

Agenda Monday Week 14

■ Reminders

- No quiz this week

■ This week's topic: language history

- How human languages vary
- Universals, and where they come from
- The search for "Proto-World"
 - Nova film on Wednesday

1

Readings and Resources

■ Pinker, chapter 8 "The Tower of Babel"

■ Some web sites

userid=e105iu password=pinker

- <http://www.nytimes.com/library/national/science/020100sci-archaeo-language.html>
- <http://www.yourdictionary.com/> Go there
- http://www.sciencefriday.com/pages/1995/Sep/hour2_090895.html



2

Language Universals: two very different views

There are over 6000 different languages on Earth!

However

- Languages differ from each other without limit and in unpredictable ways (Joos, 1957)
- A visiting Martian would conclude that aside from mutually uninterpretable vocabulary, Earthlings speak a single language (Chomsky, 1957)

3

Differences among languages

- Word structure
 - isolating: words are immutable
 - English, Chinese
 - inflecting: words are stems for inflections
 - Latin, Russian
 - agglutinating: verbs are stems for markers of all major elements of a sentence
 - Kivunjo, West Greenlandic Eskimo

4

Case in Russian (Slavic)

- **sobak-a**: dog + nominative (for subjects)
- **sobak-u**: dog + accusative (for direct objects, etc.)
- **sobak-e**: dog + dative (for indirect objects, etc.)
- **sobak-ĭ**: dog + genitive (for possession, etc.)
- **sobak-oj**: dog + instrumental (for manner, etc.)
- **sobak-e**: dog + locative (for object of prepositions)

5

Agglutination of Kivunjo (Bantu)

- **Naikimlyiia**: the verb in “I eat goats for Mary”
 - > **N**: focus of conversation is on this verb
 - > **a**: subject agreement with a Class 1 noun (16)
 - > **i**: present tense
 - > **ki**: object agreement with a Class 7 noun
 - > **m**: benefactive agreement with a Class 1 noun
 - > **lyi**: verb: eat
 - > **i**: marker indicating a extra role player (ben.)
 - > **a**: indicative (vs. subjunctive) mood

6

Differences continued

■ Word order

- fixed order: roughly correlates with isolating languages
 - English, Chinese
- Free order: roughly correlates to inflectional and agglutinating
 - Latin, Russian, Warlpiri

7

Word order in Russian (Slavic)

- Irin-a vidit sobak-u: “Irina sees dog”
- Irin-a sobak-u vidit: “Irina sees dog”
- Sobak-u Irin-a vidit: “Irina sees dog”
- Sobak-u vidit Irin-a : “Irina sees dog”
- Vidit Irin-a sobak-u: “Irina sees dog”
- Vidit sobak-u Irin-a : “Irina sees dog”

How do you say “The dog sees Irina”?

Sobak-a vidit Irin-u: “Dog sees Irina”

8

Differences continued

■ Subject and Object Case systems

- > Nominative-Accusative
 - The case of the subject of both transitive and intransitive verbs is opposed to that of the object
 - English, Russian, Japanese
- > Ergative-Absolutive
 - The case of the subject of transitive verbs only is opposed to that of both objects and the subject of intransitive verbs
 - Basque, Warlpiri

9

Differences continued

■ (Surface) Basic Word Order

- > SVO (common)
 - English, Russian, many others
- > SOV (common)
 - Japanese, German (embedded clauses), Turkish, etc.
- > VSO (less common)
 - Welsh (Gaelic), Classical Arabic
- > VOS (rare); OVS (even rarer)
 - Malagasy; Hixkaryana (Amazon basin only?)
- > OSV (probably nonexistent)

10

Differences continued

■ Prominence

- Subject prominent
 - English:
 - She saw the dog.
- Topic prominent
 - German, Russian, Japanese, ASL
 - Den Hund hat sie gesehen.
 - Sobaku videla ona.

11

The search for universals

■ Greenberg (1963) found 45 in 30 languages studied.

- absolute: no language makes questions by reversing all words
- statistical: subject usually precedes object
- implicational:
 - If SOV, then very probably postpositional
 - She dog sees → house in; city from
 - If VSO, then necessarily prepositional
 - Sees she dog → in house; from city

12

What Caused Universals?

- Descendents from one (Mother) language
- Human intellect forces languages to conform to the same patterns
- The human language processor creates all languages, thus all conform to the requirements imposed by it.

13

“Mother” language would exert too little influence to preserve universals

- Radical breaks have occurred: Creoles
- Implications cannot be transmitted, only comparative linguists know they exist
- Correlations break down with time, and are eventually (completely?) erased
- Languages change within themselves: English went from inflected, (basic) SOV order, topic prominent to what it is today.

14

Memory and thought could not impose universals

- Disassociation of language (English) and thought (mentalese)
- Arbitrary language rules defy logic:
 - inversion always structure dependent
 - Could he _ have left? not *Have he could _ left?
 - Is the boy who is sick _ here? not *Is the boy who _ sick is here?
 - Stem + derivation + inflection universally
 - “Darwinisms not *Darwinsism

15

Genetically constructed human language processor

- No need to study details, the general design features of language are enough
- A Martian would see both body architecture (within a phylum) and languages as being highly similar
- Common body architecture: backbone, four articulated limbs, head, skull, tail are universal in that animal bodies vary within limit

16

Agenda Wednesday Week 14

■ Language change and diversity

- Kinds of language change
- Reanalysis
- A little history of English
- Language classification

■ Film

- NOVA: *IN SEARCH OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE*
 - the history and origin of languages

17

Language change = Variation

■ Word change

- New words coined for new objects
- Words borrowed from other languages
- Changes in word meaning

■ Morphological change

- Irregular plurals
 - fot ~ foti → fot ~ fiti (“feeti”) by umlaut rule
 - Later, plural suffix drops to leave *foot* and *feet*
- Tense from auxiliary
 - He hammer did → He hammered

■ Syntax change

- English: word order, inflection, case

18

Reanalysis

- Grammar is in the mind! Hence, when a child acquires a language, s/he recreates its grammar.
- Change proceeds through reanalysis
 - account A competes with account B
 - A strengthens as B weakens
 - eventually, B disappears

The Early History of English

- **Origins in northern Germany, southern Denmark**
 - Old English was a Germanic language
 - Flexible word order
 - Heavily inflected, case markers on nouns
 - Topic prominent
 - Spoken by tribes called Angles, Saxons, & Jutes
- **From 449 AD, Jutes, Angles, & Saxons invaded England**
 - Indigenous Celtic languages were banished
 - Kentish (Jutes)
 - West Saxon (Saxons) KING ALFRED MADE DOMINANT
 - Northumbrian & Mercian (Angles)
- **1066 Invasion of William the Conqueror of Normandy**
 - French became prestige language, English lower class

21

Later History of English

- **1200 King John lost Normandy**
 - Middle English reemerged 1100-1450
 - Written word solidified the language
 - Dropping final syllables led to loss of many inflections
 - Case on nouns lost, but remained on pronouns
 - SVO word order adopted; topic prominence dropped
 - Auxiliaries made from small verbs: *do*, *have*, *be*
 - 1300's: Midland (from Mercian) becomes dominant
- **1450-1700**
 - Era of Early Modern English
 - Shakespeare, King James Bible
 - The Great Vowel Shift

22

Origin of the World's Languages

■ Proto-Indo-European

- > Similarities in vocabulary and grammar seen in an immense number of modern and dead languages
 - Started in Turkey in a fertile farm region
 - spread as farming swept away hunter gathering
 - spread by populations, rather than techniques

■ Major Language Phyla

- > Indo-European, Uralic, Altaic, (Afro-Asiatic, Khoisan, Niger-Congo, Nilo-Sahara), Dravidian, Sino-Tibetan, Caucasian, Austronesian, Austro-Asiatic, (Eskimo-Aleut, Na-Dene, Amerind)

23

Reconstruction of Ancestor Languages

■ Conservative vs. Speculative

- > Various phyla and possible superphyla
- > Speculative story: Proto-World
 - 200,000 BC: Mitochondrial Eve in Africa
 - 150,000 BC: First split
 - Sub-Saharan
 - Everyone else
 - 100,000 BC: migrations began through Middle East to Europe and Asia
 - 50,000 BC: to Australia, Indian and Pacific Oceans and eventually the Americas

24