



movetia



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“Guess the Language!” © How to use the game in class

The game “Guess the Language?” © is designed to help the users understand the axes of variation which account for the heterogeneity encountered across natural languages.

➤ Background

There are around 7000 thousand languages which are currently used by human communities around the world. We come across this varied reality when we get in contact with a community that uses a language different from ours. Despite the sense of estrangement that we experience when confronted with a language with which we are not familiar, the foreign language and ours share a large number of properties which makes the two more similar than our sense of disorientation would suggest.

In fact, languages vary, but variation is not unlimited. The differences between languages, no matter how great, are not completely unrestricted. The deeper we look in the structure of a language, the narrower it seems to be the space for variation. Conversely, superficial variation tends to be less restricted although patterns can be detected also at that level.

Examples of deep structural similarities in opposition to great superficial variability are word order variations and the lexica. Word orders refer to the ordering of the elements that make up a transitive sentence: subject (S), verb (V) and object (O). They are logically restricted to six possible combinations: SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OVS, OSV. The combinations are not uniformly distributed among natural languages, however, any language will inevitably fall in one of the six classes. Lexica, on the other hand, are unique. Every language has its own, and certain portions of the lexicon are subject to perpetual change, with new nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs that are acquired or fall in disuse all the time.

➤ Goals

The fundamental aim of the game is to lead the students to the understanding of language variation in terms of a set of universally available features (i.e., attributes) which can be attested or not attested within any given language. The game does so in a ludic and active way, by engaging the students in progressively more complex activities.

➤ In-class activities

The game “*Guess the Language!*”[©] facilitates the understanding of the approach to language variation sketched above by stimulating the comprehension of what languages have in common. The game shows a number of deep and superficial language attributes, and illustrates how they are realized across languages that are not genealogically related. The game is such that every attribute must be reduced to a binary choice (i.e., attested, not attested in a given language), the reason behind this choice is twofold: on the one hand it allows to maintain a similar game experience to that of the original Hasbro game “*Guess who?*”[®] on which ours is inspired, and on the other hand the binary representation of features forces the making of theoretical choices. Both aspects are capitalized on in one of the proposed in-class activities.

The content block presents three game related activities that the instructor can propose to the students: (1) a gaming session, (2) the construction of a language card, and (3) the stipulation of a new feature/attribute. Activity (1) is propaedeutic to (2) and (3), whereas number (2) and (3) are independent from one another. A detailed explanation of how to carry out each activity is explained in the Topic in which the relevant activity is proposed, along with its goals and the material needed to carry it through. In what follows we present the rationale behind each of the activities and the competence the students will work on in executing them.

(1) Gaming session

It exercises the students’ capacity to REMEMBER & UNDERSTAND

This activity should be used to break the ice. Preferably the instructor should start presenting the game “*Guess who?*” in order to familiarize the students with the concept of features, binarity and yes/no questions. The gaming session replaces the traditional frontal lesson in which the student is called to register the notions presented by the instructor in a mostly passive way. In the course of the gaming session the instructor can convey the same content in an inductive way, by letting the student actively manipulate the pre-organized data, instead of presenting to them the conclusions that can be drawn from the data.

(2) Create a Language Card

It exercises the students' capacity to CREATE & ANALYZE

This is an activity which the student should carry through at home (individually or in group). It requires them to put into practice what they have learned in class in terms of using a repository (WALS in this case) and data elicitation techniques. The analytical aspect of the activity consists in the selection of the appropriate empirical evidence to support the answer to each question presented in the game, whereas creativity is appealed to for the collection of the data and the edition of the card. The digitalization of the card is an additional element meant to provide the students with a glimpse of what programming is about.

(3) Postulate a new language attribute

It exercises the students' capacity to CREATE & EVALUATE

This activity involves simulation: the students are asked to become the creators of the game in its very essential part, meaning the selection of the features on which the questions are based. It requires a fundamental understanding of what features can be like, and the making of theoretical choices. The choices to make can pertain to the process of "binarization" (how to create a binary option out from the multiple possibilities which are empirically attested) or to the type of feature that is targeted by the question (morphological, lexical, syntactic, etc). The activity also requires the students to find the data to provide a +/- value for each language in the game, thus reinforcing their ability to uphold a position by providing supporting empirical evidence.