A very common belief that people have about language is something you might have heard from your grandparents or your teachers. Have you heard them say, “Kids these days are ruining English! They should learn to speak properly!”  Or if you grew up speaking Mandarin, maybe you heard the same thing, “Those teenagers are ruining Mandarin! They should learn to speak properly!” For as long as there has been language, there have been people complaining that young people are ruining it, and trying to force them to speak in a more old-fashioned way. Some countries like France and Germany even have official institutes that make prescriptive rules about what words and sentence structures are allowed in the language and which ones aren’t allowed.

The truth is that **every language changes over time**. Languages are spoken by humans, and as humans grow and change, and as our society changes, our language changes along with it. Some language change is as simple as in the vocabulary of a language: we need to introduce new words to talk about new concepts and new inventions. For example, the verb google didn’t exist when I was an undergraduate student, but now googling is something I do every day. Language also changes in they we pronounce things and in the way we use words and form sentences.  In a later chapter, we’ll talk about some of the things that are changing in Canadian English.

Another common belief about language is the idea that you can’t learn a language unless someone teaches you the rules, either in a language class or with a textbook or a software package. This might be partially true for learning a language as an adult: it might be hard to do it on your own without a teacher.  But think about yourself as a kid. Whatever language you grew up speaking, whether it’s English or French or Mandarin or Arabic or Tamil or Serbian, you didn’t have to wait until kindergarten to start speaking. You learned the language from infancy by interacting with the people around you who spoke that language. Some of those people around you might have taught you particular words for things, but they probably weren’t teaching you, “make the [f] sound by putting your top teeth on your bottom lip” or “make sure you put the subject of the sentence before the verb”.  And by the time you started school you were perfectly fluent in your language. In some parts of the world, people never go to school and never have any formal instruction, but they still speak their languages fluently.

That’s because almost everything we know about our language — our mental grammar — is unconscious knowledge that’s acquired implicitly as children. **Much of your knowledge of your mental grammar is not accessible to your conscious awareness**. This is kind of a strange idea:  how can you know something if you’re not conscious of knowing it? Many things that we know are indeed conscious knowledge. For example, if I asked you, you could explain to me how to get to your house, or what the capital of Canada is, or what the difference is between a cow and a horse. But our mind also has lots of knowledge that is not fully conscious. You probably can’t explain very clearly how to control your muscles to climb stairs, or how to recognize the face of someone you know, or how to form complex sentences in your native language, and yet you can do all of these things easily and fluently, and unconsciously. A lot of our job when we study Linguistics is to make explicit the things that you already know implicitly.  This is exactly what makes linguistics challenging at first, but it’s also what makes it fun!