

Linguistics and English Language

A proposed u3a Todmorden special interest group

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Overview

I am offering to convene a group for members interested in Language in general, with most but not all illustrations from English. The group activities envisaged include talks about linguistic theory, discussions of various controversies related to language, and practical activities of various kinds, some of which could lead to ongoing projects. I hope there will be others in the group who could take the lead on some topics and discussions, e.g. controversies about language in education. As u3a groups are run according to members' preferences, the suggestions below should not be seen as set in stone.

First Session

The first session will kick off with consideration of a sheet of example phrases and sentences that illustrate two of the topics from below:

- How ambiguous many utterances are if taken too literally.
- How understanding language involves reasoning as well as decoding.

The examples will form the content of a quiz/game that participants can do in pairs or groups.

After that taster session, we'll take time to discuss whether the group should proceed; if so, how it will be organised, and what we'll do in the next few sessions.

Linguistics 101

Talks providing background on frameworks for language description, in no particular order:

- What is linguistics? History, branches, scholars. Scientific versus prescriptive language study.
- Linguistic units: phoneme, lexeme, morpheme, word, phrase, clause, sentence, discourse.
- Sounds of language: phonetics and phonology. The -etic/-emic distinction. The English phonemes - vowels and consonants.
- Differences between spoken and written language. Segmentation; Punctuation.

- Syntax: What binds words together to form a phrase or a sentence? How to describe the grammar of a language with rules and a lexicon.
- English constituent structure. A review of some of the ways we can make sentences that just seem to go on and on.
- The structure of words: morphology; inflection and derivation in English and other languages.
- Language and meaning: Semantics - lexical and logical.
- Indexical expressions: pronouns, locatives.
- *How to do things with words* - Pragmatics
- Logic, language and reasoning.
- Natural Language Processing and AI
- Child language acquisition
- Historical and contrastive studies: language families, language varieties from pidgins to dialects.

Topics for discussions or investigations

- How do you react when people make ‘errors’ in language use? What are your favourite *bêtes noires*?
- Are some varieties of English more prestigious than others?
- Are Lowland Scots or Ulster Scots distinct languages or dialects of English?
- What do you make of Basil Bernstein’s work *Class, Codes and Control*?
- How is the use of smart devices affecting our linguistic abilities?
- Is systematic phonics the best way to teach reading and spelling? What is the evidence?
- Should primary children learn and be examined in SPaG?
- Does knowledge of grammar help you write better / be a better literary critic / learn a foreign language better?
- How should you talk to young children?
- Should all children learn a foreign language?

Examples of Practical Activities

- Mapping dialect words
- Describing how dialects differ grammatically from ‘standard English’, using fellow group members as informants.
- Phonetic/-emic transcription.
- Researching how language is actually used in a corpus. Google ngram viewer and similar tools.
- Practical work with the Princeton Wordnet.
- Explaining the ambiguity in example utterances.
- Inducing a grammar from example data in a language you don’t know.
- Studying what is examined in SAT tests of SPaG.
- Analysing text at various levels. Tagging, Parsing.
- Analysing discourse and conversation.
- Analysing rhetorical language.
- Using computer-based tools to analyse language data. Evaluating them.
- Designing linguistic tools to help solve crosswords.
- Evaluating chat-bots.