

# Week 2: What is language?

LING 201

Spring 2024

Prof. Joseph Pentangelo

# Quiz #1

Include your name, today's date, and "Quiz #1."

Answer any two of the following questions.  
Don't respond to all three.

1. What is it that Robert Rodman says, in chapter 1, "makes us human"?
2. What's one reason M. Paul Lewis gives in chapter 2 that it's so tricky to answer the question of how many languages there are?
3. Donna Jo Napoli's chapter (14) centers around identifying and explaining five "well-defined characteristics" of human language. What's one of them? (You don't need to remember exactly what she calls it, as long as you can explain what it is.)

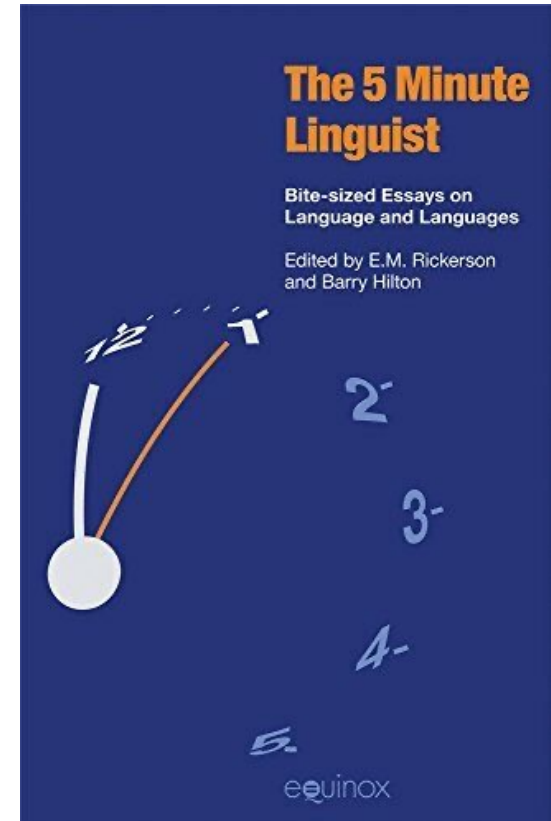
# What I'll cover:

This week, you're assigned to read three chapters from *The Five-Minute Linguist*: 1, 2, and 14.

Remember! It's on the Readings page with the password "linguist" (without the quotation marks)

Two main threads I want to explore a bit.

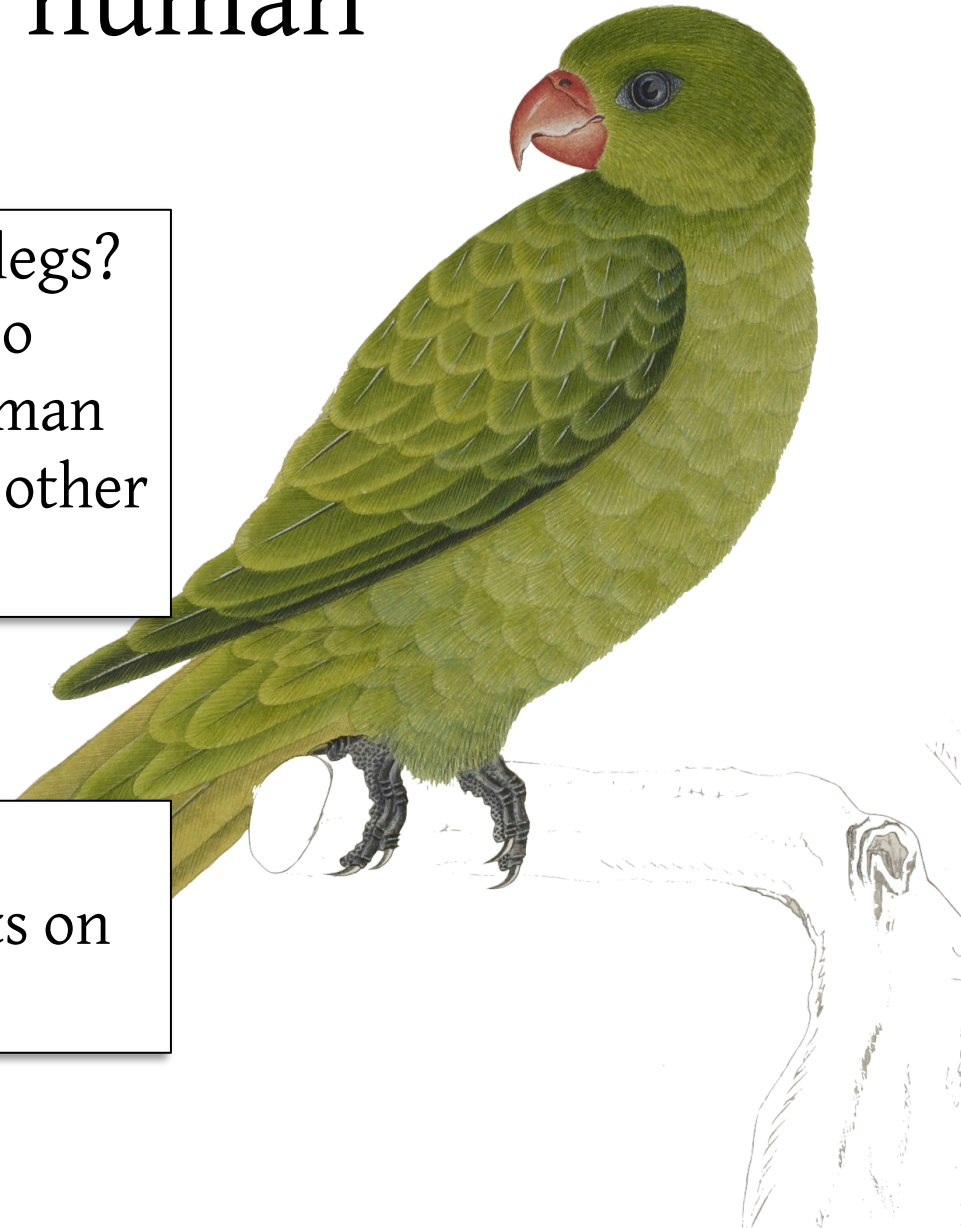
1. Language is what makes us human.
2. Languages have hazy borders.



# 1. Language is what makes us human

“What is it that makes us human? Is it walking on two legs? Or living in society? Is it our ability to love and hate? To some degree, all of those. But none is unique to the human species. [...] It’s language that distinguishes us from all other creatures.” (Rodman 7)

Animals “lack the linguistic flexibility of humans—our amazing ability to express new thoughts, without limits on subject matter.” (Rodman 9)



# 1. Language is what makes us human

“There are two issues here [...] One is whether animals use language among themselves; the other is whether animals can learn human language.” (Napoli 62)

Before diving into these questions, Napoli first gives a five-point list of criteria that identifies what we mean by language.

1. First, they are systematic; that is, they all have rules that we call grammar.

- “Grammar” in linguistics is not quite the same as “grammar” in an English class.
- We’ll talk about descriptiveness vs. prescriptivism more next week.

# 1. Language is what makes us human

2. Human language is also innate. Children are born hard-wired to acquire language. No one needs to teach them.

- Language is like walking or eating in many ways.
- The language-related phenomena that *do* need to be taught – like writing, reading, and arbitrary “grammar rules” – are not really part of language as we mean it.

# 1. Language is what makes us human

3. A third striking characteristic is what linguists call ‘displacement’—humans can talk about objects that aren’t present, like the man in this sentence:  
“The weird man you followed last week told me he’s considering writing an exposé of existentialism.”

4. Still another feature of language is its ability to talk about abstract notions—like ‘weirdness,’ ‘exposé,’ and ‘existentialism.’

5. All human languages have the ability to create new expressions.

# 1. Language is what makes us human



- Language  $\neq$  communication
- We can communicate with one another in tons of non-linguistic ways.
- Gestures, facial expressions, symbols, gasps, laughter, etc.
- Anyone with a pet can tell you that animals communicate, with each other and with us, *all the time*.
- Lots more examples in Napoli's chapter.



# 1. Language is what makes us human

“There are two issues here [...] One is whether animals use language among themselves; the other is whether animals can learn human language.” (Napoli 62)

- Napoli gives tons of examples of animals that do communicate among themselves, but explains why none of these methods fulfill all five of the criteria that she sets out.
- Many animals can be taught human language to some extent (including both spoken and signed language), but they won't teach it to one another, and they seem not to use it among themselves.

“Language remains the most profound distinction between animals and humans.”  
(Napoli 65)

## 2. Languages have hazy borders.

- Language *itself* has pretty clear borders.
- Just to use Napoli's first principle, about grammar: Despite their superficial similarities, signing is not the same as gesturing, because sign languages have grammar. Gestures don't have grammar.
- But the borders *between* languages are often extremely ill-defined.
- Many examples given in the Lewis chapter.



## 2. Languages have hazy borders.

Dialect vs language

Mutual intelligibility

Dialect continuum

“A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.” (Popularized by Max Weinreich.)



Arabic-speaking countries shown in green.



Scandinavia shown in orange.

## For this week...

- Respond to this week's discussion topic by 11:59pm EST Friday, February 9<sup>th</sup>.
- Scroll to the bottom of the post, below all the other comments, enter your response, and click "Post Comment." Don't click "Reply" below someone else's comment unless you're actually responding to them.

## For next week...

- Read chapter 17 (pp.75–78) in *5 Minute Linguist* and "file" 1.3 (pp.13–19) in *Language Files*. There will be a quiz on these readings at the start of class.
- Note that page numbers follow what's printed on the pages.