

PLIN0020

**ADVANCED
SEMANTIC
THEORY**

ABOUT

- Fieldwork project
 - Find a speaker of a language you don't speak natively, preferably an 'understudied language' (so not English, German, Mandarin Chinese, etc.)
(by 17 Oct)
 - Find a 'semantic phenomenon' that interests you
(by 14 Nov)
- Website: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/~ucjtudo/AST.html>

ASSESSMENT

- **In-class presentation (20%) on 12 December 2019**
- **Essay (80%) due on 16 January 2020**

UNIVERSALS AND VARIATION IN NATURAL LANGUAGE SEMANTICS

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- Vocabulary gaps; but borrowing and coinage are easy, esp. of content words
- **Effability:** Every language can express anything that can be expressed in any other language.
- Natural languages might or might not be completely effable but they certainly differ as to how meanings are expressed

EXAMPLE: NUMBER

- Slovenian is a language that distinguishes three number categories on nouns: singular, dual, plural (e.g. *mesto*, *mesti*, *mesta* 'town').
- *Ta stola sta polomljena* means something like 'These chairs.DL are broken'.
- English cannot express the duality in the same way, but obviously you can just say 'These two chairs are broken' to mean essentially the same thing.

EXAMPLE: NUMBER (CONT.)

- The existence of dual in Slovenian seems to affect the meaning of plural: Slovenian avoids plural when referring to exactly two things.
- Does this mean that 'plural' in Slovenian means >2 , while 'plural' in English means >1 ?
- Is this because Slovenian has dual? What is the (universal) principle behind this? (more on this next week)

EXAMPLE: PAIR NOUNS

- For things that naturally come in pairs, e.g. hands, eyes, shoes, etc. you have to use the plural.
- The dual would mean two instances that do not form a pair.
- Hungarian, a singular-plural language, is also sensitive to this distinction: You have to use the singular for paired things.
- Is there a universal principle that explains this sensitivity to duality?

EXAMPLE: TENSE

- English and Japanese both mark tense on the verb.
- English distinguishes: past, present, future, but Japanese only distinguishes past vs. non-past.
- English is said to be a *Sequence of Tense* language, while Japanese is not.
 - e.g. Mary said that she was/is at home.
- Where does this difference come from? What's universal about tense marking and what's not?

EXAMPLE: INDEXICAL SHIFT

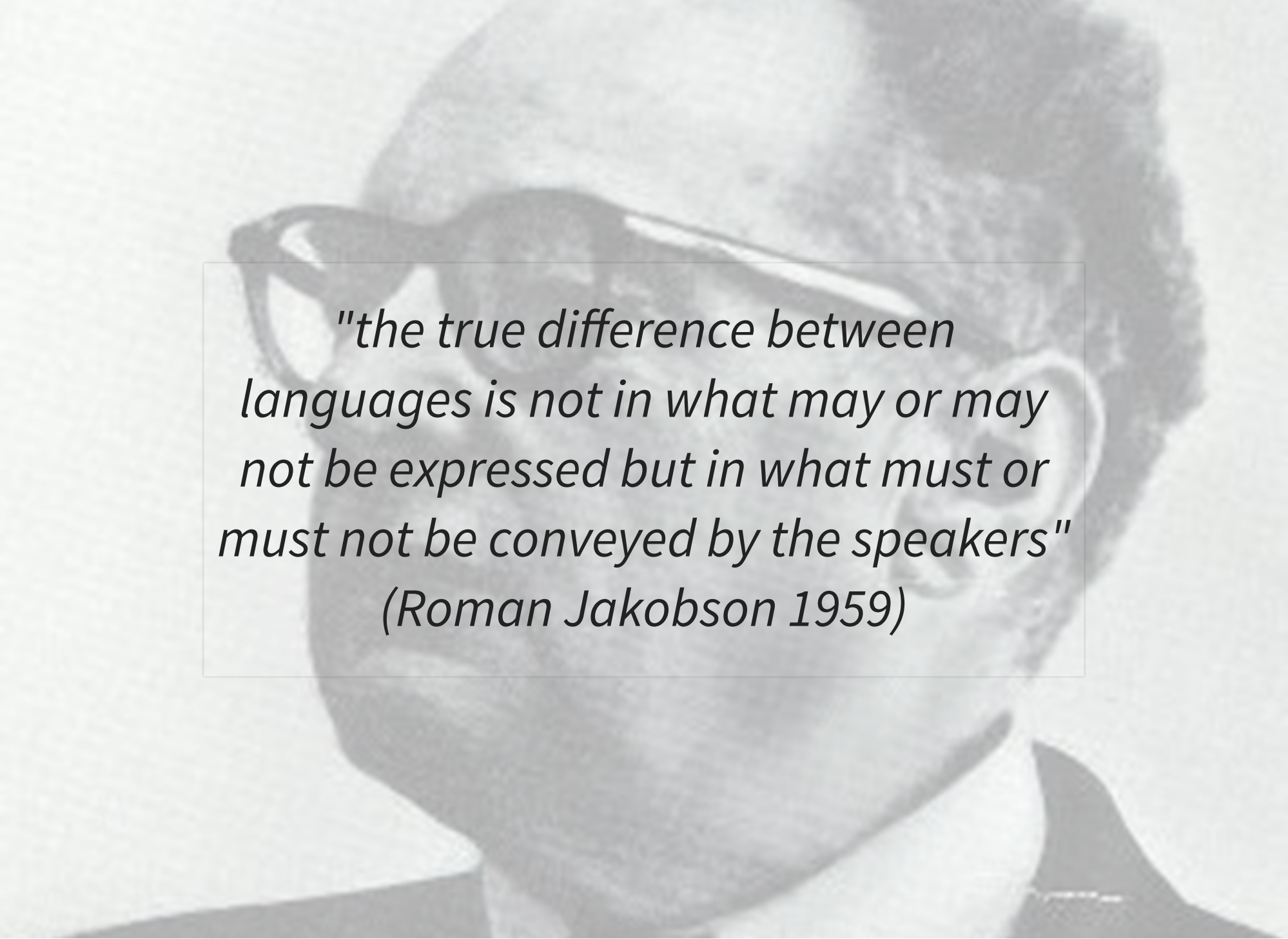
- Indexical expressions like "me" and "you" get their referents from the context of utterance.
- In many languages, the following sentence has a different meaning from English.
 - Mary said that John likes me.
- What is the range and nature of grammatical environments where 'me' doesn't need to refer to the current speaker? What explains the difference?

ALLEGED UNIVERSALS

- **Vagueness and context sensitivity**
- **Multidimensionality:** at-issue meaning, presupposition, implicature, etc.
- **Conservativity Universal:** Determiners express conservative generalized quantifiers (a bit obsolete)
- **Pragmatic principles**

WHERE LANGUAGES VARY

- Syntax, morphology, phonology
- Inventory of functional words, Determiner, Tense, Aspect, Gender, Number, etc.
- More controversial ideas
 - Constraints on syntax-semantics mapping/LF
 - Semantic composition rules



"the true difference between languages is not in what may or may not be expressed but in what must or must not be conveyed by the speakers"
(Roman Jakobson 1959)

PLAN

TENTATIVE PLAN

1: Intro (today)

6: Perspectival items
(find topic)

2: Number

7: Pronouns

3: Tense & Aspect (find
informant)

8: Evidentiality

4: Comparatives, etc.

9: No class

5: Indexicals

10: Presentations

ESSAY TOPIC

- Your essay need not be concerned with effability.
- E.g. describing uses of dual and plural pair nouns in Slovenian would be a perfectly fine topic.
- Another example: Different types of number marking on verbs in American Sign Language.
- But you should try to discuss the data from a theoretical viewpoint, especially with respect to univiersals and variation in semantics.

READING

- §§1-3 (7 pages) of Bochnak & Matthewson (2015) Introduction. In *Methodologies in Semantic Fieldwork*.
- von Stechow & Matthewson (2008) Universals in Semantics. *The Linguistic Review*, 25.

Optional reading:

- Matthewson (2004) On the methodology of semantic fieldwork. *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 70.