What is Linguistics and What Can it Do for Me/Us?

Wesley Y. Leonard
and
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is “revitalization + decolonization”; it goes beyond recognizing the factors that cause language shift to actively interrogate and address them in culturally appropriate ways.
Monica
Menominee Tribe of Wisconsin
Some Possibly Surprising Things about Linguists and Linguistics

1. Not all linguists speak lots of languages
   • “How many languages do you speak?”
Some Possibly Surprising Things about Linguists and Linguistics

2. We are not grammar police
   • “Uh-oh, I better watch my English!”
   • Always descriptive, never prescriptive.
Some Possibly Surprising Things about Linguists and Linguistics

3. We mostly focus on spoken (and signed) language, not written language
   • Spoken/signed language is central to being human; written language is an add-on.
A Brief History of the Field

• Early focus on philology – the history of languages and their relationships

• Early 20th century: U.S. Linguistics begins as a subfield of Anthropology
  • interest in language structure (grammar) with heavy focus on describing Native American languages

• 1960s: Linguistics separates from Anthropology and becomes more of a cognitive science
  • many linguists start to focus on “generative grammar”

Today: all of the above, with recent renewed interest in Indigenous languages, and increasing focus on how linguistic science can or should help people.
Subfields of Linguistics

• Linguists divide the study of language into subareas
  • of course not everyone agrees on how many or which ones!
• We tend to specialize in one or a few
Subfields: Phonetics

- The study of speech sounds
Subfields: Phonology

- How sounds are organized in a language

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{TOP} & \quad [t^h] \\
\text{STOP} & \quad [t]
\end{align*}
\]
Subfields: Morphology

• The structure of words

CAT-S
DOG-S
Subfields: Morphology (cont.)

• Most Native American languages have much more complicated words than English does.

• Meskwaki:
  
  ehkiwinamohtatiwach(i)
  
  ‘Then they together kept (him) in flight from them’

• Chinook:
  
  iniáludam
  
  ‘I came to give it to her’
Subfields: Syntax

• The structure of sentences

• English: typically
  subject – verb – object
  Pat – saw – Kim

• Other languages have other orders
  • Often more flexible than English
Subfields: Syntax (cont.)

Menominee:
1. Nekēs-pōnāwak ohpāen̓yak.
   I-PAST-put in the pot   potatoes
   ‘I put the potatoes in the pot.’

2. Ohpāen̓yak nepōnāwak ahkāēhkoh.
   potatoes   I put in the pot   in the kettle
   ‘I put potatoes in the kettle.’
Subfields: Semantics

• The study of meaning
• One useful type: lexical semantics
  • study of word meanings
Lexical Semantics

Kinship terms

English: sister, brother
Menominee:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>my sister</th>
<th>my brother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>woman speaking</td>
<td>nētekaeh</td>
<td>nekōqsemaw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man speaking</td>
<td>nekōqsemaw</td>
<td>nēhkāh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Miami *aweem-*

- *aweentioni* ‘peace’
- *eeeweemilaani* ‘I am your relative’ (whether biologically or through kinship interactions)
- *eeeweemakiki* ‘they are related to me’ – translated as “my relations”
Subfields: Discourse

- The study of connected speech, for example:
  - conversation
  - narrative, story, text
pihnēefich vaa ukūphaanik. panámniik u’ifanik. vaa kāan muthīvthaaneen. kāri xās uñusāanik "chîmi kâruk ishpûk kanikyāan kahyūras." xās uparishriihsa antunvēech. ıthēeshyav uparishriihsa. achavûra ithâ’ilthva vaa kó o uparishriihsa.

kāri xās uvâaram. xās páy pasâam usaamvârakti u’árihroov. koovûra pa’áraar umaahvuññaatih, "iimkun vûra pufàatsahara. naa kahyûras tá nivâaram."

chavûra ōok ithivthanéen’aachip tu’árihroov. kāan xās umâh áraar, uphikirîhvitih. kâan tuvûrayvikeethun. yânava páy ꞈatva uthâthriinaa. xās uxūti "tī ki kanpakatkâati." kâri xās upakatkâtaheen. amayaa’ishara. chavûra koovûra upûfip. xās pamu’asîphaar uthaxávxav. kâri xās ta’itam u’âhooheen. xās ūpeenti "lim ūok keemisha’îln ñáveeshap."

Coyote did that. He grew up at Orleans. That was his country there. And he thought, "Let me go upriver to get money at Klamath Lakes!" And he twined little strings. He twined a whole winter. Finally he twined a whole pack.

Then he left. And he went upriver downhill where that flows down from upriver. He saw all the people (and said), "You-all are just nothings. I am leaving for Klamath Lakes."

Finally he traveled upriver to the center of the world here. And there he saw a person, he was sweating himself. (Coyote) walked around there. He saw something sitting in baskets. And he thought, "Let me taste it!" So he tasted it. It was very good-tasting. Finally he drank it all up. And he chewed up (the person’s) baskets to boot. And then he traveled (on). And he told (the person sweating), "A monster outside here is going to eat you."
Subfields: Historical Linguistics

- Studies the history and relatedness of languages
- Family trees – similar to human family trees

![Diagram of Athabaskan language family]

- Athabaskan
  - Apachean
    - Kiowa Apache
    - Eastern Apache
      - Apache, Western
    - Navajo Apache
      - Western Apache-Navajo
  - Northern
  - Pacific Coast
    - Navajo
Subfields: Sociolinguistics

• The study of social factors and language
  • for example, do men and women speak differently?
  • if so: how, under what circumstances, for what purpose(s)?
• Sociolinguists also identify how ideas about group of people get associated with the languages that they speak.
Subfields: Documentary Linguistics

- Collection, transcription, translation of language data
- Increasingly linked to revitalization efforts and other community needs
Okay, so what *can* linguistics do for us?

Training in linguistics …

• helps with language learning and teaching
• helps with understanding how and why languages change
• helps with identifying similarities (or universal traits) between different languages, but also, by extension, what makes them distinct

*(an obvious but very important point)*

Linguistics training helps members of language communities effectively use resources created by linguists, *and*

it provides an avenue to bring new insights to the study of language.
Okay, so what *can* linguistics do for us? (cont.)

Menominee

• asked for a word for “sharpener” (like a pencil sharpener):
  • found in dictionary:
    kēhnaehkotam ‘he or she sharpens or makes a point on it by cutting or whittling’
  • suffix -*kan* creates instruments (*thing that does X*)
  • remove ending from verb → kēhnaehkot-
  • can’t add -*kan* directly (can’t have “tk”); needs an “e” between
    • that gives me kēhnaehkot-e-kan
  • “t” before “e” becomes “c” (=“ch”)
  • → kēhnaehkocekan ‘sharpener’
from http://linguistics.utk.edu/news.php