

DEBUNKING LINGUISTIC MYTHS
THE STARTING POINT
SPAN 200g :: Fall 2008

January 28, 2008

1 Some questions

1.1 Language Learning

1. How many languages do you speak? If you happen to speak more than one, do you find speaking one of them easier than speaking any of the others? Why do you think that is?
2. When did you learn how to speak your native language? How do you think you learn to speak? Do you think that imitating your parents' speech played a role? Why?
3. What do you think kids learn when they learn a language? A list of words? Something else? What?
4. You must be taking a foreign language class. Perhaps you learned to speak a second or third language when you were already an adult. Is there any difference between the way you speak your first language and those other languages? Do you think the way you picked up those languages is any different from the way you picked up your own native language? If so, why?
5. When does a kid start learning a language?
6. If a kid grows up listening to more than one language, will she speak, as an adult, all the languages she is exposed to correctly? Why? Why not?
7. Do you think that a kid born to a Hispanic family who does not speak any Spanish at home will pick up Spanish more easily than a kid born to a Vietnamese family? Why? Why not?
8. What does it mean for a person to be bilingual?
9. Are bilingual speakers more intelligent, on average, than monolingual speakers?

10. If a kid grows up with no access to language, will she speak a language? Will she be able to learn how to speak a language if exposed to language later in her life?
11. Does a kid need to go to school to learn how to speak a language?
12. Are there languages that are more difficult to learn than others?

1.2 Language and Thought

1. You can speak without thinking, but ... can you think without speaking? Is language independent of thinking?
2. Does the language we speak determine the way we think?
3. Can you be really smart and yet have difficulties when speaking?
4. Can people with low I.Qs master a language?
5. Are there languages that cannot express certain concepts and ideas?

1.3 Language and languages

1. How many languages are there? Can languages be count easily? Is the Spanish that somebody from Spain speaks a different language from the Spanish that a native of East Boston speaks? Why? Why not?
2. How do languages end up having the properties that they have? Who decided that English speakers should use the word *sailboat* to refer to what Spanish speakers refer to by using the word *velero*?
3. Are all languages uniform? Are there languages that are more uniform than others? Which language is more uniform: Spanish or English?
4. Are all languages as logical and clear? Is German more logical than English? Is English more logical than Spanish? Why? Why not?
5. If you could meet a speaker of English from the 14th century, will you be able to understand her?
6. What is a dialect?
7. Are certain dialects of English more correct than others? Which ones? Why?

1.4 Human languages and animal language

1. Do animals have a language comparable to any of the human languages?
2. Do animals have different languages?

1.5 Language and society

1. Do you always speak the same way? Do you happen to speak to your parents the same way you speak to your classmates? Why? If there is a difference, what is it?
2. If you happen to speak more than one language, what makes you speak one particular language in one particular situation?
3. What is the official language of the U.S.?
4. Why do some people happen to have an accent? What does that mean? Is there any relation between the social class a person belongs to and whether she has an accent?
5. Do men and women happen to speak the same way? In all cultures?
6. Do people with a formal education speak better than people with no education? Is their language more logical?
7. Is written speech, on average, more correct than oral speech?
8. Are languages with an established literary tradition better at expressing complex concepts?

1.6 Oral languages vs. signed languages

1. Is ASL (American Sign Language), a real language? Why? Why not?
2. Are all sign languages the same? Can the speakers of ASL be understood by the speakers of other sign languages?
3. Are sign languages a primitive stage of oral languages?

1.7 Human languages vs. artificial languages

1. Can computers understand English?
2. When you call your phone company and you get an automatic system, how does the computer know which language you speak?