

---

## Introduction

---

### 1.1 What is linguistics?

Linguistics is quite simply the study of language. Theoretical linguistics is divided into four subdisciplines;

Table 1.1: The four subdisciplines of theoretical linguistics

<b>Syntax</b> (Language Structure)	<b>Semantics</b> (Linguistic Meaning)
<b>Pragmatics</b> (Language in Context)	<b>Phonology</b> (Language Sounds)

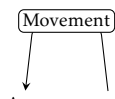
Syntax covers the structural properties of language. These structural properties are best described by comparing different languages. English takes a Subject + Verb + Object word order, e.g.

- (1) Tom watches TV

Other languages have different word orders. For example, Japanese takes a Subject + Object + Verb word order;

- (2) Tom-san-wa Terebi-o mimashita

With regard to question formation, English moves words around the sentence

- (3)  Are you *t* sure?

By contrast to make a sentence in Japanese we merely add *ka* at the end. Another aspect of syntax is word structure or **morphology**. For example the word *laugh-ed* consists of two component units or **morphemes**, with the unit to mark tense (*-ed*) coming last.

Semantics is the study of linguistic meaning, which can span both word meaning and sentence meaning. Pragmatics is the study of language in context. In the following exchange

- (4) A: Do you want to watch Mission Impossible III?  
 (5) B: I don't like action movies

B's statement has two layers of meaning. First is the explicit meaning that B doesn't like action movies. Then there is the inferred meaning that B does not want to watch Mission Impossible III. This meaning is dependent on the context. For example, we would not be able to obtain this meaning if the utterance was said in isolation. Pragmatics will be covered in Linguistics II in the second year for BScs, and first year for MScs. Finally, there is Phonology, or the sound system of language which will be covered in the Phonetics and Phonology course.

Despite the neat appearance of the four-way classification, there are plenty of phenomena which span these subdisciplines. For example, in (6) there are two participants (or "arguments") in the dropping action, while in (7) there are three participants. The number of participants a verb takes is in part related to the meaning or semantics of the verb. For example, it is difficult to imagine a giving action without three participants. However, the number of participants also affects syntax or sentence structure. So there is

a relationship between the meaning of the verb (semantics) and sentence structure (syntax). This area of research, called "argument structure" consequently spans both syntax and semantics.

(6) John dropped the bucket

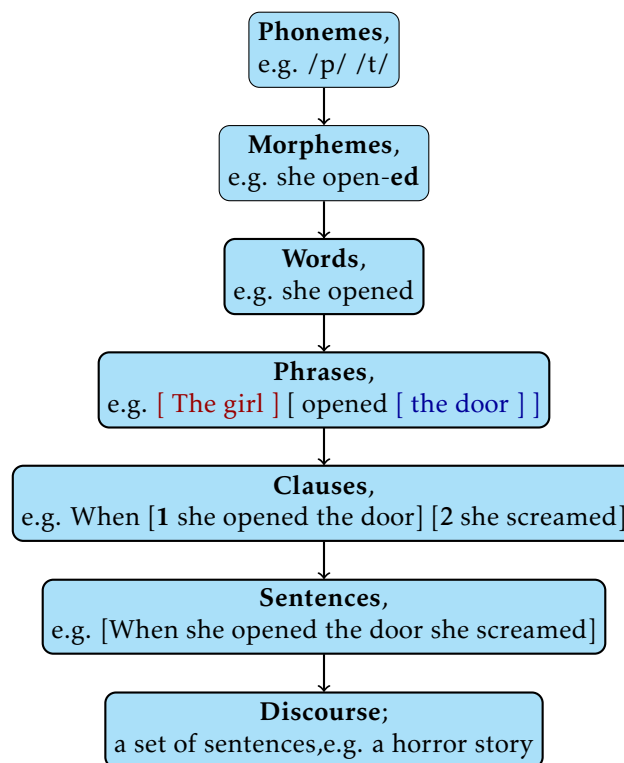
(7) Paula gave Tamsin the book

Another example, of a phenomenon which spans syntax and semantics is words. Words belong to word classes, e.g. verb, noun, and this is a syntactic property. However, words also have meanings, a semantic property. Consequently while the four-fold classification is a useful way of thinking about linguistics, it is a massive oversimplification, and the boundaries between the separate subdisciplines are fuzzy.

## 1.2 The hierarchy of language structure

Language structure can be thought of as hierarchy as shown below;

Figure 1.1: The linguistic hierarchy



We're not going to look in detail at the various different stages. However, it's worth bearing in mind that the course progresses through these stages starting with words and morphemes (next week).

## 1.3 Why study linguistics?

### Practical reasons

1. To determine whether an individual needs treatment

Many assessments involve analysing what type of linguistic constructions a client finds difficult to produce or comprehend. This is often the basis for deciding whether to treat them.

2. To determine what items or constructions need treating

Many assessments test children's performance of a range of different structures / items. You need knowledge of linguistics to determine which kinds of structures / items the child finds most difficult.

3. To inform therapy

Admittedly there are few therapies which have genuinely tried to implement linguistic theory. One example is Shape Coding (Ebbels, S. (2007). Teaching grammar to school-aged children with specific language impairment using shape coding. *Child Language Teaching & Therapy*, 23(1), 67).

### Other reasons

Another reason to study linguistics is that it is truly fascinating. Think about it for a moment. Language enables us to communicate. Communication helps us to interact and develop relationships with other humans, to learn knowledge and skills, to express opinions, to participate in society. Without language where would we be? Would we have a society? What would our relationships be like? Would we have the same capacity for abstract thought? Most of the attributes that we use to define ourselves as human depend on language. By studying linguistics we are studying the very thing which makes us human. So, when you're doing a very dry complicated linguistic exercise just step back and view the bigger picture!

## 1.4 Approaches to language structure

### Prescriptive grammars

A grammar is a set of rules of principles used to describe the utterances in a language. While it is often difficult to describe grammatical rules, we instinctively know when someone has broken them. For example we can clearly tell that the speaker of (8) is a child or a foreign language learner.

- (8) I no like it

So one approach to language is to make a list of the rules we need to follow to make well-formed utterances. This is known as the prescriptive approach, as the rules we make are prescriptive, describing the rules people *ought to* follow. However, this kind of approach is problematic. Take the English double negative, involving two negative words;

- (9) DOUBLE NEGATIVE: I do n't want no fish and chips.

- (10) SINGLE NEGATIVE; I do n't want any fish and chips

To a lot of people this sounds wrong. In fact people have argued that this is a sign of "sloppy" thought as two negatives should make a positive. For example a book called "How to write with clarity" argues that

It must be remembered that two negatives in the English language destroy each other and are equivalent to an affirmative. Often we hear such expressions as "He was not asked to give no opinion," expressing the very opposite of what is intended. The double negative, therefore, should be carefully avoided, for it is insidious.

However a brief survey of languages on our doorstep finds that both French and Spanish speakers use the double negative;

- (11) Je ne regrette rien

- (12) No me arrepiento de nada

So if the double negative is sign of sloppy thinking we would have to argue that all French and Spanish speakers are sloppy thinkers. It is clear that the moment we try to impose rules on how we should use language we are making a negative judgment about language communities who follow a slightly different set of rules. A particularly obvious example of this is the debate in the USA on African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Many commentators, including the African American actor Bill Cosby, have attempted to cast Black American English as inferior as it disobeyed the rules of Standard American English. Many linguists, for example Geoff Pullum (1999) have argued that there is nothing inferior about AAVE. It is clear that the debate regarding AAVE is coloured to a degree by perceptions of race.

You yourself are guilty of breaking prescriptive rules. For example, if asked to choose the correct version of below, you would probably choose (16), as this version is often taught at school. But if you listen to yourself speak, I bet you use (13). Therefore your language use breaks a prescriptive rule

(13) Me and Jane went to the cinema

(14) I and Jane went to the cinema

(15) Jane and me went to the cinema

(16) Jane and I went to the cinema

A final example is the sentence (17). This probably does not sound wrong to you, but until the 60s the use of *hopefully* at the beginning of the sentence (as a *sentential adverb*) was distinctly frowned upon.

(17) **Hopefully**, it won't rain this morning

So how does it feel to be a poor speaker of English?

### Prescriptive grammar and therapy

Therapists need to be constantly aware of prescriptive grammar and how it may affect their judgments. For example, a subtest of the CELF involves asking children to repeat sentences. When doing this task many children make changes to sentences which are consistent with their dialect, e.g. *the cat what he saw was wearing a red collar*. The manual states that these changes should **not** be scored as errors.



### A communicative view of language structure

We have seen that prescriptive grammars are often interwoven with social and racial prejudice. An alternative view is that the main purpose of grammatical constructions is to help members of particular community to express themselves. As long as a particular grammatical construction is used consistently and fulfils an expressive function then it is well-formed. The double negative is not standard English but is a perfectly good way for a member of a particular speech community to express themselves to another member of that speech community. For example, double negatives are hardly ever misinterpreted as a positive. Therefore we would argue that the double negative is grammatical within a specific speech community.

### Descriptive grammars

Given that any effort to describe how people should use language will almost certainly channel deeply-held prejudices, perhaps we should just attempt to describe how people speak. This is the descriptive approach. To create a descriptive grammar of English we would merely collect examples of English wherever it is spoken, and try to describe how it varies from region to region. If the prescriptive approach is a schoolteacher, telling us how we should use language, the descriptive approach is like a butterfly collector collecting samples of language.

## Mental grammars

Finally, comes the mental grammar approach, which is the main focus of theoretical linguistics. According to this approach spoken utterances are surface manifestations of underlying rules. The *me and jane* example above neatly demonstrates this. While we know that (16) is the correct version, we nearly always use (13). What's happening is that we have an explicit prescriptive rule and an underlying mental rule. It is the latter that wins out when we use the structure spontaneously.

## Focus of the course

The focus of the course will be on descriptive grammars, with some brief discussion of mental grammars. This is because descriptive grammars are extremely useful for describing a client's language and determining their need. It's a shame that there isn't more space to cover mental grammars, but I hope to give you a taster. And of course, we won't be teaching any prescriptive grammar.

## 1.5 Approaches to sentence meaning

Utterance meaning is a vastly complex topic, but we're going to focus on one extremely important principle called **compositionality**. This is really the "glue" which allows us to put words together to form meaningful utterances. At a basic level, compositionality refers to the way that the meanings of the parts of a sentence contribute to the meanings of the whole. Let's look at this in practice;

- (18) The Queen is head of the armed forces
- (19) A dog lover is head of the armed forces
- (20) A dog lover is leader of the navy
- (21) A cat lover is leader of the navy

We can see that if a change preserves the meaning of a phrase, e.g. *the queen* → *A dog lover*, *head* → *leader* then the sentence remains true. Furthermore, if the change involves a subset relationship (the navy is one of three armed forces) the change is also okay. However, if the change does not preserve meaning (*dog lover* → *cat lover*) then this affects the meaning as a whole. This clearly demonstrates that the meaning of a sentence is derived from its parts.



### Food for thought

We have learnt a very simple definition of compositionality. It can actually be broken down into three separate principles

1. Meanings of complex expressions are predictable from the sum of their parts (via general rules)
2. There is no aspect of the meaning of complex expressions which is not predictable
3. Grammatical constituents have meaning, which contributes to the meaning of the whole



## Useful Terms

Syntax, semantics, pragmatics, phonology, morphology, morpheme, prescriptive grammars, descriptive grammars, mental grammars, compositionality