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What is linguistics?

This chapter explains how linguistics differs from traditional grammar studies, and outlines the main subdivisions of the subject.

Most people spend an immense amount of their life talking, listening and, in advanced societies, reading and writing. Normal conversation uses 4,000 or 5,000 words an hour. A radio talk, where there are fewer pauses, uses as many as 8,000 or 9,000 words per hour. A person reading at a normal speed covers 14,000 or 15,000 words per hour. So someone who chats for an hour, listens to a radio talk for an hour and reads for an hour possibly comes into contact with 25,000 words in that time. Per day, the total could be as high as 100,000.

The use of language is an integral part of being human. Children all over the world start putting words together at approximately the same age, and follow remarkably similar paths in their speech development. All languages are surprisingly similar in their basic structure, whether they are found in South America, Australia or near the North Pole. Language and abstract thought are closely connected, and many people think that these two characteristics above all distinguish human beings from animals.

Insight

Normal humans use language incessantly: speaking, hearing, reading and writing. They come into contact with tens of thousands of words each day.

An inability to use language adequately can affect someone's status in society, and may even alter their personality. Because of its crucial importance in human life, every year an increasing number of psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, teachers, speech therapists, computer scientists and copywriters (to name but a few professional groups) realize that they need to study language more deeply. So it is not surprising that in recent years one of the fastest-expanding branches of knowledge has been linguistics – the systematic study of language.

Linguistics tries to answer the basic questions 'What is language?' and 'How does language work?'. It probes into various aspects of these problems, such as 'What do all languages have in common?', 'What range of variation is found among languages?', 'How does human language differ from animal communication?', 'How does a child learn to speak?', 'How does one write down and analyse an unwritten language?', 'Why do languages change?', 'To what extent are social class differences reflected in language?' and so on.

What is a linguist?

A person who studies linguistics is usually referred to as a **linguist**. The more accurate term 'linguistician' is too much of a tongue-twister to become generally accepted. The word 'linguist' is unsatisfactory: it causes confusion, since it also refers to someone who speaks a large number of languages. Linguists in the sense of linguistics experts need not be fluent in languages, though they must have a wide experience of different types of language. It is more important for them to analyse and explain linguistic phenomena such as the Turkish vowel system, or German verbs, than to make themselves understood in Istanbul or Berlin. They are skilled, objective observers rather than participants – consumers of languages rather than producers, as one social scientist flippantly commented.

Insight

A linguist in the sense of someone who analyses languages need not actually speak the language(s) they are studying.

Our type of linguist is perhaps best likened to a musicologist. A musicologist could analyse a piano concerto by pointing out the theme and variations, harmony and counterpoint. But such a person need not actually play the concerto, a task left to the concert pianist. Music theory bears the same relation to actual music as linguistics does to language.

How does linguistics differ from traditional grammar?

One frequently meets people who think that linguistics is old school grammar jazzed up with a few new names. But it differs in several basic ways.

First, and most important, linguistics is **descriptive**, not prescriptive. Linguists are interested in what *is* said, not what they think *ought* to be said. They describe language in all its aspects, but do not prescribe rules of 'correctness'.

Insight

Those who work on linguistics describe languages; they do not dictate how to use them.

It is a common fallacy that there is some absolute standard of correctness which it is the duty of linguists, schoolteachers, grammars and dictionaries to maintain. There was an uproar in the USA when in 1961 *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* included words such as *ain't* and phrases such as *ants in one's pants*. The editors were deliberately corrupting the language – or else they were incompetent, argued the critics. 'Webster III has thrust upon us a dismaying assortment of the questionable, the perverse, the unworthy and the downright outrageous,' raged one angry reviewer. But if people say *ain't* and *ants in one's pants*, linguists consider it important to record the fact. They are observers and recorders, not judges.

'I am irritated by the frequent use of the words *different to* on radio and other programmes' ran a letter to a daily paper.

'In my schooldays of fifty years ago we were taught that things were *alike to* and *different from*. Were our teachers so terribly ignorant?' This correspondent has not realized that languages are constantly changing. And the fact that he comments on the *frequent* use of *different to* indicates that it has as much right to be classified as 'correct' as *different from*.

The notion of absolute and unchanging 'correctness' is quite foreign to linguists. They might recognize that one type of speech appears, through the whim of fashion, to be more socially acceptable than others. But this does not make the socially acceptable variety any more interesting for them than the other varieties, or the old words any better than new ones. To linguists the language of a pop singer is not intrinsically worse (or better) than that of a duke. They would disagree strongly with the *Daily Telegraph* writer who complained that 'a disc jockey talking to the latest Neanderthal pop idol is a truly shocking experience of verbal squalor'. Nor do linguists condemn the coining of new words. This is a natural and continuous process, not a sign of decadence and decay. A linguist would note with interest, rather than horror, the fact that you can have your hair washed and set in a *glamorama* in North Carolina, or your car oiled at a *lubritorium* in Sydney, or that you can buy apples at a *fruitique* in a trendy suburb of London.

A second important way in which linguistics differs from traditional school grammar is that linguists regard the spoken language as primary, rather than the written. In the past, grammarians have over-stressed the importance of the written word, partly because of its permanence. It was difficult to cope with fleeting utterances before the invention of sound recording. The traditional classical education was also partly to blame. People insisted on moulding language in accordance with the usage of the 'best authors' of the ancient world, and these authors existed only in written form. This attitude began as far back as the second century BC, when scholars in Alexandria took the authors of fifth-century Greece as their models. This belief in the superiority of the written word has continued for over two millennia.

But linguists look first at the spoken word, which preceded the written everywhere in the world, as far as we know. Moreover, most writing systems are derived from the vocal sounds. Although spoken utterances and written sentences share many common features, they also exhibit considerable differences. Linguists therefore regard spoken and written forms as belonging to different, though overlapping systems, which must be analysed separately: the spoken first, then the written.

Insight

Spoken and written language need to be analysed separately. Both are important, and neither is better than the other.

A third way in which linguistics differs from traditional grammar studies is that it does not force languages into a Latin-based framework. In the past, many traditional textbooks have assumed unquestioningly that Latin provides a universal framework into which all languages fit, and countless schoolchildren have been confused by meaningless attempts to force English into foreign patterns. It is sometimes claimed, for example, that a phrase such as *for John* is in the 'dative case'. But this is blatantly untrue, since English does not have a Latin-type case system. At other times, the influence of the Latin framework is more subtle, and so more misleading. Many people have wrongly come to regard certain Latin categories as being 'natural' ones. For example, it is commonly assumed that the Latin tense divisions of past, present and future are inevitable. Yet one frequently meets languages which do not make this neat threefold distinction. In some languages, it is more important to express the duration of an action – whether it is a single act or a continuing process – than to locate the action in time.

In addition, judgements on certain constructions often turn out to have a Latin origin. For example, people frequently argue that 'good English' avoids 'split infinitives' as in the phrase *to humbly apologize*, where the infinitive *to apologize* is 'split' by *humbly*. A letter to the *London Evening Standard* is typical of many: 'Do split infinitives madden your readers as much as they do me?'

asks the correspondent. 'Can I perhaps ask that, at least, judges and editors make an effort to maintain the form of our language?' The idea that a split infinitive is wrong is based on Latin. Purists insist that, because a Latin infinitive is only one word, its English equivalent must be as near to one word as possible. To linguists, it is unthinkable to judge one language by the standards of another. Since split infinitives occur frequently in English, they are as 'correct' as unsplit ones.

Insight

Each language must be described separately, and must never be forced into a framework devised for another.

In brief, linguists are opposed to the notion that any one language can provide an adequate framework for all the others. They are trying to set up a universal framework. And there is no reason why this should resemble the grammar of Latin, or the grammar of any other language arbitrarily selected from the thousands spoken by humans.

The scope of linguistics

Linguistics covers a wide range of topics and its boundaries are difficult to define.

A diagram in the shape of a wheel gives a rough impression of the range covered.

In the centre is **phonetics**, the study of human speech sounds. A good knowledge of phonetics is useful for a linguist. Yet it is a basic background knowledge, rather than part of linguistics itself. Phoneticians are concerned with the actual physical sounds, the raw material out of which language is made. They study the position of the tongue, teeth and vocal cords during the production of sounds, and record and analyse sound waves. Linguists, on the

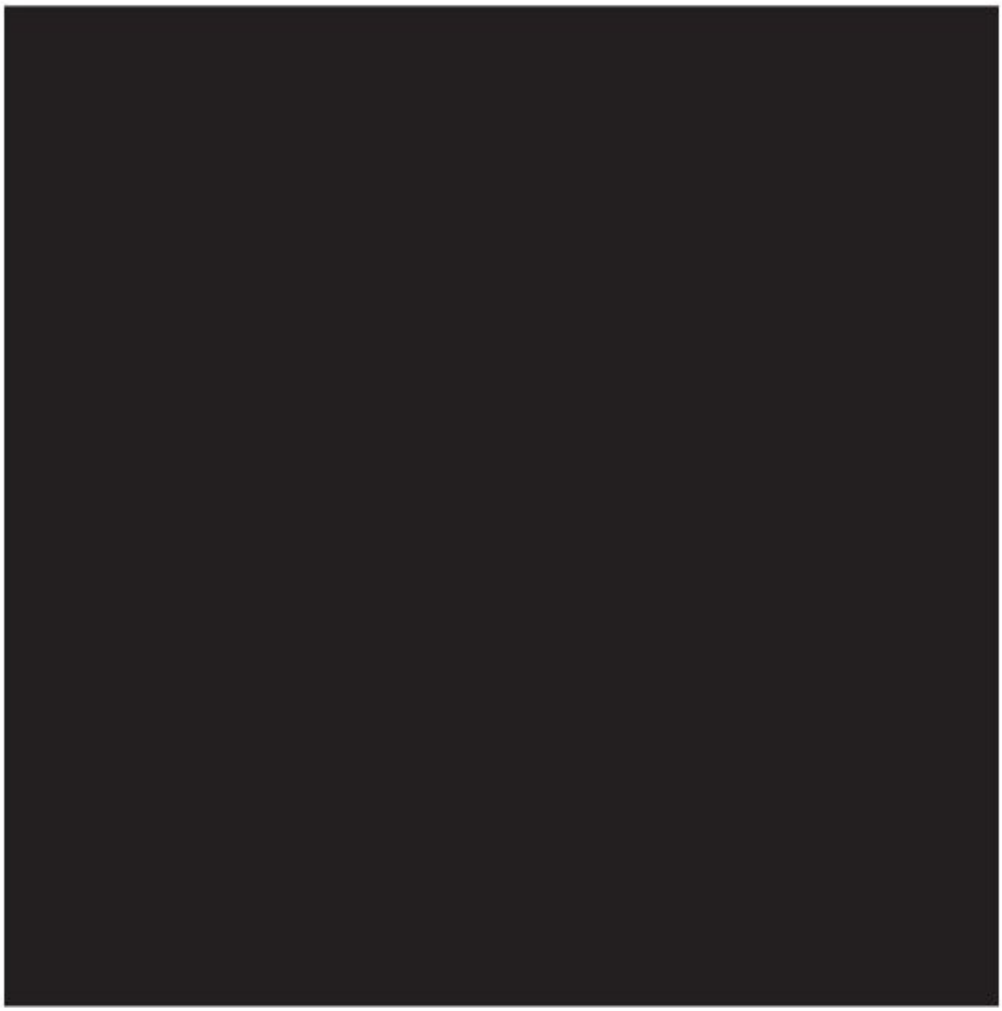

Figure 1.1.

other hand, are more interested in the way in which language is patterned. They analyse the shape or **form** of these patterns rather than the physical substance out of which the units of language are made. The famous Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, expressed the difference well when he compared language with a game of chess. The linguist is interested in the various moves which the chessmen make and how they are aligned on the board. It does not matter whether the chessmen are made of wood or ivory. Their substance does not alter the rules of the game.

Insight

The patterns of any language are more important than the physical substance out of which they are made.

Although phonetics and linguistics are sometimes referred to together as 'the linguistic sciences', phonetics is not as central to general linguistics as the study of language patterning. For this reason, information about phonetics has been placed in an appendix at the end of the book.

In Figure 1.1, phonetics is surrounded by **phonology** (sound patterning), then phonology is surrounded by **syntax**. The term 'syntax', used in its broadest sense, refers to both the arrangement and the form of words. It is that part of language which links together the sound patterns and the meaning. **Semantics** (meaning) is placed outside syntax. Phonology, syntax and semantics are the 'bread and butter' of linguistics, and are a central concern of this book. Together they constitute the **grammar** of a language.

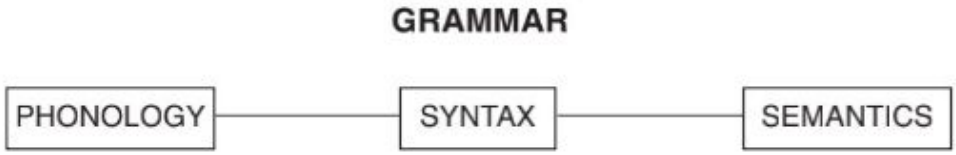

Figure 1.2.

But a word of warning about differences in terminology must be added. In some (usually older) textbooks, the word 'grammar' has a more restricted use. It refers only to what we have called the syntax. In these books, the term 'syntax' is restricted to the arrangement of words, and the standard term **morphology** is used for their make-up. This is not a case of one group of linguists being right in their use of terminology, and the other wrong, but of words gradually shifting their meaning, with the terms 'syntax' and 'grammar' extending their range.

Insight

The word *grammar* refers to sound patterns, word patterns and meaning patterns combined, and not (as in some older books) word order and word endings only.

Around the central grammatical hub comes **pragmatics**, which deals with how speakers use language in ways which cannot be predicted from linguistic knowledge alone. This fast-expanding topic has connections both with semantics, and with the various branches of linguistics which link language with the external world: **psycholinguistics** (the study of language and mind), **sociolinguistics** (the study of language and society), **applied linguistics** (the application of linguistics to language teaching), **computational linguistics** (the use of computers to simulate language and its workings), **stylistics** (the study of language and literature), **anthropological linguistics** (the study of language in cross-cultural settings) and **philosophical linguistics** (the link between language and logical thought).

These various branches overlap to some extent, so are hard to define clearly. Psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and stylistics are perhaps the ones which have expanded fastest in recent years. For this reason, they are given chapters to themselves in this book.

Finally, there are two important aspects of linguistics which have been omitted from the diagram. The first is **historical linguistics**, the study of language change. This omission was inevitable in a two-dimensional diagram. But if the wheel diagram is regarded as three-dimensional, as if it were the cross-section of a tree, then this topic can be included. A grammar can be described at one particular point in time (a single cut across the tree), or its development can be studied over a number of years, by comparing a number of different cuts made across the tree-trunk at different places.

Figure 1.3.

Because it is normally necessary to know how a system works at any one time before one can hope to understand changes, the analysis of language at a single point in time, or **synchronic** linguistics, is usually dealt with before historical or **diachronic** linguistics.

The second omission is **linguistic typology**, the study of different language types. This could not be fitted in because it spreads over several layers of the diagram, covering phonology, syntax and semantics.

This chapter has explained how linguistics differs from traditional grammar studies, and has outlined the main subdivisions within the subject. The next chapter will look at the phenomenon studied by linguistics: **language**.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

- *A normal person is likely to come into contact with tens of thousands of words each day.*
- *A person who studies linguistics is known as a linguist.*
- *A (linguistic) linguist analyses languages, but does not necessarily speak them.*
- *A linguist describes languages, but does not prescribe (dictate) how to use them.*
- *All languages, and all aspects of a language, are interesting.*
- *Languages change constantly.*
- *Spoken and written language need to be analysed separately.*
- *No language must be forced into the framework of another.*
- *Language patterns are more important to a linguist than the substance out of which the patterns are formed.*
- *Language can be analysed at a single point in time (synchronic linguistics), or its development over a number of years can be studied (diachronic linguistics).*