

Language: Nature and Function

When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the "human essence," the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man.

NOAM CHOMSKY, *Language and Mind*

Linguists are often asked questions like: What is linguistics?, why study linguistics?, What does a linguist do? In answer to the first question linguists may reply: **Linguistics is the scientific study of language.** We must now have a look at just what we mean by **language**. Language is such a familiar phenomenon that people can easily fall into the trap of thinking that we know all about it. 'of course I know what language is', someone might say, 'I use it all the time, don't I? Or again 'Everyone knows what language is, so why make such a song and dance over it?' But language is acquired or first learned in a natural environment in infancy or childhood (this is generally the case of native language or mother tongue) then, gradually as with all other skills, we have to be taught how to use it. Once it has been learned, we tend to take it for granted – until, of course, something starts to go wrong. It is when we are required, for example, to learn a new language, that we begin to realize the complexity of what we have achieved or mastered. Language, to put it mildly, is a very complex phenomenon. First of all, let's begin by considering its function: what is language's main job?

Language is the most frequently used and highly developed form of human communication. Whatever else people may do when they come together – whether they play, fight, or make automobiles – they talk. We live in a world of words. We talk to our friends, our associates, our wives and husbands, our mothers and mothers-in-law, we even talk to total strangers. We

Some Characteristics of Human Language

Here are some characteristics of language as a human faculty or as a universal and recognizable part of human behaviour:

1. **Flexibility:** By flexibility we mean man's ability to talk about things and events that are far in time and space. We can use language to express our emotions and feelings, to solicit the co-operation of others, to make threats or promises, to issue commands, to ask questions or make statements. We can make reference to the past, present and future and even to things that do not exist. No other system of communication – human or non-human – would seem to have this characteristic.

2. **Arbitrariness:** It has to do with the relation between the words and their meanings. The connection between the word (form) and its meaning is arbitrary and a matter of convention. This means that given the form, it is impossible to predict the meaning and given the meaning, it is impossible to predict the form.

3. **Productivity:** It is the capacity of man to say things that have never been said or heard before and yet to be understood by other speakers, and the ability to produce and understand an unlimited number of sentences.

4. **Duality:** By duality is meant the property of having two levels of structure: 'primary' and 'secondary'. The units of the primary level are composed of elements of the secondary level. The sounds do not of themselves convey meaning, i.e., they are meaningless. Their sole function is to combine with one another to make units which do not have a particular meaning.

What is the advantage of duality? A large number of different units can be formed out of a small number of elements. Many thousands of words can be formed, for example, out of thirty or forty sounds. (If these primary units can be combined in various ways the number of different messages is increased enormously. There is no limit to the number of distinct language messages that can be constructed in particular languages.)

5. Discreteness: It is a property of the secondary elements. By discreteness we mean the unlimited variety of sounds that can be produced by the human vocal organs. But in any language a small number of sounds are used and the difference between these sounds is absolute, i.e., no sound is like the other.

Language Forms: Speech and Writing

Language is generally identified with speech. However, a distinction must be drawn between the **message** and the **medium** in which the message is realized. Thus, it is possible to read aloud what is written and to write what is spoken. So the message can be transferred from one medium to another. We will say that language has the property of **medium transferability**.

Speech is prior to writing in different ways: historically, biologically, structurally and functionally.

The historical priority: Historically speaking, human beings have known speech before writing, i.e., speech is prior to writing. Moreover, there is no human society known to exist or to have existed at any time in the past without the capacity of speech.

The biological priority: In the normal course of events, children acquire a command of the spoken language naturally (biological endowment and without special training), whereas reading and writing are special skills in which children are given special instruction based upon their prior knowledge of the spoken language.

The structural priority: All languages make use of an alphabetic writing- system which is an association of particular shapes with particular sounds. In this respect, spoken language is structurally more basic than the written language.

Note: A sound which is not pronounced at all can be represented by a letter, for example, talk, honest, should, would in English; honnête, heureux in French.

The functional priority: The spoken language is used for a wider range of purposes than the written language (mass media, telephone, etc.). It should be said, however, that writing serves as a functional substitute for speech in situations which make vocal-auditory communication impossible, unreliable or inefficient. Written texts have been used for such important purposes throughout history and are more reliable and more enduring than spoken sentences. This has contributed to the greater formality and prestige of written languages in many cultures.

Traditional and Modern Approaches to Language Study

Traditional approaches to language study are referred to as **traditional grammar** and modern approaches to language study are referred to as **modern linguistics** or simply **linguistics**.

Linguistics is generally and commonly defined as the **science of language** or the **scientific study of language**. The term **scientific** is used in opposition to traditional grammar which gave the priority to the written language rather than the spoken one. Traditional grammar was **non-scientific** in the sense that it was prescriptive because it was more or less concerned exclusively with the standard, literary language and tended to disregard or to condemn as incorrect more informal or colloquial usage both in speech and writing.

Traditional grammar was developed on the basis of Greek and Latin languages and it was also applied with minimal modifications to the description of a large number of other languages. An example of traditional grammar is the grammar of Arabic. It is only concerned with the classical variety of Arabic or Classical Arabic and also the standard variety of Arabic or Standard Arabic and does not apply to the variety of Arabic or dialect we speak in our everyday life.

It should be specified here that **Standard language** in opposition to other dialects is the one that has acquired prestige and become the instrument of administration, education, literature and media. It is used by a greater number of people and for a wider range of activities and it is this variety of language which was the subject matter of traditional grammar.

The other varieties or **dialects** which can be regional or social, i.e., they can vary from one region to another or from one social group to another, were

not included in the scope of study of traditional grammar which regarded them as imperfect approximations to the standard. This is the reason why this type of grammar is called prescriptive since it accepts one part or a variety of a language, the standard, as correct or pure and rejects the other parts or varieties as incorrect. The important point here is that the regional or social varieties of a language or dialects, let's say Arabic for example, are no less systematic than the standard language and should not be described as imperfect approximations to it. It is important to emphasize here this point since many people are inclined to believe that it is only the standard language taught in schools that is subject to systematic description. From a purely linguistic point of view, all the dialects of a language are of equal consideration, something which traditional grammar failed to realize.

One of the principal aims of modern linguistics has therefore been to construct a theory of grammar which is more general than the traditional theory, one that is appropriate for the description of all human languages. This theory is said to be descriptive and not prescriptive, i.e., it describes language as it is, not as it should be. In other words, it studies language objectively, without judgements or criticism. Modern linguistic theory is scientific because it is also explicit and empirical, i.e., based on observable facts. What is generally understood by scientific description is one that is carried out systematically on the basis of objectively verifiable observations. The linguist is therefore interested in all languages and all varieties of the language and his principle is one of generalization.

From what has been said so far and according to many other contemporary linguists such as Lyons the traditional grammarian tended, therefore, to assume that the spoken language is inferior to and in some sense dependent upon the standard written language or literary language. In conscious

opposition to this view, the contemporary linguist maintains that the spoken language, whatever its form and variety, is primary and that writing is a means of representing it.

It is also important to mention that linguistics is primarily concerned with the **non-historical** or **synchronic** study of language, i.e., the study of a state of a language at a given time, regardless of its previous or future history. For example, it is interested in English as it is used now in opposition to a **diachronic** study of language which is a description of its historical development, i.e., through time. This terminology (diachronic/synchronic) has been introduced to modern linguistics by the father figure of modern linguistics, the Swiss scholar Ferdinand De Saussure whose lectures were reconstructed, as specified by Lyons and others, from the notes of his students and were published in 1915 after his death as Cours de linguistique générale.

To conclude this introductory chapter, the following diagram summarizes the main points or significant differences between the two approaches:

<u>Traditional Grammar</u>	<u>Modern Linguistics</u>
- Selective, subjective (evaluates criticizes), selects as right, as wrong. - Priority to written language. - Based on classical languages such as Greek and Latin - Interested in particular languages such as standard and literary languages - Prescriptive: prescribes rules telling people how they ought to speak and write.	- Scientific: objective, empirical, systematic, explicit, descriptive. - Synchronic (non-historical) - Priority to spoken language. - General (interested in all languages, in all forms and all aspects of the language) - Describes language in its own terms, no judgements.
<u>Notion of correctness</u>	<u>Notion of appropriateness</u>

Micro-linguistic Branches or Core Linguistics

the central part of the subject
a.k.a. Core Linguistics

Microlinguistics is generally considered as **core linguistics** since it is concerned with the fundamentals or basic components of language, i.e., sound, form and meaning. In a microlinguistic study, language is viewed as a system in itself, within itself and for itself independently of any other consideration of a non-linguistic or extra-linguistic nature such as the psychological context, the sociological context or the cultural context and so on. Core linguistics or microlinguistics consists therefore of many interrelated branches or parts:



The oldest and most widely-used division of **grammar** is that between **morphology** and **syntax**. Morphology is thus a branch of linguistics which studies the structure of words or word formation. For example, the following words can be divided into parts, each of which has some kind of independent meaning.

e.g.: Unhappiness: un- - happy - -ness

Horses: horse- -s

Talking: talk- -ing

Irremplaçable : ir- -remplacer- -able

Garçons: garçon- -s

عرب - ي - ة : عربية

second language acquisition

Happy, horse and talk plainly have a meaning, as do the elements attached to them (the 'affixes'): **un-** carries a negative meaning, **-ness** expresses a state or

quality; -s expresses plural; and -ing conveys a sense of duration. The smallest meaningful elements into which words can be analysed are known as **morphemes**, and the way morphemes operate in language provides the subject matter of morphology.

Syntax is that part which accounts for the regularities governing the combination of words. It is also defined as the rules underlying the construction of sentences. It is by means of syntactic rules that we can specify the grammaticality or ungrammaticality of sentences. For example, the syntactic rules specify which of the following sentences is grammatical and which is ungrammatical (the latter are marked with an asterisk*):

- e.g.: Susan wanted George to go.
*Susan wanted George go.
Susan heard George go.
*Susan heard George to go.

The part which describes the meaning of words and sentences is **semantics**. It is the branch of linguistics which is concerned with meaning, for example, identifying words which have more than one meaning (**polysemous** words: break, break a cup; break, break the law/the rules; break, break a journey to London at oxford, i.e., stop in Oxford on the way to London), words which are similar in meaning (**synonyms** or **synonymous words**: deep=profound; mature=^{developed}ripe), words with opposite meanings (**antonyms** or **antonymous words**: alive/ dead; married/ single) and words with simply different meanings (get, take)

The part of linguistics that deals with the sounds and their permissible combinations is **phonology**. It is by means of phonological rules that we can specify, for example, that **apt** and not **atp** is a possible English word. It should be specified, however, ^{or pronounce} that many students confuse between that part of

is a sub-
of
↑
logics

linguistics which is **phonology** and that part which is **phonetics**. It seems important here to stress the difference between the two.

is an independent discipline

Phonetics is that part or branch of linguistics which studies the basic sounds of speech, investigates all sounds of human speech objectively whether they conform to any given social or personal standard or not. It is the science of human speech sounds. Phonetics is concerned with establishing precisely what goes on or what happens when one speaks either in the mouth (**articulatory phonetics**), or in the air (**acoustic phonetics**) or in the ear (**auditory phonetics**). Phonetics is thus essentially a descriptive, empirical study (based on observable facts). It is also a general one, i.e., it is not restricted to studying the sounds of any one language or group of languages. It studies the features of all human sounds whichever language they happen to occur in. This branch of linguistics is accordingly often referred to as **general phonetics**.

from a large independent point of view
without any reference to any language

However, language is not randomly articulated human noise. It is patterned noise, i.e., sound with organization. Out of the total range of sounds a human being can produce, only a limited number are used in any one language. We refer to the kinds of sounds which occur in a given language and the patterns into which they fall as the **sound system** of that language and the study of sound-systems is called, **phonology**. Phonology is thus different from phonetics in that phonetics studies sounds without restricting its attention to any one language whereas phonology deals with sounds only within the context of some specific language. It should be specified that these sounds constitute the minimal or smallest units of phonological description which are called **phonemes**. A **phoneme** is a minimal unit that serves to distinguish between meanings of words. The phonemes /r/ and /l/ (represented between slashes by convention) serve to distinguish the word **rip** from the word **lip**. The

phonetic variants of a phoneme are called **allophones**. Each allophone is used in a specific phonetic context. In English, for example, word initial voiceless stops (/p/, /t/, /k/) are **aspirated**, whereas non word-initial voiceless stops are not aspirated. This can be seen by putting your fingers right in front of your lips and notice the difference in breathiness as you say **pin** and **spin**. Therefore, [p^h] (as in **pin**) and [p] (as in **spin**) are allophones of the phoneme /p/.