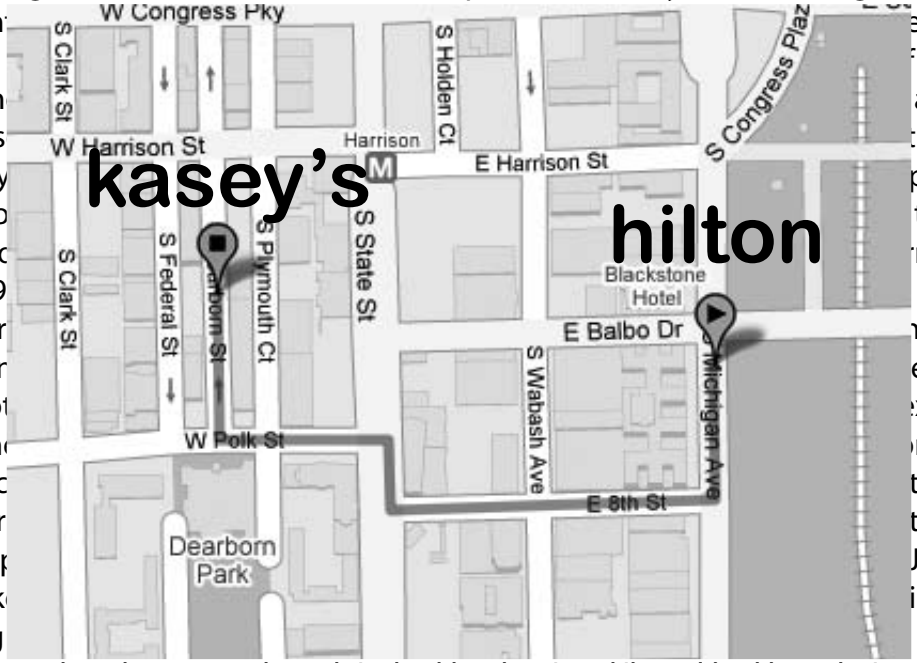
linguistic society of america

student mixer

friday 1.4, 9:30 onwards



kasey's tavern (701 south dearborn) snacks on us.

Three questions arise at once when we consider the notion 'knowledge of language': (I) What is the nature of this knowledge? (II) How is it acquired? (III) How is it put to use? The first question has a certain conceptual priority, we can hope to gain some insight into acquisition or use of knowledge only to the extent that we have some understanding of what it is that is acquired or used. A standard, and I think basically correct, approach to the first question is to assume that a person who knows a language has internalized a grammar, a system of rules and principles that assigns structural descriptions to linguistic expressions. If so, then the central notions to be developed are the correlative notions 'grammar' and 'structural description', and the central cognitive relation is the one that holds between the person and the grammar. I shall refer to this relation (tacit) 'knowledge', the [illegible] that a person knows his grammar and knows the rules and principles of the grammar, whether of course does not imply that he has propositional knowledge [illegible] these are the rules and principles of his grammar. The linguist may develop such propositional knowledge, but that is quite different [illegible] person who knows English [illegible] attained a certain mental state, different from that of someone who knows Japanese. Abstracting [illegible] individual differences, the [illegible] in [illegible] mental state common to the species that provides the basis of acquisition of knowledge of grammar, a characteristic that distinguishes humans from birds or apes. One proposal which I think is basically correct, is that the [illegible] endowment consists of a system of principles, each with certain possibilities of parametrization, and that acquisition of knowledge of grammar with all that it entails is, in part, a matter of setting these parameters one way or another on the basis of presented experience. Let us say that this process yields a 'core grammar'. Then an actual grammar, representing full knowledge of language, consists of a core grammar extended to a periphery that incorporates more idiosyncratic (marked) elements, also constrained by innate principles but in somewhat different ways. There are familiar idealizations implicit in this rough account, but they are, I think, quite legitimate ones. One component of the human mind-brain, then, is a genetically determined initial configuration, which we may call 'the initial state of the language faculty'. It is characterized by a theory of principles and parameters and a theory of markedness, which permits the extension of core grammar to a full grammar. I shall refer to this complex as 'a theory of universal grammar (u.g.) ', and shall say that u.g. is a component [illegible] erience, the initial state is transformed to a more [illegible] f mentalistic terminology involves nothing beyon[illegible] and steady state, respectively, characterized at s[illegible] tion expresses conditions satisfied in some way by [illegible] ple, refer to the proposals of David Marr and his co[illegible] the rigidity principle that permits determination o[illegible] rms of axes of elongation, etc. (Marr & Nishihara 19[illegible] the transition from initial to steady state can be r[illegible] have at most a negligible effect on the state attain[illegible] emely good first approximation, and I shall adopt [illegible] experience to steady state attained, through the m[illegible] roaching our initial questions in this way, the sec[illegible] this account of growth of knowledge can be inter[illegible] t knowledge of language that we would like to exp[illegible] John to like him (2) everyone wants him to be lik[illegible] in (3), whereas (2) cannot have the corresponding [illegible] like x (4) for every person x, x wants x to be liked by John. Thus, even though 'John likes him' and 'he is liked by John' are virtual synonyms, insertion of the corresponding infinitives as the clausal complement of the verb want yields expressions that differ in their range of meaning. The language-user's knowledge of these facts is propositional knowledge that so-and-so. Such examples of propositional knowledge extend beyond the bounds of well-formed English sentences. It is, for example, a property of my dialect of English that the verb want does not take a that-clause complement, e.g. the sentence (5) is not well-formed. (5) everyone wants that John like him Nevertheless, I know that this expression, were it well-formed, could have the meaning expressed in (6), just as (7) in contrast to (8) could have the meaning expressed in (8). - (6) for every person x, x wants that John like x (7) everyone wants that he be liked by John (8) for every person x, x wants that x be liked by John.. In this case, interchange of synonyms ('John like him', 'he be liked by John') does preserve meaning. How can we explain these facts? At one level, we can explain them by postulating a grammarthat yields these consequences, taking it to be a component of the steady state attained. At a deeper level, we can explain these facts by postulating a u.g. as an element of the initial state with the following property: given experience sufficient for language acquisition, this u.g. determines a grammar that in turn yields these consequences. A theory 0fu.g. with this prop-