Initiation to Linguistics

Second Year

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Chomskyan Definitions of Language and Grammar

1. Language Definition according to Chomsky:

For Chomsky, "A language is a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements."(Syntactic Structures, p.13).

This definition concerns all languages (natural and man-made). It implies the following points:

• Language is a collection of the infinite number of possible sentences.

• Every sentence is finite in length.

• Every sentence is made up of elements that can be collected in a set, and that can be counted (sounds, morphemes and words)

• Language is defined in terms of “sentences”.

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1. Grammar Definition according to Chomsky:

Grammar is defined as "a device which generates all and only the grammatical sentences of a language." This definition implies the following points:

• The sentence is the basic unit to be described by grammar.

• A grammar generates sentences. That is to say, it produces an infinite number of sentences out of precisely specified rules. (A word taken from maths = to “generate” is to act as a base of a given set

• The rules of generative grammar represent knowledge.

• A grammar generates “all and only” the grammatical (intuitively accepted as wellformed) sentences of a language.

That is to say, grammar should be able to generate all possible grammatical sentences of the language, and it excludes the ungrammatical (ill-formed) ones.