# Dialectical Linguistics: Capturing Language 'Live'

Introducing the newly externalised 4.11406 Introduction to Linguistics course

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# Importance of Language

- Language sets humans apart from other animals

- Human progress is inconceivable without effective communication

- This is why the acquisition of good language skills is (and has always been) regarded as the cornerstone of education in all human societies.

# Challenges in Language Education

- In multilingual societies, students often are faced with additional linguistic hurdles, particularly if the language of instruction is not their mother tongue.

- This makes quality language instruction on all levels of education all the more relevant, as human resource development hinges on the students' language skills, necessary for all specialised training.

# Linguistics Course at UPNG

- The **Introduction to Linguistics** course taught at the University of Papua New Guinea ever since the 1970s was shaped by the influence of prominent descriptive and historical linguists, such as John Lynch, Terry Crowley, etc., who, attracted by the linguistic diversity of Papua New Guinea, taught at this university

# Descriptive linguistics

- ***Descriptive linguistics*** focuses on spoken language. American anthropologists and linguists (Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, Morris Swadesh, etc.) developed descriptive methods & techniques to record and analyze unwritten Native American languages in the early 1900s.

- *Phonemic*, *morphological*, and *syntactic* analysis enables descriptive linguists to describe the grammars of languages never before written down or analyzed.

# Linguistics Course at UPNG

- This course was primarily designed to train descriptive linguists, equipped with the skills and knowledge to study and record the endangered languages of PNG

- Descriptive Linguistics is a highly specialized area of research → limited appeal as a career choice amongst students.

# Other specialised areas of linguistic research

- **Historical & Comparative Linguistics**: language change;

- **Generative Grammar**: relationship between linguistic forms and meaning;

- **Conceptual Semantics**: the nature of linguistic meaning;

- **Cognitive Grammar**, correlation between grammar and general (non-verbal) cognition

# Need to 'connect the dots'

- None of them addresses Language as one organic whole

- This elusive nature of Language has been the 'Holy Grail' of linguistic pursuits for as far back in Time as we know

- We must 'connect the dots' in order to see the living image, emerging from the many details of knowledge amassed in Linguistics, Philosophy, Psychology, Cognitive Science, Anthropology, Sociology, etc.

# Capturing the Image

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Dialectical approach can capture a 'live' image of Language through the synthesis of all that we have glimpsed of it through the narrow windows of specialised analyses

# Benefits of Dialectical Approach to Language

- All students, *including* those who may choose to pursue professional careers in descriptive linguistics, will benefit greatly from this breathtaking view. Why?

- Because they will see Language as it really is – they will get an idea of how it *lives* and *functions* as an organic whole;

- this new understanding will enable them to use it more effectively. I will now try to substantiate these claims.

# Dialectical Linguistics

This course is the product of intensive course development in the past three years (2007-2009). It represents a complete and substantive overhaul of the old materials on several levels:

- Course Aims & Objectives
- Course Design & Structure
- Course Content
- Course Activities & Exercises
- Course Resources

# I. Course Aims & Objectives

- Descriptive approach focuses on the physical forms of Language, discussed typically under such headings as phonetics/ phonology, morphology and syntax, with a pinch of semantics

- This course aims to help students see Language as an organic whole – in all its complexity, interconnectedness, development and change.

# II. Course Design & Structure

- 1$^{st}$ edition: starts with the smallest 'bits' of language, sounds, and goes on to morphology and syntax

- 2$^{nd}$ edition presents Language in reverse order – starting from its organic whole, it goes on to the details.

- Apart from the introduction, it has three distinct parts

# II. Course Design & Structure

- **Part I** examines Language as an organic whole, powered and shaped by the creative ability of the human brain (generalisation);

- **Part II**
  - shows the interface between the principles of human understanding and syntax
  - focuses on the forms & structures of Language

- **Part III** – synthesis after analysis helps students to capture Language 'live'

# III. Course Content

**Unit 1**

- Introduces Linguistics as a science
- Explains the Scientific Method (Sciences vs. the Arts)
- Gives a brief survey of the history of linguistic thought tracing the spiral evolution of our knowledge:

# Part I: Language Whole

**Unit 2 Language: a Knot of Contradictions**

- Language as a complex *living* system of arbitrary symbols, created and used by society to think and share meaning

- The Gordian knot of physical, psychological, social and historical strands of Language

- Ferdinand de Saussure's solution: limit the scope of linguistic enquiry to the relatively fixed linguistic *structures* and the relations between them

# Language: a Knot of Contradictions

There is no way out of the circle. … However we approach the question, no one object of linguistic study emerges of its own accord. Whichever way we turn, the same dilemma confronts us. Either we tackle each problem on one front only, and risk failing to take into account the dualities mentioned above, or else we seem committed to trying to study language in several ways simultaneously, in which case the object of study becomes a muddle of disparate, unconnected things. By proceeding thus, one opens the door to various sciences - psychology, anthropology, prescriptive grammar, philology, and so on - which are to be distinguished from linguistics. These sciences could lay claim to language as falling in their domain; but their methods are not the ones that are needed

Saussure: 1983

# Where Saussure 'lost' Language

- Structuralism cannot capture the 'live' essence of language:

"A language is to be identified with the living capability by which speakers produce and understand utterances, not with the observed products of the acts of speaking and writing" (Robins: 1995)

- Saussure, despite his lucid insight that "It is the combination of the idea with a vocal sign which suffices to constitute the whole language" (Saussure: 1910), fractured his Linguistic Sign by analyzing its component parts (the Signifier and the Signified) separately.

# Word-Meaning – the Smallest Unit of Language

- We cannot understand the properties of complex wholes through the study of the properties of their component parts (2H+O ≠ H & O).

- We ask, next, "What is the smallest unit of Language that possesses all the properties of Language? Vygotsky's **Analysis into Units** supplied the answer: word-meaning

- The study of *word-meanings* can help us understand the complex whole of Language

# Each Word Is a Generalisation

A closer look at the smallest unit of Language presents us with a discovery:

**"each word is ... already a generalisation"**

Vygotsky: 1934

In other words, every word of Language is abstract *thought.*

# What Is Generalisation?

- Generalisation is a verbal act of thought and reflects reality in quite another way than sensation and perception reflect it.

- There is a *dialectic* leap not only between total absence of consciousness (in inanimate matter) and sensation but also between sensation and thought.

- The qualitative distinction between sensation and thought is the presence in the latter of a generalised reflection of reality, which is also the essence of word meaning: and consequently that meaning is an act of thought in the full sense of the term

(Vygotsky: 1934).

# Generalisation = Meaning

Since Meaning Is Language (a word without meaning is empty sound, and meaning can only be born through words), we must understand the way we think in order to understand Language structure (syntax)

Therefore, we 'dig deeper' and ask,
### How do we generalize?

# universal principle of connecting ideas

Among different languages it is found, that the words, expressive of ideas, the most compounded, do yet nearly correspond to each other: a certain proof that the simple ideas, comprehended in the compound ones, were bound together by some universal principle, which had an equal influence on all mankind.

To me, there appear to be only three principles of connexion among ideas: **Resemblance**, **Contiguity** in time or place, and **Cause or Effect**.

**David Hume (1711–1776)**

# universal principle of connecting ideas

These principles of human understanding underlie all **generalization**:

- we categorize the world, grouping similar things together, because of their similarity

- Since every word of language is a generalisation, they also underlie linguistic structures

## The Dialectical Process of Understanding: Synthesis & Analysis

In order to see similarities between things, all the part-whole and causal relationships, we must be able not only to connect, but also to *abstract*, to *single out* characteristic elements, and to view them separately from the "totality of the concrete experience in which they are embedded"

In genuine concept formation, it is equally important to unite and to separate: Synthesis & Analysis presuppose each other, as inhalation presupposes exhalation (Vygotsky: 1986)

The product of Synthesis & Analysis is the concept that forms in our minds; it is that *idea* – MEANING!

# Language –
# a Dynamic Structure of Meaning

Unit 3 focuses on **Meaning:**

- How we learn to 'think Human'
  - Piaget's 4 stages of cognitive development: Language *precedes* Logic
- The 'fluid' nature of meaning
  - meaning-as-use
  - meanings ***develop***

# Grammaticalisation

**Because meanings develop (in individual minds, as well as in the collective mind of the community), all grammars have emerged**:

"From a primitive generalization, verbal thought rises to the most abstract concepts. It is not merely the **content** of the word that changes, but the **way in which reality is generalized and reflected in the word**" (Vygotsky: 1934).

# Language Origins & Evolution

Unit 4 explains why and how Language arose in human societies; it argues that two biological survival factors played a decisive role in the origins of language:

- the need for cooperation in order to survive → communication, and

- biological evolution of the brain, that has allowed for high-speed connections between neurons

# Part II: Zooming In

Since Language is Generalisation, the universal principles of generalization are also the universal principles of its structure:

## Syntax

**Synthesis & Analysis are the 2 universal principles of syntax**

# Generalisation –
# the Rational Language Mechanism

The main 2 principles of sentence structure (chunks of complex meaning) are:

- **Synthesis:** S/V/C (in various order)
- **Analysis** (or modification, specification, or naming) of the main sentence constituents (Recursion)

# G-nalysis

G-nalysis uses the natural way we think (by connecting ideas and specifying them by resemblance, contiguity, and cause/effect) to analyse sentence structures

- The first step in G-nalysis focuses on identifying all S/V/C patterns present in the sentence

- The second step aims to determine the *logical relationships* between all the S/V/C patterns in the sentence.

# Syntax

**Units 6 and 7** discuss the concepts of

- **grammaticality**

- **the Limitations of Arbitrariness** of Language (our natural way of thinking) and

- **Grammaticalization**: We conclude that it is our natural way of thinking, the 3 principles of human understanding (which underlie generalization) that drive grammaticalization processes, that have shaped the grammars of all languages.
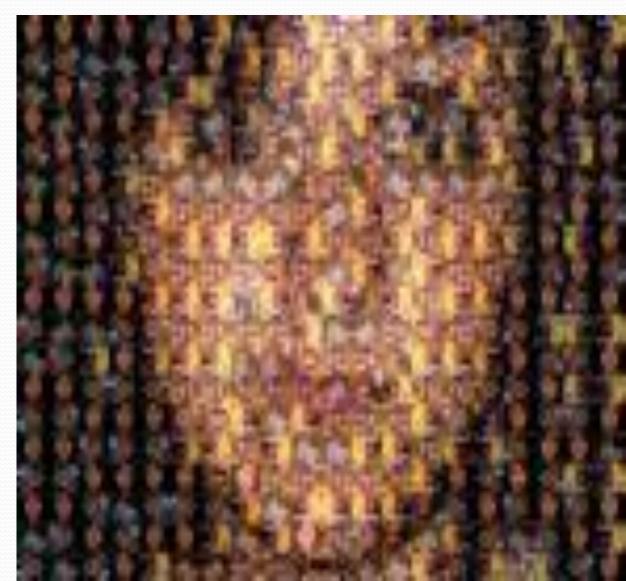
# The Rest of Part II

- **Units 8-11** go below the surface of the 'word-meaning' to examine the smaller bits that make them up – morphemes and phonemes, adopting the descriptive approach in our analysis (morphology, phonetics and phonology sections present the detailed knowledge amassed by descriptive linguistics).

- **Unit 12** explains key concepts used in semantic analysis (Semantic properties/ features; lexical relations; types of semantic change, etc.) and discusses metaphor & metonymy as the 'drivers' of semantic change

# Part III – New Synthesis

**Part III** 'ties' it all together again, showing how the 'bits' and 'pieces' combine together to form a living structure:

synthesis after analysis → new understanding

# IV Course Activities & Exercises

The new 2nd edition provides a lot of new in-text activities and exercises, designed to 'bring theory to life';

Most of the self-assessment activities and exercises have model answers listed at the back of the study guide.

# V Course Resources

The new edition of the course also provides the students with a Resource Book, which is a compilation of related readings, required for a number of in-text activities.

# Conclusion

- The 2nd edition of the Introduction to Linguistics course is radically different from the first edition in its content, design, and structure.

- The Dialectical approach to Language connects Language with Thought and uses the natural way we think (connect ideas by Resemblance, Contiguity and Cause/Effect) to understand sentence structure).

- Because g-nalysis is so logical, it is also easy and enjoyable.

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