

# Introduction

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## What is Linguistics?

- It is the scientific study of human natural language.
- It has an impact on different fields - education. anthropology (the study of human societies and cultures and their development.), sociology (the study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior), language teaching, cognitive psychology, philosophy (the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline.), computer science, AI, neuroscience
- The last 5 are the key components of cognitive science, ie, the structure and functioning of human cognitive processes.
- In spite of the above facts, even highly educated people have a vague idea of what the field is about. Some of the common perceptions are
  - A linguist is a person who speaks many languages fluently
  - Linguists are language experts who can correct your grammar
  - A linguist can be a better creative writer
- **A polyglot need not be a linguist and a linguist need not know more than one language.** A polyglot may speak many languages but need not necessarily have language as a subject of enquiry. You may speak your mother tongue fluently/grammatically, but may not formally be able to tell the difference between a relative clause and subordination. **A kite flyer does not have to study aerodynamics. We can walk but may not understand or explain the principles of balance or support. We all breathe but...**

- One can be a professional linguist without ever having taught a language class - a linguist is not meant to be amazing at languages or using the language for communication - what they study is the science behind language and how languages work.



When do you think a child starts speaking their mother tongue correctly?

How does a child learn the very complex system of language or grammar is a question we have to ponder upon. It has various schools of reasonings but we have not been able to answer definitively yet.

Language has a lot of abstraction and it is amazing how a child can get hold of all that abstraction without formally being taught how to do so.

The imitation theory doesn't hold true cause we often notice children making sentences and saying things they have NEVER heard in their life.

## Extra note: Equi-NP deletion

**Equi NP deletion** is a transformation deleting one of two identical NPs.

### Example

in deriving *John wants to win* the surface-structure (i)b is derived from deep-structure (i)a by deletion of the second occurrence of *John*.

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(i) a  John wants [John to win]
      b  John wants [to win]
      c  John wants [ PRO to win ]
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The two occurrences of *John* in the deep-structure (i)a account for the fact that the understood subject of *to win* is identical to the subject of *wants*. This analysis has been replaced by the analysis in (i)c with a PRO subject.

## What exactly is Linguistics then?

- It is concerned with the Nature of Language and Linguistic Communication.
- What is the nature of language? How does communication work? It is not easy to answer that question as it is much more complicated and intrinsic.

- It's like asking a physicist what is energy or matter and they'd have to explain it by breaking it down into smaller components starting from the very basics. Explaining what language is works in a similar way.
- Linguistics is not different. We need to break down the broad questions about the nature of language and linguistic communication into smaller, more manageable questions which together can answer the larger question
- The field covers a surprisingly broad range of topics/layers/levels :
  - speech sounds (phonetics - articulatory, auditory, acoustic)
  - how sounds are structured in a language (phonology)  
eg: pal vs phal (moment vs fruit) but p vs ph doesn't have any significance in English but it does in Hindi
  - word formation processes (morphology)
  - arrangement of words (syntax)
  - meaning generation and interpretation (semantics)
  - mind/brain and society (psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics)
  - intended meaning in actual communication situation (pragmatics) and many other things as well
- Each language is rule-governed with an inherent grammar. The linguist explores and formulates these rules/grammars. **The job of the linguist is to describe and not prescribe** (like the language teacher :), or the proverbial grammarian - "it is I" not "it is me" which is grammatically wrong but usually used during conversations with a non-grammarian) the grammar at each level.
- Descriptive vs Prescriptive grammars (A linguistic is able to describe the rules of grammar and explain why sentences are meant to be one way and not the other way, a grammarian is able to prescribe the rules of grammar and is able to state what rules should be strictly followed and carried out)



### A fun joke about linguists



St Peter patiently waiting at the pearly gates of heaven hears a knock at the door. As he asks, "Who is here?" he is responded by "It is I". That is when St Peter realized that another grammarian has come to stay at heaven.

## What is Language?

- A knowledge system like math, philosophy, engineering, medicine etc. the study of grammar was an essential component of traditional education system - "vyaakaran" taught in gurukuls during the early Vedic age, grammar schools
- Language is central to human existence. Wherever there are human beings, there is at least one language because it has proven to be really essential for communication among humans. *Watch the World Languages series.*
- Imagine your world without language. It is kind of really hard to imagine a world without language, given that language is pretty intrinsic in the process of

imagination in itself and it will be kind of impossible to imagine anything without the help of language in the first place.

- Language distinguishes us from other animals. (kind of speculative cause animals also seem to have a language of their own which they use to communicate among themselves although it is hard for humans to understand and decipher that)
- To some people in Africa, a newborn child is a *kuntu*, a thing, not yet a *muntu*, a person. the child becomes a person by the act of learning. one of the first thing that a child learns is a language. So from that we can to an extent conclude that language is an extremely important part of us being humans or being social creatures in this modern world.

## Different schools of thoughts among linguists

Chomsky : "When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the human essence, the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man"

Chomsky believed that language is a part of our biological programming. It is innately a part of the blueprint of our mind and thus a child is able to pick up languages so easily regardless of what language the child is learning.

VS

Skinner - behavioral psychologist believed in the idea of tabula rasa - which implied that the mind is empty at the time of birth or it is like a blank slate and we learn as we grow up from the stimulus from our external world.



What does it exactly mean to know a language?

## What do I know when I say I know a language

### Sounds

Take the example of a 5 year old child and their knowledge of language.

When we know a language we don't just utter sounds randomly. We know what is possible and what is not possible with context to that language.

For example, in Hindi

- guzzle, ghazal vs ghazl(?)
- patan, patn(?)
- baTn/baTan
- maTn/maTan
- boTl/botal
- pleasure, pleiyar
- station is a word borrowed from a foreign language. As the Indian languages don't inherently have a sT sound as such, so we have natively broken it down into smaller parts and thus it is often pronounced as saTeShan or isTeshan
- Another example might be a person from say Yorkshire saying "Ba?ar, I ha? you!" where ? signifies the glottal stop. What the person actually meant to say is "Brother, I hate you!"



Can I start a word with - ng, nt, tk, sg, sp, mk, nt, mb, ptsg, str, stk, sk, sT-

The above examples signify how not only do different languages have different sounds that are used normally but also how people adopting words from a foreign language also change the words to suit the sounds of the language they speak.