



Discussion Questions on Language as an “Instinct”
APS Reader, pages 15-16

1. Things we know by “instinct”

The point of questions a-e below is to show that we have knowledge about our language (1) that all native speakers would agree on but (2) that we could not have learned through explicit instruction.

- a. Put the phrase **two big white cows** into a language you know other than English. What is the word order? Are other orders possible? Are there things other than word order that the language requires, such as agreement between adjective and noun?

Here are a couple of examples used in class, with comments.

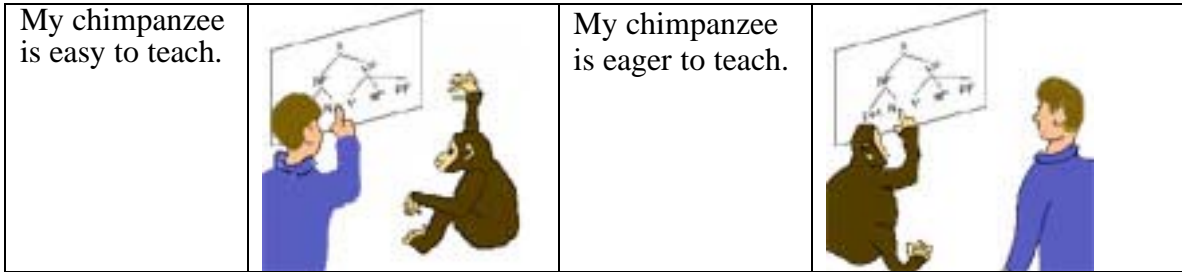
	<p><u>manyan</u> <u>shanu</u> <u>farare</u> <u>biyu</u> big (plural) cows white (plural) two</p> <p>Order is completely unlike English: One adjective goes before the noun, the other after. The number goes at the end. The adjectives have to be marked as plural (compare <u>fari</u> ‘white (singular)’)</p>
	<p><u>liǎn</u> <u>tṣī</u> <u>tà</u> <u>pá1</u> <u>njú</u> two “classifier” big white cow</p> <p>The basic order is like English, but Chinese (like lots of Asian languages) requires a "classifier" stating the "category" of thing being enumerated.</p>

- b. Answer the same question about the following (or other phrases you make up):

I gave money to the church. *or* I gave the church money.
but not *I gave to the church money. *or* *I gave money the church.

<p>Hausa: <u>na</u> <u>ba</u> <u>wa</u> <u>coci</u> <u>kudi</u> I gave to church money</p>	<p>Unlike English, the recipient ("church" here) must directly follow the verb and must have the preposition "to".</p>
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c. Who is doing the learning in each of the following sentences?



This is parallel to the "persuade" vs. "promise" example used in lecture. The two sentences are identical in their structure:

My chimpanzee is + ADJECTIVE + to teach.

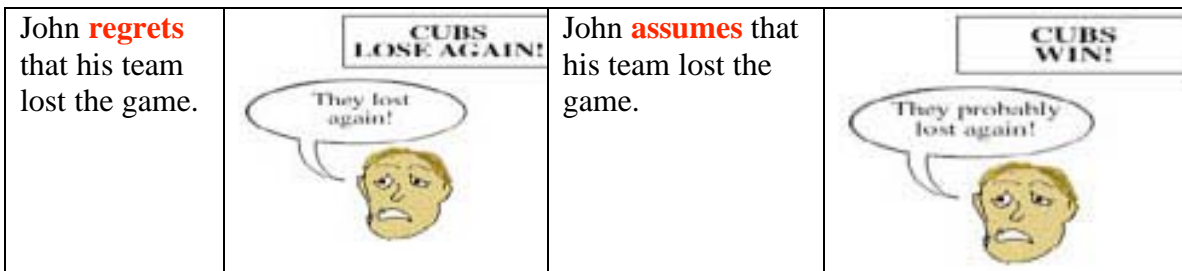
Yet in one case the chimpanzee is getting taught and in the other (s)he is doing the teaching

d. How many students “understand” in each of the following sentences?

<p>You are the one student who understands.</p>	<p>One student understands (it's you).</p>
<p>You are the only student who understands.</p>	<p>One student understands (it's you).</p>
<p>You are not the one student who understands.</p>	<p>One student understands (though it's not you).</p>
<p>You are not the only student who understands.</p>	<p>MORE THAN ONE student understands.</p>

The affirmative sentences, 1-2, mean the same thing, but putting the sentences in the negative not only adds the negative meaning, but it changes the number of students who understand!

e. Did John’s team lose?



The verb **regret** is called a "factive" verb--the statement that follows it is a true fact. The verb **assume** is NOT a factive--one could be wrong in one's assumptions.

2. In each pair of sentences below, one would be called “ungrammatical” in sense (a) on page 11 of the APS book (it does not conform to a norm of “standard” English) whereas the other would be called “ungrammatical” in sense (b), the linguist’s sense (it does not follow the system of “rules” of native speakers of English). For each pair,

- state which is ungrammatical in sense (a) and which in sense (b).
- state what the “standard” native English version would be.
- try to decide WHAT makes the sentence ungrammatical in sense (a) or (b).

a.	Me and my friend talked for three hours.	"Prescriptively ungrammatical" (in TWO ways): We are taught (1) to put first person (I, we) after other persons and (2) to use "I", not "me" as the subject of an action. Yet everyday you and your friends say sentences starting with "me and ..."!
	Me talked for three hours.	"Descriptively ungrammatical": No native speaker of English uses "me" alone as the subject. "Me" as subject works only in "me and ...".
b.	We no need no stinking badges!	"Descriptively ungrammatical": Native speakers of English do not use "no" to negate verbs. They use "not" or the contraction "n't" added to a verb.
	We don't need no stinking badges!	"Prescriptively ungrammatical": This is another example of "double negative", which many native speakers of English use in everyday speech.
c.	Tell me why are you ignoring me.	"Prescriptively ungrammatical": The prescriptively "standard" wording would be, "Tell me why you are ignoring me." Some "non-standard" varieties of English use the ordering in the example, which would be the order in a simple question, "Why are you ignoring me?"
	Tell me why you ignoring me.	"Descriptively ungrammatical": The "-ing" form of the verb requires a form of the verb "be" with it. Native speakers of English could say, "Tell me why you ignore me," or, "Tell me why you are ignoring me," but not the form in the example.
d.	Finish quickly your carrots.	"Descriptively ungrammatical": An adverb like "quickly" cannot normally intervene between a verb and its object in natively spoken English.
	Finish your carrots quick.	"Prescriptively ungrammatical": We are taught that an adverb must always add "-ly", i.e. "Finish your carrots quickly." However, for many short words like "quick", "slow", "easy", "clear", "deep", etc., colloquial English can use the word without "-ly" if it comes AFTER the verb. (Native English speakers would not say, "He quick finished his carrots," with a "-ly"-less adverb.)

3. Here are some examples of questions by a native speaker of Arabic learning English (data from L. Selinker & S. Gass, *Workbook in Second Language Acquisition*, Rowley, MA:Newbury House, 1984, p. 75):

- a. What you said you like to make?
- b. What did you learn doing?
- c. What you call?

- d. Where your house?
 - e. Where she is from?
 - f. Why this "Khalwa" funny name?
- √ How is this "interlanguage" like a pidgin?

- **Circumstances:** The speaker and the person spoken do not share a language which both speak natively, or at least in a native-like manner. The difference from the normal pidgin situation is that presumably the person being spoken to IS a fluent speaker of English.
- (probably) **Limited vocabulary:** This is not evident from the sample, but it is a characteristic of a second language learner.
- (probably) **Lacks full range of expressive devices:** Again, this is not evident from the sample, but it seems unlikely that this speaker would have command of the full range of English tense distinctions, the full range of question types (rhetorical questions, echo questions, questions showing irony, etc.), the full range of expressing types of conditions ('if I do it' vs. 'even if I do it' vs. 'if I were to do it'), and other types of distinctions that native speakers make naturally.
- **Variation:** Native speakers are consistent in grammatical patterns they follow, whereas grammar tends to be "looser" in pidgins. This speaker shows variation in grammatical patterns. For example,
 - In (a) s/he has no form of "do" in the question (required in native English), but in (b) s/he does.
 - In (d) s/he has no verb "be" in a question about a location, but in (e) s/he does.

√ How does this differ from a child acquiring a first language?

- **A child will attain native ability; this adult probably never will.** (We can't prove this claim about this speaker based on this sample, of course, but it would be astonishing if s/he managed to acquire native-like ability!)
- **The concepts here are beyond what a child at the beginning stages of acquisition could do:** Even though the English illustrated here is clearly that of someone who is only beginning to express him/herself in English, the concepts and even the attempted structures are adult-like, e.g. in (d-e) asking about a place which the speaker has probably never seen, and (a) with three levels of linguistic "embedding"--(1) you are being questioning about saying something; (2) what you said is that you like something; (3) what you said you like is to make something.

√ Why does an example like this call into question the notion that humans might have "invented" language?

One would have expected the adult to be better at mastering the language than the child if all that was involved was to apply reasoning abilities. This clearly is not enough, even with instruction by native speakers. Yet the child, with no special instruction, will master the language. The only possible explanation is that the ability to acquire a language must be something built in, which the individual has little control over.

4. Hausa, spoken in Nigeria and other parts of West Africa, has the following simple color words: *fari* 'white', *baki* 'black', *ja* 'red', *kore* 'green', *shudi* 'blue'. Other color terms are derived in various ways, e.g. *ja-ja-ja-ja* "red-red-red-red, reddish" (= 'pink'), *ƙasa-ƙasa* "earth-earth" (= 'brown'), or *ruwan goro* "tint of kola" (= 'orange', since chewing kola nuts turns one's saliva orange). The Whorf Hypothesis claims that our linguistic categories shape our perceptions. This incorrectly predicts that we might just as well find people whose primary color terms are 'pink', 'brown', and 'orange' and who see the world in variants of those colors. Why is this prediction false?

Would people from anywhere speaking any language view flamingos of having a primary color of which the canary and cardinal had colors that were variants of "flamingo"?!







See Pinker's discussion of color perception and terminology, p. 52. It is not surprising that Hausa has "simple" color terms for the colors 'black', 'white', 'red', 'green', and 'blue', but "complex" or "derived" terms for other colors. Human eyes have three kinds of cones which best process light in three areas of the spectrum of light visible to the human light-processing system. Languages around the world reflect this by all having words for black and white. Languages with more elaborate terminologies follow a pattern whereby canonical colors at certain points in the spectrum will have names whereas colors moving away from those points are less likely to have names and/or are less likely to have linguistically non-derived names. Far from language influencing perception (à la Whorf), perception drives language and in fact makes languages be like each other because human color perception is universal.

5. Here is a table of verb tenses in Chibemba, a Bantu language of Zambia. *Ba* is a plural person subject prefix; *-bomb-* is the verb root; grave accent = low tone, acute accent = high tone. (Data from T. Givón, *Studies in Chibemba and Bantu Grammar, Studies in African Linguistics*, Supplement 3, 1969, pp. 174-176.)

ba-àléé-bomba	'They were working.' (some time before yesterday)
ba-áléé-bomba	'They were working.' (yesterday)
ba-àcíláá-bomba	'They were working.' (earlier today)
ba-á-bomba	'They have just worked.' (within the past 3 hours)
ba-léé-bomba	'They are working.' (now)
ba-áláá-bomba	'They will work.' (within about the next 3 hours)
ba-léé-bomba	'They will work.' (later today)
ba-kà-bomba	'They will work.' (tomorrow)
ba-ká-bomba	'They will work.' (sometime after tomorrow)

"This demonstrates that Chibemba speakers do not think of time as an single "flow" up to the present and away from the present, but rather as a set of discrete periods or "slots" into which events fit." ARGUE AGAINST THIS CLAIM ABOUT THE WAY CHIBEMBA SPEAKERS VIEW TIME.

	Later today	Tomorrow	After tomorrow
The Chibemba view of the future. (that is, three actions unrelated to each other)			
	Any time after now		
The English view of the future. (that is, one action that just hasn't happened yet)			

Whorfian reasoning about the way Chibemba speakers view degrees of future time would go as follows (the same line of argument would go for degrees of past time):

- "Bemba children learn discrete linguistic time distinctions, with the result that they do not see a commonality between something happening later today, something tomorrow, and something beyond tomorrow--a set of distinctions for which English or French speakers have a single concept, future."

How can we prove that Bemba speakers do not have a unitary concept "future".

- Well, they don't have a single verbal form that means "sometime after the present time".

This is an example of CIRCULAR REASONING, i.e. you argue that "a" is the case because of "b" and the reason that you know "b" is true is because "a" is the case.

6. In what ways do the following items show thought and language to be separate cognitive processes?

- Describe the difference between the smell of frying bacon and frying hamburgers.

We can tell the difference, we process this olfactorily, we have a thought. Yet it is not a thought that words and syntax are able to make concrete. Same goes for most (all?) smells, tastes, sounds, emotions, etc.

- What I mean when I say, "Hold your horses!"

An **idiom**. As with all idioms, the thought that the idiom conveys is distinct from the meaning that the linguistic sense conveys. We are using language to stimulate a thought different from what we actually say.

- The sentence, "I can do what I cannot do that I can do."

A sentence impossible to process, and even if we could, it probably wouldn't mean anything--there is no thought attached to or attachable to it. Yet in terms of its linguistic make up, it is perfectly well formed. Each of the words is an English word, and the sentence has exactly the structure of perfectly sensible sentences, e.g. *I can do what you cannot do that John can do* or *I will ask for what you will not buy that I want for my birthday*.