Chapter

1 Introduction to Linguistics

Preliminaries

Linguistics is the science that studies language. Someone who studies linguistics is a linguist. Notice that there is a common understanding of the word *linguist* as meaning "someone who knows many languages." While it is often true that linguists know several languages, being a **polyglot** (i.e., someone who knows many languages) is not a requirement for being a linguist.

Note that in the definition above we have talked about "language," not a specific language (say, English) or a group of languages. To a large extent, all languages in the world are based on similar principles. Part of our goal will be to outline such principles. The other purpose of this book (and of this course) is to make you appreciate the complexity (and the beauty) of language as well as the complex relations between the speakers, their societies, and their languages.

Language Principles

All languages of the world share some design features (see Figure 1.1). Languages share some general organizational mechanisms that distinguish them from other forms of communication, such as the systems of communication developed by animals and insects. While many animal communication systems may share some of these features, none has them all.

FIGURE 1.1: Eight Design Features of Languages

Double articulation	Language uses a small number of sounds (less than 50 in most languages) that are combined to produce a large, but finite, number of words, which can be combined in an infinite number of sentences.
Productivity	Language can produce novel sentences that have never been uttered before.
Arbitrariness	There is no necessary connection between sound and meaning: the meaning *dog* and the English word *dog* are connected arbitrarily as proven by the existence of the word *chien* in French, which expresses roughly the same meaning.
Interchangeability	An individual can both be a speaker and a hearer.
Displacement	Language can be used to talk about things that are not present or do not exist. Language can also be used to lie.
Discreteness	The differences between language units are of an all-or-nothing kind: a sound cannot be heard as something in between a *b* or a *p* sound.
Specialization	Speaking requires only a limited part of the speaker's behavior/attention and is independent of its context.
Cultural transmission	Not all aspects of language are innate; some are taught after birth and differ according to the culture the child is reared in.

The Subfields of Linguistics

The fields in which linguistics is traditionally divided are:

- **Phonetics** deals with the sounds of language.
- **Phonology** deals with how the sounds are organized.
- **Morphology** deals with how sounds are put together to form words.
- **Syntax** deals with how sentences are formed.
- **Semantics** deals with the meanings of words, sentences, and texts.
- **Pragmatics** deals with how sentences and texts are used in the world (i.e., in context).
- **Text linguistics** deals with units larger than sentences, such as paragraphs and texts (i.e., any message, large or small, simple or complex, expressed through language).

Several other fields within linguistics that look at language from the perspective of another discipline include:

- Sociolinguistics (language in society)
- Psycholinguistics (psychology of language)
- Anthropological linguistics (anthropology of language, a.k.a. ethnolinguistics)
- Historical linguistics (the history of languages)
- Neurolinguistics (language and the brain)
- Language pedagogy (how to teach languages; its best-known field is English as a second/foreign language)
- Computational linguistics (computers and language)
- Many others, such as forensic linguistics (language and the law) and translation.

Exercises

Words to Know

double articulation	productivity	arbitrariness
interchangeability	displacement	discreteness
specialization	cultural transmission	

Review 1.1

1. Explain: All languages in the world are based on similar principles.

2. What evidence in this unit tells you that linguistics is primarily concerned with speech? Which subfields might be useful for investigating literacy?

Approaches to Language

The following sections will outline different ways in which a linguist, or a knowledgeable amateur, may approach language. The sections will cover the prescriptive and descriptive approaches, the historical approach (with a few hints at the origins of linguistics as a historical discipline), and the very important competence-versus-performance distinction. The last section rounds the chapter off with a discussion of the scientific method as it applies to the study of language.

Prescriptive vs. Descriptive

You have been using, but also studying, language for much of your life.

TASK

What grammar rules do you remember from school? Make a list. After you have read this section, try to decide whether the rules you remember are prescriptive or descriptive rules.

We can look at language from two points of view:

- **Prescriptivism** consists basically of stating what is considered right and wrong in language. It passes judgments—for example, splitting infinitives is wrong. This means that *To boldly go where no one has gone before...* is a bad sentence because it "splits" the infinitive *to go*.
- **Descriptivism,** on the other hand, consists of describing the facts, as in, some people split infinitives, and some don't. Which kind of people split infinitives? When do they do that? What can be used to split an infinitive?

A common misunderstanding is that descriptivists "have no rules" and that they have a permissive "anything goes" attitude. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Descriptive linguistics is dedicated to describing the rules of the language, and language is seen as essentially rule-governed (that is, made of rules). So what is the issue? Don't descriptivists and prescriptivists agree?

In fact, prescriptivists and descriptivists disagree deeply: descriptivists seek to find the rules that govern the languages spoken by people (i.e., English, French, Chinese, Swahili, and all others), while prescriptivists, for the major part, seek to impose arbitrary rules that come from outside the language and/or seek to preserve a stage of the language that has been left behind by the evolution of the language itself.

For example, the prescription of the avoidance of the split infinitive was based on the fact that Latin avoided doing so, when Latin was thought of as a "better" language than English. Often prescriptivists are merely clinging to a past state of the language. For example, the distinction between *who* and *whom* is now lost on most speakers. There isn't anything anyone can do, practically speaking, to restore this distinction.

What prescriptivists say is often not supported by linguistic data. For example, a common claim of prescriptivists is that the "double negative" (*I don't want no fish*) should be banned. English has always had the double negative. Shakespeare uses it in Romeo and Juliet, III, i (Mercutio: *I will not budge for no man's pleasure*).

So why do people get so upset about prescriptivism? Perhaps because following certain grammatical rules is a social "shibboleth." A shibboleth provides information about the group to which individuals belong.

> The word *shibboleth* comes from the Bible (Judges, 12:6), where it is used by the Gileadites to distinguish themselves from the Ephraimites, who pronounced it *sibboleth*. Once the Gileadites sorted themselves out from the Ephraimites, they killed their rivals.

Linguistic usage helps gather information about someone. If you do or say something in a certain way, you belong to a certain group. Following or not following certain linguistic forms may be used to identify a social class or ethnic group. For example, African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) eliminates the copula in certain syntactic constructions, roughly whenever Informal English allows contractions (In *It's*, *'s* is the contracted form of *is,* the third-person singular form of the **copula**). So, *They are home* would be *They home* in AAVE (see Chapter 7 for a fuller discussion). This elimination of the copula and other features of AAVE may be perceived as unprofessional or as ignorant, while in fact, they are signs of a speaker speaking a different dialect. Because of various historical reasons (essentially, the history of discrimination against African Americans), the AAVE dialect is considered less prestigious than other dialects; therefore, speakers

will associate negative impressions, such as those noted, with it. In other words, the dialect a speaker uses marks him or her socially. This is why the use of a particular dialect (or some features of a dialect) may be used as a social shibboleth.

What are the most egregious examples of prescriptivism? The following are some examples that you may have unwittingly been exposed to.

Double Negatives

The **double negative** "rule" was invented in 1762 by Robert Lowth, a British priest, who stated the rule that two negatives affirm (*I am not unaware = I am aware*). This " rule" is not true. English has always had double negatives. Despite the success of Lowth's grammar book in which he presented his ideas, this rule never made it past written English. Double and triple negatives are found in spoken English, but they are not tolerated in written English, which is typically more formal.

On occasion, even in written English, we use double negatives that do not affirm. The sentence *He couldn't sleep, even with a sedative* has the same meaning as *He couldn't sleep, not even with a sedative*. In the second sentence, the second *not* reinforces the first. In other words, we use two negatives yet the sentence does not affirm, thus showing that Lowth's rule does not always work.

In essence, the double negative rule doesn't make sense historically, and it doesn't always apply where it should. Rather, this rule is an issue of social class and good manners. If you follow this rule, you belong to the "educated" group.

Split Infinitives

The traditional rule concerning **split infinitives** states that one should not put something between the *to* and the rest of the verb in an infinitive; in other words, don't split the infinitive. If we try to change the sentence *I have tried to consciously stop worrying about it* to make it follow this rule, we would change the meaning of the sentence: *I have tried to stop consciously*

worrying about it, or *I have consciously tried to stop worrying about it*. The rule and the sentence can't both be right; therefore, we must split infinitives in some cases when necessary.

Postponed Prepositions

A question such as *What are you looking at?* comes from a statement having the rough form of *You are looking at what*. If the indirect or direct object is moved to the beginning of the sentence to form a *wh*-question, a preposition ends up being left at the end of the sentence—hence the term **postponed preposition.**

Wh-questions, relative clauses, and exclamations (*What a fine mess you've gotten us into!*) will always have postponed prepositions; there's no way to avoid them. Sometimes using the passive voice can also result in sentences that end with a preposition, as in *She was sought after*.

Infinitive clauses are also difficult to change. Consider the sentence *He's impossible to work with.* Where could one move *with* to make it "grammatically" correct, short of changing the sentence altogether? Note that if you reword the sentence as *It is impossible to work with him,* you are shifting the emphasis from *he* to *impossible*.

> "This is the sort of English up with which I will not put."
>
> —Winston Churchill's famous line demonstrating how he felt abut this particular grammar rule

Language Planning

Not all prescriptivism is wrong, though; for example, language planning may have positive effects. **Language planning** is when the government (or any other public body) decides which languages will be taught in schools or which languages public employees must know. The revival of biblical Hebrew in modern Israel is one good example of language planning. Bibli-

cal Hebrew had been a dead language for centuries, but with the new Israeli state underway, the government needed to decide on a language. They chose Hebrew for various religious and political reasons. Among the other contenders were Yiddish and English, both spoken by many people. Naturally, the speakers have had to invent many new words that were not in the Bible (e.g., *telephone*). Other examples of language planning are the campaign against sexist language (see Chapter 8), and government and school board decisions about which languages should be used for instruction, which books to use, and so on. More discussion of language planning may be found in Chapter 6.

Diachronic vs. Synchronic

Linguistics may focus either on the history of the language or how it functions at any given point in time.

The **diachronic** view:

- studies how language changes through time.
- traces a word back to its origins (**etymology**).
- reconstructs languages that are no longer spoken, by comparing several languages that descend from them (this is known as the comparative method).

The **synchronic** view:

- studies how language functions at any given moment in time. For example, we might study classical Latin, how Latin was spoken roughly between the first century BCE and the first century CE, synchronically. We do not focus on change: once we start looking at how Latin got to be that way or evolved, our view becomes diachronic.
- is not concerned with the origin of words or languages.

The distinction between synchronic and diachronic approaches is not absolute. There are points that overlap: In each generation new words are created, or already existing words change their meaning, and speakers perceive them as **neologisms** or new words. At the same time, old words die out—that is, they are no longer used (they become **archaisms**) and eventually are no longer understood and are forgotten. Clearly, in order to label a word as a neologism or an archaism, one must refer to the diachronic aspect of language, even when one is describing language synchronically.

Competence vs. Performance

There are two ways of looking at language synchronically: We can look at the actual sentences that a speaker says (or writes or signs), or we can try to abstract away from the actual production of any given speaker at any given time and try to describe the speaker's knowledge about his or her language. This is what the opposition of competence and performance tries to achieve.

- **Competence** is the ability to produce a word (or sentence) and what you know about a word (or sentence).
- **Performance** is actually saying the word (or sentence) and the sounds you articulate and make.

So, competence is what speakers know when they know how to speak a language, whereas performance is what speakers actually do. Note that competence is not what speakers know about their language (e.g., that English is spoken in England and that it used to be called Anglo-Saxon, among other facts), but rather the skills that they have acquired, without having an explicit understanding of what they know. Recently, competence has been referred to as **i-language** (for internalized language or **internalized grammar,** which is language that the speakers have in their brains) and performance as **e-language** (for externalized language, which is spoken, written, or signed language).

TASK

Think of riding a bicycle. Could you describe how you do it? It's harder than you may think. Try to do so.

Some linguists say that only competence is important. This is somewhat overstated. Competence is the idealization of performance. The competence of a speaker is his or her performance not affected by such factors as fatigue, the need to eat, or other such problems. Stuttering is a performance problem, not a competence problem. Slurring words when drunk is another performance problem.

What does the competence/performance distinction do for us? Think how hard it would be to write a grammar that included all the possible mistakes and false starts that speakers may produce when saying a sentence. All of those are idealized away by competence.

Linguistics as a Science

We began our presentation with the claim that linguistics is the science that studies language. Another way to express this is to say that linguistics is the scientific study of language. This means that linguists need to follow certain procedures to make sure that their conclusions are appropriate. This is the **scientific method**. Essentially, this consists of formulating a first hypothesis on the basis of the available data and then checking the validity of this hypothesis against new data. If the data do not match the hypothesis, the first hypothesis is proven wrong and the linguist will need to formulate a new hypothesis. This implies that a theory can never be proven right but that it can be proven wrong any time a new observation (a new datum) contradicts it. This is called the **principle of falsification**.

Consider this example. On the basis of the following data, a linguist is trying to formulate a hypothesis on how questions are formed in English:

(1.1) Does Mary love John? / Mary loves John.

(1.2) Did Mary meet John? / Mary met John.

(1.3) Do you want more coffee? / You want more coffee.

On the basis of these data, the linguist could produce the hypothesis that to make a question in English, it is necessary to put the auxiliary *do* at the beginning of the sentence, in the right tense and person, and change the main verb of the sentence to the bare infinitive form. However, the next piece of data the linguist encounters is this:

(1.4) Is Mary a well-known woman? / Mary is a well-known woman.

This example clearly does not follow the hypothesis (there is no *do* at the beginning of the sentence and the verb has been moved and not put in the infinitive) and thus falsifies it. The linguist will then have to formulate a new hypothesis on how questions are formed that will take into account the new data.

TASK

Try to work out a better hypothesis for making questions in English.

MYTH 1 **If it's in the dictionary, it's "correct."**

Some of the most grossly misinformed discussions of the prescriptive/descriptive distinction have been about dictionaries. Periodically, there is a newspaper article making fun of a new word that has been added to a dictionary. The most famous discussion was about the inclusion of the word *ain't* in *Webster's Third International Dictionary* in 1961, but this is something that continues to happen. People (in this case, journalists) are mistaken about the purpose of a dictionary, which is to describe the current language, not to rule on what is correct. To be sure, some dictionaries do have a practice of labeling words as *informal* or even *vulgar*, but such practice goes beyond the dictionary's core mission (and the judgments made are frequently controversial and unhelpful). We hear and read neologisms and where else can we turn but to a dictionary to find the meaning of these words? Dictionaries, by including certain words, are not endorsing them, only describing their use.

Exercises

Words to Know

prescriptive	descriptive	double negative
split infinitive	postponed preposition	diachronic
synchronic	competence	performance
internalized grammar	principle of falsification	i-language
e-language	neologism	archaism
scientific method	language planning	copula

Review 1.2

1. Identify the difference between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to language.

2. How do the diachronic and synchronic views of language differ?

3. Identify how competence differs from performance.

4. How is linguistics a science?

Practice 1.2

Intuition & Grammaticality: Rely on your native language abilities to help you identify what seems problematic or "ungrammatical" about each sentence. Rewrite the sentence so it is grammatically correct.

1. Who are you talking to? _____
   _____

2. The moderator tried to clearly restate the candidate's response.
   _____
   _____

3. The driver thought he had went the wrong way on the turnpike.
   _____
   _____

4. Do you think there's too many words on the page?
   _____
   _____

5. Waiting in line for more than six hours, the tickets finally went on sale. _____

_____

6. Vinnie spent the whole day laying around the house.

_____

_____

7. Tori felt badly that she had missed your phone call.

_____

_____

8. Me and her waited more than two hours for your plane to land.

_____

_____

9. Dawn's new staff include Bruce, Theo, and Evan from the old office.

_____

_____

10. We knew right away that we should of taken a left turn at the light.

_____

_____

11. Our tutor, Fiona, met with my classmates and I this morning.

_____

_____

12. Andrew said he did pretty good on the exam.

_____

_____

13. My clothes really need washed.

_____

_____

Chapter Research Projects

1. Compile some statements of prescriptivism and descriptivism in language. Good sources for prescriptivist claims are works by William Safire (1980) and John Simon (1980). Good sources favoring descriptivism are works by Jim Quinn (1980) and Steven Pinker (1994) (all of which are in the bibliography at the end of the volume).
2. In a dictionary with etymologies, or in Ullmann (1957), find some words that have changed in meaning over time.
3. Read and summarize Saussure (1916) on *langue* and *parole*.
4. Read Quinn (1980). Find the most amusing example of a wrong-headed claim by a prescriptivist and prepare a presentation for your class.
5. Do you recall any experience in which you were taught a rule that now you see makes no sense? How do you feel about it? Write a short essay documenting your experience and share it with your classmates/colleagues.
6. If you are (or are going to be) a teacher, write an essay on how one of these relates or will relate to your teaching situation: prescriptivism; language change.

Further Readings

The reader may find dictionaries of linguistics useful. Among the best are: Matthews (2007), with broad coverage and clear explanations; Richards, Platt, and Schmidt (2010) oriented toward applied linguistics; Trudgill (2003) on sociolinguistics; Crystal's text (2008), in its sixth edition, oriented toward theoretical linguistics. Bussman is a general dictionary of linguistics (1996). Ducrot and Todorov's (1972; translated 1979) work is a bit older but also of interest. Two massive encyclopedias are available for further research: Frawley (2003) in four volumes and Brown (2006) in fourteen volumes. These require serious effort. Crystal's single-volume *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (2010) is very accessible, user friendly, and packed with interesting tidbits. Spolsky and Hult (2008) is good for educational linguistics issues.

Etymological issues can be addressed with the Oxford English Dictionary, which any serious research library should carry. Webster's current edition also lists etymologies of words and is more accessible for homework. McArthur (2005) is a concise introduction to many aspects of the English language.

General introductions to the subfields of linguistics can be found in Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2011); O'Grady et al. (2010); Akmajian et al. (2010); Aitchison (2004); Hudson (2000); and Ohio State University's Linguistics Department *Language Files* (Bergmann 2007). Classical introductions to the field are Bloomfield (1933), Sapir (1921), Saussure (1916), and Martinet (1966).

The design features of language come from Hockett (1958), *A Course in Modern Linguistics*. In the original, there are seven features. We have added, from further research, discreteness. On prescriptivism see Hall (1960), which offers a "militant" discussion of the linguistic reasons against prescriptivism. The spirit of the book is best summed up in the original title *Leave Your Language Alone*. Another great source on prescriptivism is Quinn (1980). On the history of linguistics, a short introduction is Robins (1997). On historical linguistics, a good reference work is Hock (1991). On linguistics as a science, the only book-length treatment is Botha (1981), which is not for beginners.