

# What is language?

Ling 301 (Spring 2021)

Joseph Pentangelo

The College of Staten Island

# What is language?

- It's a way to communicate.

# What is language?

- It's a way to communicate, to express yourself, to impact reality, and more.
- It's multimodal.
  - Languages can be **spoken** or **signed**.
  - Even spoken languages combine sound and vision. (Gesture, posture, gaze, etc.)
  - Written language is a visual mode of a spoken language (usually).
- Language has **grammar**.

# Grammar is essential to language.

- Lots of ways to communicate, express ourselves, impact reality, etc.
  - Art, music, facial expressions, visual comedy, even animal calls
- Symbolism is not linguistic, although it is meaningful.
- Symbols, art, music, etc. do not have grammar in the same way that language does.
- Linguistic grammar (hereafter grammar) has many elements.
  - syntax, morphology, phonology, to name a few
- These elements interact in ways that can be studied scientifically.
- This is what linguistics is: the scientific study of grammar.



# What grammar *isn't*.

- “John and me went to the store.”
- “Me and John went to the store.”
- “John and I went to the store.”
  
- “This is where I came from.”
- “This is from whence I came.”
  
- “No I ain’t.”
- “No I’m not.”

All these sentences are fine.

Grammar is not about  
“correcting” grammatical  
sentences that are perhaps  
unfashionable (or that annoy  
curmudgeons)

# What grammar *isn't*.

- Descriptivism: Scientifically describes things as they are.
- Prescriptivism: Declares how things “should” be.
- Linguistics is a science. It is descriptivist.
- Not about how one “should” use language, but about how people actually do use language.

# Is anything ungrammatical?

- Yes, plenty!

\*John and me to the store went.

\*This where from came I.

\*No I amn't.

\*Fsfdgkkln lkjgfd.

# Language, variety, dialect

- What is a language?
- What is a dialect?
- What's the difference?
- What does Max Weinreich's quote mean?

“A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.” — Max Weinreich

- Please read “What's the difference between dialects and languages?” on the Readings page of our website. Consider the above questions in your reading. [15 minutes]



# Language, variety, dialect

- What is a ‘dialect continuum’?
- What is ‘mutual intelligibility’?

“Dialect differences are often relatively minor—sometimes just a matter of pronunciation (‘You say tomayto, I say tomahto’) [...]” — G. Tucker Childs

“Ultimately, *all* languages are dialects.” — G. Tucker Childs

- We need to be able to talk about speech sounds in a more sophisticated way.

# For next week...

- Read pages 42–57 in *Language Files*.
- This is posted on the Readings page, and you'll get a reminder soon as well.