Prescriptivism and Usage. Spring 2004. Linguistic Concepts Take 1.

1. There are, alas, (at least) five kinds of concepts that have to be distinguished in talking about linguistic expressions (sentences, phrases, words): two sets for **semantics** (one having to do with **meaning types**, like Agent and Modifier, one having to do with **discourse functions**, like Sentence Topic and Contrastive Focus), two for **syntax** (one having to do with **syntactic functions**, like Subject, Adjectival, and Determiner, the other having to do with **syntactic categories**, like Noun, Noun Phrase, Count Noun, Adjective, and Determinative), and one for **morphological categories**, like Plural, Present Participle, and Comparative.

I'm capitalizing all the technical terms, just to emphasize that they *are* technical terms, not words of ordinary English. This is awkward, and eventually I'll want to give it up, but for the moment I want to drive home the specialness of this vocabulary.

It's important that these technical terms are just labels for concepts. They aren't definitions of any kind. They *could* all be replaced by arbitrary labels, like numbers (meaning type 35, syntactic function 73, syntactic category 6, morphological category 17, etc.). Some of the terms have a long history of use, and most linguists are unwilling to advocate a wholesale replacement of opaque or misleading terms (like Present Participle), but you should beware of all technical terms, especially familiar ones like Noun, Pronoun, Past Tense, and the like.

2. **Semantics** concerns itself with the persons, objects, situations, events, actions, properties, locations, propositions, etc. that linguistic expressions refer to in the real or an imagined world.

3. **Meaning types** have to do directly with reference. An Agent expression, for example, refers to the active instigator in a change event; in *Kim broke the vase*, the Subject Noun Phrase *Kim* refers to Kim. who is the active instigator in the change event of breaking the vase.

Notice that I'm carefully distinguishing the person Kim from the linguistic expression *Kim*. People, Kim for instance, can't be Subjects. And linguistic expressions, *Kim* for instance, are normally ineligible to be Agents.

4. Modifier expressions have a complex semantics. They operate on, apply to, alter, or indeed literally modify the meanings of other expressions, in a regular way. Consider the meaning of the (Modal) Verb *must* in *It must be raining*. What this word does semantically is take the meaning of the sentence *It is raining* (which asserts that rain is falling) and alter it by adding a claim of necessity, giving a meaning much like that of *It is necessarily the case that it's raining*.

5. Some syntactic functions are most devoted to expressing (semantic) modification. Among these are the functions Sentence Adverbial (combining with clauses), Degree Adverbial (combining with Adjective or Adverb expressions), Determiner (combining with following Noun Phrases, in an outside layer of modifiers, before Adjectival expressions), Prenominal Adjectival, and Postnominal Adjectival.

5.1. Some Sentence Adverbials, of various syntactic categories:
        Adverb Phrase (a.k.a. AdvP):
                Very slowly, the snake ingested the rat.
                Quite frankly, this coffee stinks.
        Prepositional Phrase (a.k.a. PP):
                With great patience, the snake ingested the rat.
                In a word, this coffee stinks.
                At age 12, I discovered sex.
                As a parent, my concern is for the kids in this school.
        Noun Phrase (a.k.a. NP):
                Last week, we had visitors.
        Clause:
                When you leave, you should turn out the lights.
                [elliptical clauses]   **When leaving**, you should turn out the lights.
                                [Verb in Present Participle form]
                                When faced by a mountain lion, you shouldn't panic.
                                [Verb in Past Participle form]

5.2. Some Prenominal Adjectivals, of various syntactic categories:
        Adjective Phrase (a.k.a. AdjP):
                an **extremely professorial** query about European politics
        Noun (a.k.a. N):
                a **monster** rally for same-sex marriage

5.3. Some Postnominal Adjectivals, of various syntactic categories:
        AdjP:
                a query **too professorial to be taken seriously**
        Verb Phrase (a.k.a. VP), in Present Participle or Past Participle form:
                a query **suggesting that we had made the wrong decision**
                a query **made by a professor**
        PP:
                a query **from a professor**
        Clause:
                a query **that/which a professor made**
                a query **a professor made**

5.4. Some Determiners, of various syntactic categories:
        Determinative [Huddleston/Pullum's term]:
                a/the/this/one/each happy camper
        NP:
                a lot/lots of happy campers
                a lot/lots of ugly shrubbery
        NP in Possessive form:
                a parent's deepest concerns
                Toni Morrison's great genius