1. Linguistics is the Study of human language

(1) What he did was climb a tree.
(2) *What he thought was want a sports car.
(3) Drink your beer and go home.
(4) *What are you drinking and go home?
(5) I expect them to arrive a week from next Thursday.
(6) *I expect a week from Thursday to arrive them.

Language is systematic and rule-governed. The ability to carry out the simplest conversation requires profound knowledge that most speakers are unaware of. In a parallel fashion, a child can walk without understanding the principles of balance or support.

2. Descriptive and prescriptive grammars

Prescriptive Rules: tell you how to think or write according to someone’s idea of what is good or bad.

Never use double negatives

(7) I don’t have nothing.
(8) I don’t have anything. I have nothing.

Never end a sentence with a preposition

(9) Where do you come from?
(10) From where do you come?

Descriptive Rules: describe the actual patterns of a given language. These rules do not tell you how you should speak, but explain how it is possible for you to speak and understand.

Every sentence has a subject and a predicate.

In this course, and in linguistics generally, we are concerned only with descriptive grammar.
3. Grammatical Aspects of Language

3.1. Phonology: The Sound Patterns of Language

Phonemes:

(11) sip  fine  chunk
     zip  vine  junk

The difference between sip and zip is ‘signaled’ by the fact that the initial sound of the first word is s [s] and the initial sound of the second word is z [z]. Sounds [s] and [z] can therefore distinguish words in English. Such distinctive sounds are called phonemes.

Languages vary in which sounds represent different phonemes. For example, in German, French, and some other languages [u] and [ũ] are different phonemes.

French:   tout [tu] ‘all’;   tu [tũ] ‘you’

In English the difference is not phonemic.

Phonological rules: which sounds may start a word, end a word, etc

(12) *gisnt  –  gis
     *gtabt  –  gitab
     *gsut  –  sut

3.2. Morphology: Word Structure

Words are composed of morphemes, the minimal units of meaning:

One morpheme       boy
                    desire

Two morphemes       boy-ish
                    desire-able

three morphemes     boy-ish-ness
                    desire-able-ity

four morphemes      gentle-man-li-ness
                    un-desire-able-ity

Morphological Rules: word formation processes

(13) Bak-er  -  *er-bake
    Nice-ly  -  *book-ly
3.3. Syntax: The Sentence Patterns of Language

- Sentences are composed of syntactic categories, such as noun phrases, verb phrases, etc.

Example: Rule for forming a question

(14) A unicorn is in the garden ->
(15) Is a unicorn in the garden?

Now consider the sentence

(15) A unicorn that is eating a flower is in the garden.

Why cannot we move the first ‘is’? Though sentences are strings of words, our mental algorithms for grammar do not pick out words by their linear positions, but rather group words into phrases. The phrase ‘a unicorn that is eating a flower’, which we call a subject noun phrase, behaves like a single unit.

What is the rule for forming a question?

- Sentences are not simply random strings of words, they conform to specific patterns determined by the syntactic rules of the language.

(16) The boy found the ball
(17) The boy found quickly
(18) The boy found in the house
(19) The boy found the ball in the house

Grammaticality judgments do not depend on whether the sentence is meaningful or not. Although the following sentence does not make sense, it is syntactically well formed.

(20) Colorless green ideas sleep furiously

3.4. Semantics: The Meaning of Words and Sentences

Although the sentence in (20) seems to obey all the syntactic rules of English, it is semantically uninterpretable. Sentence meaning is partially based on the meanings of its words and phrases. Knowing the meaning of a declarative sentence means knowing under what circumstances that sentence would be true. Those “circumstances” are called the truth conditions of the sentence.

In the world as we know it, the sentence in (21) is true, but (22) is false:

(21) The Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776.
(22) The Declaration of Independence was signed in 1976.
What are the truth conditions of the following sentence?

(23) Rufus believes that the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1976.

It does not matter that a subpart of the sentence is false. Truth is determined by the semantic rules which permit you to combine the subparts of a sentence and know under what conditions the sentence is true or false.