

Psych156A/ Ling150  
Homework 1: Language and Learning

1) Rules of Interpretation [6 pts]

Consider the following sentence:

“Jareth threatened him while Hoggle was in the forest.”

(a) Indicate whether each of the following interpretations is compatible with the sentence above. [1 pt]

Jareth threatened Jareth while Hoggle was in the forest.

Jareth threatened Ludo while Hoggle was in the forest.

Jareth threatened Hoggle while Hoggle was in the forest.

(b) Briefly describe the difference between prescriptive and descriptive rules in language. [2 pts]

(c) Based on your definitions in part (b), is your ability to interpret the sentence as you did above the result of a prescriptive or descriptive rule? Explain why you think so. [3 pts]

2) Our Friend Sigmund von Hacklestein [10 pts]

Sigmund von Hacklestein has not attended class (alas!) and has not read Jackendoff's chapters. So, he has some ideas about language that are a bit uninformed. Your job is to help Sigmund reach enlightenment.

(a) “Kids always improve their language performance, right?” – SvH  
Give Sigmund an example that demonstrates that sometimes children's performance worsens before it gets better again. Be sure to highlight in what way the performance worsens, and then improves. [2 pts]

(b) “Animals can communicate all the things humans can communicate.” – SvH  
Give Sigmund two examples of messages animals would have difficulty communicating, and make sure to explain why animals would not be able to communicate that precise message. (The second chapter of Jackendoff is particularly helpful.) [4 pts]

(c) Sigmund heard some of his friends who are taking language classes talking about “linguistic infinity”. He thought this seemed like a strange notion – we don't have infinite time to speak, so how could language be infinite? Briefly explain to Sigmund what is meant by “linguistic infinity” in the context of language production. Then, explain to Sigmund why this property of language means that humans must have a set of unconscious rules or patterns they use when generating utterances in a language. [4 pts]