

24.93 “The search for meaning”

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<https://kvf.me/fyd>

Lecture 2/12

What's the deal?

- first year discovery class
- exposure to some topics
- no psets
- attend, participate
- 2 credits (= two hours max per week)
- no policing, honors system

Deep background

The canvas site will have some additional material that you can explore if you a particular topic grabs your interest.

Examples of meaning

The two empty tea cups mean that Jill had someone over.

That gold ring means that Poliana is married.

The sentence “Tayla is taking physics” means that Tayla is taking physics.

The possibility of deception

Imagine that Jill wants you to think that she had someone over. She arranges two empty tea cups just right to make you think that.

Imagine that Poliana wants to dissuade people from chatting her up. She wears a gold ring.

Imagine that I want to mislead you about what Tayla is up to and I say “Tayla is taking physics”.

**The genius of language:
a specific noise for everything**

A former meerkat expert at London Zoo has been ordered to pay compensation to a monkey handler she attacked with a wine glass in a love spat over a llama-keeper.

But also

contextual intelligence

→ communication by minimal means

Dude!

Other minimal one word utterances

- yes, no
- hello, goodbye, thanks
- ouch, oops, wow, phooey, hooray, gadzooks, oboy, oy vey, dammit, shit, yuck, upsey-daisy
- hey, fiddlesticks, pshaw, humph, oo-la-la
- shh, psst, tsk-tsk
- abracadabra, hocus-pocus, bow-wow, cockadoodledoo

Design principles of human language

Discrete infinity / Productivity

- duality of patterning
- arbitrariness

Duality of patterning

Each meaning-bearing element of language is made up of a combination of meaning-less elements taken from a limited set of items.

Duality of patterning

cat = $k + \text{æ} + t$

Duality of patterning

- *tæk*
- *ækt*
- *æt*
- *tækt*

Arbitrariness

The pairing of meaning-bearing elements with meanings is *arbitrary* and varies from language to language.

These words all mean the same thing in different Australian indigenous languages

marongkai buruma

thuthu kunyarr

ngwely baka

ngupano butjiy

muyiny taara

<https://50words.online>

How many languages?

7,151 languages are spoken today. 

That number is constantly in flux, because we're learning more about the world's languages every day. And beyond that, the languages *themselves* are in flux. They're living and dynamic, spoken by communities whose lives are shaped by our rapidly changing world. This is a fragile time: Roughly 40% of languages are now endangered, often with fewer than 1,000 speakers remaining. Meanwhile, just 23 languages account for more than half the world's population.



<https://www.ethnologue.com/guides/how-many-languages>

How many idiolects?

W / Population / World Population

Current World Population
7,974,178,376

<https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>