

INTD0111A

The Unity and Diversity of Human Language

Lecture #1
Feb 9th, 2009

Introduction to the course (including administrivia)

- Let's just click [here](#) and see what's on the course website.

What's this course about?

- As the title indicates, this is a course ...

What's this course about?

- "Hi, Mr. Linguist. My name is Mr. D. Advocate and I'd like to attend your class."
- "Sure! Welcome to the class. So, where was I? Yes, ...

What's this course about?

- As the title indicates, this is a course about unity and diversity of human languages.
- "Unity" means we'll be looking at how languages are similar (not quite obvious on the surface), and "diversity" means we'll be looking at how languages are different (pretty obvious to everyone, right?).
- But we will also go beyond the "descriptive" level to seek "explanation" for why there's unity and why there's diversity in human language.

What's this course about?

- The study of unity and diversity in human language is sometimes referred to as "linguistic typology".
- Linguistic typologists are mainly concerned with characterizing what is and what is not "a possible human language".

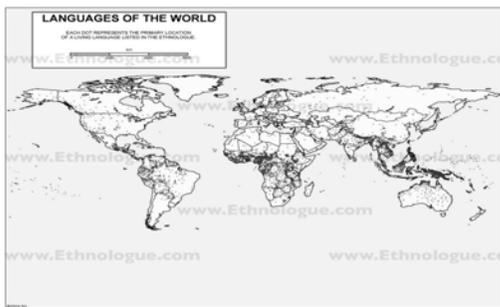
Mr. D. Advocate interrupts:

- “Excuse me Mr. Linguist. Can I ask you a question?”
- “Sure, sure! Go ahead.”
- “Since you’re a linguist, could you please tell me how many languages there are in the world?”
- “Oh, well, ... this is actually a good question. Why don’t we get everybody in the discussion, then?”

How much linguistic diversity is there in the world?

- Well, let’s see, how many languages do you guys think exist in the world?

Languages of the world per ethnologue: close to 7000



Distribution of languages over the world

(from Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, based on Ethnologue and a few other sources)

Europe and the Middle East	appr. 275 (4%)
America	appr. 1000 (15%)
Africa	appr. 2000 (30%)
Asia (excl. former USSR)	appr. 2200 (32%)
Pacific	appr. 1300 (19 %)

Some countries are more linguistically diverse than others

(from Skutnabb-Kangas 2000)

Papua New Guinea	850
Indonesia	670
Nigeria	410
India	380
Cameroon	270
Australia	250
Mexico	240
Zaire	210
Brazil	210

Mr. D. Advocate:

- “So, you guys study language for living, and don’t know how many languages there are in the world?”
- We’re definitely doing the best we can Mr. D. Advocate, but there are two main reasons why we do not know exactly how many languages there are in the world.

First, it's a wide wide linguistic world

- There's still so many areas in the world waiting for linguists to study their languages.
- To make things worse, many of these languages are on the verge of extinction.

Second, it all depends on what we actually mean by "language"

- In other words, when do we count a system of communication as "language" and when not?

Second, it all depends on what we actually mean by "language"

- For example, are New England English and the English spoken in the South two different languages or two different dialects of the same language? What about Australian English, or Indian English?

Second, it all depends on what we actually mean by "language"

- Are the forms of Spanish spoken in Buenos Aires, Mexico City, or Barcelona, separate languages or different dialects of the same language?
- What about Brazilian and European Portuguese?
- Is Moroccan Arabic a language or a dialect?

The "mutual intelligibility" basis for the language-dialect distinction

- The common answer to all these questions is based on the criterion of "mutual intelligibility."
- Makes sense, huh?

The "mutual intelligibility" basis for the language-dialect distinction

- Not quite. Consider what Stephen Anderson says in one of the readings for today's class:
- "Suppose you were to start from Berlin and walk to Amsterdam, covering about ten miles every day. You can be sure that the people who provided your breakfast each morning could understand (and be understood by) the people who served you supper that evening. Nonetheless, the German speakers at the beginning of your trip and the Dutch speakers at its end would have much more trouble, and certainly think of themselves as speaking two quite distinct (if related) languages."

The “mutual intelligibility” basis for the language-dialect distinction

- Same goes for:
- Hindi-Urdu,
- Macedonian-Bulgarian,
- post-Yugoslavia Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian “languages”, and
- Nembe-Kalabari in Nigeria.

The “mutual intelligibility” basis for the language-dialect distinction

- How about the linguistic situation in China? Mandarin and Cantonese?
- Similarly, what do we make of the several dialects of today’s Arabic in the Middle East?

So, what’s the difference between a language and a dialect, then?

- Linguistically, *none*.
- Rather, the difference is sociopolitical, or, as Max Weinreich used to say,
“A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”

I hear a question coming. Yes, Mr. D. Advocate.

- Mr. D. Advocate: “Ok, I see your point. But if we do not know the exact number of languages, how can you study linguistic unity and diversity, then?”
- “Well, actually that’s a very good question. So, let’s discuss this with everyone.”

Methods for the study of linguistic typology

- The answer to Mr. D. Advocate’s question is really not different from what scientists do in the study of any natural phenomenon. The key word is SAMPLING.
- Take a representative sample of languages and see if you can draw generalizations on the basis of that sample for the rest of human languages.

Your assignments for the day

- Fill in the questionnaire and send it to me as an attachment by e-mail (usoltan@middlebury.edu).
- Visit [ethnologue](#) and browse through the site.
- Follow the links on the syllabus table on the course website and do the readings. Most of them are easy to follow and full of interesting information about human language.

Next class agenda

- Classifying languages and kinds of similarities among languages (O'Grady *et al*).
- Language universals.
- Variation in basic word order.