Modular Grammar

Giusti (2003: 5-14)
What is language?

• A means of communication
  (definition according to its use)

• A complex cognitive ability shared by all and only human beings
  (definition according to its nature)
A complex cognitive ability

• Only human beings have language
• Language is acquired during the first years of life
  – reaching the same level of competence
  – in the same time
  – despite obvious differences in the exposure
  – without / despite explicit instructions
  – more than one language/dialect can be acquired
What is a language?
e.g. English, Italian, Venetian…

- Language vs. dialect
- Oral vs. written register
- Standard vs. substandard
- Social vs. geographical variety
- Language change
Modules

- Phonology (the sounds of language)
- Lexicon (the inventory of the words)
- Morphology (word formation)
- Syntax (sentence structure)
- Semantics (interpretation)
- Pragmatics (derived interpretation and use)
Phonology

phones

linear order

meanings

mental representations

structure
Lexicon: the inventory of words

- ha
- mangia
- colori
- una
- Lucia
- la
- il
- tarlo
- foglia
- i
- nocciolina
- sedia
- candeggina
How many meanings for a verb?

• mangiare
• mangiare una mela
• mangiare i colori
• mangiare la foglia
• mangiare la polvere
• mangiarsi le parole
• mangiarsi il vantaggio
• ecc.
[+hum]

1. a. Gianni ha già mangiato (una mela).
   b. John has already eaten (an apple).

[+anim]

2. a. Il cane ha già mangiato.
   b. The dog has already eaten.

3. a. Il tarlo ha già mangiato #(una gamba della sedia).
   b. The woodworm has already eaten #(a leg of the chair).

[-anim]

4. a. La varechina ha già mangiato *(i colori della maglietta).
   b. The bleach has already faded the colours of the T-shirt.
[+hum]
1. a. Gianni ha già mangiato la foglia
   b. John has already smelled a rat.

[+anim]
2. a. #Il cane ha già mangiato la foglia.
   b. #The dog has already smelled a rat.
3. a. *Il tarlo ha già mangiato la foglia.
   b. *The woodworm has already smelled a rat.

[-anim]
4. a. **La varechina ha già mangiato la foglia.
   b. **The bleach has already smelled a rat.
morphology

- act
- action
- active
- activate
- activation

- formal / informal
- possible / impossible
- credible / incredible
- legal / illegal

- known / unknown
- happy / unhappy
- believable / unbelievable

- *unformal
- *unpossible
- *uncredible
- *unlegal

- *inknown
- *inhappy
- *inbelievable
syntax

- John hit Mary. $\neq$ Mary hit John.
- John hit Mary. $=$ Mary was hit by John.
- Mary loves John. $\neq$ John loves Mary.
- John broke the vase. $\approx$ The vase broke.
- This room sleeps three people. $=$ Three people can sleep in this room.
- The house belongs to Mary. $=$ Mary owns the house.
syntax

• John hit Mary. ≠ Mary hit John.
• John hit Mary. = Mary was hit by John.
• Mary loves John. ≠ John loves Mary.
• John broke the vase. ≈ The vase broke.
• This room sleeps three people. = Three people can sleep in this room.
• The house belongs to Mary. = Mary owns the house.