our needs. A vernacular dialect feature, like *ain't* in most places, or a vernacular variety, like Southern US English, is *vernacular* because it is not considered to be standard.

For a language example in the standard~vernacular continuum, consider the language variation of R-dropping. This pattern can happen when a word has a potential R near the end of it, e.g. *part*, but the R sound is turned into a vowel instead of a consonant, something like <paht>. Many Australian, English, and New Zealand speakers have R-dropping as a regular part of their speech. R-dropping is also in a few regions of the United States, including the Boston area of Massachusetts and areas of the US South. What is different for all these regions is the cultural evaluation of R-dropping. In the British varieties, R-dropping is the prestigious form and can be considered standard. In the US South, it is vernacular because it is seen as nonstandard.<sup>4</sup> The mechanics of R-dropping is exactly the same in every region, but the social evaluation differs because it is associated with different social groups in the different regions.

For North American English, the most reliable scale is the standard~vernacular continuum. Other languages' speakers use one prestige variety as the ideal form and then judge all deviations from that prestige form. For US English speakers, the definition of standard English is simple, if not a bit unsatisfying. Standard English is defined by what it is not: It is not vernacular. What is vernacular? Anything that is stigmatized. In the US South, *y'all* is the normal pronoun for second person plural: *Y'all should go to the museum*. Outside the US South, *y'all* is stigmatized as vernacular; it is seen as bad. The linguistics of *y'all* is not relevant for judging *y'all* along the standard~vernacular continuum, since that is simply a range of social judgment. Whether any bit of language is vernacular or not is a social judgment. It depends on what the audience thinks of it.



## Word Play: Along the continuum

Rate along a standard~vernacular continuum dialect features you know well. The dialect features could include sounds or whole phrases, such as bir[f]day, *youz guys* vs. *y'all*, *between you and I*, *the car needs washed*.

Standard-----Vernacular

Have the class vote where each feature falls in this continuum. Which dialect features have the largest range of votes (i.e. the largest estimated standard deviation)?

## grammars

Perhaps the most common word used when the topic of *language* comes up in school is *grammar*. Like a jilted lover, the term *grammar* has quite a history and carries a lot of baggage. It started as an ancient Greek term for the *art of writing*, and the term maintained that meaning for centuries. Many beginning schools have been called *grammar schools* because of a medieval tradition of teaching the *trivium*, a collection of three basic topics: grammar (the art of writing), rhetoric (the art of persuasion), and dialectic (the art of logical debate). Within that art of writing, the study of language and comparison of languages became more common. In the Middle Ages, the study of grammar mostly meant the study of languages like Greek and Latin, the dominant languages of medieval Europe. During these earlier times, the study of grammar was often connected to magic, and several related words were split from the term, including the French *grimoire* and English *glamour* (think of modern vampires who *glamour* their victims). In the twentieth century, the study of grammar was carried on by those who taught Latin, and it eventually landed in English departments where linguists now usually perform that duty. Its connection to the art of writing was lost at this point in the United States, since a separate field of composition studies exists today, although in Europe there continues a connection to the much broader study of philology.<sup>5</sup> For modern linguists, the study of grammar became a study of how languages work, mostly focused on how words and phrases were built by native speakers.

From this long history, the word *grammar* has hooked up with lots of different words and suffixes. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists 13 different entries for *grammar* related terms, and in the main entry for the word, there are 24 sub-entries for words like *grammar-rule*, *grammar-lad*, and *grammar-monger*. Although we do not need to work through all the *grammar* terms, we do need to distinguish between different types of grammar. Here, we will focus on five kinds of grammars: teaching grammars, prescriptive grammars, descriptive grammars, mental grammars, and Universal Grammar.

## teaching grammars

Learning a second or third language as an adult is much more challenging than learning it as a child. Children have a natural ability to acquire a language, but this ability gets lost around puberty. To compensate for that lost skill, many people take formal classes and buy books explaining the language they are trying to learn. Those books are **teaching grammars**. They are big business, especially for a language like English, which is the focus of a billion-dollar-a-year industry. Teaching grammars explain language regulations like “adjectives come before their nouns” and “objects come after their verbs,” as well as supplying a limited vocabulary and exercises to practice. Teaching grammars include many regulations that no native speaker had to formally learn in a classroom; native speakers knew those rules before they started school. Yet, teaching grammars assume you have knowledge of at least one language. If you were to use only the information in a teaching grammar to help children learn their first language, it would not be enough.

## prescriptive grammars

Medical professionals write prescriptions for medicine. Such medicine is intended to make sick patients better. Those who give **prescriptive grammar** advice also intend for people’s language to get better by virtue of taking their advice. However, the people prescribing medicine are licensed professionals, whereas the people giving prescriptive grammar advice are not. There is no institutional authority for prescriptive grammar.

The foundational assumption with prescriptive grammar is that language can be sick. Variation is often seen as a symptom of this sickness. For example, advice such as “don’t end your sentence with a preposition” attempts to enforce a pattern from Latin on to English. Yet, prepositions in English have always been free words and have appeared in different positions throughout its history (e.g. Middle English, Layamon’s *Brut* (§88), *Þenne he þe treoweðe alre best on* ‘Then he you trusts all best on’). Despite the disapproval of variation, prescriptive grammar advice itself does vary over time. Prescriptive grammar advice follows social fashion, and will change over time. Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) disliked the word *mob*, meaning a group of people, because it was a clipping of *mobile*. Today, this meaning of *mob* is a well-accepted part of English.

One of the basic facts of modern language study is that writing is a human invention. Language is not a human invention. Writing is a method of representing language, and we can experience language through the technology of writing the same way we can experience language through the technology of audio recordings. Writing systems have been invented in different cultures using various techniques, such as systems of hieroglyphs, cuneiform, logographs, syllabaries, and alphabets. Writing systems have been invented as a helpful technology, and they are an essential part of modern society. In many

## Word Play: Judging the verbs

Read through the following sentences and figure out your judgment of where they would fall along the standard~vernacular continuum.

- *If this be to your liking, please sign below.*
- *I would buy that bike if I were rich.*
- *I will do it so I can go.*
- *It is important that our rights be upheld.*
- *What if she was the last one on Earth?*
- *He be laughing all the time.*

countries, literacy is a necessity for success. As a widely used technology, learning to read and write follows from prescriptive advice. Capital letters at the start of sentences and periods at ends are part of the prescriptive repertoire for the English alphabetic system. Paragraphs, introductions, conclusions, and all other regulations of writing are part of prescriptive grammar advice. Prescriptive grammars are not inherently evil, but they are restrictive, and all too often people give prescriptive grammar advice with an air of self-righteousness.

If we were to train an infant with only the knowledge in a prescriptive grammar book, that infant would be in bad shape. Most of these works assume you are already a native speaker of the language and have full literacy skills. As an example of prescriptive grammar advice, *me* is used as an object form and *I* is used as a subject form. Native speakers, however, have started to reshuffle the deck with *I* and *me* in phrases such as *The athletic director fired Rich and I*. Were the combined phrase *Rich and I* a subject, it would prescriptively be correct: *Rich and I could not beat Ohio State*. People have begun to assume that *and I* is prescriptively correct in every situation, even when the *and I* is working as an object. So some people will see *Divide the candy between her and me* as wrong, despite it being prescriptively correct.

With the importance placed upon literacy in our modern world, too many people are tempted to fan the flames of self-righteousness when discussing genre conventions. Plus, prescriptive grammar advice is used to chide students. Chapter 10 explains how a different approach can accomplish all the beneficial educational goals of prescriptive grammar while fostering an understanding of human language. It would be most efficient if this modern approach were delivered with accurate information about how language works. In this book, I hope to provide a detailed portrait of language to allow for better teaching of genre-specific rules for writing.



## descriptive grammars

A **descriptive grammar** is a book about a language. Such books are not written for students learning the language (teaching grammars), nor are they written for natives who want to follow the writing fashions of the language (prescriptive grammars). Descriptive grammars are written for linguists who want to learn how a certain language works. Does the language allow multiple suffixes or any suffixes? Can a syllable start with only one consonant or two, or even three? How many types of vowels are there in the language? These kinds of questions are answered in a descriptive grammar. They are highly technical books. With those technical details, an attempt is made to document the inner workings of a language. For most descriptive grammars, the vocabulary of the language would need to be delimited and described in a separate dictionary. With a descriptive grammar and a dictionary for a language, we could program a computer to generate grammatical sentences in that language. Descriptive grammars are more complete than teaching grammars or prescriptive grammars.

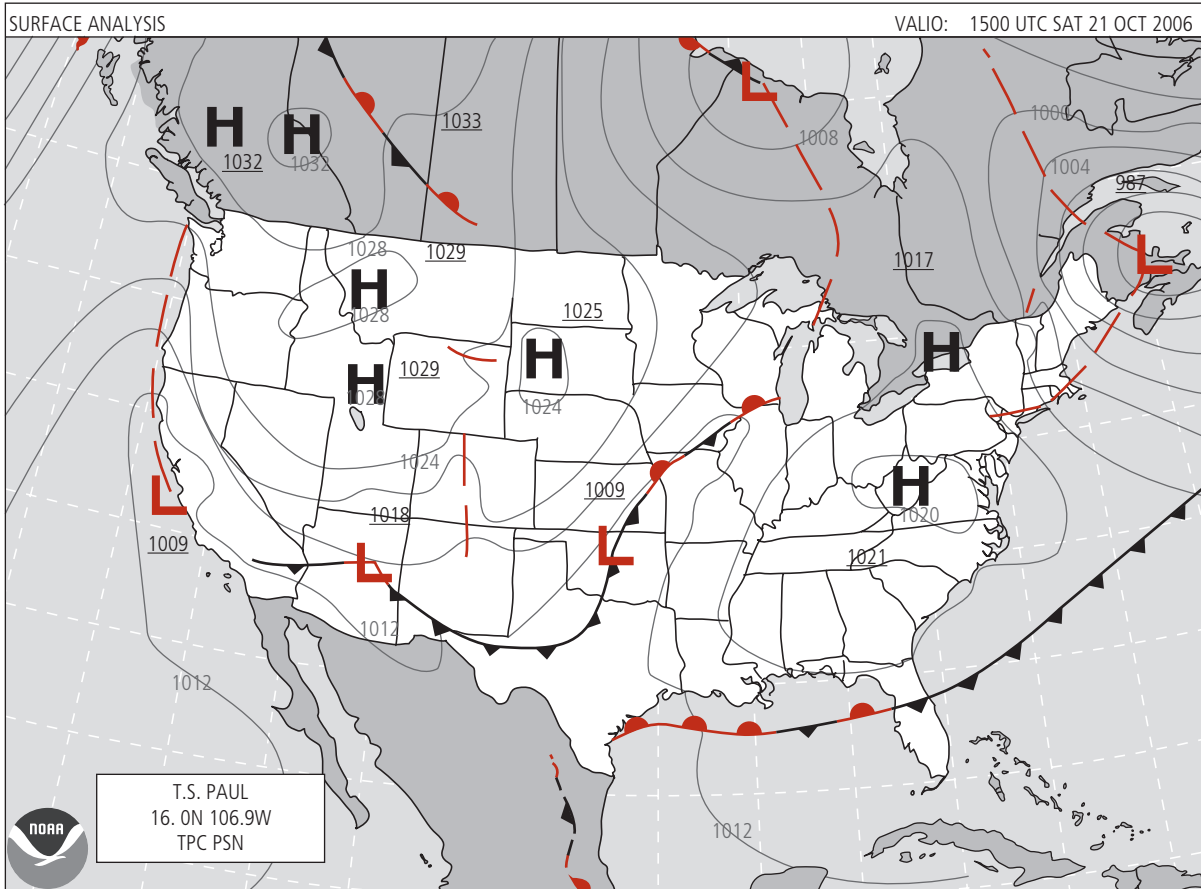
Descriptive grammars describe the workings of a language, but they do not judge speakers' usage of that language. A descriptive grammar of English should note that a common negative present-tense form of *be* is *ain't*, and that *ain't* also functions as a replacement for *have* or *do* in some varieties of English. This descriptive grammar should also note that *ain't* is stigmatized by many speakers, but describing social judgments is different from exercising them.

The difference between descriptive and prescriptive grammars has caused a lot of confusion and a fair bit of anger. For many people, a “grammar” is supposed to tell you how to use your language, such as when to use “which” or “that” in front of a clause (e.g. *I lost the book [which/that] I bought*). Descriptive grammars do not give advice: They detail the ways in which native speakers use their language. A descriptive grammar is a survey of a language. For any living language, a descriptive grammar from one century will differ from a descriptive grammar of the next century because the language will have changed. This textbook follows the path of descriptive grammars. As **linguistics** is the scientific study of language, this book presents information from linguistic studies.

## mental grammars

The first three grammars can come in books and have a tangible form. These next two kinds of grammar, mental grammar and Universal Grammar, are more abstract. The **mental grammar** is the place in the mind where language happens. When you are speaking or writing, your mental grammar is producing language. When you are listening or reading, your mental grammar is dissecting language and making the meaning real for you.

When we talk about the mind, we make a subtle but worthwhile distinction between the brain and the mind. The brain is the squishy part which sloshes



**Figure 1.2** A standard weather map representing billions of small happenings. From the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. [www.noaa.gov](http://www.noaa.gov)

around in your skull. It is an object, and you can touch it, but you probably should not try to. The mind is an abstraction, not an object; no one has ever touched a mind. Yet, this concept of the mind has been really useful for the study of humans because it is a model of what happens in the brain. One good analogy to explain the distinction between minds and brains is the comparison of weather maps and weather itself.

On a weather map like the one above, from the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, there are symbols for different weather formations, such as high and low pressure systems. These maps are a common part of modern life, and we interpret them as *models* for the weather. Yet, from looking at this map, no one will walk outside and expect to see a giant H in the sky. New Brunswick, Canada should be safe from the giant L floating overhead because they know there is no giant L. The map is not the weather, only a model of the weather. But, there are billions of molecules interacting with each other

over large patches of space, and trying to explain all of those interactions just to tell someone whether it is going to rain or not would be silly. Accordingly, all of those interactions are abstracted into a model we can more easily understand. Like weather maps, the mind is a simplified abstraction for the billions of molecular interactions in the brain.

In the model called the mind, the mental grammar is the language module. It is that unit which *does* the language. It languages, both producing and receiving. In this book, we will discuss what role the mental grammar plays at every level of language. As with models in many scientific fields, linguists do not agree on what the best model should be. Establishing that is one of the goals of modern linguistics. The model presented in this book is one of several which vary in how the parts are configured. For example, a lot of ink has been spilled in linguistics over whether or not to include our mental dictionary, the **lexicon**, as part of the mental grammar or not.

## Universal Grammar

Universal Grammar is even more of an abstraction than the mental grammar. Our discussion of the mental grammar of English generalizes from as many as a billion people, characterizing what qualities of English are in their heads. Universal Grammar generalizes to the entire species, but it is not the grammar in an adult's head, it is the template for grammar we are born with. The **Universal Grammar** is the biological endowment for building a mental grammar. It in itself is not a mental grammar of any particular language, but it is the set of genetic instructions we use as infants to acquire languages.

The Universal Grammar is something of a holy grail in linguistics. Although some argue against its possible existence, a lot of linguistic effort has gone towards describing it. It most likely contains instructions for building a lexicon with arbitrariness as a basic tenet, along with a module to put together words and phrases. The lexicon instructions might also direct the construction of slots for nouns and verbs. In Chapter 8, we discuss some other qualities the Universal Grammar might contain.

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## meaning

Meaning is the goal for language and for all forms of communication. To communicate is to *mean* something. For humans, many different ways to convey meaning are used every day. If two people approach a doorway at the same time, and one pauses, the other person might take that pause to mean “permission to go first.” Language is a subset of human communication, but it is a special subset. As far as linguists know, the ability to acquire and use language is a genetically-endowed, species-specific trait. Only humans do it. In the evolution of this ability, meaning must have been one of the first components, since we find meaning to be part of all animal communication systems.

## Words to the Wise: Unambiguating language

There has been a long-standing desire to eliminate ambiguity from human language. Some mathematicians and philosophers have tried over the years to create a more logical system of communication. The polymath Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) wanted to create a communication system which would disallow the normal confusions of human language so that philosophers could argue about law and ethics as precisely as mathematicians argue about space and time. Modern computer languages are also designed to prohibit ambiguity. At the level of hardware, computers need clear, step-by-step instructions to allow operations to flow smoothly. Ambiguity would make a computer stop, but humans work around such problems every day.

Meaning in language is not always clear. There are many ways in which a speaker's intended meaning does not become the same as the received meaning. Several important traits of language allow for these twists in meaning.

First, it is important to recognize that meaning is not *transferred* between speaker and hearer. Language is not a pipe that carries meaning from one person to another. Language is a discrete combinatorial system. Small parts are put together into packages and sent off (by speaking or signing) to an audience. Those packages are broken apart on the receiving end, triggering meanings in the audiences' minds. The sounds of <bat> combine to form the word, which itself fits inside of sentences (parts within larger parts). How the receiver interprets <bat> depends on other factors, such as the context of the word: *the wooden bat* vs. *the flying bat*.

Meaning can be confounded because of **ambiguity**. Ambiguity can happen when multiple meanings are attached to some bit of language. When two or more meanings are associated with the form of a word, the word is potentially ambiguous. For example, the form *set* could be connected to 'a group of things' or to 'place something somewhere'; the form *bat* could be connected to 'a flying mammal' or to 'a stick used to hit.' When sentences are ambiguous in their phrases, the collection of words can be seen to make up different meanings. For example, in *the child kissed the toddler with the puppet*, two meanings arise: either the child used the puppet to kiss the toddler or the child kissed the toddler who was holding the puppet. Some sentences can contain both word and phrase ambiguity. How many meanings can you pull out of this sentence: *Umberto turned on the TV* (Consider how "on the TV" could be a prepositional phrase or how "turn on" can be a verb). These kinds of ambiguity are a natural part of every language. They are also absent from other animals' communication systems.

Perhaps the most important quality related to meaning itself is arbitrariness. To explain this quality, let us begin with the idea that a word is a pairing of form and meaning. For sounded languages the form is one or more sounds; for signed languages, the form is a gesture. The meaning is whatever is *conventionally* associated with that form.

There is no meaning assigned by nature to any certain form, because the relationship between form and meaning is arbitrary. That quality of arbitrariness distinguishes us from many other species.

If speakers use the form *pop* in the Northern United States, but Southerners use *coke*, they may have the same meaning, but arbitrariness allows for different forms to be connected to that meaning. Arbitrariness refers to any form's lack of inherent meaning. There is nothing in the meaning of 'artificial, packaged, sweetened beverage' which is naturally affiliated with either the forms *pop* or *coke* or *soda*. On the flip side, there is nothing in the form *pop* which requires it be associated with that meaning. *Pop* also means 'to hit someone' or 'the sound of hitting someone' in many English varieties.

If language were not arbitrary, then forms would be naturally connected to certain meanings. The form <bow> [bo] would mean one and only one thing in all the world's languages. Perhaps that meaning would be 'a certain kind of knot' (English, <bow>) or 'beautiful' (French, <beau>) or 'stay' (Norwegian, <bo>), all with similar pronunciations, but perhaps not. As a quality of language, arbitrariness has received its share of complaints over the years, but it is one of the basic qualities that make us human.

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## standard Englishes and different world views

Treating "standard English" as a single entity with coherent and solid boundaries is an empirical mistake. What might be standard English gets defined both today and over time by shifting social standards. There are standard Englishes throughout North America and the world, but there is no single set of features that is "standard English." There never was just one, and there are numerous standard Englishes now.

Yet for many people, the common belief about language is that some supremely correct form exists for all contexts and times. In previous centuries, this belief extended to the superiority of some languages, such as Latin, to all other languages. We are currently in the transition from such older concepts to improved, modern ones. Two signs of this transformation are the following trends: (1) People more readily accept that no one language is inherently supreme, and (2) people more readily accept that language change is not decay. Both of those ideas used to be the norm. Were other tenants of modern linguistics, such as the legitimacy of language variation, to be taken up by educational professionals, then the educational goals of literacy and writing would be accomplished more thoroughly and efficiently.

Many teachers, speech pathologists, and other educational professionals have transitioned from a foundational assumption of language having only correct and incorrect forms to an assumption of language having multiple, linguistically legitimate forms. It is important for all of us to understand that the linguistic evaluation of language can be separate from the social evaluation of language.

## structure

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Words are some of the most noticeable parts of language. They are the bricks and mortar used to build language. But, buildings are more than just a pile of raw materials. Buildings are structures. They have certain qualities which link their parts together and allow them to be useful. Language also has structure, at many different levels. A significant portion of this book is dedicated to explaining that structure.

Sounds make up words and are arranged in specific orders. In phonetic script, the word *blue* has three sounds [blu], and the first two are sounds which cannot be reversed in English. The combination [lbu] is not something English speakers do, and this ordering of sounds is part of the structure of English.

As parts, words are combined together to make up phrases, some of which are short, and some of which are long. Some phrases are sentences, but most are not. A noun phrase like *the whale* is short, but it can be combined with other units to form larger phrases. Perhaps the most literary whale is *the sperm whale*, which is a noun phrase that has an adjective phrase inside of it. But, that phrase can be used as a single unit in yet a larger phrase. Herman Melville writes of “the sperm whale’s vast tail” in *Moby Dick*, positioning that noun phrase in yet a longer phrase: “let me assure ye that many a veteran who has freely marched up to a battery, would quickly recoil at the apparition of the sperm whale’s vast tail, fanning into eddies the air over his head” (Chapter XXIV, 107).

Layers of structure such as these are explained throughout the book, starting with the smallest parts and building to larger and larger combinations.

## a tour of language

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Human language is a natural phenomenon and demonstrates the diversity of human culture while illustrating our shared humanity as members of the same species. Some scientists study language to better understand how it works in the human mind. The scientific study of language is called linguistics, and this book provides a modern linguistic description of human language.

Consider this book to be your tour guide to the “language factory” inside your head. You do amazing things with language every day. I hope you enjoy your tour and learn to appreciate how special language is.

## chapter summary

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This chapter explains that human language is diverse in its vocabulary but similar in its sounds and sentence patterns. To analyze language, we must first understand that it is a natural biological development of being human, like vision, and that writing is a technological innovation, like photography. A

language like English has basic parts we combine into patterns. The parts include sounds, words, and phrases. Words are built by connecting sound forms to meanings; those connections are culturally determined because no natural relationship exists between sound and meaning. With all these parts, we often judge other people's language, either from a Rhetorically or Prescriptively Correct Perspective. The Rhetorically Correct Perspective is based on the appropriateness of an utterance for a certain speaker in a certain context, and it makes the most sense given how language works. The Prescriptively Correct Perspective is based on the mythical assumption of one correct form. Teaching grammars and descriptive grammars are different kinds of books; the first helps students learn another language, and the second describes how a certain language works. The mental grammar is not a book at all; it is the factory in your mind where the parts get assembled to make language. To build that factory requires special instructions, and the Universal Grammar is the genetically coded blueprint babies use to build mental grammars. In this book, there are many terms that might seem familiar to students, but though terms such as *word* and *vowel* will be familiar from everyday speech, they are technical terms in this book and have distinct definitions. A term like accent can mean different things to different people. What does it mean in this *Natalie Dee* comic: <http://www.nataliedee.com/021210/>



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## key concepts

- Ambiguity
- Arbitrariness
- Dead languages
- Descriptive grammar
- Discourse
- Language
- Language variation
- Lexicon
- Linguistics
- Living languages
- Mental grammar
- Monolingual
- Multilingual
- Phrases
- Prescriptively Correct Perspective
- Prescriptive grammar
- Rhetorically Correct Perspective
- Standard-vernacular continuum
- Teaching grammars
- Universal Grammar
- Word
- Writing

## notes

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- 1 For some teachers of linguistics, using *language* as a verb is as normal as using *table*, *pen*, *mind*, *box*, or *cup* as verbs. John E. Joseph (2002) has written about the usage, rationale, and history of *language* as a verb, which dates back to at least 1628.
- 2 Lewis, M. Paul (ed.). 2009. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, Sixteenth edition. Dallas, TX: SIL International. Online version: [www.ethnologue.com/](http://www.ethnologue.com/)
- 3 British RP is a prestige variety in England. The RP stands for *received pronunciation*, supposedly received from the monarchy itself.
- 4 R-dropping used to be prestigious in the US South, but since World War II, it has become increasingly seen as vernacular as it has become more of a rural and non-upper-class language variation pattern.
- 5 Philology is the study and comparison of classical texts, usually ancient Greek and Latin. Modern language study now takes place in most European philology departments. Friedrich Nietzsche was perhaps the most famous classical philologist, although his fame was more for his philosophical writings than his philology.

## references

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Joseph, J.E. (2002) "Is language a verb? Conceptual change in linguistics and language teaching." H. Trappes-Lomax and G. Ferguson, eds. *Language in Language Teacher Education*: 29–48.



Lewis, M.P. (ed.) (2009) *Ethnologue: Languages of the world*. 16th edition. Dallas, TX: SIL International. Online version: [www.ethnologue.com/](http://www.ethnologue.com/)

Melville, H. (2011) *Moby Dick*, Harper Perennial Classics (Chapter XXIV, 107).

## further reading

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*The Language Instinct*. Steven Pinker. 2007. Penguin.

For linguists, this book is now a classic and shining example of introducing language to public audiences. For most readers, this book is a quick read packed with humorous stories and memorable examples. *The Language Instinct* covers the sound system, the construction of words and phrases, and the workings of language in the mind. Although originally published in 1994, it is still relevant, accurate, and highly readable today.

*Doctor Dolittle's Delusion: Animals and the Uniqueness of Human Language*. Stephen R. Anderson. 2004. Yale University Press.

Anderson takes on Hugh Lofting's fictional character of Doctor Dolittle, the British doctor who could speak to animals. The key arguments are that all animals have communication systems, but only humans have language. Anderson works through



discussions about animal communication, including the dances of honeybees and the warning calls of vervet monkeys. He also addresses the sign-language gestures learned by primates. Additionally, Anderson makes clear the distinction between language and communication.

*Language Matters: A Guide to Everyday Questions About Language.* Donna Jo Napoli and Vera Lee-Schoenfeld. 2010. Oxford University Press.

In *Language Matters*, the authors explain *why* language matters to all of us and the most pressing language matters which arise in our society. The authors write chapters on questions such as “Is Ebonics really a dialect or simply bad English? Do women and men speak differently? Will computers ever really learn human language? Does offensive language harm children?” These and many other questions come up regularly in discussions about education, parenting, and society in general. From their linguistic background, Napoli and Lee-Schoenfeld answer them directly and clearly for the widest possible audience.

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## exercises



### individual work

1. Pet peeves are things other people do which drive you crazy. Everyone has them.
  - a. What language pet peeves do you have?
  - b. Are your pet peeves about written or spoken language?
  - c. Which pet peeves deal with sounds, which with words (apart from sounds), and which with how phrases are built?
  - d. Are any of them about spelling?
2. When do meanings not work as intended? Provide an example of a misinterpreted meaning in a conversation you have had or in a movie.
3. Using a dictionary which provides the etymology of words (their history), write up a description of the following types of words, complete with how the word or phrase is used:
  - a. What is the most old-fashioned word you know? When did it actually come into the language?
  - b. What is the most modern-sounding word you know? When did it actually come into the language?
  - c. Find three words with a Latin history.
  - d. Find three words with an Anglo-Saxon history.
  - e. How do these words differ in how they are used? Sometimes, words such as *beautiful* (Latin) and *pretty* (Anglo-Saxon) compete against each other for certain styles of speaking.

## group work

1. The longest word:
  - a. What is the longest (nontechnical & nonplacename) English word in terms of sounds your group can remember?
  - b. What is the longest (nontechnical & nonplacename) English word in terms of letters your group can remember?
  - c. How many units does each one have (sounds or letters), and which one is longer?
2. Judging language:
  - a. Consider these two sentences:

*The cabin in which we stayed burned down yesterday.*  
*The cabin we stayed in burned down yesterday.*
  - b. From the prescriptive perspective, judge these two sentences on a scale of good and bad.
  - c. From the rhetorical perspective, what contexts would make either sentence better than the other?
3. Prescriptive perspective vs. rhetorical perspective:
  - a. Develop two sentences which would satisfy the prescriptive perspective, and provide two contexts where those same sentences would not work rhetorically.
  - b. Develop two other sentences which would not satisfy the prescriptive perspective, and two contexts where those same sentences would work rhetorically.
  - c. Develop two more sentences which satisfy neither the prescriptive nor rhetorical perspectives, regardless of context.
7. Meaning in language:
  - a. Develop a skit where a couple is having a verbal fight. The fight builds in the skit until one says to the other, “What do you mean by that?” At that point the skit ends, and the audience then must figure out not only what was “meant by that,” but also how they are able to discern what the speaker meant. Additionally, why *did* the second member of the couple ask, “What do you mean by that?”
  - b. Develop a single sentence with as many meanings as possible. The context for the sentence can be changed as many times as you like (e.g. change the decade, the place, the speaker, or audience), but the sentence itself cannot change. The group with the sentence which can yield the most meanings wins. It is best to let the class as a whole be the judge as to how legitimate the meanings might be.

8. Language diversity:
  - a. With your group, try to develop what you know about languages other than English. How many other languages does your group know?
  - b. With your group, how many different dialects have you encountered?
9. Debate between groups (in front of the class) whether or not the following are myths about language:
  - a. Some languages are primitive and do not perform the same functions as others.
  - b. Some people speak dialects, but others do not.
  - c. Some languages have only three vowels.
  - d. Some writing systems have symbols which represent syllables, some represent sounds, and some represent words.
  - e. Our languages are the basis for our thought.
  - f. English is the hardest language to learn.
  - g. In Appalachia, people speak Elizabethan English.
  - h. Some languages have no grammar.
  - i. Everyone has an accent.
  - j. Humans can communicate with other species.
  - k. Other animals also have language.
  - l. Children cannot speak or write properly anymore.

10. Language play:

The following information came from one of those endlessly forwarded emails. The main question for you is the following: Which statements deal with language, which with spelling, and which ones deal with both?

Learn this info if you intend to try out for “Jeopardy”:

- A. The longest one-syllable word in the English language is “screeched.”
- B. “Dreamt” is the only English word that ends in the letters “mt.”
- C. The word “set” has more definitions than any other word in the English language.
- D. “Underground” is the only word in the English language that begins and ends with the letters “und.”
- E. There are only four words in the English language which end in “-dous:” tremendous, horrendous, stupendous, and hazardous.
- F. Los Angeles’s full name is “El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciuncula” and can be abbreviated to 3.63% of its size: “L.A.”
- G. There is a seven letter word in the English language that contains ten words without rearranging any of its letters. This word is

“therein,” and the words within it are: the, there, he, in, rein, her, here, ere, therein, herein.

- H. “Stewardesses” is the longest English word that can be typed with only the left hand.
- I. The combination “ough” can be pronounced in nine different ways; the following sentence contains them all: “A rough-coated, dough-faced, thoughtful ploughman strode through the streets of Scarborough; after falling into a slough, he coughed and hiccoughed.”
- J. The only 15 letter word that can be spelled without repeating a letter is “uncopyrightable.”
- K. “Facetious” and “abstemious” contain all the vowels in the correct order, as does “arsenious,” meaning “containing arsenic.”

Some points to ponder for these statements are the following: What does *longest* mean in statement A? How could you reword statement I so that it takes into account that writing is a representation of language? What does *correct order* mean in statement K? How many vowel sounds are there in the English language? In contrast, how many vowel letters? How would some of these work if we replaced *sound* for *letter*? What does *word* mean in statement G?

## study questions

1. Are most humans multilingual or monolingual?
2. What is language variation?
3. How are language and writing not the same thing?
4. Why is Latin considered a dead language?
5. Are individual language sounds connected to meaning?
6. What is a word?
7. What are phrases?
8. What are the two most common word order patterns?
9. What must infants build to acquire a language?
10. Approximately how many varieties of human language do we have?
11. What is something that all varieties of language have in common?
12. How is language variation seen in the prescriptive perspective?
13. What is the rhetorical perspective?
14. How is standard English defined for US English speakers?
15. How has the meaning of the term *grammar* changed?
16. What basic assumption is the foundation for prescriptive grammar advice?

17. What is a descriptive grammar, and how do linguists use them?
18. In the mind, what is the mental grammar's job?
19. What is the lexicon?
20. What is Universal Grammar?
21. How is the Universal Grammar related to a mental grammar?
22. What is ambiguity, and how does it relate to meaning?
23. How is arbitrariness related to meaning?
24. What goes into making a word?

Visit the book's companion website for additional resources relating to this chapter at: <http://www.wiley.com/go/hazen/introlanguage>



