

Week 3: Descriptivism and Prescriptivism

LING 201

Spring 2024

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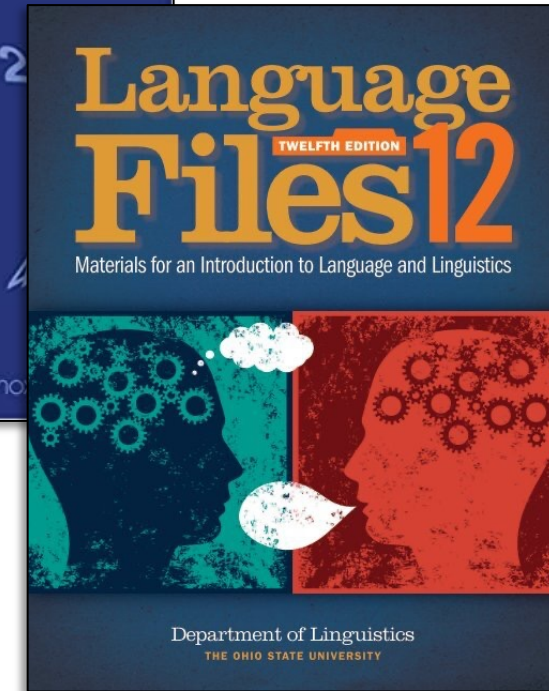
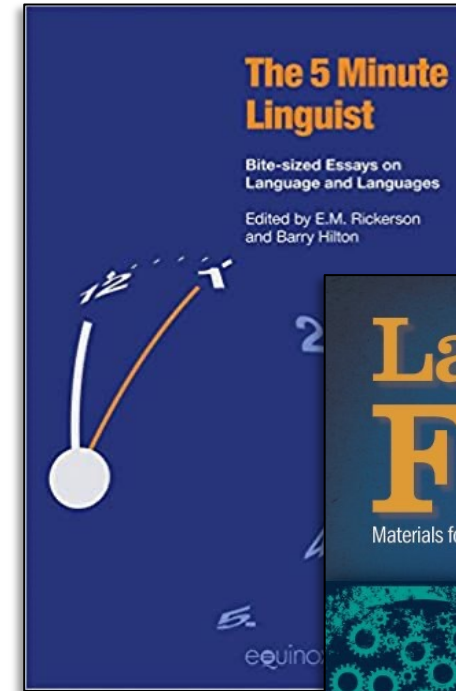
What I'll cover:

This week, you were assigned to read chapter 17 in *The Five-Minute Linguist*, and file 1.3 from *Language Files*.

Remember! Readings can always be found on the Readings & Videos page of our website with the password “linguist” (without the quotation marks).

Two main threads:

1. What is prescriptivism?
2. What is descriptivism?



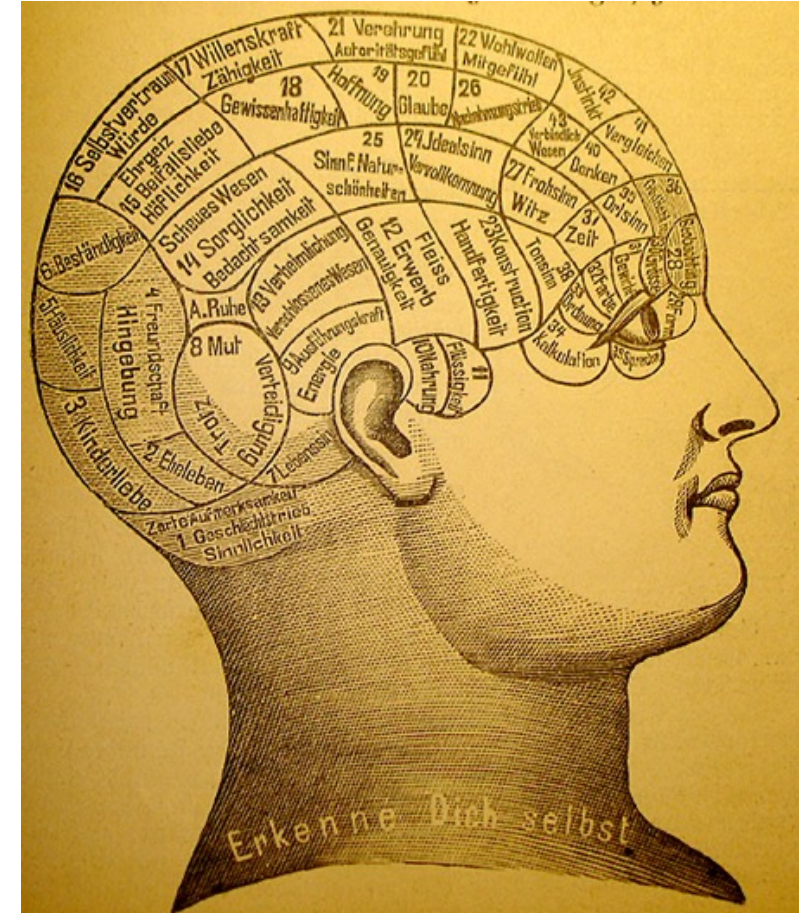
Linguistic knowledge

What do you know when you know a language?

- Lexicon (sort of like a mental dictionary)
- Mental grammar (rules of how the language *actually* works)

There are two other, extra things that people – non-linguists – often include:

- Writing
- Prescriptive grammar



Writing



Writing is secondary to speech – i.e. it is a technological method of encoding speech in the physical world.

Writing is not universal.

It's not a natural phenomenon.

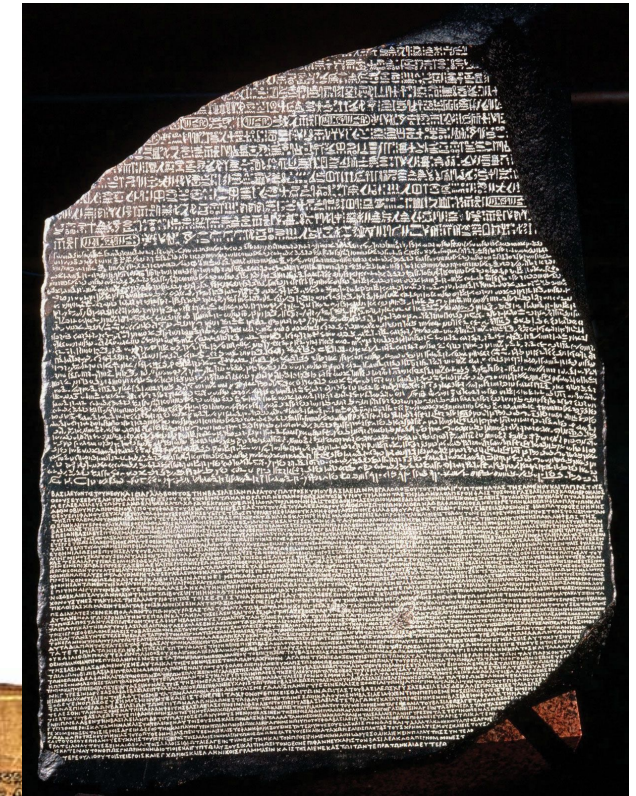
It's less spontaneous than speech.

It was developed later than spoken language.

Writing is not “more perfect than speech.”

Writing

- It might sound like we're being hard on writing here.
- The role of the linguist is to study language.
- Writing is *extremely* useful for historical linguistics and its related domains.
- It's wonderful tech that makes language stable and shareable.
- But it's not that useful for the other things we're interested in, where we prefer naturalistic speech as an object of study.



Prescriptive Grammar

- This is the form of “grammar” you’re likely most familiar with.

“[T]he socially embedded notion of the ‘correct’ or ‘proper’ ways to use a language.” (LF)

“The U.S. has no shortage of linguistic gatekeepers. Language pundits warn in the press, on the air, and even on the inside of matchbook covers that if we don’t clean up our linguistic acts, the doors of opportunity will be closed.” (Preston)

- Prescriptive rules survive due to their association with high social status.

“Power, money and prestige cause one variety of language to be preferred and therefore prescribed.” (Preston)

Prescriptive Grammar

Examples of prescriptive rules

- a. Do not end a sentence with a preposition.
NO: Where do you come from?
YES: From where do you come?
- b. Do not split infinitives.
NO: ...to boldly go where no one has gone before.
YES: ...boldly to go where no one has gone before.
- c. Do not use double negatives.
NO: I don't have nothing.
YES: I don't have anything. I have nothing.

(LF)

“[I]t is usage, not logic, that must determine the descriptive rules of grammar.” (LF)

Actually ungrammatical forms:

*Where you come from do?

*...to boldly go where no
has one gone before.

*I don't nothing have.

* = ungrammatical

Descriptive Grammar

- This is the object of real linguistic inquiry.
- What are the *actual* rules that govern language?
- Not the rules you need to be explicitly taught, but the rules that you implicitly follow.

**psatl*

← Violates the phonotactics of English.

*Him love me.

← Violates the inflection of the subject pronoun and the verb.

*Help me you can?

← Violates English word order.

For this week...

- Respond to the discussion board post by 11:59pm on Friday, 16 Feb.

For next week...

- Read pp.21–33 in David Crystal's book and pp.124–127 in *5 Minute Linguist*.
- Post Blog Post 1:

In this week's readings, you're introduced to a topic that you may not have previously encountered: prescriptivism, the perspective that educators and society at large – the "linguistic gatekeepers" that Dennis R. Preston talks about – should play an active role in shaping how people use their language, on the one hand; and descriptivism, the perspective that we as linguists have a duty to describe language *as it is*, rather than to prescribe or control how it "should" be used. Linguists like myself are generally quite dubious of prescriptivism.

With this in mind, I'd like you to reflect on past classes that you've had, from any time (pre-K through the current semester). What were some of the prescriptive rules that you were taught? Were you told that "ain't" was less valid than "aren't"? Were you taught not to use the "double negative"? What reasons were provided for why these forms were "wrong"? And did you stop using these forms in your everyday life?