- **Mental grammar and language diversity**

Background reading:

- *CL* Ch 1, sec 3

1. Setting the stage: Some review

- A **main focus of this course** will be investigating the properties of a language system that a speaker has acquired **naturally** (not through instruction)

- What is *grammar*?
  - What people "should" say or write? **Prescriptive** grammar
    - Useful for learning a foreign language, or learning a particular style (formal writing, …)
    - NOT the focus of most research in linguistics

1. Setting the stage: Some review

- What is *grammar*?
    - What people **do** say and understand:
      Descriptive grammar

    - Linguistic competence ("What we know when we know a language"):
      Mental grammar

- Linguistics typically focuses on **descriptive** and **mental** grammars of **native speakers**
    - Native speaker: Someone who acquires a language from exposure, *as a small child*

2. Language varieties

- If you are a native speaker of English, does your mental grammar judge this example to be grammatical? (Does this "sound normal" to you, or does it "sound funny"?)

  *Feeding your cat is **different to** feeding your dog.*

2. Language varieties

- This structure is judged ungrammatical by most speakers of <u>American</u> English (it "sounds wrong")

  *Feeding your cat is **different to** feeding your dog.*

  - This came from a blog called *catsofaustralia.com*
  - I myself first heard the expression *different to* from an Australian (linguist) housemate

- So—
  Which is **<u>correct</u>**, American English or Australian English?

??? But (you may say), that's not a fair question! The two kinds of English are **just different**

- An American English speaker has a mental grammar that allows *different than* [yes, really, for most of us] or *different from*, but not *different to*
- An Australian English speaker has a mental grammar that does allow *different to*

- Both American English and Australian English speakers **have** mental grammars; they're simply **different**

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2. Language varieties

This is a key idea in linguistics.

- This point can be extended to the **language variety** (sometimes called *dialect*) of **any** speech community

  - No language variety "has no grammar"
  - No language variety is any less (or more!) logical
  - Every mental grammar is systematic

- The speakers of **any language variety** can use their mental grammar to make **grammaticality judgments** about whether words, sentences, etc., are acceptable **in that variety**

2. Language varieties

- What is a "**standard**" or "**prestige**" language variety?
  One that got lucky! (historically, socially, politically)

  - Which group was **in power** when dictionaries, style guides, curricula, etc., were made?

  - Which group did other people **want to imitate** or sound like in order to gain certain social or political advantages?

  - These are the factors that typically determine which variety (dialect) is considered the "correct" or "desirable" one in a society

2. Language varieties

- Is it **useful** to be able to speak and write so-called "standard" or "mainstream" American English?

  - In many cases, **yes** — there are social implications of using, or not using, this variety

- Does that mean that mainstream American English is intrinsically, linguistically **better**?

  - **Not at all!**

  - Remember our discussion of Australian English? In the same way, non-"standard" varieties of English simply have a **different** mental grammar

2. Language varieties

- For **any variety of any language**, we can analyze it and determine its linguistic properties

- You may have **emotional reactions** to different varieties of your language, based on your own background and experience—you may like some and dislike others—that's human nature. ***BUT!!!***

  - All varieties have a mental grammar
  - All varieties can contribute to our understanding of the range of possible human languages
  - All varieties deserve respect; **none are "wrong"**

3. Varieties of English in this course

- Many of the language data from English that we discuss in this course will be from "mainstream" American English

  - This is because this is the variety that is at least familiar as a second language or second dialect to most of the class

- Later in the course, we will look again at language varieties and how they are related to **social factors** and **speaker identity**