



**Department of Spanish Studies, General Linguistics and Literature Theory
University of Alicante**

Undergraduate level

LINGUISTICS 8806

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Task Sheet 1

Academic year: 2009-2010

PART I. BEGINNING LINGUISTICS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE

KEY TOPIC(S):

- **General conceptual goals.**

- 1.** Read the following text carefully (CABTREE, Monica y POWERS, Joyce (comp.) (1991): *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 5th ed.) and answer the questions as stated below (all of the questions refer to central concepts to linguistics, so you are strongly recommended to look for and underline the term in the text for future reference before answering the question).

Below is a list of some very general principles of human language that will be explained and illustrated throughout this course. Though the full significance of these characteristics won't be apparent to you at the beginning of the course, they are the underlying themes of many of the lectures you will hear and the assignments you will read.

1. Every language is enormously complex.
2. Despite this enormous complexity, every language is systematic, often in ways that are hidden and surprising. (General statements of the systematic relationships in a language are called rules).
3. Not only is language systematic, but it is systematic on many levels, from the system of sounds to the organization of discourses.
4. This systematicity is sometimes hard to see, for at least two reasons:
 - a) the very complexity of language obscures the patterns and regularities, and
 - b) in actual speech, there are hesitations, errors, changes in midstream, interruptions, confusions, and misunderstandings.
5. Language varies systematically from person to person, area to area, situation to situation. There is variation at every level of structure. Speakers are not consciously aware of most of this variation.
6. Languages are diverse, often astonishingly so. There are surprising differences in the way individual languages are organized.
7. Despite this diversity, there are a great many universal properties of languages, that is, there are characteristics shared by all languages as well as characteristics no language can have.
8. Some properties of a language are arbitrary, in the sense that they cannot be predicted from other properties or from general principles.



9. It is not easy for speakers of a language to reflect on their speech; although a great many complex rules govern our speech, we are no more aware of them than we are of the principles that govern ball-throwing or bicycle-riding.
10. The attitudes that people hold about their language and other languages, or about their own speech and other people's, can be very different from the facts about them. These attitudes are often based on nonlinguistics factors, and make an important field of study on their own.
11. Speech is the primary manifestation of language, and writing is only a secondary one.
12. Although children learn their first language, they cannot really be said to be taught it. They intuit the rules of their language from what they hear, guided by certain implicit assumptions about what language is like.
13. All languages change as time passes, whether speakers desire change or not; often they are not aware of it.
14. Linguists try to give accounts of the properties of a language that are both as precise and as complete as possible.
15. Linguists try to determine the ways in which all languages are alike and the ways in which they differ.

A few questions for you to reflect upon:

Question 1. Why do you think the authors state that *every language is enormously complex*? Do you agree with this statement? Why?

Question 2. Write down three or four issues from the above text that have had an impact on you.

Question 3. Why do you think languages are so diverse? What are your personal experiences with language diversity and how do these experiences affect the way you learn a language?

Question 4. Use examples you have observed in your own first language to illustrate the attitudes that people hold about their language and other languages and how they can be different from the facts about them.

Question 5. Why do you think linguists try to determine the ways in which all languages are alike and the ways in which they differ?