

RECORDING!!!

Introduction, organization, first attempts at a theory of grammar

LING566 — Sept. 29, 2026

Overview

- Safety Procedures
- Syllabus
- Self-intros
- Prescriptive/descriptive grammar; Competence/performance
- Some history
- Why study syntax?
- Practice exercises

Safety Procedures

Emergency Protocols

- UW Emergency Guides: <https://www.washington.edu/uwem/>
- During an earthquake:
 - Drop, Cover, Hold
 - Evacuate using the nearest and safest exit **after shaking stops**
 - Do not use elevators
- During a fire:
 - Evacuate using the nearest and safest exit
 - Do not use elevators
- See link above for guides for other types of emergencies.

COVID-19, Flu, etc.

- Masks are welcome and encouraged indoors
- **Do not come to class if you are sick**
 - attend online if you are able, or watch the recording of the lecture later
- You are welcome to attend online at any point, for any reason
 - no need to let me know, just tune in!

Syllabus & Intros

Syllabus

- Course policies are all listed on the course webpage:
 - <http://courses.washington.edu/ling566>

Tips for success

- Work together: make study groups!
 - If someone would like to create a LING566 Discord server for this year, please do so!
- Homework: discuss as much as you want, but write up your own answers
- Exams: no discussion
- Post questions to Canvas discussion threads
- Read the book before class (and after again, if necessary)
- Ask questions early and often!

Resources

- Glossary at the back of the textbook
- Bender 2013 (“100 things”)
- Grammar summaries and Appendix A
- Answers to exercises at the back of the book
- Canvas, study groups, office hours ...

Liz Conrad (she/her)

- From Cincinnati, OH
- University of Alabama (2014-2018)
 - B.S. in Computer Science, double major in Spanish
- University of Washington (2019-present)
 - M.S. in Computational Linguistics (2021)
 - PhD in Linguistics (December 2026 🙌)
- Research focuses on generating plain, English text from non-linguistic data
 - will talk more about this later, as it's highly relevant to this course :)
- Love to bake and play video games :)

Self-introductions

- Name
- Pronouns
- Favorite sweet treat 





Why take this class?



Want to research syntax

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Help me build better language technology

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Help me study languages better

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Want to get a better sense of "how language works"

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Required for CLMS

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I really REALLY love feature structures

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Prescriptive vs. Descriptive Grammar

Two Conceptions of Grammar

Prescriptive

- Rules against certain usages
- Few if any rules for what **is** allowed
- Proscribed forms generally in use
- Explicitly normative enterprise

Descriptive

- Rules characterizing what people do say
- Goal to characterize all and only what speakers find acceptable
- Tries to be scientific

Uses of Grammar

Prescriptive

- Identify speaker's socioeconomic class & education level
- Identify level of formality of a particular usage

Descriptive

- Understand how people produce & understand language
- Identify similarities & differences across languages
- Development of language technologies

Prescriptive Grammar

- Examples of silly prescriptive rules?
- Examples of useful prescriptive rules?
- CompLing applications which might need to encode prescriptive rules?

Fill in the blanks:

he/his, they/their, or something else?

1. Everyone insisted that _____ record was unblemished.
2. Everyone drives _____ own car to work.
3. Everyone left the room, didn't _____ ?
4. Everyone left early. _____ seemed happy to get home.



For which sentences do he/his sound better than they/their?



1. Everyone insisted that ___ record was unblemished.
2. Everyone drives ___ own car to work.
3. Everyone was happy because ___ passed the test.
4. Everyone left the room, didn't ___?
5. Everyone left early. ___ seemed happy to get home.

All

0

Some

0

None

0



Descriptive Grammar: an example

- F--- yourself!
 - Go f--- yourself!
 - *Go f--- you!
-
- Who taught you this?
 - How did you learn it?

Kinds of things we'll worry about

- Where to use reflexives vs. ordinary pronouns
 - e.g. *myself* vs. *I* or *me*
- Agreement
 - e.g. *We sing* vs. **We sings*
- Word order
 - e.g. **Sing we*
- Case
 - e.g. **Us sing*
- Coordinate conjunction
 - *We sing and dance*
- How to form questions, imperatives, negatives...
- ... and more! :)

Competence vs. Performance

Competence vs. Performance

- Competence — knowledge of language
- Performance — how the knowledge is used
- Examples
 - That Sandy left bothered me.
 - That that Sandy left bothered me bothered Kim.
 - That that that Sandy left bothered me bothered Kim bothered Bo.
 - The horse raced past the barn fell.

Competence vs. Performance

- You are what you eat.
- You are what you eat eats, too.
- You are what what what you eat eats eats, too.

Acceptability vs. Grammaticality

- A sentence is **acceptable** if native speakers say it sounds good.
- A sentence is **grammatical** (with respect to a particular grammar) if the grammar licenses it.
- Linguists are sometimes sloppy about the difference.

History

Some History

- Writings on grammar go back at least 3000 years
- Until ~200 years ago, almost all of it was prescriptive
- Until ~70 years ago, most linguistic work concerned
 - sound systems (phonology)
 - word structure (morphology)
 - and the historical relationships among languages

The Generative Revolution

- Noam Chomsky's work in the 1950s radically changed linguistics, making syntax central.
- Chomsky has been the dominant figure in linguistics ever since.
- The theory we will develop is in the tradition started by Chomsky, but diverges from his work in many ways.

Main Tenets of Generative Grammar

- Grammars should be formulated precisely and explicitly.
- Languages are infinite, so grammars must be tested against invented data, not just attested examples.
- The theory of grammar is a theory of human linguistic abilities.

Some of Chomsky's Controversial Claims

- The superficial diversity of human languages masks their underlying similarity.
- All languages are fundamentally alike because linguistic knowledge is largely innate.
- The central problem for linguistics is explaining how children can learn language so quickly and easily.

Partial Family Tree of Syntactic Theories

Early Transformational Grammar

(1955-1964)

Standard Theory TG

(1964-1967)

Not pictured:

- Construction Grammar
- Dependency Grammar
- Categorical Grammar

EST
(1967-1977)

Generative Semantics
(1966-1975)

REST
(1977-1981)

GPSG
(1979-1985)

Realistic TG
(1978-1980)

RG
(1974-present)

GB
(1981-1993)

HPSG
(1986-present)

LFG
(1980-present)

APG
(1980)

MP
(1993-present)

Group activities

Group Activities

- Get into groups and work on the activities at this link:
- <https://tinyurl.com/3h3avru7>
- I'll give you about ~20 minutes :)
- I plan to do group work like this during most lectures using problems out of the book to get you additional practice with the grammar/formalism

Why study syntax?

- Why should linguists study syntax?
- Why should computational linguists study syntax?
- Should anyone else study syntax? Why?
- What are you looking forward to about this class?
- What are you nervous about about this class?

Judging Examples

(i) Kim and Sandy is looking for a new bicycle

(ii) Have you the time?

(iii) I've never put the book.

(iv) The boat floated down the river sank.

(v) It ain't nobody going to miss nobody.

(vi) Terry really likes they.

(vii) Chris must liking syntax.

(viii) Aren't I invited to the party?

(ix) They wondered what each other would do.

(x) There is eager to be fifty students in this class.

HW Reminders

Upcoming Due Dates

- HW0 — Due this Friday, 10/2, 11:59PM PT
- RQ2 — Due Monday, 10/5, 6:00AM PT
 - remember: you don't need to read everybody else's questions!
 - if many people ask the same thing that's a signal to me that it's something I need to emphasize during lecture