



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

Undergraduate level

LINGUISTICS 8806

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Task Sheet 2

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

KEY TOPIC(S):

- **Why study linguistics.**
- **Popular ideas about language.**

- 1.** Read the following text carefully (downloadable from <http://www.uni-kassel.de/fb8/misc/lfb/html/text/1.html>) and discuss your thoughts, feelings and reactions to it.

Talking, shouting, whispering, lying, swearing, telling jokes or tales, in short: communication of all sorts by means of articulate sound is something we are so familiar with that we hardly ever come to think about it as something unique. However, no other creature on this planet shows the ability to communicate verbally in the way they do. Take a minute to think about the immense impact spoken and written language has on your everyday life! You could not possibly do without it in situations where you meet other people, like in school, university, or at the breakfast table. The examples are innumerable. In this course, we will take a look at the unique features of human language. As you will see when we proceed, the human curiosity concerning language is no modern phenomenon. Language has been examined by linguists and philosophers for several millennia. Therefore, we can look back on a respectable stock of literature on the topic originating from the times of Ancient Greece until the present day. The result is a compendium of linguistic disciplines that are interwoven with the domains of, among others, philosophy, psychology, neurology, and even computer science: a vast and fascinating network of knowledge. To keep you fascinated (which I hope you are) and to keep you from becoming intimidated (which I hope you are not), we will start right away with the very principles that make human language so special.



2. 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 question as stated below.

People have all sorts of beliefs about language, only some of which have been supported by the research of linguists. One of the incidental functions of this course is to correct misconceptions about particular languages and about language in general. Some of these misconceptions are harmless, while others are not; some of these beliefs could lead you to spend a great deal of time trying to change things that can't be changed or don't need fixing, and some can be used as instruments of prejudice against various groups. Here is a random list of misconceptions. Look the list over carefully. Some of the items you will readily perceive as misconceptions, and will be able to explain why they're misconceptions. Others you may recognize as misconceptions without really being able to explain why. And still others you'll probably agree with. You may wish to refer to this list as the course progresses. At the end of this course, we hope you'll be able to look at this list and be able to provide a cogent explanation of why these are misconceptions.

1. Writing is no more perfect than speech.
2. Women generally speak better than men.
3. There are 'primitive' languages with only a few hundred words.
4. French is a clearer and more logical language than English or German.
5. People who say *Nobody ain't done nothin'* can't think logically.
6. Swearing degrades a language.
7. Kids need to study for years in school to learn to speak their language properly.
8. Some people can pick up a language in a couple of weeks.
9. It's easier to learn Chinese if your ancestry is Chinese.
10. Some words, like *sapphire*, are naturally more beautiful than others, like *runt* or *stupid*.
11. The only reasonable way to arrange words in a sentence is to start with the subject and follow with the verb.
12. English is a simpler language than Latin or Greek.
13. The only ways deaf people can communicate are by writing, by reading lips, and by spelling out English with their fingers.
14. You can almost always recognize Jews and Blacks by the way they talk.
15. Correct spelling preserves a language.
16. International relations would get better if everyone spoke the same language.
17. Japanese, Chinese, and Korean are dialects of the same language.
18. Sloppy speech should be avoided whenever possible.
19. Eskimos don't have a general word for *snow*, therefore they can't think abstractly.
20. The more words you know in a language, the better you know the language.

Check for each of the above statements whether you think it is a) a clear misconception which you are able to clarify; b) a misconception which you are really not able to clarify; or c) a statement you agree with.

A clear misconception which I am able to clarify	A misconception which I am really not able to clarify	A statement I agree with