24.900

Introduction to Linguistics
What are we going to learn in this class?

Briefly: we’re trying to figure out what exactly it is that you know, when you know a language… and how you end up knowing that.
Syntax
Study of how sentences are made up of words

John walked up the stairs
Mary looked up the reference
Study of how sentences are made up of words

N  V  P  D  N
John walked up the stairs
Mary looked up the reference
Study of how sentences are made up of words

N  V  P  D  N
John walked up the stairs
Mary looked up the reference

John walked up the stairs.
--Up the stairs?!
Study of how sentences are made up of words

N V P D N
John walked [up the stairs] constituent
Mary looked up the reference

John walked up the stairs.
   --Up the stairs?!
Mary looked up the reference.
   --Up the reference?!
Study of how sentences are made up of words

N  V  P  D  N
John walked [up the stairs] constituent
Mary looked up the reference

John walked up the stairs.
    --Up the stairs?!
Mary looked up the reference.
    *--Up the reference?!
Study of how sentences are made up of words

N    V    P    D    N
John walked [up the stairs] constituent
Mary looked up the reference

John walked up the stairs.
  --Up the stairs?!
Mary looked up the reference.
  *--Up the reference?!

[up which stairs] did John walk?
Study of how sentences are made up of words

John walked [ up the stairs] constituent
Mary looked up the reference

John walked up the stairs.
   --Up the stairs?!
Mary looked up the reference.
   *--Up the reference?!

[up which stairs] did John walk?
[up which reference] did Mary look?
Study of how sentences are made up of words

N    V     P     D     N
John walked [ up the stairs] constituent
Mary looked up the reference

John walked up the stairs.
    --Up the stairs?!  
Mary looked up the reference.
    *--Up the reference?!

[up which stairs] did John walk?
*[up which reference] did Mary look?
Study of how sentences are made up of words

N  V  P  D  N
John  walked  [ up  the  stairs]  constituent
Mary  looked  up  the  reference

John walked up the stairs.
    --Up the *stairs*?!
Mary looked up the reference.
    *--Up the *reference*?!

[up which stairs] did John walk?
*[up which reference] did Mary look?

John walked up the stairs and up the hill.
Mary looked up the reference and up the vocabulary words.
Study of how sentences are made up of words

John walked [up the stairs] constituent
Mary looked up the reference

John walked up the stairs.
    --Up the stairs?! 
Mary looked up the reference.
    *--Up the reference?! 

[up which stairs] did John walk?
*[up which reference] did Mary look?

John walked up the stairs and up the hill.
*Mary looked up the reference and up the vocabulary words.
Semantics

the study of how the meaning of a sentence is computed from the meanings of the parts of the sentence.
Who did Biden ask to see him?
Who did *Biden* ask to see *him*?

can ‘him’ be ‘Biden’?
Who did Biden ask to see him?
Why did Biden ask to see him?

how about now?
similarly…

She thinks that Susan is smart.
similarly…

She thinks that Susan is smart.

Susan thinks that she is smart.

why do you think it works this way?
similarly…

**She** thinks that **Susan** is smart.

**Susan** thinks that **she** is smart.

After **Susan** came to MIT, **she** was happy.
similarly…

*She* thinks that *Susan* is smart.

*Susan* thinks that *she* is smart.

After *Susan* came to MIT, *she* was happy.

After *she* came to MIT, *Susan* was happy.
similarly…

She thinks that Susan is smart.

Susan thinks that she is smart.

After Susan came to MIT, she was happy.

After she came to MIT, Susan was happy.

(if you speak another language—how do things work in that language?)
Phonology
The study of speech sounds.
Phonology
The study of speech sounds.

cat    cats
dog    dogs
Phonology
The study of speech sounds.

cat  cats

dog  dogs

how are these pronounced?
Phonology
The study of speech sounds.

cat cats

dog dogs

how are these pronounced?

…and how about these?

dove doves

reef reefs
Phonology
The study of speech sounds.

cat  cats

dog  dogs

how are these pronounced?

…and how about these?

dove  doves

reef  reefs

…and so what’s the rule?
Syntax: how sentences are put together  
Semantics: how meanings are put together  
Phonology: study of speech sounds  
Morphology: how words are put together  

other topics for the semester:

Language endangerment  
Signed languages  
Neurolinguistics  
Historical linguistics  
Dialectology  
Language acquisition
General themes of the class

There’s all this fascinating, complicated linguistic stuff going on in your head, without you being aware of it.

What exactly do you know, when you know a language?
General themes of the class

There’s all this fascinating, complicated linguistic stuff going on in your head, without you being aware of it.

What exactly do you know, when you know a language?

What are the basic differences between languages?