

Seminar 2

Reading: Hale

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A Discussion questions

§1 Hale remarks (p. 8) that in much of 19th-century linguistics (and even some of today's linguistics), languages were equated with **corpora** (singular: **corpus**), e.g. Latin was taken to be simply the collection of surviving Latin texts. Why is this way of defining "language" problematic?

§2 What is meant by **grammar**, **output representation** and **output**, and what is the relation between the three? What is "PLD"?

§3 Explain figure 1.2 (p. 12).

§4 What is the difference between **artifact**, **text** and **grammar**?

§5 Why is historical linguistics neither the study of relationships between artifacts nor the study of relationships between texts?

§6 Explain figure 2.6 (p. 26).

B Languages, grammars, change: further clarifications

§7 From the preceding discussion, we can gather the following points:

1. The proper object of study in linguistics is the grammar (or I-language), i.e. the set of mental representations that accounts for an individual's knowledge of language.
2. This is a different use of the word 'grammar' than in expressions like 'the Duden Grammar of German'. (Whenever I use the word 'grammar', I intend it in the sense of I-language, unless otherwise indicated.)

3. Grammar in the sense of I-language is a mental device that generates output representations at all levels of linguistic knowledge: phonology, morphology, syntax.
4. At the phonological level, a grammar gives the individual's phonological inventory (vowels, consonants and tones in tonal languages) as well as a set of rules or constraints that outline how sounds can be combined. Example: the set of vowels in Spanish is /a e i o u/, but the combination /ea/ cannot go in the same syllable in Spanish, instead there must be a syllable break: *beato* 'blessed' /be.'a.to/.
5. The morphological part of the grammar contains information on how words are put together. E.g. Finnish is an inflected language in which affixes are used to mark various functions. In particular, case endings must go before possessive suffixes, e.g. *autossansa* 'in his car', where *-ssa* is the inessive case (corresponding to English *in*) and *-nsa* is the possessive suffix (corresponding to English *his*). The order **autonsassa* is impossible.
6. The syntactic part of the grammar tells how phrases and sentences are formed. E.g. in German, the verb must be the second constituent of a finite clause (so-called **V2 constraint**):
 - (1) Gestern habe ich das Auto verkauft.
 - (2) *Gestern ich habe das Auto verkauft.
7. Note that each of these levels (phonology, morphology, syntax) provides (a) a set of elements and (b) some restrictions on how those elements are combined. Moreover, the elements of morphology are the output of phonology, and the elements of syntax are the output of morphology.
8. Historical linguistics studies how grammars change over time. (It does *not* study how texts, i.e. E-language, change over time, even though in many cases texts are the only source of evidence about the underlying grammars.) Change can target any level of the grammar: phonology, morphology, syntax.
9. Languages also change in the sense that new words are adopted and old ones die out of use. E.g. Middle English had no word for the concept 'microprocessor', for obvious reasons. This, however, is not linguistic change in the strict sense, but simply a reflection of cultural change.
10. Finally, changes must spread through a population to become fixed. If a random German person, for example, for some reason acquires a grammar without the V2 constraint, we would not say that "German syntax has changed" – until many other, indeed most, speakers of German undergo the same process. A grammatical innovation needs to **propagate** through the relevant speech community (i.e. sufficiently many I-languages must change) for language change to occur.¹

¹Old English, too, had the V2 constraint but this was lost sometime during the Middle English period. It is still not well understood why the initial innovation (no V2) managed to propagate in English but so far has not been able to propagate in German, but candidate explanations include language contact and morphological erosion.