

Linguistics Graduation 2013

*Hommage à Harry Mathews, “Country Cooking from Central France:
Roast Boned Rolled Stuffed Shoulder of Lamb (Farce Double)”*

Homework 13

In this assignment you’ll investigate the relation between linguistic structure and nonlinguistic context. Linguists notice formal patterns, but a language is also shaped by its speech setting.

If you collaborate with fellow students, be sure the write-up is your own. If it’s based on notes from a group study session, give credit when you quote them. If you use a color printer, please attach pens of various colors so I can make the same distinctions in my comments. The most important thing I’ve learned about teaching is not to use multi-colored chalk if students don’t have multi-colored pens, but sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. And if I can’t respond effectively to your ideas, desperation could lead me to be snarky. This is good for nobody.

Problem 1: Climate phonetics

In his book *School grammar*, published in London in 1890, the author David Salmon wrote that “differences of climate and of surroundings have, in the course of ages, caused differences in speech. The inhabitants of a warm country, for example, are disinclined to take trouble, and gradually drop the harsh sounds which require an effort to make. This will explain why Italian is more liquid than German.” Undergraduate linguists in 2013 may prefer to compare the eight Hawaiian consonants with the forty-two found in the Kwak’wala language of British Columbia, or for that matter the eighty consonants in the Ubykh language of the Caucasus Mountains. Either way you have the company of Hermann Collitz, first president of the Linguistic Society of America, who in 1926 endorsed an interpretation of Grimm’s Law whereby “the mountain climate favors a vigorous articulation accompanied by an overdose of aspiration.” For this problem, please assess the Salmon-Collitz hypothesis. You should operationalize it through the following testable predictions: Collitz expects an increase in aspiration at higher altitudes, while Salmon posits warm-weather deletion of effortful consonants.

To evaluate the Collitz claim, you’ll run a simulation in the phonology lab. This will require the sound booth in room 52, Dwinelle Hall, which you’ll first have to locate. If your starting point is the Linguistics lounge, you may see other students. Don’t be tempted to ask them for directions. Graduating seniors are napping because their Karuk homework was too hard, while sophomores don’t know how to get there any better than you do. Just leave the lounge and turn right, ducking into the first doorway on the right. If you mistakenly turn left at this time, you

may meet someone with an outrageous hat, lurid shoes, and a vintage polka-dot dress. Slowly back away. Your doorway's on the right, hiding a narrow staircase. Wind up to the third floor, level C, exit the stairwell and turn right, then right again past another staircase and an elevator, and then another right. If you find stairs going down ahead of you, and then a forced turn to the right yet again, you will have made a second common mistake: in the winding staircase you ascended only to the second floor, level B, whose corridor is organized like an Escher drawing that folds back in on itself. From here you cannot get where you're going. Return to the narrow staircase, go up another floor, and again turn right, then right again, and then again right. Note: On the first floor, level A, you were at ground level, but now you're two floors up and below ground. On the right you'll pass room 3422, at ground level on the third floor, and on your left is room 76, in the first basement below ground. Continue past the graduate student caves on the right until you see the locked door to room 52 and the laboratory of phonetics. A notice on the door invites passers-by to participate in your experiment.

Phonetics, as you know, is a matter of tubes connected to other tubes through which sounds pass to emerge through further tubes. This is similar to the corridors of Dwinelle, except that unlike students, sound can easily get out. I gather that learning phonetics involves assembling these tubes. To measure the aspiration you seek to correlate with mountainous altitudes, put your ear to the outermost tube and measure how long it takes your experimental subject to start vocal fold vibrations after the sound [t] in *toy*. This, of course, is merely your control condition. The key element of the experiment will be your mountain simulation. Gradually, in increments of one-tenth of a pound per square inch, you should reduce the pressure in the sound booth by removing air with a bicycle pump. Do not be distracted by watching your research subjects, who are probably undergraduate psychology or cognitive science majors. Keep your eyes on the pump you're using to extract air while you listen carefully through the tubes. After a while, you may hear sounds like gasping or heavy breath. Congratulations! Your hypothesis is confirmed by the presence of significant aspiration. Go get a coffee and write up your preliminary results.

To assess the Salmon statement, that effortful consonants are deleted in warm weather, book two flights to Honolulu and a table by the beach at Waikiki. You would be contributing to the delinquency of minors if you promised mai tais or other tropical drinks to undergraduates, so you should recruit an older subject for this experiment. A member of the linguistics faculty would probably do, but perhaps not a specialist in phonetics or another area liable to induce bias. Historical linguistics might be best. For your experiment, ask your subject to articulate a pharyngealized uvular and jot down what happens. If he's asleep, don't disturb him; it was a long flight. Congratulate yourself instead! Once more your hypothesis is confirmed, this time by the relaxing surf you hear while listening for that complex speech sound and backing quietly away. Bring your subject a coffee later, in time for the lū'au.

Problem 2: Why meaning changes

You're familiar with the theory that change in meaning cannot be studied systematically, due to the confounding interference of the real world. For example, every year on November 5th, some people dress up a scare-crow as the English revolutionary Guy Fawkes and burn it on a bonfire. They call the scare-crow *Guy*, and from this custom, around 1850, the word *guy* came to mean any 'fellow' or 'man', not just the stuffed effigy of a failed revolutionary. A century later, the hip cats of urban living repurposed a word from western tourism to refer to their in-group, and when it jumped the social barrier into general usage, we heard it in Amy Heckerling's movie *Clueless*, when Dionne greeted Cher by saying *Dude!* My point is, to understand guys and dudes, you have to know a lot about context. Here you'll work this out in a characteristic example.

In the earliest English, a thousand years ago, the word *bird* meant only a young bird and the general word for any animal with feathers was *fowl*. Nowadays *bird* can mean any bird, while *fowl* mainly refers to domesticated birds like chickens and turkeys. How did *fowl* get specialized? The first example of the specialized meaning in the Oxford English Dictionary is from 1586, so for this problem it's convenient to study the usage of a single well-known author of the period. Begin by reading all of Shakespeare's plays. Take careful notes whenever birds are mentioned, to evaluate the hypothesis that ongoing changes in hunting practice caused a change in word meaning. For example, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Claudio exclaims, "Stalk on, stalk on; the fowl sits. I did never think that lady would have loved any man." Here you may assume a reference to the hunting of wild birds. Limit your essay on Shakespeare's bird hunting to six or seven pages, with a few well-chosen supporting quotations. Explain how the examples support your hypothesis.¹

¹One of Shakespeare's 32 examples of the word *goose* will puzzle you. Watching the comic play-within-a-play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus calls the Lion "a goose for his discretion." The following explanation is understood. With his comic players, Shakespeare was parodying the famous activities of the College of St. John, in particular some buffoonery associated with its annual Feast of the Fowl. On that occasion, students customarily carried a papier-mâché mallard on a platter from the kitchen into the dining hall while the language professors sang a rather lengthy ballad to commemorate the draining of the college duck pond by King Henry VIII. The goose was the symbol of the college, of course, with goose gargoyles watching over the whole business. Shakespeare's "discretion" alludes to the hope that after the tomfoolery of the college feast, nobody will mention what happened.

The ballad traditionally sung by these language professors, naturally enough in Latin, tells the story of a student setting out on a journey to learn the hardest language in the world. She tells her parents about her plan, and though they love her and feel they should support her goals, they can't help feeling that engineering or medical school might have been a good choice. She is young and headstrong, however, and sets out anyway. After traversing a forest for three days, the student comes to a village where people talk with great animation but everything sounds exactly the same to her. After a while, she realizes that the phonology they use has only one distinctive feature, pitch, but that this has twelve possible values. This language therefore has twelve different sounds, otherwise identical vowels distinguished only by their twelve different pitches, combined into words that sound to her like long and very melodic vowels. This is surely the world's hardest language, the student says, which I could master by learning tone. But in a few days she realizes she knows how to manipulate pitch already, through intonational patterns like questions and uptalk. She can apply that knowledge to this language. Wondering if languages differ not so much in what they use as in how they use it, she heads out once again.

Problem 3: Language use in context

Shortly you'll embark on a sociolinguistic experiment. Most of your intellectual energy has lately been directed at statements like this: *She had your dark suit in greasy wash water all year.* You've attended to its pronunciation without worrying why she left the suit in the water for so long, and whether it shrank. In the broader world it would matter if you had to buy a new suit.

If you've lost sleep or shared your obsessions recently, it probably has to do with the Karuk and Yurok languages. But some people in the broader world might not share these obsessions. If you've thought at all about food and drink, maybe it was boba tea, or maybe you said things like *John likes beef waffles, and so does Mary.* But not everybody in the broader world eats that stuff.

For this problem, investigate differences in word and sentence choice between the classrooms of Dwinelle and the broader world. Here a three-page summary of preliminary findings will suffice. You may reserve your final report until you visit campus on the next alumni giving day.

Due on Tuesday.

After a walk of three more days, along an ancient river bed, the young student comes to another town. Here, she learns immediately, the words of the local language are utterly familiar, but its strange metaphors challenge her understanding. For the good people of this town, life is not a journey but a rest-stop. Every time someone says something like *You have to forget about it and stay still*, or *I'm confused because my life has direction*, the student misunderstands. Here ideas are not food but shoes, and it's a proverb that *Gossip leaves blisters on your feet*. This language must be the world's hardest, says the student, but if I'm serious about metaphors I'll learn to speak it fluently. Yet after only a few weeks, she realizes that everybody here is obsessed with shoes, and nobody travels at all, so the unusual patterns of metaphor are as socioculturally embedded as her own. If they come naturally, she thinks, the language isn't so hard; and she takes her leave.

Three more days bring our student to her third and final stop, a great city built in emerald green. She stays in an inn near the city wall, and again the language they speak seems familiar at first. She knows all the words, but it turns out she doesn't understand how they're arranged. They say stuff like *I you just met, Crazy and this is, but is here my number, maybe so me call*. This sounds like what she knows, but also not like it. I can learn sound patterns and metaphors, the student reflects, but syntax is hard! Undoubtedly this is the world's most difficult language. No matter how many words it has, the number is finite; but its strange sentences are infinite. So she starts listening and imitating the patterns she heard. But it takes her only a couple of days to realize that even though words are scrambled like an egg in this language, at bottom it has the same basic structural pattern as hers because reflexive pronouns are still subject-oriented and ellipsis still targets verb phrases. If a crazy pattern just hides the same building blocks as usual, the language isn't impossibly hard.

"I'll never find the world's hardest language," says the student to the innkeeper when she thinks her quest has failed. "Can you help me?" And the innkeeper says, "You don't need to be helped. You've always known the language you seek." The student realizes then that every language is so full of intricate complexities that you can examine it for decades and never finish learning. Packing to go home, she says, "I've learned that if I ever go looking for language complexity again, I won't look any further than my own backyard." And with that she returns home, where her parents are so happy they urge her to do graduate study in any field she enjoys.

The connection of this song with the college duck pond, I am told, lies in an analogy between the green color of the pond and the city.