(Informal) Logic: Crystal Ch. 1

WRIT 0590: Module 2.2

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Contents

Language

Language acquisition

Building languages bottom up

What is a language?

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  - ▶ Language is a system of communication unique to our species.
  - ▶ Language is a cognitive system in the mind/brain.
  - ▶ It underlies our ability to produce and comprehend infinitely many sentences.
- ▶ **Definition:**
  - ▶ A language is an internal, mental grammar that generates a potentially infinite set of linguistic expressions.

A Precise Way to Talk About Language

- Language exists in an individual's brain (the mental grammar).
- The study of an individual's internal grammar is key to understanding linguistic competence.

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How Children Learn Language

- ▶ Children acquire language by parsing the linguistic input around them:
  - ▶ Parents
  - ▶ Caregivers
  - ▶ Peers
- ▶ They analyze speech patterns very efficiently and form robust grammatical systems early on.
- ▶ Children do not replicate their parents' language (not transmitted via Bluetooth) but rather **reconstruct** grammar based on surface patterns.

Adult Speech & the Shaping of Grammar

- Adult speech patterns provide the raw data for children to construct their grammars.
- When adults speak Language A or B, children often form an innovative grammar (C) that may combine features of both.
- This explains how new speech patterns and dialects can emerge within a few generations.

Individual Grammars are Unique

- Each individual has a unique grammar in their mind.
- No two people share exactly the same linguistic history or neural wiring.

Similarity in Grammars

- ▶ Children raised in the same environment share similar linguistic input.
- ▶ Their grammars, therefore, often end up being quite similar.
- ▶ Sometimes, these grammars are nearly identical, giving the illusion of a uniformly shared language.

Clustering Grammars & Mutual Intelligibility

- Given many similar grammars, we can **cluster** them.
- Mutual intelligibility often determines whether two people are deemed to speak the same language.
- If speech is "close enough" for effective communication, we call it the same dialect of a language.

Same Language, Different Dialects

- ▶ People who can still understand each other but have noticeable differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, or grammar:
  - ▶ They speak **the same language** but different **dialects**.
- ▶ Dialectal differences can be subtle or highly pronounced.
- ▶ Often linked to geography, social class, or ethnic group.

Different Languages

- When mutual intelligibility breaks down, we say they are different languages.
- This is a practical heuristic, but not a hard-and-fast rule.
- Certain individual linguistic features can obscure understanding (e.g., sound change, vocabulary differences, innovative morphology).

Sociopolitical Factors

▶ Political boundaries, cultural identity, and historical context often override purely linguistic notions.

▶ Linguists, governments, and bureaucracies can **label** or **rename** languages and dialects for their own reasons.

▶ "Language" vs. "dialect" is not always a straightforward linguistic distinction but also a political or sociocultural decision.

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- These examples highlight how sociopolitical and cultural factors intersect with linguistic reality.

Activity

- Do we all speak the same variety of English? Can a computer test reliably identify our linguistic origin?
- Let's compare:
  - How Y'all, Youse and You Guys Talk (NYTimes)
  - What Kind of American English Do You Speak? (How Stuff Works)