

Dirty Words, Pig Latin, and the Structure of Language

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What do linguists do?

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- What makes our minds unique? *Language*

Ernie



Ernie



Birds, bees, dogs, etc. all “communicate”

Ernie



Birds, bees, dogs, etc. all “communicate”
... but is it language?

What *don't* linguists do?

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- We don't tell people how they *should* talk.
- We don't tell people what the rules of language *should* be.
- ... and we do *not* necessarily speak a lot of languages.

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- These tell us how the mind works.

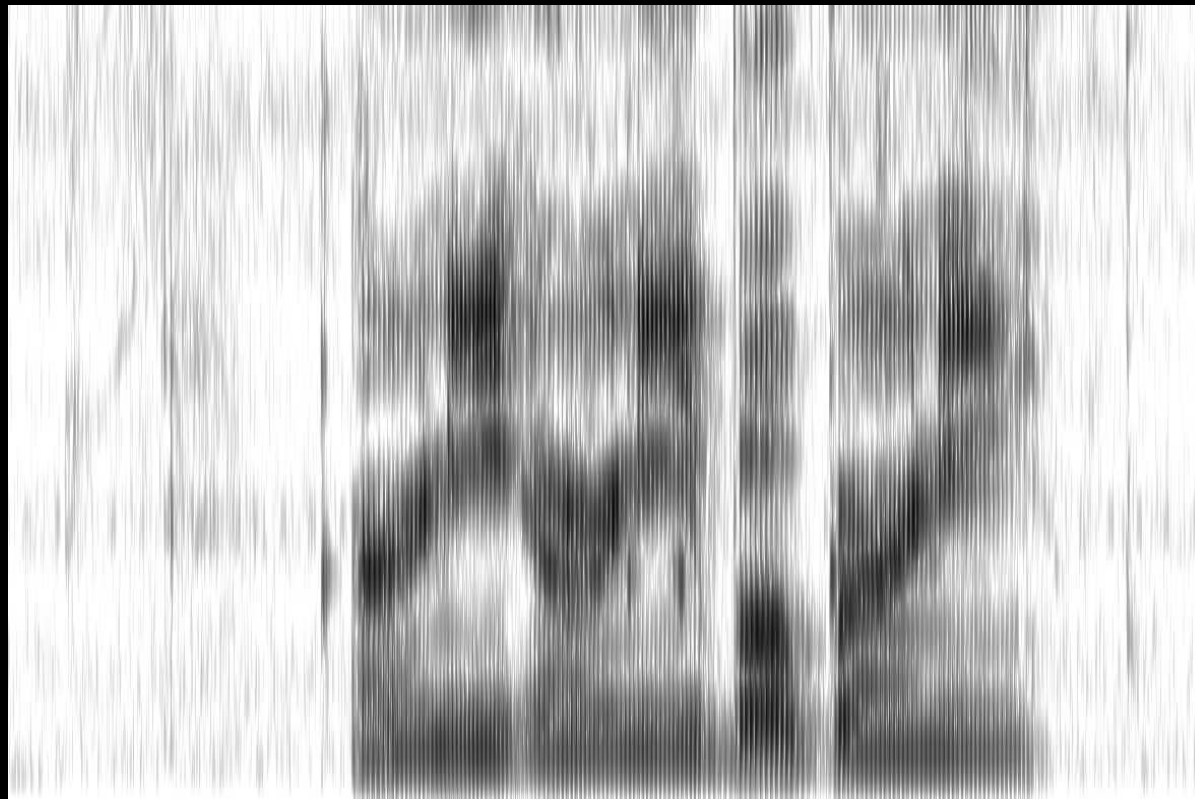
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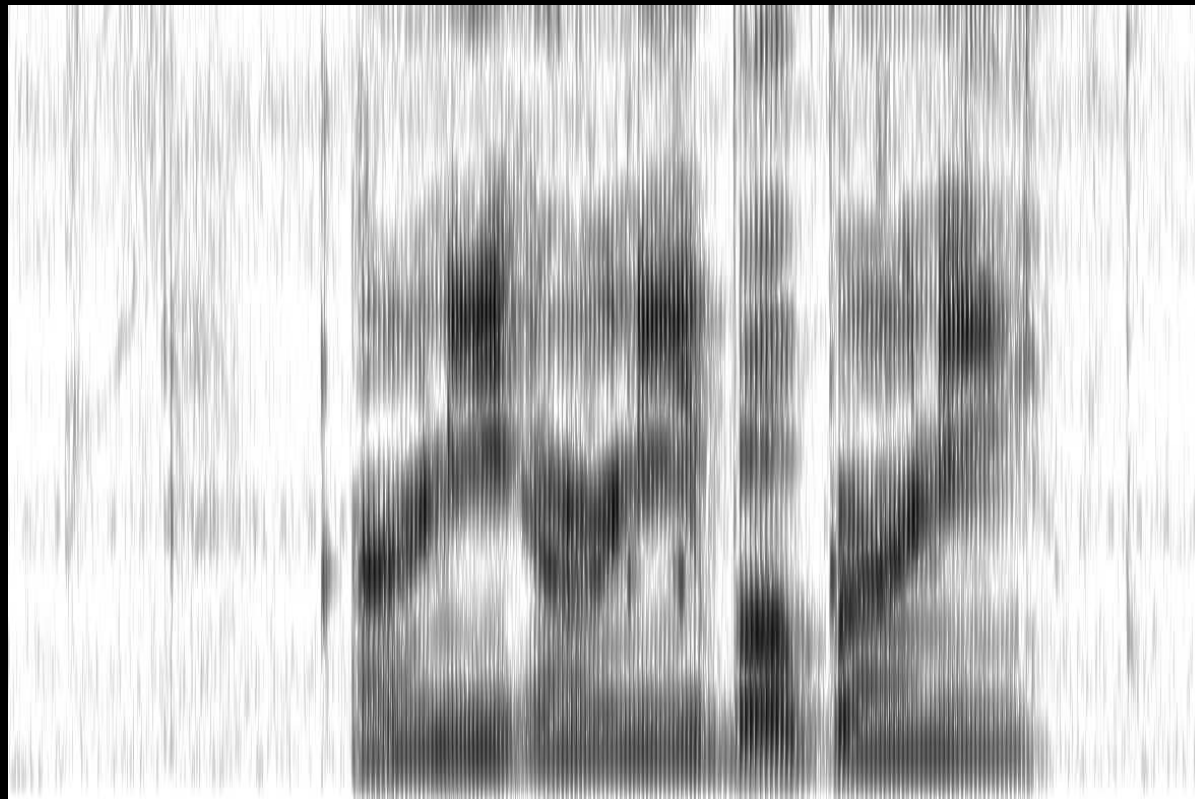
So what *do* linguists do?

- We look at how languages work and how they vary.
- These tell us how the mind works.
- In particular that there is a rich invisible structure underlying language that reveals itself in different ways, *even in language games and dirty words.*

High tech



High tech



“Ernie, Ernie, bo-bernie...”

Low tech?

Two language systems that tell us about that
“invisible” structure:

Low tech?

Two language systems that tell us about that “invisible” structure:

- the “Name Game”

Low tech?

Two language systems that tell us about that “invisible” structure:

- the “Name Game”
- Expletive Infixation

The “Name Game”

Ernie

The “Name Game”

Ernie, Ernie, bo-Bernie,

Banana, fana, fo-Fernie,

Me, my, mo-Mernie,

Er-nie.

Another name

Jonah

Another name

Jonah, Jonah, bo-bonah,

Banana, fana, fo-Fonah,

Me, my, mo-Monah,

Jo-nah.

How to play

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- Replace any word-initial consonants with [b], [f], and [m].
- If there's no word-initial consonant:
Ernie/Anna → bernie/banna
- If there's just one consonant, replace it:
Todd/Bonnie → bodd/bonnie

More than one consonant

If there's more than one consonant, replace them all:

More than one consonant

If there's more than one consonant, replace them all:

Steve/Stella → beve/bella

Brad/Brenda → bad/benda

Dwight/Gwen → bight/ben

Strom/Sprague → bom/bag

More than one consonant

If there's more than one consonant, replace them all:

Steve/Stella → beve/bella

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But:

Beula/Buford → b[y]eula/b[y]uford

Names that work fine

one syllable	two syllables	three syllables
Bob	Joseph	Christopher
Anne	Robert	Madeline
Strom	Jonah	Catherine
Ed	Michael	Sergio

Stress matters

one syllable	two syllables	three syllables
B ó b	J ó seph	Chr í stopher
Á nne	R ó bert	M á deline
Str ó m	J ó nah	C á therine
É d	M í chael	S é rgio

Names that don't work!

- Two syllables (final stress): *Dani^élle*
- Three syllables (second syllable stress):
Am^ánda
- Three syllables (third syllable stress):
Adri^énne
- Four syllables+ (any stress): *Agam^émnon*,
Ábernathy

Names that don't work!

- Two syllables (final stress): *Danié*lle (cf. *Dáni*el)
- Three syllables (second syllable stress): *Amá*nda (cf. *Á*gatha)
- Three syllables (third syllable stress): *Adrié*nnne (cf. *Á*drian)
- Four syllables+ (any stress): *Agamé*mnon, *Á*bernathy

The generalization

The game can be played with names that are composed of a “stressed” syllable followed by at most two (unstressed) syllables.

yes

no

Bób

Daniélla

Jóseph

Amánda

Chrístopher

Adriénne

Agamémnon

Ábernathy

The generalization

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Agamémnon

Ábernathy

Don't be offended!

Minnesota

Don't be offended!

Minnesota

Minne-*f**-sota

Don't be offended!

Minnesota

Minne-*f**-sota

Not: *Mi(n)-*f**-nesota

Not: *Minneso-*f**-ta

Some more

Tennessee

Montana

Some more

Tennessee

Tenne-*f**-ssee

Montana

Mon-*f**-tana

Some more

Tennessee

Tenne-*f**-ssee

Not: *Te(n)-*f**-nessee

Montana

Mon-*f**-tana

Not: *Monta-*f**-na

Multiple options

Timbuktu

Apalachicola

Alamagordo

Multiple options

Timbuktu

Tim- f^* -buktu *and* Timbuk- f^* -tu

Apalachicola

Apa- f^* -lachicola *and* Apalachi- f^* -cola

Alamagordo

Ala- f^* -magordo *and* Alama- f^* -gordo

Some words don't work at all!

These work

but these don't

Minne-sota

Missouri

Tenne-ssee

Florida

Mon-tana

Georgia

Tim-buk-tu

Connecticut

Apa-lachi-cola

Ala-ma-gordo

Stress patterns

These work

but these don't

Mìnne-sóta

Missóuri

Tènne-ssée

Flórida

Mòn-tána

Geórgia

Tìm-bùk-tú

Connécticut

Àpa-làchi-cóla

Àla-ma-górdo

What's the pattern?

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- If there's one or more stressless syllables in between, at least one of those must be to the left of the infix.

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- This invisible grouping includes a single stressed syllable and up to two following stressless syllables.
- This is called the *trochaic foot*.

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- Nicknames tend to be of this form as well, e.g. *Bóbbie*, *Cáthy*, *Jóey*, etc.

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- Nicknames tend to be of this form as well, e.g. *Bóbbie*, *Cáthy*, *Jóey*, etc.
- Children tend to reduce longer words to just this pattern as well, e.g. *banána* → *'nána* (Gerken, Carter).

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- There are *hidden* structures in language.
- These can only be detected by looking at how language works in various contexts.
- Here a language game and dirty words converge on the *same* hidden structure.
- People don't learn how to play this game or insert the expletive in school.
- Poetry and literature may be satisfying to read, but sometimes the most revealing language is of a very different sort.