

## Linguistics in a One Room Schoolhouse

### LSA 2006 – Albuquerque, K-12 Linguistics Materials, LiSC-sponsored Workshop

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For the past year I have been teaching a linguistics class once a week in a multi-age elementary classroom where I have been given free rein by the two teachers. The students are between the ages of 6 and 11 and once a week we spend about an hour and a half doing linguistics. I'll talk about here some of the activities we have been doing as well as some of the ways that I have connected the material to other parts of the curriculum (math, science, social studies, and language arts). I will share in more detail two of the lessons and materials: one on parts of speech and one on children's language games.

#### My own broad goals for this class include the following:

- to introduce students to language as an object of study
- to allow students to discover the unconscious knowledge they already possess with respect to language and language rules
- to maintain and foster children's natural love of language and language play
- to allow students to see the patterns and systematicity of language
- to reduce linguistic discrimination
- to raise language awareness
- to engage in scientific investigation
- to begin to develop the materials that the field (linguistics and education) is now ready for (for K-5)
- to explore ways to integrate linguistic material into existing curricula

#### Partial list of topics covered

(This list does not reflect the amount of time spent on each topic—some might take one hour, some several, and some might continue throughout the year.)

#### 1. Languages of the world – This is an easy way to integrate linguistics into other topics they are studying.

When studying the African continent, I introduced languages of Africa and we investigated five of them more closely (Swahili, Arabic, French, Fly Taal, and Tswana). We learned how to say "hello" in these languages and made decorated signs with these greetings to use throughout the month. We made an illustrated Swahili-English alphabet book. We talked about

Swahili words they knew (from *The Lion King*): *rafiki*, *samba*, *pumbaa*, *bakuna matata* and their meanings.

For languages of Asia, we also talked about five of them in more depth, and two of them, Japanese and Mandarin, even more. This led to discussion of writing systems, comparing alphabetic to ideographic, and the kids practiced writing the Chinese characters for some words, created a Japanese counting book with the numbers and their characters 1-10. They also used greetings from the five languages we discussed throughout the month. We did an excellent exercise (found at <http://www.askasia.org/frclasrm/lessplan/1000007.htm>) on Chinese dialects, in which the kids looked at characters and translations, but made up (in groups) their own pronunciations. Each group was able to understand only their own group's sentences. This again led to discussion of writing system, dialects, the arbitrariness of the sign, etc.

They have also studied Hawaii and so we have discussed Hawaiian and Hawaiian Creole English. This has been a great opportunity to talk about creoles in general and language genesis.

For the study of specific languages, the teachers have been reinforcing the knowledge and the concepts, primarily by using greetings in the languages we have discussed.

#### 2. Languages of Washington state and Whatcom County

So far we have learned mostly about Lushootseed, a Salish language of our area. This study has been greatly aided by the excellent language information at Tulalip Elementary School in Marysville, Washington: (<http://www.msvl.k12.wa.us/elementary/tulalip/home.asp>) where Lushootseed is being used in several classrooms and integrated into the curriculum. An excellent example of the ways in incorporating Lushootseed into other areas of the curriculum can be seen at this link as well (nonstandard measurement units).

We created together a book with stories they wrote called *Lady Louise*, based on a well-known local Lushootseed story.

### 3. Language change

We have talked about language change throughout the course. We have looked at Old English and listened to recordings of it (along with discussion of other aspects of the people and their culture, geography, immigration and settlement patterns, etc.).

We have talked a lot about spelling and the historical reasons for many of the spelling idiosyncracies.

We have talked about the distinction between spoken and written language and have begun discussing the effects of standardization, the influence of dictionaries and grammar books.

We talked about the etymology of their names. I did the research on the etymology of each name. (With older kids you could have them do this, paying attention to varying theories of the origins and why the information is varying.) This led to discussion of cultural, historical, and social influences on naming.

One could also discuss the ebb and flow of the popularity of names – how that varies depending on political, social, and linguistic reasons. (Dick, Adolf, Jesus)

### 4. Language variation (and discrimination)

So far we have dealt with variation by discussion of British vs. American dialects and discussion of variation in language games (discussed below).

For British vs. American we first discussed some examples they were familiar with (lift/elevator, torch/flashlight) and used the experience of several children in the class who had British connections (Scottish father, English grandmother). Then we turned to *Harry Potter* examples.

We also used the variation in games and rhymes (jump rope rhymes, game calls (Come out! Come out! wherever you are!, Ollie Ollie Oxen/All Come Free), etc.) to talk about language variation in general.

### 5. Discovering rules

#### a. Morphology problems

The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders did standard morphology problems (using Hungarian, Michoacan Aztec, Turkish, Quiche, Samoan, and Nahuatl from several introductory textbooks). They loved this and were great at it.

#### b. English plural

We did the traditional allomorphic variation of English plural. They were much faster than my college students. The younger ones were not as inhibited/affected by spelling, so immediately tuned into the differences in sound. We talked about spelling. “Has anyone ever spelled a word like “bags” with a /z/?” “Yes, it sounds like a /z/.” We also talked about the spelling of some products (Bratz, Myntz, Squirtz, Catz (and Dogz))) and that they’re hard/impossible to pronounce as written. Very effective lesson.

**c. prepositions** – We talked about when we use *in* and when do we use *on* with respect to modes of transportation.

IN: car, taxi, truck, limo, van, elevator, rocket

ON: plane, ship, subway, train, bus

They did really well and had great fun describing the intricate semantics affecting this choice of preposition.

#### d. use of *the* with geographical place names

##### these take **THE**

the Mississippi River  
the Wabash River  
the James River  
the Rocky Mountains  
the Cascades

##### these do not take **THE**

Clear Lake  
Walden Pond  
Whatcom Creek  
Lookout Mountain  
Nob Hill

The interaction between syntax and semantics here is really interesting and they grasped it well.

## 6. Written word games

As part of “fun with language” we have done lots of written word games such as anagrams (showing knowledge of sound and spelling), pink stinks (knowledge of rhyme and synonyms), word chains (*a, an, and, sand; metal, almost, stone, nest, stare, reverse, seat*; integrated into math unit on sequencing), among others.

## 7. Syntax, Grammar, Parts of Speech

We have discussed parts of speech throughout the course in various ways with emphasis on what they already know as speakers of the languages. They love to do Mad Libs. They acted out sentences and then discussed why some words were easier (N, V, A) than others (Det, Aux Vs, Preps). They played parts of speech bingo. (I had some issues with some of the labels that the game came with, but they were good at coming up with their own descriptions of the POS.)

See attached description of this lesson.

## 7. Ludlings (language games)

I first talked about Pig Latin which some of them had heard of, but they quickly brought up their own languages. This led to lots of interesting data and analysis.

See attached description of this lesson.

### SAMPLE LESSON ON PARTS OF SPEECH

#### 1. Be a Sentence

Goals:

- To get at the difference between content words and function words
- To introduce parts of speech
- To discover how parts of speech have to do with meaning and that we can describe content words by their meaning and function in the sentence

I handed out words on pieces of paper:

The	rabbit	hopped	in	the	tall	grass
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I asked them to act out their words. Those with *rabbit, hopped, tall,* and *grass* all could act out their words fairly easily (though ‘grass’ was kind of tough); *the* and *in* were harder.

We did it with different kids and a second set of words.

A	cat	is	eating	a	bird
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Here *cat, eating,* and *bird* were easy to act out, but not *a* and *is*.

Then we talked about which words were harder to act out. I put the words into groups on the board (using different colors for each group too):

rabbit	the
hopped	in
tall	a
grass	is
cat	
eating	
bird	

I asked what made the words in the first column easier to act out. They mean something. They’re things and actions. They also describe. (Underlining indicates their responses.)

What about the other ones? They don’t mean anything. You need them, but they’re hard to act out because they don’t mean anything.

What can we call the kind of words in the first column? Nouns. Verbs. Adjectives. Are nouns, verbs, and adjectives more meaningful than the other words? Yes.

Ok, so one way we can identify nouns, verbs, and adjectives—parts of speech—is by their meaning.

How can we describe nouns: things, people, places, stuff you can touch

How can we describe verbs: actions, doing-words

How can we describe adjectives: they describe

**Follow-up** - The kids have developed a system for some of the functional category words. So one student made her body into an *A*-shape for the determiner *a*. The kids guessed it so now they use that not only for *a*, but for other determiners—if it’s not *a*, they go through a list, guessing *the, that, this, each, some,* etc., showing excellent command of the category **determiner**.

## 2. Jabberwocky

Goals:

- To see that meaning is not the only way we understand parts of speech—we also use our syntactic knowledge.
- To see that we use our knowledge of other pieces of the sentence to figure out categories (parts of speech).
- To understand that we already have all of this knowledge simply by being speakers of the language.

I wrote on the board this sentence from Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*:

The froobling greebies snarfed the granflons with great libidity.

We circled the words that are English words: *the, with, great*.

I then asked if there were pieces of the other words that they recognized from other English words: *-ing, -(e)s, -ed, -s, -ity*. (They were fast on this. I thought they might not pick them out so fast. So we talked a little about what these suffixes mean.)

I asked them what part of speech *greebies* is. Noun.

How do you know it's a noun? Because it has an -s. How else? What other word nearby gives you a clue that it's a noun? The word *the*.  
So you know that if you have a *the* that there will be noun nearby? Yes.

So what part of speech is *froobling*? Verb. Adjective. Yes, you're both right. Do verbs sometimes have *-ing*? Yes. Is this a verb here? No, it's describing *greebies*. Can you think of other words that describe nouns that have *-ing*? The running horse, the drinking cat, the spitting boy. So sometimes *-ing* words are verbs and sometimes they are adjectives? Yes, it depends on where they are in the sentence.

We did this for the other nonsense words in the sentence. *-ity* was interesting since most of the suffixed *-ity* words we thought of were "big" words—*probability, fluidity*—that some of the kids didn't know the meanings of. We put them in sentences to see their part of speech, though:

The probability of rain is low.

Oh, it occurs with *the* so it's a noun!

They also mentioned *city* and *kitty* and said that these are nouns too. They are, but how are they different? They don't mean anything when you take the *-ity*

off. Exactly. So we have two *-itys*. One can attach to an adjective and make a noun, the other can't be separated from the noun. There's also *itty, bitty*

So we go back to the Lewis Carroll sentence. How do we know the parts of speech of these words when we don't even know what the words mean? We have the other words and parts of words as clues.

They did ask what the names for the other words are (*the, in, is*). We talked a little about this, but said we'd return to it.

### SAMPLE LESSON ON LUDLINGS - UBBY DUBBY VS. OBBISH/ABBISH

This lesson began with discussion of two language games already in use in the school, Ubbly Dubby and Obbish.

**Obbish:** Insert "obb" (/əb/) between the **onset** and the **rime** of each syllable. Stress the initial syllable.

(1) My name is Morgan. = M-obb-y n-obb-ame obb-is m-obb-or g-obb-an.

/mábaj nábem ábız mábörgábn/

Ubbly Dubby is very similar to Obbish, but has a different vowel inserted and a different stress pattern.

**Ubbly Dubby:** Insert "ub" (/əb/) between the onset and the rime. Stress is on syllable following insertion point.

(2) My name is Morgan. = Mu-by nu-bame u-bis Mu-bor gu-ban.

/məbáj nəbém əbíz məbörgəbán/

We together listened to the two ludlings and discovered the rules of each. When they realized that these were two *different* varieties, they all got very excited since some of the kids had thought they were just "bad" speakers of Obbish. We discussed how they were like two dialects of the same language.

Also, the speakers of the two different varieties were able to understand each other and they continued to speak their own variety, for the most part, even

when conversing with each other. Sometimes the Obbish speakers would “correct” the Ubbly Dubby speakers, but as I emphasized the fact that the two varieties were different, they began to accept the two varieties and became interested in exactly what the rules are.

I paired up students—those who knew either variety with those who knew neither. Most of the kids began to pick it up very quickly. Some of the older children tried to explain the pattern orthographically or pseudo-phonetically (“insert /b/ in it somewhere”), which wasn’t very effective. I encouraged them just to speak to each other which worked great.

**Language Change:** In the school I’m working in, it looks as if Obbish may be winning out over Ubbly Dubby. The speakers of Obbish are more numerous, more confident in their speaking abilities, and older (i.e., more powerful), so their language variety may become the dominant variety (though perhaps it will have been influenced in some ways by Ubbly Dubby). This is precisely the way that language change happens in the “real world.” It is such external, non-linguistic factors that drive language change—who has the power—not anything about the linguistic features of the language. (Perhaps there is a linguistic component involved here, however. Obbish is a bit more difficult for English speakers to understand due to the divergence in the stress pattern, compared to English. Because it is a code language, such divergence is viewed as a good thing, so this linguistic feature of the language may be a driving force in its adoption as the primary ludling.)

This activity helps students know that:

- languages are rule-governed
- knowledge of language is largely unconscious
- no language variety is “better” than another
- that they are the experts
- that language variation is a natural process
- that language study is fun
- that they have an awareness of stress and stress patterns
- that they have an awareness of syllables and syllable structure

### Extensions

**1) Ludlings and Writing:** This topic provides an excellent forum for discussion of the differences between spoken and written discourse. Kids find that it is difficult to convey in writing how these languages should be pronounced. The spoken ludlings manipulate pieces of the language that may not be represented by the writing system; for example, stress (and they

may not know how to even identify this, but they use it and know it). Kids in this school talked about how it was pretty easy to write it (they themselves could read it), but others couldn’t read it well. But they could all speak it.

### 2) Relating the difficulties of writing it to the history of written English:

Discussion of the kinds of problems one encounters when trying to write the language could be related to how this happened in the history of English, how the spelling system became standardized, the kinds of choices writers/spellers made and why (and how such choices have led to some “odd” spellings in modern day English).

**3) Syllables:** Almost all ludlings make use of syllables, so any discussion of syllables could use these games as evidence for our sophisticated but unconscious knowledge of syllable and their structure.

**4) Universality of ludlings:** Nearly all languages have ludlings. To describe ludlings alongside “real” languages illustrates our universal ability to manipulate unconscious rules in language play.

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