

Tenzing Briggs

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Language Theory

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*Learning Portfolio Cover, or Final Reflection*

The difficulty with studying language is how intricate, complex, and abstract it can be. Language, as a topic of study, comes with an enormous amount of data and many different theories — a reflection of its complexity and of how many interconnected parts it has. Studying it, then, can be a bit of a “rabbit hole”, because language itself reflects many different theories coming together — first, it has many interconnected components, such as its five basic components of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. But, second, those components also reflect other *kinds* of theories, such as theories of philosophy, culture, neurology and biology, and history. For example, language theory can reflect neurology in the study of childhood language acquisition studies, history and culture in the study of pidgins, creoles, and dialects, and philosophy in the study of semantics and Universal Grammar. This fact means that there are near-limitless ways of understanding, explicating, and explaining both how language works and how language has developed. Once we try to form a theory that explains how and why a language works, we can begin to see commonalities across different languages. In short, language theory helps us understand all that language is and can be.

Through this course, we delved into each of the five basic aspects, by investigating both the functions behind English and behind other languages. In particular, we found that language can be investigated on a deeper level through *comparison*. That is, in many cases, foreign languages, languages of the deaf, or differences in English dialects can demonstrate concepts that

are either less or not at all prominent in Standard American English. The practical take away from language theory is thus twofold: the theory of this class helps us to better understand both our own English language and that of others. Thus, language theory can help when it comes to bridging communication difficulties across speakers of different contexts, and such theory has emphasized to me the need to recognize the barriers to communication — something which matters greatly to my own graduate assistantship, as an editor helping international students rewrite their papers. By better understanding English language theory (particularly abnormal or difficult syntax, like that seen in garden path sentences), I can better explain to the colleagues I edit where their language works well, where it could be improved, and why or when it should be changed.

Language theory is also the study of the *context* of language; language reflects to a great deal its own contexts. For example, pragmatics show us how context matters in the interpretation of sentences, showing that different contexts inform how sentences are formatted differently, and in one of my Writing Responses I investigated how context matters to entailment. Furthermore, context matters in the development of language itself — as we learned, pidgins, creoles, and other dialects develop in certain contextual circumstances. For example, AAVE dialects reflect the development of new English vernacular within the historical context of American slavery (i.e., language responding to the need for communication between slaves and masters).

For myself, the practical application of such theory is that, by recognizing that language changes according to circumstances, I can hopefully begin to understand my *own* contexts that I bring to language — especially when it comes to research and editing I undertake in my current graduate assistantship. Currently, I am an editor at UALR's Collaboratorium for Social Media and Online Behavioral Studies (COSMOS) Research Center — COSMOS is primarily made-up

of computer and information science international student researchers, who study trends in social media, such as misinformation, AI, and narratives that exist on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Not being literate in computer or information science, I have yet to contribute as a writer to any COSMOS studies, but the language theory I have learned in this class will help me begin to possibly formulate hypotheses relating to social media that could be researched with the help of my graduate assistant colleagues. Namely, social media contexts recurred as a theme in this class — we saw how, for example, slang trends in social media could show language developing in the context of internet communication, such as the use of the (possibly 4th-person) pronoun “Chat” that I discussed in one Writing Response. By learning language theory in this class — and, importantly, by learning of the ways language theory has been experimentally confirmed — I’ve learned concepts that will help me begin my own research on social media language in my current graduate assistantship.