



Levels of Linguistic Analysis

Week One: Revision

1. What is Linguistics?

Language is what makes us human. It enables us to express our thoughts, ideas, and feelings, and to understand those of others. Linguistics is the **scientific** study of this **rich and complex human ability**.

In simple terms, linguistics asks questions such as:

- What is the nature of language?
- How do humans use and understand it?
- Why do languages differ?
- How do children acquire their first language?
- What happens when language breaks down?

As linguist Richard Hall (1968) defined it:

“Language is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory, arbitrary symbols.”

Let us unpack this:

- **Confined to humans:** Animals communicate, but only about the here and now. Human language allows us to talk about the past, future, or imaginary events.
- **Communication and interaction:** Language enables complex social interaction and cooperation.
- **Habitual use:** We use language daily, often without conscious thought.
- **Oral-auditory channel:** Speech (using mouth and ears): is the primary mode of communication.
- **Arbitrary symbols:** There is no natural link between a word and what it represents. For example:
 - Table (English)
 - Tabla (Algerian Arabic)
 - Tisch (German)
 - Zhōozi 桌子 (Chinese)

These all refer to the same object, but there is no reason why any one form must represent it.

=> Human language is a **creative, flexible, and learned system** unlike any other form of communication in the natural world.

2. What Linguistics is (and is Not)?

Before defining what linguistics is, it is important to clarify what it is not (adapted from David Crystal's *What is Linguistics?*, 1974):

Linguistics is NOT	Linguistics IS
The same as <i>philology</i> or the <i>historical study of languages</i> .	The scientific and systematic study of language as it is used now, as well as its structure and function.
About <i>learning to speak many languages</i> .	About understanding how languages work , not necessarily speaking them.
The same as <i>literary criticism</i> .	Linguists describe how language functions; they do not judge its aesthetic value.
The same as <i>traditional grammar</i> .	Linguistics is descriptive , not prescriptive => it describes what speakers actually say, not what they <i>should</i> say.

Examples:

Example	Traditional Grammar Says...	A Linguist Asks...	Linguistic Insight / Real-Life Example
1. Double Negatives	“Don’t say <i>I didn’t see nothing</i> . It’s wrong. You should say <i>I didn’t see anything</i> .”	“Who uses double negatives? In which situations or regions? What purpose do they serve in communication?”	Double negatives are common and perfectly normal in many English dialects (like African American English or Northern British English) and in Algerian Arabic: <i>Ma sheft walū</i> (literally “I didn’t see nothing”): meaning <i>I didn’t see anything</i> .
2. Word Order	“English word order must always be Subject–Verb–Object.” (<i>Ali eats apples</i> .)	“Do all languages follow this rule? How do other languages, like Arabic, organise their sentences?”	English typically uses SVO , but Algerian Arabic often uses VSO : <i>Yākul Ali t-ifāh</i> (“Eats Ali the apples”): perfectly natural in Arabic grammar.
3. Borrowed Words	“Keep your language pure, do not mix languages!”	“Why do speakers borrow words? What social or cultural needs does this reflect?”	Algerian Arabic speakers mix French, English, and Arabic every day: <i>Rānī busy lyoum, mā ndir walū!</i> (“I’m busy today, I won’t do anything!”). This is code-switching ; a natural and creative part of bilingual communication.

Traditional grammar tells us what we *should* say.

Linguistics, however, **observes** what people *actually do say*, and **tries to understand why**.

==> So instead of judging language as “right” or “wrong”, linguists describe, analyse, and explain it scientifically. Thus, linguistics is about describing, analysing, and understanding language scientifically.

3. Why Study Linguistics?

There are many reasons to study linguistics, both practical and intellectual:

A) LANGUAGE AWARENESS

To become conscious of how your own language works.

Example: Why do English speakers say ‘cheese’ while some Arabic speakers say ‘*jubn*’? Why is ‘ain’t’ common in some dialects but not others?

B) LANGUAGE IMPAIRMENT

Linguistics helps us understand and treat language disorders, which is vital for speech therapy and clinical linguistics.

C) ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND COMPUTERS

Why are computers unable to use language in the same way that humans do? Linguistics informs machine translation, speech recognition, and chatbots.

D) LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

How do children learn language so quickly, even when adults use “baby talk”? Linguistics explores how humans acquire their first and second languages.

E) LITERATURE AND HISTORY

Linguistics helps us interpret older texts (e.g., Shakespeare’s English vs. Modern English).

F) LANGUAGE TEACHING

To teach English effectively, teachers must know not only the language but also about its structure and systems, just as a surgeon must know anatomy.

4. The Branches of Linguistics

Linguistics can be divided into three main branches, each with its own subfields:

Branch	Focus	Subfields
Sound	How language is spoken and heard	Phonetics and Phonology
Structure	How words and sentences are formed	Morphology and Syntax
Meaning	How language conveys meaning	Semantics and Pragmatics

5. Levels of Linguistic Analysis

1. PHONETICS: THE STUDY OF SPEECH SOUNDS

Phonetics examines how sounds are produced, transmitted, and perceived.

Example:

- English /p/ vs. /b/ differ in voicing:
 /p/ (voiceless) → pat
 /b/ (voiced) → bat

In Algerian Arabic, the sound /ق/ (as in قهوة “coffee”) does not exist in English, but it is an important phonetic distinction in Arabic.

Phonetics looks at:

- Articulatory phonetics: How sounds are made by the speech organs.
- Acoustic phonetics: Physical properties of sound waves.
- Auditory phonetics: How we perceive sounds.

2. PHONOLOGY: THE SOUND SYSTEM OF A LANGUAGE

Phonology studies how sounds function in a language, their patterns and rules.

Example:

- English allows street /stri:t/, but not srteet ==> that is because English phonology forbids certain sound clusters.
- Phonology helps explain what combinations are possible or impossible in a given language.

3. MORPHOLOGY: THE STRUCTURE OF WORDS

Morphology studies how words are built from smaller units called morphemes (the smallest meaning-bearing elements).

Example:

- English: nationalisation = nation + al + ise + ation
- Algerian Arabic: **hkāyāt** (“stories”) = **hkāya** (“story; tale”) + **-āt**

Morphology distinguishes between:

- Inflectional morphology (adds grammatical information: cats, played)
- Derivational morphology (creates new words: happy → happiness)

4. SYNTAX: THE STRUCTURE OF SENTENCES

Syntax studies how words combine to form sentences.

Example:

- English: The students are studying linguistics.
- Algerian Arabic: **ttalaba rāhum yqraw f l-lingwistīk** (lit. “The students they-are reading in linguistics”)

Syntax explains:

- Word order rules (e.g. Subject–Verb–Object in English)
- Grammatical relations (subject, object)
- Sentence types (questions, negatives, etc.)

* A well-known example proposed by Noam Chomsky is the sentence “**Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.**”

Although it is syntactically well-formed, it is semantically incoherent. This illustrates that grammatical structure and meaning operate on distinct, independent levels.

5. SEMANTICS: THE STUDY OF MEANING

Semantics explores the meanings of words and sentences.

Examples:

- Synonymy: big vs. large
- Antonymy: hot vs. cold
- Hyponymy: tulip is a kind of flower
- Ambiguity: Visiting relatives can be annoying → Who is visiting whom?

Flying planes can be dangerous → Are the planes flying, or are people flying planes?

I saw the man with the telescope → Did *I* use the telescope, or did *the man* have one?

6. PRAGMATICS: MEANING IN CONTEXT

Pragmatics studies how meaning depends on context and social interaction.

Example:

* “I’ll come to your party.” → Depending on tone and situation, it could be:

- A promise, if you are excited
- A threat, if you are unwelcome!

* Another example: → “Can you open the window?”

Semantically: a question about ability.

Pragmatically: a polite request.

7. BEYOND THE CORE LEVELS: HYBRID DISCIPLINES

Modern linguistics connects with many other fields:

Discipline	Focus
Psycholinguistics	How language is processed in the mind and brain
Sociolinguistics	How language varies across social groups
Computational Linguistics	Using computers to model or process language
Clinical Linguistics	Diagnosing and treating language disorders
Forensic Linguistics	Analysing language in legal contexts
Corpus Linguistics	Studying large collections of real-life language data



Summary:

Linguistics is not concerned with the mere ability to speak numerous languages; rather, it seeks to *understand* the *structural* principles underlying all human languages. It is a *scientific, descriptive*, and inherently *interdisciplinary* field. Engaging with it enhances one’s *awareness* of the ways in which language *shapes* human *thought, culture, and communicative practices*.