



Mental Grammars

Ling101 2/19/21



Linguistic Knowledge

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 - Words and meanings
 - Sounds/signs
 - Possible sentence arrangements
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 - Break down of complex words Morphology
- So...what do we know when we know a Grammar?



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 - Break down of complex words Morphology
- So...what do we know when we know a Grammar?
 - All of the above! But more specifically...



Mental Grammar

- We know:
 - The rules of the language
 - I.e. what is grammatical vs. ungrammatical
 - The properties of the language
 - See previous slide



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 - Yes!



Prescriptivism

- The rules prescribed onto a language from an authority
- What are some 'authorities'?
 - Dictionaries
 - Grammar books
 - Grammarians, teachers, etc...
 - 'Hooked on Phonics' and other sources
 - Cultural Convention (?)



Descriptivism

- Describe how a language is (not how it ought to be)
- Formulate rules that match language usage (rather than trying to get use to match rules)
- Rules based on speakers' usage (rather than from authorities)



Descriptivism Cont.

- The way people actually use language is important to understanding the way our linguistic system works
- The job of a descriptivist:
 - objectively analyze and describe how language is actually used by a group of people in a speech/sign community
- Descriptive grammarians focus on how all sorts of people in all sorts of environments, usually in more casual, everyday settings, communicate



Descriptivism Cont.

What questions are important to a descriptivist?

- Why do people use language the way they do?
- How do people construct language the way they do?
- Are there patterns we can find?
- What can these patterns tell us about language?
- Can we generalize these patterns within/across languages?
- What can we learn about cognition from linguistic utterances?



Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism (example)

I have fewer than you. vs I have less than you.

- A descriptive grammarian would state that both statements are equally valid, as long as the receiver of the message can understand the meaning behind the statement.



Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism (example)

I have fewer than you. vs I have less than you.

- A descriptive grammarian would state that both statements are equally valid, as long as the receiver of the message can understand the meaning behind the statement.
- A prescriptive grammarian, on the other hand, would analyze the rules and conventions behind the statements made and determine which statement is correct or otherwise preferable according to those rules
 - fewer is only to be used when discussing countable things, while less is used for singular mass nouns