PLIN0020

ADVANCED SEMANTIC THEORY

- Fieldwork project
  - Find a speaker of a language you don't speak natively, preferably an 'understudied language' (try to avoid English, German, French, Mandarin Chinese, etc.)
  - Find a 'semantic phenomenon' that interests you
- A short **in-class presentation** on 17 Dec
- Write an **essay** (due on 18 January)

- **Task 1**: Find language informant by **29 Oct**
- **Task 2**: Find topic by **3 Dec**
- **Task 3**: In-class presentation on **17 Dec**
- **Task 4**: Write an essay, due on **18 Jan**

Your final mark will be based only on the essay.

UNIVERSALS AND VARIATION

IN NATURAL LANGUAGE SEMANTICS

IS SEMANTICS UNIVERSAL?
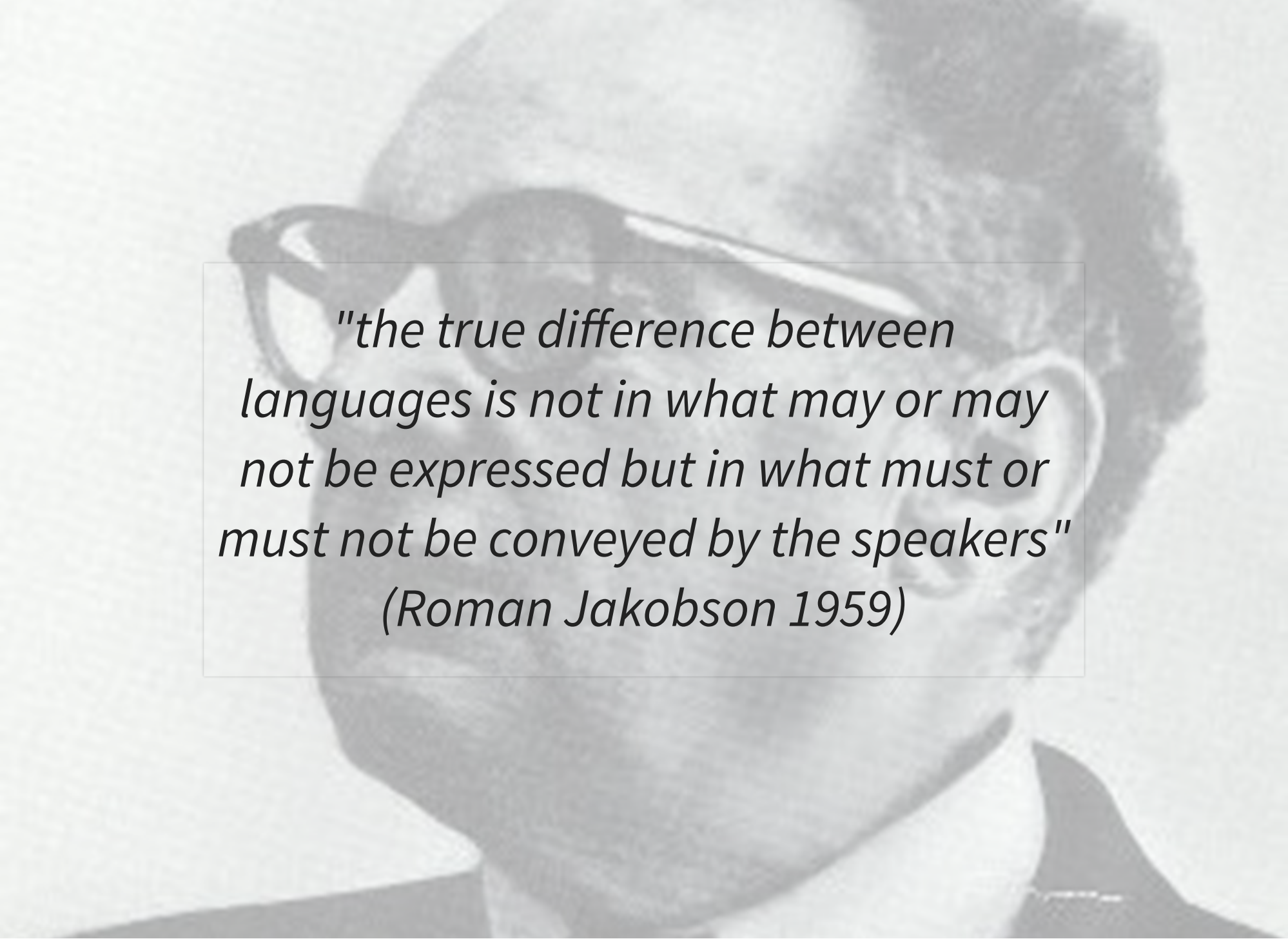
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- Vocabulary gaps; but borrowing and coinage are easy, esp. of content words
- **Effability**: Every language can express anything that can be expressed in any other language.
- Natural languages might or might not be completely effable but they certainly differ as to <u>how</u> meanings are expressed

"the true difference between languages is not in what may or may not be expressed but in what must or must not be conveyed by the speakers" (Roman Jakobson 1959)

EXAMPLE: NUMBER

- Slovenian is a language that distinguishes three number categories on nouns: singular, dual, plural (e.g. *mesto*, *mesti*, *mesta* 'town').
- *Ta <u>stola</u> sta polomljena* means something like 'These chairs.DL are broken'.
- English cannot express the duality in the same way, but obviously you can just say 'These two chairs are broken' to mean essentially the same thing.

EXAMPLE: NUMBER (CONT.)

- The existence of dual in Slovenian seems to affect the meaning of plural: Slovenian avoids plural when referring to exactly two things.

- Does this mean that 'plural' in Slovenian means >2, while 'plural' in English means >1?

- Is this because Slovenian has dual? What is the (universal) principle behind this? (more on this later)

EXAMPLE: PAIR NOUNS

- For things that naturally come in pairs (e.g. hands, shoes) you have to use the plural in Slovenian.

- The dual would mean two instances that do not form a pair.

- Hungarian, a singular-plural language, uses the singular for paired things.

- Is there a universal principle that explains this sensitivity to duality?

EXAMPLE: TENSE

- English and Japanese both mark tense on the verb.
- English distinguishes: past, present, future, but Japanese only distinguishes past vs. non-past.
- English is said to be a *Sequence of Tense* language, while Japanese is not.
    - e.g. Mary <u>said</u> that she <u>was/is</u> at home.
- Where does this difference come from? What's universal about tense marking and what's not?

EXAMPLE: INDEXICAL SHIFT

- **Indexical expressions** like "me" and "you" get their referents from the context of utterance.

- In many languages, the following sentence has a different meaning from English.

  - Mary said that John likes <u>me</u>.

- What is the range and nature of grammatical envinroments where 'me' doesn't need to refer to the current speaker? What explains the difference?

ALLEGED UNIVERSALS

- **Vagueness** and **context sensitivity**
- **Multidimensionality**: at-issue meaning, presupposition, implicature, etc.
- **Pragmatic principles**
- **Conservativity Universal**: Determiners express conservative generalized quantifiers (see the optional reading for this week)

WHERE LANGUAGES VARY

- Syntax, morphology, phonology

- Inventory of functional items, Determiner, Tense, Aspect, Gender, Number, etc.

- More controversial ideas

  - Constraints on syntax-semantics mapping/LF
  - Semantic composition rules

PLAN

TENTATIVE PLAN

1: Intro

2: Semantic fieldwork

3: Number

4: Gender
(find informant)

5: Tense and aspect

6: Modality and mood

7: Degree constructions

8: Indexicality

9: Discourse particles
(find topic)

10: Presentations

ESSAY TOPIC

- Your essay need not be about effability.
- E.g. uses of dual and plural pair nouns in Slovenian would be a perfect topic.
- Another example: Different types of number markeing on verbs in British Sign Language.
- But you should try to discuss the data from a theoretical viewpoint, especially with respect to unviersals and variation in semantics.

CLASS PARTICIPATION

- From next week, there'll be reading to do.

- Do the reading and watch the lecture, *before* the discussion session on Thu at 10:00-11:00.

- Check the Moodle site regularly.

- Ask questions via email and/or on Moodle!