Focusing on evidence in introductory linguistics classes

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Foundations of Linguistics

• LING-201, offered every semester, no prereqs
• required for major and minor in linguistics, prereq for many upper-level linguistics classes
• concentrate on ‘six subfields,’ using *Language Files* or *Contemporary Linguistics*
Who takes Foundations of Linguistics?

• 50-60 students/semester
• ≤50% are thinking about major or minor in linguistics
• ≤20% take it to fulfill GER in History, Society and Culture
• The rest take it out of curiosity, because it fits in their schedule, etc...
• Many will never take another linguistics class.
What do we want our various students to take away from this class?

**traditional nuts and bolts**
- IPA, allophonic analysis, morphological analysis, syntax trees, terms, etc...

**bigger-picture stuff**
- understanding what kind of discipline linguistics is
- enhancing students’ general educational experience
Evidence QEP at Emory

• Since 2015, Emory offers summer training workshops for faculty who want to design an evidence-focused course.

• Topics vary; evidence is ‘foregrounded’ in assignments, discussions, etc. (similar to writing-focused courses).

• Originally for first-year seminars, but applies across courses – even large intro courses.

What is an Evidence-Focused Seminar?

While almost all courses offered at Emory involve evidence, evidence-focused first-year seminars offer a unique opportunity to learn about the important role evidence plays in academic study. In an evidence-focused seminar, you will learn about the nature of evidence, the role of evidence, and what counts as evidence related to the course topic.

Why learn about evidence? Studying evidence will help you produce new knowledge through research and study, be a smart consumer of knowledge in this technological age, make informed decisions based on evidence, and understand other people in a diverse global community.

http://evidence.emory.edu/index.html
Recognizing the scientific method across disciplines

- every few weeks (after a unit test),
  ~20 minutes of class discussion
  focusing on a question that I provide

4. *(This question won’t be graded; I just want to hear your thoughts.*) We have been practicing the scientific method in this class, although I haven’t (yet) called your attention to it. Indeed, the scientific method plays a central role in the study of linguistic structure. Thinking back over the last several weeks, can you remember exercises that involved practicing the scientific method? How do you think the application of the scientific method is different in linguistics from in (other) natural sciences? *(Sub-question: In what ways do you think linguistics is/is not a natural science?)*

An ungraded, optional question on Homework 4. Most answered it, some very thoughtfully.
Questioning underlying assumptions

**Introduction to morphology**

Broadly speaking, **morphology** is the study of the rules and principles that determine how **words** are formed.

**What is a word?** This is actually not an easy question to answer. If I ask you how many words the first sentence of this paragraph has, you’ll probably all answer: ____. But how do you know this?

Here are four possible definitions of **word**; each of them is flawed. What’s wrong with each? For (b)-(d), try to come up with counterexamples.

a) A word is something that’s written with spaces around it.

b) A word is a syllable.

c) A word is a unit of meaning.

d) A word is a unit of meaning that could be pronounced by itself.

We’re not going to answer the question **What is a word?** in this class. At this point, I just want you to recognize that it is a real question. There are entire books and conferences devoted it!
Getting students in the habit of supporting claims with examples

1. Suppose this was the only surviving document in this language. Do your best to answer the following questions based on this document only. For each answer, cite specific examples that support your claim. Don’t worry if you’re not sure about some of the grammatical terms used here – just ask Dr. Pak or a fellow student.

   a. What’s the basic order of subject, verb and object in this language?

   b. Does the verb in this language change its form to indicate tense (e.g. past, future)?

   c. Does the verb change its form to agree with the subject (i.e., Are verbs conjugated)?

   d. How many pronouns does this language have? Try to present the pronouns in a chart. Are there any instances where this language has two distinct pronouns and English has only one (or vice versa)?

2. Which of your answers above do you feel the most confident about? Which do you feel the least confident about? Why?

3. Now suppose you discover a surviving speaker of this language. What questions could you ask this speaker that would help you answer some of the questions above that you were unsure about? Be as specific as you can.
Making the most plausible generalizations

- More detail isn’t necessarily better. This exercise reminds students that we’re ultimately interested in what’s going on in speakers’ minds.

In Turkish, the plural suffix is sometimes pronounced -ler and sometimes pronounced -lar. All of the following statements are factually correct, but one is preferable to the others. Why?

- **a)** -ler is used when the preceding vowel is e, i, y or ø, and -lar is used when the preceding vowel is a, i, o or u.

- **b)** -ler is used when the preceding vowel is front and -lar is used when the preceding vowel is back.

- **c)** -ler is used when the preceding vowel is high or mid, front, and unrounded or rounded, and -lar is used when the preceding vowel is high or mid, back and rounded or high or low, back and unrounded.

This wording makes it clear that a statement can be ‘technically correct’ without being very good.
Suppose a team of linguists is trying to figure out if ‘Language M’ is a tone language or not.

- Larry asks a speaker: ‘Does your language have tones?’ The speaker says, ‘Yes.’ Larry concludes that Language M is a tone language.

- Jim asks a speaker, ‘Can you think of a pair of words that mean different things and are pronounced exactly the same except for the pitch?’ The speaker says, ‘No, I can’t.’ Jim concludes that Language M is not a tone language.

- Sally conducts an elicitation session. She asks the speaker ‘How do you say water?’ The speaker says /si/ with rising pitch. Then she asks, ‘How do you say sister?’ The speaker says /si/ with falling pitch. Sally concludes that Language M is a tone language.

Sally’s approach is better than Jim’s, which is in turn better than Larry’s. But there are flaws in all three linguists’ methods and/or reasoning. Identify as many problems as you can with each.

The scenarios are meant to be a bit silly. In considering them, students are forced to think about how we can tap into our linguistic knowledge, articulating standards for evidence.
Sometimes students make a claim, present evidence, but neglect to explain how the evidence is supposed to support the claim. Here I provide both claim and evidence, so students can focus on articulating the connection between them.

Suppose you’re trying to figure out what kinds of syllables Swahili allows. Each of these documents could be used to support the following claim:

**Claim: Swahili does not allow closed syllables.**

- Explain how Document A supports this claim. State precisely how the logic behind the argument would work.
- Explain how Document B supports this claim. State precisely how the logic behind the argument would work.

**Document A**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Loanwords from Arabic</th>
<th>Loanwords from English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adaba (Ar. ?adab)</td>
<td>'good manners'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kisi (Ar. qis)</td>
<td>'estimate'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raibu (Ar. ratib)</td>
<td>'arrange'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wakati (Ar. waqati)</td>
<td>'time'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>madini (Ar. ma?din)</td>
<td>'metal'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maki (Ar. ma?q)</td>
<td>'thickness'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>milki (Ar. milk)</td>
<td>'possession, dominion'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaburi (Ar. qabr)</td>
<td>'grave, tomb'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dhaifu (Ar. da?if)</td>
<td>'weak'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fariji (Ar. farrid)</td>
<td>'comfort'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shahamu (Ar. fahum)</td>
<td>'fat, lard'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>duni (Ar. duun)</td>
<td>'inferior, low'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sakifu (Ar. saqif)</td>
<td>'make a stone floor'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kuzi (Ar. kuuz)</td>
<td>'earthenware pitcher'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Document B**

Thanks!

These slides are on my website (www.marjoriepak.com), and you can email me (mgpak@emory.edu) with any questions.