



UCL

What is Human Language?

Reading: FRH Ch. 1

PLIN0006: Introduction to Language



Fig. 1 "We'll start out by speaking in simple declarative sentences."

The Language Faculty

- “The mind is what the brain does.” (Steven Pinker)
 - The mind stores and computes information.
 - The mind consists of a number of components, each dedicated to storing and computing a specific type of information.
- **The Language Faculty** is the component of the human mind that is exclusively dedicated to the storage and computation of linguistic information.

What the Language Faculty is **NOT**

✘ General Intelligence

✘ Thought

✘ Literacy

✘ Prescriptive Rules

General Intelligence

The Language Faculty **is not** General Intelligence (GI).

Evidence from **double dissociations**:

- **Patient A:** Language = impaired; GI = healthy.
- **Patient B:** Language = healthy; GI = impaired.

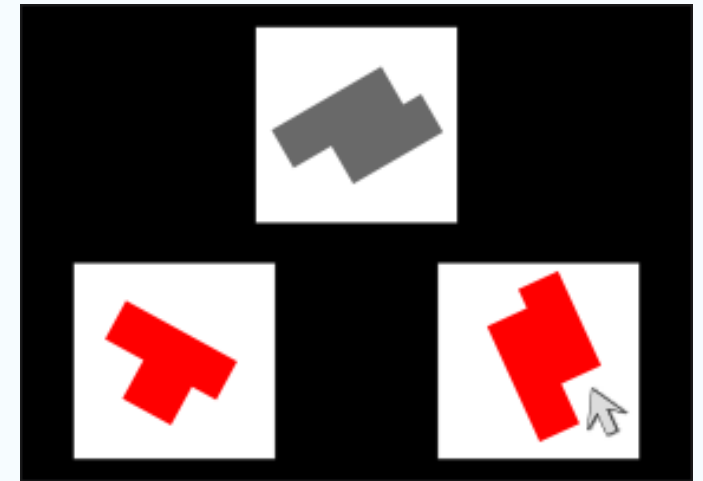
Christopher: An extreme case of dissociation

Thought

- Non-linguistic organisms can think:
 - Pre-linguistics babies
 - Animals

- Linguistic organisms can think non-linguistically:
 - Mental Rotation

Fig. 2 Mental Rotation Example



Literacy

- Learning to read and write a language:
 - Requires rich input
 - Requires formal instruction
 - Does not proceed along a biologically determined schedule
- Learning to understand and speak a language:
 - Does not require rich input
 - Does not require formal instruction
 - Proceeds along a biologically determined schedule

Prescriptive rules

Prescriptive rules:

- Prescribe how one **ought** to speak.
- Constitute a **Prescriptive Grammar**.

Descriptive rules:

- Describe what speakers instinctively know about their language.
- Constitute a **Descriptive Grammar**.

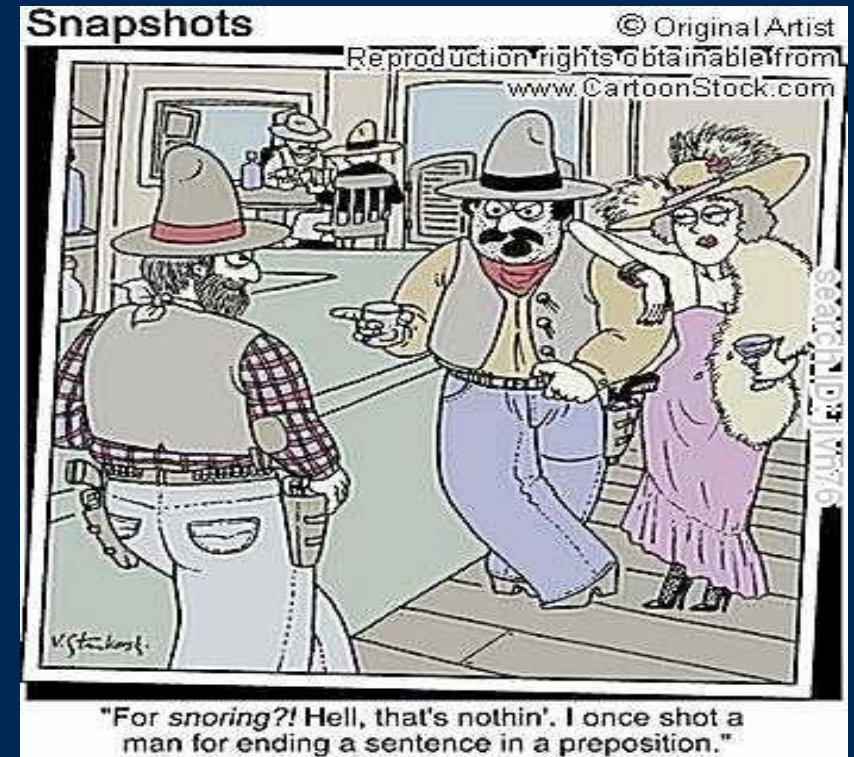


Fig. 3 For snoring?! Hell, that's nothin'. I once shot a man for ending a sentence in a preposition.

Double Negatives

“Two negatives make a positive, so don’t use double negatives!”

- Why should the rules of language be based on multiplication, rather than on addition?
- Why should the rules of language be based on mathematics at all?
- Even if we find an answer, it’s beside the point: we want to describe and understand language, not tell people how they ought to use it.



Fig. 4 I won't (not) use no double negatives!

Split Infinitives

“Don’t split infinitives!”

- Latin infinitives can’t be split, because they form a single word:
cogitare ‘to think’
- Why should the rules of English be based upon the rules of Latin?
- English clearly marks infinitives in a totally different way.
- The comparison with Latin is absurd!



Fig. 5 To boldly go where no man has gone before.

Competence vs Performance

- **Competence:**

- Knowledge of Language.

- **Performance:**

- How this knowledge is put to use on any given occasion.

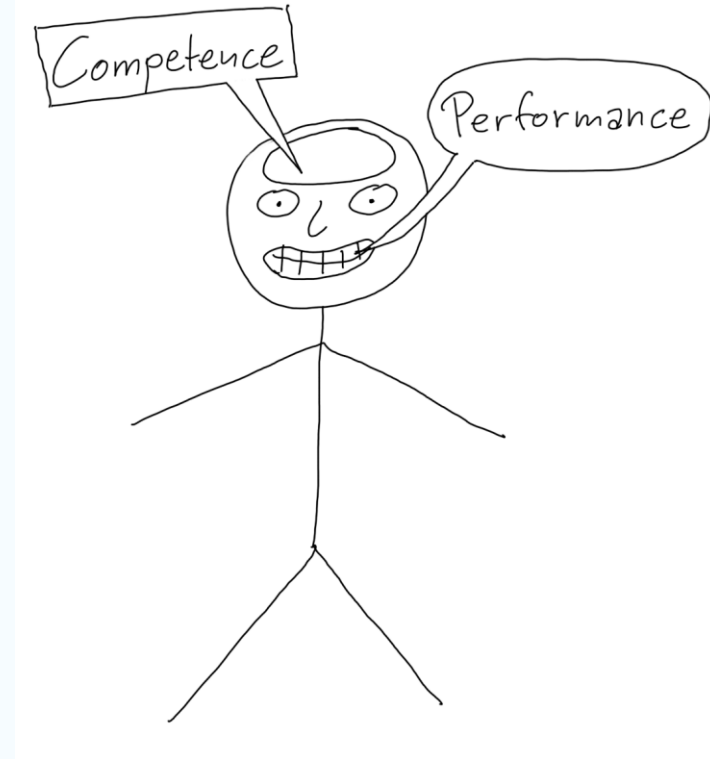


Fig. 6 Competence vs. Performance

Language \neq Speech!

- **Speech:** Oral externalisation of a spoken language only.
- Sign languages are languages, too:
 - There are over 100 different sign languages across the world
 - They share many of the underlying properties of oral languages.
- Some languages allow variant externalisations:
 - Some spoken languages can be drummed and/or whistled.
 - Some signed languages can be communicated through touch.

Summary

- Knowing a language means knowing a wide range of facts, from the sound structure of one's language to its word order.
- Linguists study this knowledge, so as to gain a better understanding of the human mind.
- Linguists focus specifically on the component of the mind which is dedicated to the storage and computation of linguistic information.