

PLIN0068 Constructed Languages

2024-25

Lecture 9: Semantics & Pragmatics

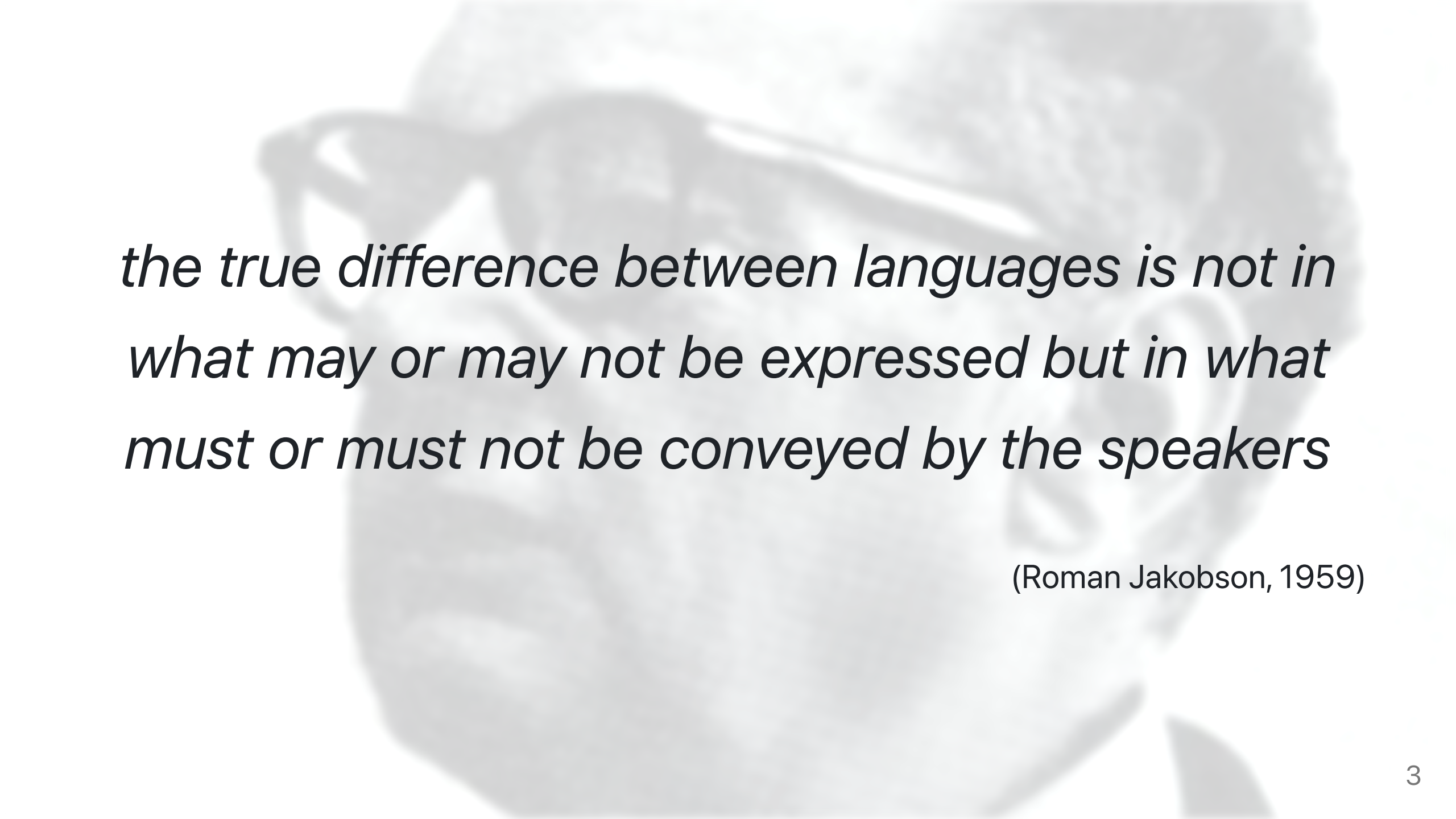
Effability

Natural languages differ significantly in vocabulary

But it's extremely easy to borrow and to coin (content) words

Effability thesis: Every natural language can express anything that any other natural language can express.

- This is a hypothesis!
- Animal languages are likely to be different (probably less expressive)
- Fictional languages might be more expressive than human language, but could we even think about such languages??



*the true difference between languages is not in
what may or may not be expressed but in what
must or must not be conveyed by the speakers*

(Roman Jakobson, 1959)

E.g. gender

A student is waiting for you.

French

Un étudiant vous attend
a.**MASC**.SG student.**MASC**.SG you wait.3SG

Une étudiante vous attend
a.**FEM**.SG student.**FEM**.SG you wait.3SG

E.g. number

- Hanako saw **a sheep**.
- Hanako saw **sheep**

Japanese

Hanako-wa hituzi-o mita

Hanako-TOP sheep-ACC saw

E.g. tense

Suppose John thought yesterday morning, "Wow it's snowing right now!"

John thought that it **was** snowing.

Russian

Dzhon dumal chto idët sneg

John thought that go.3SG.**PRES** snow

For your language

Some of these obligatory markers are grammatical agreement, but not all

- Gender
- Number
- Politeness
- Tense
- Aspect

You don't need to have such obligatory markers in your language

Logical operators

Negation

- All human languages have negation
- No evidence for negation in communication systems of other animals

See [WALS](#) for ways in which natural languages express negation

Quantifiers

All human languages have some ways of talking about quantities (if not all of the following)

- **Quantificational determiners:** *all, some, no, many, most*, numerals
- **Focus sensitive operators:** *only, also, even*
- **Negative polarity items:** *any, ever*

Not all quantificational meaning is lexicalized (e.g., **Conservativity Universal**)

Aspect

- Imperfective
- Perfective

Tense

- Past
- Present
- Future

Modality

- *must, can, required, allowed, possibly*
- Attitude verbs: *think, say*

Mood

- Statements (affirmative)
- Questions (interrogative)
- Commands (imperative)

For your language

At least find ways of expressing:

- Negation
- Basic quantification (*every/all* and *some*)

Other things are optional

Pragmatics

Universal pragmatics

The core principles of pragmatics (e.g. the Gricean Maxims) are considered to be universal for all human languages

- If you are constructing a language for non-humans, you could consider changing some of these principles, e.g. What if we don't have the Maxim of Manner?

Languages nonetheless may differ with respect to:

- quantity implicatures
- politeness
- metaphor etc. etc.

Scalar implicatures

- A or B $\implies$ Not(both A and B)
- Some As are Bs $\implies$ Not all As are Bs

These scalar implicatures are considered to be due to alternative expressions that have stronger meanings, e.g.:

- A and B
- All As are Bs

Question: What if these alternative expressions don't exist??

Ad hoc implicatures

Languages differ in vocabulary and that may affect implicatures

He is her brother.

Japanese

kare-wa kanozzyo-no kyōdai-da

he-TOP she-GEN brother-is

⇒ The speaker doesn't know the brother's relative age

kare-wa kanozzyo-no otōto-da / ani-da

he-TOP she-GEN younger.brother-is older.brother-is

Ad hoc implicatures in English

- She broke a finger. $\implies$ It's not a thumb.
- She's looking at a large star with a telescope. $\implies$ It's not a planet.

Politeness

- Behavioural vs. linguistic politeness
- An example of linguistic politeness is polite pronouns
 - Many languages encode politeness in 2nd person pronouns, e.g. *tú* vs. *usted* in Spanish
 - Common to 're-use' morphology: *tu* vs. *vous* (2PL) in French, *tu* vs. *Lei* (3SGF) in Italian
 - Languages like [Japanese](#) and Thai have a lot of 1st and 2nd person pronouns, some encoding politeness

Politeness markers

Some languages use special politeness morphology

- Case particles in Korean, e.g. *-kkeseo* vs. *-ga/i* (nominative)
- Nominal morphology, e.g. *Mr.* in English, *(go-)koonyuu* 'purchase' in Japanese
- Verbal morphology, e.g. Japanese politeness verbs
 - Hearer politeness, e.g. *-mas-*, *haiken-suru* vs. *mi-* 'see'
 - Subject honorifics, e.g. *irasshar-* vs. *ku-* 'come'
 - Object honorifics, e.g. *o-mikake-suru* vs. *mikake-* 'glimpse'

Diminutives

Diminutives (e.g. *-(t)je* in Dutch, *-aki* in Greek, *xiǎo-* in Mandarin Chinese) are morphemes that mean 'small'

They are often used to express intimacy

- Intimacy towards the referent, e.g. 'Look at this doll-DIM!'
- Intimacy towards the hearer, e.g. 'Let's read a book-DIM'

Cf. [Klingon morphology](#)

You could consider morphology encoding other types of added emotional meaning (e.g. anger, admiration, hatred, disgust) for your language

Final essay

Final essay

- Max 3,000 words (not very strict)
- Category 2
- Deadline: noon, 24 January 2024
- **Task:** Construct a novel *a priori* language, describe its grammatical properties, and compare it to natural language
- **Goal:** Learn and use theoretical concepts and ideas in linguistics
- Your essay may, but need not, have a single narrative flow; It could look like a Wikipedia page with short paragraphs and bullet points in each section.
- All examples should be glossed according to the [Leipzig glossing rules](#)

Key points to discuss

1. Who the speakers/signers/users are + biological/cultural background
2. Phoneme inventory and syllable structure; Romanisation
3. Morphology: Rules for complex words (if any)
4. Syntax: Pronouns + rules (word order, dependency marking) for transitive and intransitive sentences, DPs. State them clearly. See the slides from Week 8
5. Semantics: Explain how to express negation and quantification
6. An example narrative/discourse with ≥ 5 sentences, including sentences with pronouns, complex DPs, negation, and quantification

Throughout, remark how your language is different from natural language

Optional components

You can discuss any further aspects, e.g.:

- Pragmatics
- Writing system
- Historical change
- Social variation
- More sentence types, e.g. polar and/or *wh*-questions, adverbs, relative clauses
- Formal grammatical properties

For any of these, you should try to mention suitable theoretical ideas with appropriate academic references (email me for advice)