

Introduction to English Linguistics

1. Introduction
19 September 2019

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What is linguistics?

■ **Linguistics**

The scientific study of language.

■ **Scientific:**

"Linguistics shares with other sciences a concern to be objective, systematic, consistent, and explicit in its account of language. Like other sciences, it aims to collect data, test hypotheses, devise models, and construct theories."
(D. Crystal. 2005. *How Language Works*. London: Penguin.)

■ **Study of language:**

"[The] subject matter ... is unique: at one extreme it overlaps with such 'hard' sciences as physics and anatomy; at the other, it involves such traditional 'arts' subjects as philosophy and literary criticism. The field of linguistics includes both science and the humanities."
(D. Crystal. 2005. *How Language Works*. London: Penguin.)

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What is linguistics?

"Today there are roughly 7 billion of us humans. We are the most important animals on earth, if only because of our unparalleled power to modify and perhaps destroy the planet's very capacity to support life. Animals of other species do all sorts of clever things, and alter their environments in many ways, but it's nothing comparable to what humans do. The complexity of human thought, behaviour, technology, and environmental modification is of an entirely different kind.

The aspects of human life that make our species unique depend in numerous ways on the special human ability to use language. For anyone who thinks it is important to understand what humans are like and why, a scientific comprehension of the capacity for language is essential. Linguistics is the scientific field devoted to achieving that understanding."

(G. Pullum. 2018. *Linguistics. Why It Matters*. Cambridge: Polity. pp. 2-3)

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Language

What exactly do we mean by a 'language'? Pullum (2018: 3-4):

"[H]uman languages are structured systems for making articulated thoughts fully explicit both internally (mentally) and externally (in a form perceptible to other humans), and linguistics studies all components of such systems, together with the ways in which they are used.

It is extremely common for people to take '**language**' and '**communication**' to be the same thing. ... They are clearly distinct in that each is found in the absence of the other. Most communication, even between humans, has nothing to do with language (think of frowning, winking, shrugging, grinning, eyebrow-raising, caressing, or glaring). Some of it isn't even voluntary (blushing, limping, trembling). And conversely, lots of the use we make of language involves no communication. Think of someone silently planning a speech that they will never give, or checking a document for wording errors, or silently reflecting on whether *likely* has exactly the same meaning as *probable*."

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Language as a form of knowledge

- (1) a. They are happy. (full form)
b. They're happy. (reduced form)
- (2) a. She is happier than they are.
b. * She is happier than they're.

* = ungrammatical (vs. grammatical)

A native speaker knows which sentences are grammatical and ungrammatical in her/his language. This knowledge is often unconscious.

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Language as a form of knowledge

Knowledge of (im)possible interpretations:

- (3) a. Jay hurt his nose.
b. Jay's sister hurt him.
c. Jay said he hurt Ray.
d. Jay said Mary hurt him.
- (4) Jay hurt him.

Goal: To make *explicit* the (largely) unconscious knowledge speakers have of their language.

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Knowledge of language

- What is it that we know when we know a language?
 - (i) **Sounds**.
 - (ii) **Words** (the lexicon).
- (i) and (ii): memorized.
- But cf. e.g. sentence formation.
- (5) An X is not a Y.
(e.g. *A lake is not a tree*).
→ Sentences are not memorized.

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Knowledge of language

- Cf. also an English *nursery rhyme*:
 - (6) a. This is the house that Jack built.
 - b. This is the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.
 - c. This is the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.
 - d. This is the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.
 - e. This is the dog that worried the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.
- ... This is the farmer sowing the corn that kept the cock that crowed in the morn that waked the priest all shaven and shorn that married the man all tattered and torn that kissed the maiden all forlorn that milked the cow with the crumpled horn that tossed the dog that worried the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

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Knowledge of language

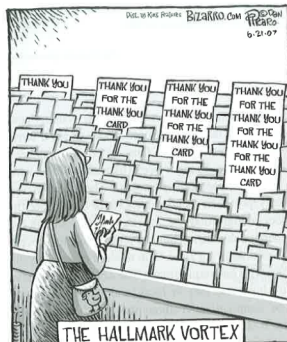


Figure 2.4 The Hallmark vortex.

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Knowledge of language

- An infinite number of sentences could in principle be created as the result of relative clause formation as in (6).
- Sentence formation is based on rules.
→ The **creativity** of language.
- Knowledge of language:
 - (i) Sounds.
 - (ii) Words.
 - (iii) **Rules**.

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Rules

- Goal in linguistics: To identify the rules that are part of a speaker's knowledge of language.
- E.g. for examples (1)/(2) above:
are cannot be reduced when it is stressed.
- Rules affect:
 - Sounds (e.g. article *the*).
 - Words (e.g. regular plural).
 - Sentences (e.g. word order *I turned it off* vs. **I turned off it* (but OK: *I turned off the tap*))

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Competence vs. performance

- Knowledge of language: sounds, words + rules (a mental grammar).
- Competence:
The (largely unconscious) knowledge a speaker has of her/his language.
- Performance:
The actual use of this knowledge in concrete situations of speaking or listening.
Cf. performance errors: e.g. slips of the tongue (*roasted a cook* vs. *cooked a roast*), false starts etc.).

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Descriptive vs. prescriptive grammar

- “Don’t use an object pronoun for a subject pronoun with a conjunction”.
→ **prescriptive**
- (7) a. Bill and I went to the store.
b. Bill and me went to the store.
- Modern linguistics: **descriptive**.
A descriptive grammar is a description or model of a speaker’s knowledge of language. No attempts at evaluating language (good vs. bad).

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Descriptive vs. prescriptive grammar

- But: This does not mean that “anything goes” from the point of view of descriptive linguistics.
- (8) a. She doesn’t know him.
b. She don’t know him.
c. *She knows not him.
- (8c): Ungrammatical in all present-day varieties of English.
- (8a) vs. (8b): (8b) is grammatical only in some varieties of English. Part of the linguist’s task is then to also describe restrictions on certain linguistic features. → Geographic issues; issues of social acceptability (style, register).

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Core areas of linguistics

- **Phonetics and phonology**
Sounds and sound patterns.
 - **Morphology**
Word structure and word formation.
 - **Syntax**
Sentence structure and formation.
 - **Semantics / pragmatics**
Semantics: Meaning of words and sentences.
Pragmatics: Meaning in context.
- (8) A: Is there any shopping to do?
B: We’ll be away for most of the weekend.

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Some other fields

Applying the concepts from the core areas to the study of various linguistic issues. E.g.:

- **Language acquisition.**
 - First language acquisition.
- (9) a. Want more apple.
b. I taked a cookie.
- Second language acquisition and bilingualism.
- (10) I wonder what can I do.

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Some other fields

- **Language change.**
E.g. the syntax of negation in the history of English.
- (11) **Old English (-1100)**
He **ne** andwyrde ðam wife æt fruman.
He not answered the woman at first.
- Middle English (1100-1500)**
Yet **ne** wolde he **nat** answey sodeynly. (Chaucer)
Still not wanted he not answer immediately
- Early Modern English (1500-1800)**
I loved you **not**. (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*)

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Some other fields

- **Sociolinguistics.**
Language in society. E.g.: regional or social variation.
 - Variation in the pronunciation of *-ing* between *running* and *runnin’* in Norwich.
- Conclusion from a sociolinguistic study of the variation: The use of the standard form (*running*) is more likely with members of the middle class and women than with members of the working class and men.

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Sociolinguistics

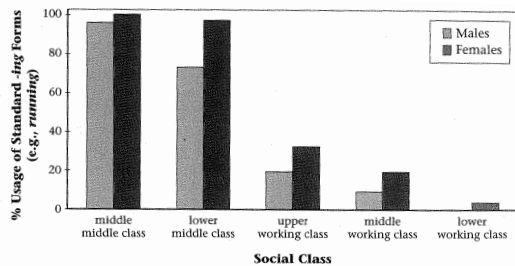


Figure 1. Percent (17) usage in formal speech in Norwich by social class and gender (based on Trudgill 1974, p. 94).

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Some other fields

- **Psycholinguistics.**
Production/comprehension of speech.
- **Computational linguistics.**
The interaction of human language and computers.
- **Discourse analysis.**
The analysis of language beyond the sentence.
- **Applied linguistics.**
E.g. language teaching, translation, language policy and planning, language and literacy issues.

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Linguistics for students of English

- Why study linguistics as a student of English?
 - The intrinsic interest of closely examining the multi-faceted properties of a language. Someone with a degree in English should have awareness and basic knowledge of these properties.
 - Also e.g. awareness of the history of the language, or of the way the language is used in different parts of the world.
 - Contribution to literary analysis: A good understanding of how a language works can be useful when analyzing the artistic use of the language.
 - Language teaching: A good understanding of how a language works is essential to correct learners in an appropriate way.

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