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ABSTRACT

Linguistics is the study of human language, and has several major divisions: formal linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and applied linguistics. Formal linguistics is the study of grammar, or the development of theories about how language works and is organized. Within formal linguistics there are three major schools of thought: traditional, structural, and generative/transformational grammar. The principal areas of study within the field are phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Sociolinguistics is the study of language as a social and cultural phenomenon, and includes the study of language variation, language and social interaction, language attitudes, and language planning. Psycholinguistics is the study of the relationship between linguistic and psychological behavior, including first and second language acquisition, the relationship of language and cognition, and the processes by which humans store and retrieve linguistic information. Applied linguistics is concerned with the use of linguistic research findings for the solution of practical problems and for innovation in everyday language matters such as language teaching, literacy education, development of grammars and alphabets for unwritten languages, lexicography, legal matters involving language, and speech synthesis and recognition. (MSE)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

ERIC Digest

What Is Linguistics?

Prepared by the staff of the Center for Applied Linguistics *December, 1986*

What is Linguistics?

Linguistics is the study of human language. Knowledge of linguistics, however, is different from knowledge of a language. Just as a person is able to drive a car without understanding the inner workings of the engine, so, too, can a speaker use a language without any conscious knowledge of its internal structure. And conversely, a linguist can know and understand the internal structure of a language without actually speaking it.

What Do Linguists Study?

A linguist, then, is not an individual who speaks many languages, more accurately called a "polyglot" or a "bi-" or "multilingual". Rather, linguists are concerned with the grammar of a language, with the social and psychological aspects of language use, and with the relationships among languages, both historical and in the present. As in any complex field, there are several major divisions within the field of linguistics.

Formal Linguistics

Formal linguistics is the study of grammar, or the development of theories as to how language works and is organized. Formal linguists compare grammars of different languages, and by identifying and studying the elements common among them, seek to discover the most efficient way to describe language in general. The ultimate goal of this process is a "universal grammar"--the development of a theory to explain how the human brain processes language. Within formal linguistics, there are three main schools of thought:

Traditional. The traditional approach to grammar is the one that is probably most familiar to the majority of us. A typical definition in a traditional grammar is "A noun is a person, place, or thing." "Adjective clause," "noun clause," "complement," and "part of speech" are other familiar terms from traditional grammars.

Structural. Structural linguistics, a principally American phenomenon of the 1940's, was heavily influenced by the work of B.F. Skinner. Of the areas of linguistic study to be described below, structuralists are principally concerned with phonology, morphology and syntax. Structuralists exclude meaning from the study of language, focusing instead on linguistic forms and their arrangement. "Phoneme," "morpheme," "form class" and "constituent" are terms typically used in structural grammars.

Generative/transformational. The generative/transformational approach to the description of language was introduced in 1957 with the publication of Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*. Generative approaches include meaning in the study of language, and look for patterned relationships between "deep" structures of meaning and "surface" structures of linguistic forms actually used by the speaker. Since Chomsky's original proposals in 1957, there have been numerous elaborations and alternative theories (some discussed by Newmeyer, 1986), so that today, a number of approaches are being discussed.

The following are the principal areas of study within formal linguistics:

Phonetics. Phonetics is the study of the sounds of language and their physical properties. Phonetics describes how speech sounds are produced by the vocal apparatus (the lungs, vocal cords, tongue, teeth, etc.) and provides a framework for their classification. Two practical applications of phonetics are speech synthesis, the reproduction by mechanical means of the sounds produced in human language; and speech recognition, the developing capacity of computers to comprehend spoken input.

Phonology. Phonology is concerned with the analysis and description of the meaningful sounds uttered in the production of human language, and how those sounds function in different languages. The letter "p", for example, can be pronounced in several different ways: an English speaker interprets these different pronunciations as one sound, whereas a speaker of some other language might interpret the pronunciations as two or more sounds. It is phonological analysis such as this that allows the foreign language teacher to pinpoint and correct students' pronunciation difficulties in the foreign language classroom.

Morphology. Morphology is the study of the structure of words. Morphologists study minimal meaning units, or morphemes, and investigate the possible combinations of these units in a language to form words. For example, the word "imperfections" is composed of four morphemes: im+perfect+ion+s. The root, "perfect", is transformed from an adjective into a noun by the addition of "ion", made negative with "im" and pluralized by "s".

Syntax. Syntax is the study of the structure of sentences. Syntacticians describe how words combine into phrases and clauses and how these combine to form sentences. For example, "I found a coin yesterday" is embedded as a relative clause in "The coin which I found yesterday is quite valuable." Syntacticians describe the rules for converting the first sentence into the second.

Semantics. Semantics is the study of meaning in language. The goal of semantic study is to explain how sequences of language are matched with their proper meanings and placed in certain environments by speakers of the language. A demonstration of the importance of meaning to the grammar of a language is the following well-known example from Chomsky (1957): ***Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.*** This is a grammatical sentence; but because semantic components have been ignored, it is meaningless in ordinary usage.

Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is the study of language as a social and cultural phenomenon. Studies of language variation, language and social interaction, language attitudes and language planning are major divisions within the subfield of sociolinguistics.

Language Variation. Language variation is a term used to describe the relationship between the use of linguistic forms, geography, and certain social categories, such as social class, ethnic group, age, sex, occupation, function, and style. The combination of these various factors in speech result in an individual's *idiolect*, or particular and idiosyncratic manner of speech. When a variety of language is shared by a group of speakers, it is known as a *dialect*. A dialect, whether standard or non-standard, includes the full range of elements used to produce and present speech: pronunciation, grammar, and interactive features. In this respect, dialect should be distinguished from *accent*,

which usually refers only to pronunciation.

All speakers of a language speak a dialect of that language. The speech of a resident of Alabama is quite different from the speech of a New Englander, as the Texan differs in language variety from the resident of rural Kentucky, and so forth, even though the language spoken by all is English. Further differentiation is possible by investigating factors such as social class, age, sex, occupation, and others.

Language and Social Interaction. Language and social interaction refers to language and its function in the real world. Three subfields of sociolinguistics investigate this relationship: pragmatics, the ethnography of communication and discourse analysis.

Pragmatics. Pragmatics is the study of the ways in which context affects meaning. Thus, as a function of context, the intended meaning of an utterance is very often significantly different from its literal meaning. For example, a sentence such as "I'm expecting a phone call" can have a variety of meanings. It could be a request to leave the phone line free; or a reason for not being able to leave the house; or it could suggest to a listener who already has background information that a specific person is about to call to convey good or bad news.

Discourse Analysis. Discourse analysis examines the way in which sentences are combined in larger linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written texts. Matters of coherence and cohesion of texts are also investigated, and the links between utterances in sequence are important topics of analysis.

Ethnography of Communication. The ethnography of communication uses the tools of anthropology to study verbal interaction in its social setting. One practical example of the use of ethnographic research is in the study of doctor-patient communication. Such a study involves microanalysis of doctor-patient interaction by noting not only what is said, but also the duration between turns, interruptions, the style of questioning, changes in pitch, and nonverbal aspects of interaction, such as eye contact, physical contact, and gestures.

Language Attitude Studies. Language attitude studies investigate the attitudes that people hold, or appear to hold, vis à vis different language varieties and the people who speak them. While studies in language and social interaction investigate actual language interaction, language attitude studies explore how people react to what occurs in language interaction and how they evaluate others based on the language behavior they observe.

Language Planning. Language planning is the process through which major decisions are made and implemented with regard to how and which languages should be used on a nationwide basis. Language attitude studies are an essential component of language planning. In the United States, such issues as declaring English the official language, or the establishment of bilingual education programs are major language planning decisions.

It is in the multilingual, emerging nation-states of the third world, however, that language planning is the most significant. Governments must often decide which of a country's several or many languages should be developed, that is, written, standardized, or modernized; and how a country's languages will be used (in the government, the schools, the media, and so on). *Status* planning involves the initial choice of which language to be used for which function. *Corpus* planning involves the development or simplification of writing systems, dictionaries and grammars for the indigenous languages, in addition to the coining of words to express new concepts. In such contexts, language planning is an important part of affecting economic, political and social development.

Psycholinguistics

Psycholinguistics is the study of the relationship between linguistic and psychological behavior. Psycholinguists study first and second language acquisition; the relationship between language and cognition, or thought; and how humans store and retrieve linguistic information, or verbal processing.

Language Acquisition. The study of how humans acquire language begins with the study of child language acquisition. Principally two hypotheses of language acquisition have been presented. The first, deriving from the structuralist school of linguistics mentioned above, holds that children learn language through imitation and positive-negative reinforcement. This is known as the *behaviorist* approach. The second, or *innateness* hypothesis, proposes that the ability to acquire a human language is an in-born, biologically innate characteristic. Furthermore, this innate language-learning ability is linked to physiological maturation, and begins to decay around the time of puberty. The innateness hypothesis derives from the generative/transformational school of linguistics.

Such descriptions of language acquisition are further tested in exploring how adults acquire language. It appears that most adults learn language through memorization and positive-negative reinforcement--a manifestation of the behaviorist model. Whether this is a result of the decay of the innate ability described above, or a result of other psychological and cultural factors is a question of great interest to the psycholinguist. Recent evidence that the innate ability to learn language may only be suppressed after puberty could lead to important innovations in the treatment of language disorders and in teaching foreign languages to adults.

Verbal Processing. Verbal processing involves four skills: speaking, understanding, reading and writing, and implies both the production of verbal output, and processing the output of others. For example, although the sentences of a language may theoretically be infinitely long, there are constraints placed on them by our processing capabilities, as well as on certain structural characteristics. While we readily comprehend "The dog bit the cat which chased the mouse which ran into the hole", we have some difficulty sorting out "The mouse the cat the dog bit chased ran into the hole." Why this is so, in terms of cognition, perception and physiology, is a major concern of the psycholinguist.

Applied Linguistics

The findings of linguistics, like the findings of any other theoretical study, can be applied to the solution of practical problems, as well as to innovations in everyday areas involving language. Such activities are the concern of applied linguistics.

Some of the many positive contributions of applied linguistics are the development of first and second language teaching methodologies; practical literacy work; the development of alphabets and grammars for unwritten languages; dictionary compilation (lexicography); the use of expert witnesses in legal cases involving language; the development of special teaching strategies for speakers of non-standard English; and speech synthesis and speech recognition (described above).

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