

The following program is a UW-TV classic. I mean, there have been, for example, at the peak periods of -- forget the structure of language, which is complicated enough -- but just take vocabulary acquisition, the simplest part. First of all, there's a variety of conventions, formal conventions, that are humanly created but undoubtedly reflect our aesthetic capacities that set a framework within which...they set a framework of rule, humanly imposed rule, within which people create. A lot of the cultural wealth has to do with playing games with languages and constructing elaborate kinship systems and things which probably have no or little functional utility. So for example, if you read, say, but not by me, I have nothing to say about it, no one will pretend to. But if you read, say, William Empson's I have nothing to say about it, no one would pretend to. But if you read, say, William Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity, you get an intriguing account of why poetry makes you think, in part because it's so compressed, and you only get hints, so the reader has to impose a lot of structure. But if you were in France in the twelfth century and you understood all the nuances of language, could you have predicted how these various languages would have evolved over time? But experience suffices to indicate, in no cases, that you can create an environment in which a five-year-old will sound like a college professor and it's kind of comical, but they'll use big words and complicated sentences and so on. I suspect you're probably harming the five-year-old, but it's possible to do that. And undoubtedly, if you really took my speech patterns and so on aside, you'd find influences from the parents and the uncles and so on. But overwhelmingly, you pick up the peer culture. At peak periods of acquisition of vocabulary, learning new words, children are picking them up at maybe a rate of one an hour or something, which means that they're essentially learning a word on one exposure. Professor Noam Chomsky from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a guest lecturer at the University of Washington upon reflection. Our guest is Professor Noam Chomsky from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a guest lecturer at the University of Washington. In fact, if you look at the languages structurally, the way a linguist would look at them, French is different from the other Romance languages in a variety of ways, which make it more similar to German and other Germanic languages. There's a mixture of all sorts of dialects, and the mix changes over time, either because of conquest or some political change, or boundaries are drawn in a different place, or some kind of commercial interchange or whatever, the mixture of these things changes over time. After all, you go to pre-colonial times, there were just hundreds of thousands, probably, and it was real destruction, kind of genocidal, and the conquest by speakers of basically one group, you ended up having a large homogeneous language. So France is good for telling, French is good for telling the truth because of its, what later came to be called its Gallic lucidity and clarity, whereas German and, I think his examples were German and English, maybe Italian. They're good languages for telling fantasies and falsehoods, so they'll be the languages of literature. For example, some of them may be the speech of a conquering group or a wealthy group or a priestly caste or one thing or another, and we may decide, okay, those are the good ones and some other one is the bad one. Now, the fact is that the system that grows in the brain is sometimes different from a system which is regarded, for whatever reason, as necessary or appropriate or approved or something, some prestige dialect. The pronunciation may be different enough so that you're...part of your knowledge of language is a way of decoding noises that you hear and converting them into a system that matches your own representations. But when it's done within

the framework of a humanly constructed system of rule, at least you've got the prerequisites for a work of art. These other topics that you're mentioning, say humor, should be subjected to the same kind of study, but so far it hasn't been clear how to do it. Words are endlessly fascinating, I think, because it's amazing how somebody can walk in a room, hear a few words, and walk out crying or angry or this whole series of emotions simply with a few words. So take me. My father spoke with a Ukrainian accent, and my mother spoke with a mixed New York-Lithuanian accent, and I spoke urban Philadelphia, because that's what the kids were talking in the streets. And you can help them, and you can read the children and show them pictures, and they're all fascinated with it. There are periods of very rapid language growth where you just can't satiate the curiosity fast enough. If you take the Oxford English Dictionary, you know, the one you read with the magnifying glass, and they give you a long detailed thing which they call the definition of a word. In there, they have what they call clitics, small pronouns that you attach to verbs. I mean, up until, say, the turn of the century, you could find people in nearby villages in France who couldn't understand one another, virtually could not understand one another. There was just a, I wouldn't say a continuum, there's just constant changes and fluctuations and variations. Virtually every national language, every national culture, or at least the European ones, maybe others, has a mythology that that's the only real, pure language, and all the others are corrupt. And I suspect that the mythology of the purity and lucidity and clarity of French goes back to ideas of that kind. Now, the literary standard has some principles associated with it, some of which are those of a real language, some of which are completely artificial. In Italy, if somebody grows up in the Piedmont area and somebody else grows up in the Naples area, they speak totally different languages. So there, when you teach what they call Italian, which is the language roughly of the area of Florence, of Tuscany, you're teaching people what amounts to a second language, and it's the national language. We call them Chinese dialects, but that would be like calling French and Romanian two different dialects of the same language, Latin or something. Well, you know, whatever the reason is, they wanna be different, they like to be innovative, they're creative, and they'll pick up— So there's fads in fashions and language? So you get very complex language games, a special language system taught as a puberty rite, and only a particular group of people speak it and nobody else understands it. How does language differ in the way that it's used in the arts? And in the literary use of language, it's just everything from the structure of a novel to the metric character of a poetic form is one or another human invention. But what you're pointing to is central part of it. Little hints here and there succeed in invoking in us very rich experience and interpretation. The nutrition that's given to an organism, to an embryo, is not what determines that it's going to be a human or a bird. It's a few hints that a person who already knows the concept can use to understand what's going on. But remember, the child is picking that up not from the Oxford English Dictionary with its whole array of hints. It can only mean that the concept itself in all of its richness and complexity is somehow sitting there, waiting to have a sound associated with it. Now that can't be quite true, but something very much like that is probably true. To see more UWTV Classics, visit uwtv.org/slash/classics. It has to do with the rise of nationalism and communication and so on, or take, say, Italy today or Germany today. But what happens is that between generations, there are usually small changes having to do with other influences from the outside and so on. And these things are cumulative. Most of the world, language areas, you can

get very different languages pretty close by, and much of the world is what we would call multilingual. Now, with the rise of national states and especially national communications and national education systems and all of these things, which is a pretty modern phenomenon, then you get what we call national languages. After all, French culture had a certain dominance and appeal for a long time, so these attitudes get established. On the other hand, if blacks happened to have all the power and own all the corporations and whites were working for them would be the other way around. Black English would be the language of culture and science and so on, and the stuff that you and I speak would be considered a degenerate dialect, which you have to get people out of so that they'll be able to think. Now, in English, the literary standard is not so radically different from what, say, you and I grew up with, but it's somewhat different. Same is true in Germany and— China. Well, China's even worse, because what we call Chinese is a set of languages which are as different from one another as the different Romance languages. And the way in which they interact with authority structures is crucial. So what we call good English is a system which is partly artificial, I should say, which is taught to people because it was legislated to be good English. There are certain principles of human biology which determine what a language can be, and no language can be like that. Peter Robinson Why is pronunciation and intonation so important to language? Why aren't words themselves sufficient to convey meaning? But if you go to, say, Central Australia, where you're finding basically Stone Age tribes, there's a lot of innovation in language. And while that's an extreme case, the same is true of other literary conventions. I mean, part of human creative intervention has been to create forms, aesthetic forms, which are somehow either appealing to us or challenge our intelligence or whatever, and you work within them. That's pretty recent in human history, and that itself imposes a framework which determines the kind of art that you can produce. And I think the comparable assumption is true in all these cases. One of the... part of the fascination of the study of language is that it's one of the few examples where you can really get some insight into how it works. And what's more, it's done surprisingly uniformly for different people, which means, and it's of course done without any training or very minimal training. and what determines that we are going to be the kind of creature that can speak and that can interpret a sign or a couple of lines or something as evoking an emotional experience or whatever, that's something in our nature. Typically they'll pick up the language of their peers. But, you know, if you think what it means to learn a word on one exposure, the way to understand how amazing an achievement this is, is to try to define a word. So suppose you had an organism that wasn't equipped to learn the words of human language, and you really had to teach it those words by training. We'll have that even though we all have very limited experience because basically we started with those concepts. What determines how language in a particular country evolves? There are a number of features of French which are sort of Germanic in character. Well, just to take a simple one, in all the Romance languages, except for French, you can delete the subject of a sentence. And for a variety of constructions, actually. There are quite a number of respects in which French is different from the other Romance languages. Incidentally, Old French, Middle French, French in the medieval period was not. So something happened to it that made it less like the Romance languages and more like the Germanic languages. I mean, the differences among the things that we call German are enormous, so enormous as to lead to non-mutual intelligibility. And, of course,

in, say, lexicon, you know, the words of the language, well, that's a different matter altogether. So when technology develops, you get a whole new vocabulary. Now, our cultures are tentative. Speakers of English can be misled by this. English is relatively homogeneous. I mean, I just came from Boston, and I understand everybody in Portland and Seattle and so on. But that's not true of most of the world. The closer I get to the border between France and Germany, would the closer the languages become? And there isn't, in fact -- I mean, by now there's enough national unity and so on, so you can really find a border. And you started speaking one thing in one place and another thing in another place, and they're not mutually intelligible often. In fact, if you go back to its origins, it's even a little bit comical. I don't know if anybody's actually studied it. But if you go back to, say, the 18th century and you read, say, Diderot, he explains Diderot very seriously. He says, France is going to be the language of science, and German and English will be the languages of literature. And some of them may have prestige associated with them. But if social and political relations reversed, we'd make the opposite conclusions. In fact, you can trace that back, and you can find out who invented it. Some bishop in the 17th century or something invented it and decided that's the way it's supposed to be. Now, that kind of thing, of course, has to be taught because it's totally artificial. I mean, if you go to central London and somebody's speaking Cockney and the words happen to match ours at some abstract level, you still may not understand them. You and I can do it. Actually, if you listen to us closely, we're speaking different languages. But they're close enough so that we don't have any... I don't have a problem decoding you and you don't have a problem decoding me. But again, that's a little artificial. It doesn't mean anything