This "pretest" is a set of statements and questions which cover a number of misconceptions that people have about language. They are meant to serve as discussion points at the beginning of Linguistics 1. I hope that by the end of the course, you will have a better understanding of why the answers below are appropriate.

1. There are five vowel sounds in English.
   
   **False:** English is written with five vowel LETTERS. However, those letters serve to represent as many as 12 to 15 SOUNDS, depending on your variety of English. For example, the letter "u" represents 3 different sounds in the words 'but', 'put', 'butte'. We will discuss this in detail during Week 4.

2. Educated people speak more grammatically than do uneducated people.
   
   **False:** Educated people tend to conform more closely to the norms of a "standard" variety of a language (English in English-speaking countries, French in French-speaking countries, etc.) than do people without formal education. If "conformity with a standard" is what is meant by "grammatical", then in this sense, educated people do, by definition, speak more grammatically. However, in linguistics, speaking "grammatically" means "following systematic patterns of sentence construction". EVERYONE, regardless of educational level, speaks"grammatically" in this sense, i.e. no one speaks his or her native language in a random, non-systematic way.

3. All linguists speak several languages.
   
   **True or False, depending on what you mean by "linguist":** One dictionary definition of "linguist" is "someone who speaks two or more languages". By this definition, the statement is obviously true. However, if by "linguist" you mean "a specialist in the science of linguistics" (the only definition which we will use in this class), it is not necessarily the case that such a person speaks many languages any more than it is necessary that a specialist in music theory be able to play all the instruments in an orchestra. Language can be analyzed as an abstract object of study, which does not require that one be able to actively communicate in that language. (One might add, however, that because linguists get pleasure from working on a variety of languages, most of them do speak more than one language if for no other reason than that it is fun!)

4. The languages of primitive peoples have simpler grammars than languages such as English or French.
   
   **False:** This is nonsense. There is no relation between language structure and culture. All languages are complex, but some of the languages which have the greatest complexity in details of how words are put together, etc. are, in fact, spoken by people in some of the least technologically advanced cultures, e.g. hunter-gathers of Africa and Australia, Eskimos of Alaska and northern Canada, etc.
5. Parrots and people can both use language.

**False:** Parrots have the ability to mimic sounds of various types, including words and phrases of human languages. However, a parrot could not learn to combine the word-like sounds that it can mimic into new combinations to create sentences which it had not heard before. As for the sounds that parrots make as part of their native communication system, these comprise a variety of vocalizations which may signal things like danger, the presence of food, etc., but they cannot be analyzed in terms of words combined into sentences or the like.

6. Intelligence is a major factor in a child's ability to learn a first language rapidly and well.

**False:** All children in all cultures acquire the languages of their cultures at about the same rate and following similar paths, starting with one-word utterances, then combinations of two words, then more complex utterances with the cute "mistakes" we recognize as baby talk, and so on. Except in cases of the most severe mental impairment or other pathological problems such as deafness, all children in all cultures achieve very similar language abilities regardless of their aptitudes in other areas.

7. More than two-thirds of the English vocabulary consists of "borrowed" words.

**True:** If one goes through an unabridged dictionary of English, one finds that as many as 2/3 of the words listed there have come into English from other languages. That is, these words were not part of the vocabulary of English as it was spoken, say, 1000 years ago. However, many of these words are specialized in various ways. In speech on everyday topics, the vast majority of words that English speakers use can be traced back all the way to Old English.

8. We should say, "It's I," rather than, "It's me."

???: The answer here is similar to that for #2 above. If "should say" means that this is what we were taught in school and it is therefore the norm which we should follow, then this statement is true. If "should say" means that we are not speaking "real English" if we do otherwise, then it is false. In fact, this "rule" was INVENTED in the 18th century by teachers who based their ideas on the grammar of Latin. Native English speakers of English have never said, "It's I," as part of their natively-learned variety of English!

9. A language which has never been written is more properly called a "dialect" than a "language."

**False:** If by "dialect" you mean "a non-written variety of speech", this statement is, by definition, true, but this is an incoherent and unacceptable use of the word "dialect". Properly used, the word "dialect" refers to "a variety of language showing systematic differences from other varieties of THE SAME LANGUAGE". Thus,
"standard" English is a "dialect of English" just as much as are "Black English", "Southern English", "Cockney English", "New York English", etc.

10. As a language is passed on from one generation to the next, it tends to get corrupted.

**False**: Again, a matter of definition—if "corrupted" means "changed", then this would be true, but normally persons who make such statements as this mean "degenerated". Language does change over time (the English of Chaucer, spoken in the 14th century, is quite different from 20th century English), but all human languages have equal expressive power in terms of the vocabulary and sentence structures which they have available. As longer as people have human brains, their language cannot become "corrupted" in the sense of "generate in expressive power"—it can only change in the ways that it expresses things.

11. There are 3 to 5 distinct sounds in the word *thorough*.

The sounds are
- **th** = a single "fricative" sound made by passing air between tongue and teeth
- **or** = for some speakers, a single sound like the "rr" sound in 'bird'; for other speakers, two sounds, i.e. a vowel like the vowel in 'but' and an 'r'
- **ough** = for some speakers a single sound, 'o'; for other speakers, two sounds, 'o' followed by 'w'

12. There are 4 units of meaning in the word *disrespectfully*.

- **dis**- means "not, negative"
- **-respect**- means "respect, deference"
- **-ful**- added the noun respect makes an adjective ("full of respect")
- **-ly** added to an adjective, makes an adverb ("in a manner of respecting")

One might argue that **-respect**- has two meaningful units: **re**- as in *redo* and **-spect** as in *inspect*. However, in English, **-spect**- doesn't seem to carry any independent meaning that runs across all the word in occurs in, and the **re**- of "respect" doesn't give the meaning of "again" that it has in words like 'redo' or 'reread'.

13. How many languages are there in the world?

Several thousand: nobody knows exactly how many languages there are, but most recent estimates put the number at about 7000. There are over 2000 on the African continent alone. The relatively small island of New Guinea has about 800.

14. Which two languages in the following pairs are the most closely related to each other?

**Answer**: English and Yiddish! These are both "Germanic" languages. Yiddish is actually quite similar to German.

Yiddish and Hebrew: These are not related at all linguistically—Yiddish is Germanic and Hebrew is Semitic. However, there is a cultural tie in that almost all speakers of
both these languages are Jewish. The two languages are also both written with the Hebrew alphabet.

**English and French:** These are distantly related in that they belong to the Indo-European family. The similarity in many words is largely a result of the fact that English borrowed large numbers of French words after the Norman invasion of 1066.

**Chinese and Japanese:** Not related at all—Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family, Japanese has not been convincingly grouped with any other family (some linguists believe there is a relationship to Korean, others to languages of the Pacific, like Indonesian). Chinese has, however, exercised great cultural influence over Japanese, the result being that Japanese has borrowed many Chinese words (including even the numbers) and Japanese uses many Chinese symbols in its writing system.

15. Which is the oldest language in the world?

**None of those listed!** It makes no sense to talk about the "oldest language". All languages spoken at a certain time are of equal age for the simple fact that all languages are changing all the time—no language has the same form as it had several centuries ago. Sumerian is the language for which we have written records dated from the earliest time--5000-6000 years ago, but the fact that English, for example, has written records dating back "only" about 1000 years does not mean that English is not at old as Sumerian. The precursor of English was being spoken at the same time that those ancient Sumerian documents were being written. The speakers of that precursor to English just hadn't developed a writing system yet! The only way this question could make sense would be to ask, "Which language has the oldest written records?" Here are the approximate dates for the earliest written records for each of the languages listed, starting from the earliest:

- Sumerian: records dating from about 3100 BC (5100 years)
- Egyptian: 3000 BC
- Sanskrit: 1500 BC
- Greek: 1400 BC (oldest records in the Greek alphabet, ca. 1000 BC)
- Chinese: 1300 BC
- Hebrew: 1100 BC