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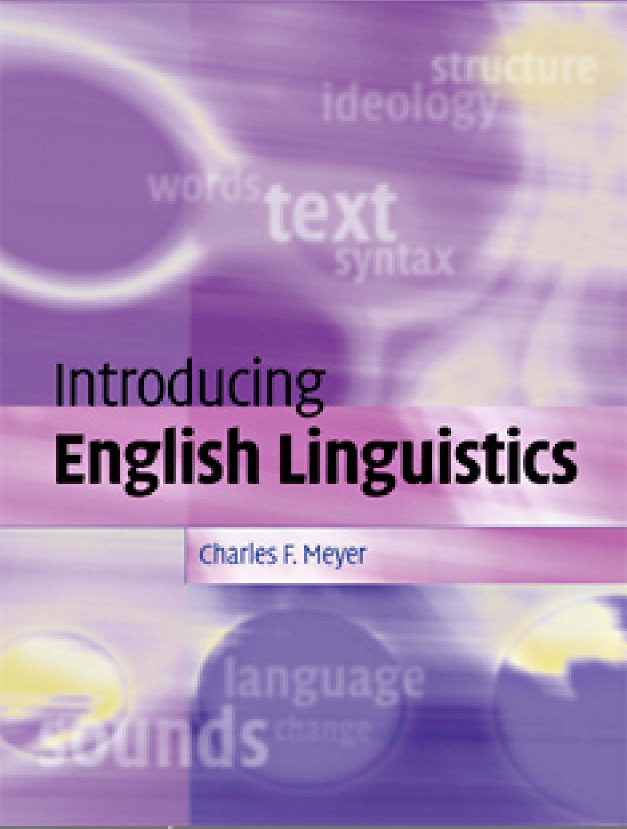
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Introducing
English Linguistics

Charles F. Meyer

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Introducing English Linguistics

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Introducing English Linguistics

CHARLES F. MEYER

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Contents

Preface ix

1 The study of language 1
Introduction 2
Language as part of a semiotic system 3
The modes of language 5
Studying linguistic structure 6
Language and ideology 12
Theorizing about language 15
Summary 17
Self-study activities 18
Further reading 18

2 The development of English 19
Introduction 20
The current state of the English language 20
Genetic classifications of languages 23
Typological classifications of languages 34
Why languages change 39
The nature of language change 43
Summary 44
Self-study activities 45
Further reading 46

3 The social context of English 47
Introduction 48
Grammatical vs. pragmatic meaning 48
Sentence vs. utterance 49
Speech act theory 50
The cooperative principle 55
Politeness 62
Speaker variables 70
Summary 76
Self-study activities 77
Further reading 78

4 The structure of English texts 79
Introduction 80
Register or genre? 81
Spoken and written registers 83
Unity of structure 84

Unity of texture 98
Summary 108
Self-study activities 108
Further reading 109

5 English syntax 111
Introduction 112
Formal vs. notional definitions 113
The linear and hierarchical structuring of constituents 115
Form and function 116
Word classes and phrases 117
Clauses, sentences, and clause functions 130
Summary 146
Self-study activities 147
Further reading 147

6 English words: Structure and meaning 149
Introduction 150
Varying definitions of meaning 151
The morpheme 152
Lexical semantics 157
Deixis 182
Summary 192
Self-study activities 192
Further reading 193

7 The sounds of English 195
Introduction 196
Speech segments 196
Suprasegmentals 208
Summary 216
Self-study activities 216
Further reading 218

Appendix: Linguistic corpora consulted 219
Glossary 221
Answers to self-study activities 239
References 247
Index 253

Preface

English is currently the most widely spoken language in the world. Mandarin Chinese may have more speakers, but no language is spoken in more parts of the world than the English language. The global reach of English is one reason the language has more non-native speakers than native speakers. The popularity of English, it must be emphasized, has little to do with the language itself, and more to do with geopolitical considerations: the initial spread of English worldwide as a consequence of British colonization, and the rise in the twentieth century of the United States as an economic and political power in the world.

Because of the importance of English as a world language, it has been widely studied and taught: English has been the focus of many linguistic descriptions, and it is taught worldwide in thousands of classrooms and language institutes. In fact, more people are learning English from non-native speakers of the language than native speakers. For this reason (and many others), it is important that teachers of English as well as others having an interest in the structure and use of the language have an adequate understanding of the language. This book attempts to provide such an understanding, but it does so in a manner that is different from many other introductions to the English language.

Because language involves not just individual sentences but sentences that are parts of texts, the book is organized on the principle that an adequate introduction to the study of the English language requires a top-down rather than a bottom-up discussion of the structure of English. That is, instead of beginning with the smallest unit of language (the phoneme) and working up to the largest unit (the text), this book begins at the level of the text and works its way down to progressively smaller units of language. The idea behind this organizational strategy is that the structure and use of smaller structures is in many cases dependent on larger linguistic considerations. For instance, in Boston, whether one pronounces the word *never* with a final /ɹ/ [nɛvɚ] or without one [nɛvə] depends not just upon whether the speaker's grammar contains a rule deleting /ɹ/ after vowels but upon other factors as well, such as the social context (e.g. formal vs. informal) in which the individual is speaking.

To provide a top-down description of English, the book is divided into two main sections: one dealing with more general characteristics of English – its development as a language and the pragmatic considerations governing its use – and a second focusing on the grammatical characteristics of the language, from the sentence down to the individual speech sound.

Chapter 1 ("The study of language") discusses how linguists study language, advancing but also critiquing the widely held view in linguistics that all languages are valid systems of communication and that it makes little sense to claim that one language is "better" than another. Chapter 2 ("The development of English") provides a historical perspective on English: where it has stood over time in relation to the other languages of the world, and how its development can be explained by general principles of language change. The next two chapters focus on the various pragmatic principles that affect how English is used. Chapter 3 ("The social context of English") examines the social factors influencing linguistic interaction, such as politeness considerations and speaker variables (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, and level of education). Chapter 4 ("The structure of English texts") describes how English texts (both written and spoken) are structured, and why they have the structure that they do.

The second section of the book contains chapters concerned with examining the grammar of English. Chapter 5 ("English syntax") discusses the major syntactic categories in English, focusing on how the structure of English sentences can be described in terms of the particular constructions that they contain – clauses (main and subordinate) and phrases (e.g. noun phrase and verb phrase) – and the functions within clauses (e.g. subject and object) that these forms serve. Chapter 6 ("English words: Structure and meaning") is concerned with the structure and meaning of words. The chapter begins by discussing how morphemes, the smallest unit of meaning, are combined to create words, and continues with a description of how the meanings of words are described by lexicographers (those who produce dictionaries) and semanticists (linguists who theorize about meaning in language). Chapter 7 ("The sounds of English") discusses the sound system of English, beginning with a description of speech segments (phonemes) and concluding with an overview of word stress and intonation.

Much current work in linguistics has demonstrated that linguistic descriptions are most accurate and meaningful if they are based on actual examples of spoken and written English rather than on examples invented by the linguist him or herself. Therefore, most of the examples included in this book were taken from a number of different linguistic corpora: computerized databases containing various kinds of spoken and written English, such as transcriptions of actual conversations that people had, or samples of articles appearing in newspapers. The appendix contains a list of the corpora that were used as well as a brief description of the kinds of texts that they contain.

There are many people to whom I owe a huge debt of gratitude for their help with this book. First of all, I want to thank Andrew Winnard of Cambridge University Press for his help and support throughout the process of writing this book. I also wish to thank three anonymous reviewers for Cambridge University Press for the many useful comments they provided that helped improve the book considerably; Malcolm Todd, whose expert copy-editing skills greatly improved the clarity of the book; Bill Kretzschmar for his feedback on sections of Chapter 3; Stephen Fay, who did the artwork for Figures 6.3 and 7.1; my colleagues in the Applied Linguistics Department at the University of Massachusetts, Boston; the many students whom I have taught over the years who have helped me refine and improve the way that I teach linguistics; and, most importantly, my wife, Libby, and son, Freddie, who offered their constant love and support while I spent many hours away from them writing this book.

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CHAPTER

1 The study of language

CHAPTER PREVIEW

KEY TERMS

- *Competence and performance*
- *Functional grammar*
- *Generative grammar*
- *Grammar and pragmatics*
- *Grammaticality and acceptability*
- *Linguistic creativity*
- *Linguistic rules and principles*
- *Modes of linguistic communication*
- *Prescriptive and descriptive grammar*
- *Semiotics*

This chapter provides an overview of how linguists approach the study of language. It describes language as one of many different systems of communication, a system that is unique to human beings and different from, for instance, the systems of communication that animals employ. Language exists in three modes: speech, writing, and signs (which are used by people who are deaf). Although all languages (with the exception of sign languages) exist in spoken form, only some have written forms. To study language, linguists focus on two levels of description: **pragmatics**, the study of how context (both social and linguistic) affects language use, and **grammar**, the description of how humans form linguistic structures, from the level of sound up to the sentence.

Introduction

Unless a human being has a physical or mental disability, he or she will be born with the capacity for language: the innate ability to speak a language, or in the case of someone who is deaf, to sign a language (i.e. use gestures to communicate). This capacity does not involve any kind of learning – a young child, for instance, does not need to be taught to speak or sign – and occurs in predictable stages, beginning with the babbling cries of an infant and culminating in the full speaking abilities of an adult.

The study of language is conducted within the field of linguistics. Contrary to popular belief, linguists are not necessarily polyglots – individuals fluent in many languages. Instead, their primary interest is the scientific study of language. Like a biologist studying the structure of cells, a linguist studies the structure of language: how speakers create meaning through combinations of sounds, words, and sentences that ultimately result in texts – extended stretches of language (e.g. a conversation between friends, a speech, an article in a newspaper). Like other scientists, linguists examine their subject matter – language – objectively. They are not interested in evaluating "good" versus "bad" uses of language, in much the same manner that a biologist does not examine cells with the goal of determining which are "pretty" and which are "ugly." This is an important point because much of what is written and said about language is highly evaluative: many teachers tell their students not to use a word like *ain't* because it is "ignorant" or the product of "lazy" speech patterns; similar sentiments are expressed in popular books and articles on English usage. Linguists do have their biases, a point that will be covered later in this chapter in the section on the ideological basis of language, but it is important to distinguish the goal of the linguist – describing language – from the goal of the teacher or writer: prescribing English usage, telling people how they should or should not speak or write.

Because linguistics is multidisciplinary, specialists in many disciplines bring their own expertise to the study of language. Psychologists, for instance, are interested in studying language as a property of the human mind; they have contributed many insights into such topics as how people acquire language. Anthropologists, on the other hand, have been more interested in the relationship between language and culture, and early work by anthropologists provided extremely valuable information about, for instance, the structure of the indigenous languages of the Americas. Prior to the study of these languages in the early twentieth century, most of what was known about human language was based upon the investigation of western languages, such as Greek, Latin, and German: languages that are structurally quite different from the indigenous languages of the Americas. This new knowledge forced linguists to reconceptualize the notion of human language, and to greatly expand the number of languages subjected to linguistic analysis. Other disciplines – sociology, computer science, mathematics, philosophy, to name but a few – have likewise brought their interests to the study of language.

Despite the many influences on the study of language, it is possible to isolate some basic principles that have guided all studies of language, and it is these principles that will serve as the focus of this chapter. The chapter opens with a discussion of language as one part of a larger semiotic system. Semiotic systems are systems of communication and include not just human language but, for instance, gesture, music, art, and dress as well. Like any system, language has structure, and the succeeding sections provide an overview of this structure: the modes (speech, writing, signs) in which language is transmitted, and the conventions (both linguistic and social) for how sounds, words, sentences, and texts are structured. Speakers of English know that the phrase *day beautiful* is not English because as speakers of English they have an unconscious knowledge of a rule of English sentence structure: that adjectives come before nouns (e.g. *beautiful day*), not after them. In addition, speakers of English know not to ask directions from a stranger by saying *Tell me where the museum is* because, according to conventions of politeness in English usage, such an utterance is impolite and would be better phrased more indirectly as *Could you tell me where the museum is?*

Because linguists are engaged in the scientific study of language, they approach language, as was noted earlier, "dispassionately," preferring to describe it in an unbiased and objective manner. However, linguists have their biases too, and the next section explores the ideological basis of language: the idea that all views of language are grounded in beliefs about how language should be valued. The final section describes two competing theories of language – Noam Chomsky's theory of generative grammar and Michael A. K. Halliday's theory of functional grammar – and how these theories have influenced the view of language presented in this book.

Language as part of a semiotic system

Because language is a system of communication, it is useful to compare it with other systems of communication. For instance, humans communicate not just through language but through such means as gesture, art, dress, and music. Although some argue that higher primates such as chimpanzees possess the equivalent of human language, most animals have their own systems of communication: dogs exhibit submission by lowering their heads and tails; bees, in contrast, dance. The study of communication systems has its origins in semiotics, a field of inquiry that originated in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure in a series of lectures published in *A Course in General Linguistics* (1916).

According to Saussure, meaning in semiotic systems is expressed by **signs**, which have a particular form, called a signifier, and some meaning that the signifier conveys, called the signified. Thus, in English, the word *table* would have two different signifiers. In speech, it would take the form of a series of **phonemes** pronounced in midwestern American English as [teɪbəl]; in writing, it would be spelled with a series of **graphemes**, or letters: t-a-b-l-e. Signifiers, in turn, are associated with the signified. Upon hearing or reading the word *table*, a speaker of English will associate the word with the meaning that it has (its signified). Other semiotic systems employ different systems of signs. For instance, in many cultures, moving the head up and down means 'yes'; moving the head left to right means 'no.'

Although semiotic systems are discrete, they often reinforce one another. In the 1960s it was common for males with long hear, beards, torn blue jeans, and necklaces with the peace sign on them to utter expressions such as "Far out" or "Groovy." All of these systems – dress, personal appearance, language – worked together to define this person as being a "hippie": someone who during this period lived an unconventional lifestyle in rebellion against the lifestyles of mainstream society. If a delivery person shows up at someone's house with a large box, and asks the person where the box should be placed, the person might respond "Put it there" while simultaneously pointing to a location in his or her living room. In this case, the particular linguistic form that is uttered is directly related to the gesture that is used.

The fact that language and gestures work so closely together might lead one to conclude that they are part of the same semiotic system. But there are many cases where gestures work quite independently of language and therefore are sometimes described as paralinguistic in nature. In the middle of one of the 1992 presidential debates in the United States, the first President Bush was caught on camera looking at his watch while one of the other candidates was answering a question. This gesture was interpreted by many as an expression of impatience and boredom on President Bush's part, and since the gesture had no connection with any linguistic form, in this instance it was clearly part of its own semiotic system.

One of the hallmarks of the linguistic sign, as Saussure argued, is its arbitrary nature. The word *window* has no direct connection to the meaning that it expresses: speakers of English could very well have chosen a signifier such as *krod* or *fremp*. An examination of words for *window* in other languages reveals a range of different signifiers to express the meaning of this word: *fenêtre* in French; *ventana* in Spanish; *Fenster* in German; *ikkuna* in Finnish. Although most linguistic signs are arbitrary, there are instances where signs bear an iconic relationship to the meanings that they express. If in describing a recently viewed movie an individual utters *It was so loooong*, extending the length of the vowel in *long*, the lengthening of the vowel reinforces the excessive length of the movie. In the sentence *The cow mooed for hours*, the verb *mooed* mimics the sound that a cow makes. Likewise, in *The bee buzzed by my ear*, *buzzed* imitates the sound of a bee. English also has phonesthemes: sounds associated with particular meanings. The consonant [ʃ] at the end of a word is suggestive of rapid motion: *crash*, *bash*, *slash*, *smash*, *gash*.

However, not all words ending in this consonant have this meaning (e.g. *fish*, *dish*). Moreover, if there were true iconicity in language, we would find it more consistently cross-linguistically. Sometimes so-called onomatopoeic words occur across languages. For instance, the equivalent of

English *beep* and *click* can be found in French: *un bip* and *un click*. However, *whisper*, which is iconic in English, has equivalents in French and Spanish – *le chuchotement* and *el susurro* – that are different in form but iconic within French and Spanish. Thus, while it is clear that signs can be iconic, for the most part they are, following Saussure, arbitrary in nature.

The modes of language

Signifiers are transmitted in human language most frequently through two primary modes: speech and writing. A third mode, signing, is a system of communication used by individuals who are deaf. Contrary to popular belief, sign languages are not merely gestured equivalents of spoken languages. American Sign Language (ASL), for instance, has its own grammar, and those who use it go through the same stages of language acquisition as speakers of oral languages do. In fact, it is not uncommon for children of deaf parents who are not deaf themselves to learn a sign language as their first language, and a spoken language as a second language.

In linguistics, it is commonly noted that speech is primary and writing secondary. Linguists take this position because all languages are spoken (with the exception of dead languages such as Latin, which now exist only in written form), and only a subset of these languages are written. All children will naturally acquire the spoken version of a language if they are exposed to it during the formative period of language acquisition. However, to become literate, a child will need some kind of formal schooling in reading and writing. In many respects, though, calling speech "primary" and writing "secondary" unfortunately implies that writing has a second-class status when compared with speech. It is more accurate to view the two modes as having different but complementary roles. For instance, in most legal systems, while an oral contract is legally binding, a written contract is preferred because writing, unlike speech, provides a permanent record of the contract. Thus, if the terms of the contract are disputed, the written record of the contract can be consulted and interpreted. Disputes over an oral contract will involve one person's recollection of the contract versus another person's.

While writing may be the preferred mode for a contract, in many other contexts, speech will be more appropriate. Because the most common type of speech – face-to-face conversations – is highly interactive, this mode is well suited to many contexts: casual conversations over lunch, business transactions in a grocery store, discussions between students and teachers in a classroom. And in these contexts, interactive dialogues have many advantages over writing. For instance, individuals engaged in conversation can ask for immediate clarification if there is a question about something said; in a letter to a friend, in contrast, such immediacy is lacking. When speaking to one another, conversants are face to face and can therefore see how individuals react to what is said; writing creates distance between writer and reader, preventing the writer from getting any reaction from the reader. Speech is oral, thus making it possible to use intonation to emphasize words or phrases and express emotion; writing has punctuation, but it can express only a small proportion of the features that intonation has. Because speech is created "on-line," it is produced quickly and easily. This may result in many "ungrammatical" constructions, but rarely do they cause miscommunication, and if there is a misunderstanding, it can be easily corrected. Writing is much more deliberate, requiring planning and editing and thus taking much more time to produce.

Because of all of these characteristics of writing, if an individual desires a casual, intimate encounter with a friend, he or she is more likely to meet personally than write a letter. Of course, technology has made such encounters possible with "instant messaging" over a computer. And if someone wishes to have such an encounter with a friend living many miles away, then this kind of on-line written "chat" can mimic a face-to-face conversation. But because such conversations are a hybrid of speech and writing, they still lack the intimacy and immediacy of a face-to-face conversation.

While speech and writing are often viewed as discrete modes, it is important to note, as Biber (1988) has demonstrated, that there is a continuum between speech and writing. While speech is in general more interactive than writing, various kinds of spoken and written English display various degrees of interactivity. For instance, Biber (1988: 102, 128) found that various linguistic markers of interactive discourse (or "involved" discourse, to use his term), such as first and second person pronouns, contractions, and private verbs such as *think* and *feel*, occurred very frequently in telephone and face-to-face conversations but less frequently in spontaneous speeches, interviews, and broadcasts. In addition, while various kinds of writing, such as academic prose and official documents, exhibited few markers of interactive discourse, other kinds of written texts, particularly personal letters, ranked higher on the scale of interactivity than many of the spoken texts that were analyzed.

What Biber's findings demonstrate is that how language is structured depends less on whether it is spoken or written and more on how it is being used. A personal letter, even though it is written, will contain linguistic features marking interactivity because the writer of a letter wishes to interact with the individual(s) to whom the letter is written. On the other hand, in an interview, the goal is not to interact necessarily but to get information from the person (or persons) being interviewed. Therefore, interviews, despite being spoken, will have fewer markers of interactivity and contain more features typically associated with written texts.

Studying linguistic structure

Whether it is spoken, written, or signed, every language has structure, which can be described, as Leech (1983: 21–4) notes, by postulating:

(1) **rules** governing the pronunciation of sounds; the ways that words are put together; the manner in which phrases, clauses, and sentences are structured; and, ultimately, the ways that meaning is created;

(2) **principles** stipulating how the structures that rules create should be used (e.g. which forms will be polite in which contexts, which forms will not).

Rules are studied under the rubric of **grammar,** principles within the province of **pragmatics.** To understand what is meant by rules and principles, and why they are studied within grammar and pragmatics, consider why a three-year-old child would utter a sentence such as *I broked it* [ai broʊkt ɪt] to his father, who just entered a room that the child was playing in to discover that the child had broken a wheel off a truck that he had been playing with.

To account for why the child uttered *I broked it* rather than, say, *Breaked it I*, it is necessary to investigate the linguistic rules the child is using to create the structure that he did. Linguistic rules are different from the rules that people learn in school: "Don't end sentences with prepositions"; "Don't begin a sentence with *but*"; "Don't split infinitives." These are **prescriptive rules** (discussed in greater detail in the next section) and are intended to provide guidance to students as they learn to speak and write so-called Standard English. Linguistic rules, in contrast, serve to describe what people know about language: the unconscious knowledge of language they possess that is part of what Noam Chomsky describes as our linguistic competence. Even though the sentence the child uttered does not conform to the rules of Standard English – the past tense form of the verb *break* is *broke*, not *broked* – it provides evidence that the child is aware of the rules of English grammar. He has applied a past tense ending for the verb, spelled *-ed* in writing, but has not reached a stage of acquisition where he is able to recognize the difference between regular and irregular verb forms.

Rules of grammar operate at various levels:

Phonetics/Phonology: This level focuses on the smallest unit of structure in language, the phoneme. Linguistic rules at this level describe how sounds are pronounced in various contexts. For instance, there is a rule of **voicing assimilation** in English that stipulates that when a past tense marker is added to the stem of a verb, the last sound in the stem determines whether the marker is **voiced** or **unvoiced** (i.e. whether or not the vocal cords vibrate when the consonant is pronounced). Thus, even though the child uses the wrong past tense form, the past tense marker is pronounced as /t/ because the last sound in the stem, /k/, is unvoiced. Had the stem been *kill*, which ends in voiced /l/, the past tense marker would have been voiced /d/. The sound system of English and the rules that govern it are discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

Morphology: The next level of structure is the morpheme, the smallest unit of meaning in language. Rules of morphology focus on how words (and parts of words) are structured. At the beginning of the sentence, the child uses the pronoun *I* rather than *me* because English has rules of case assignment – pronouns functioning as subject of a sentence take the **subjective form** (sometimes referred to as the nominative case) rather than the **objective form** (or accusative case). And because the number of the subject is singular, *I* is used rather than the plural form *we*. Rules of morphology describe all facets of word formation, such as how prefixes and suffixes are added, and are described in Chapter 6.

Syntax: The largest level of structure is the clause, which can be analyzed into what are called **clause functions**: subject, predicator, object, complement, and adverbial. The child's utterance, *I broked it*, is a **main clause** – it can stand alone as a sentence, as opposed to a subordinate clause, which has to be part of an independent clause – and can be analyzed as containing a subject (*I*), a predicator (*broked*), and a direct object (*it*). At the level of syntax, there are many rules stipulating how constituents within a clause are grouped. For instance, all languages have constraints on how constituents should be ordered. Because English is an SVO (subject–verb–object) language, the utterance is *I broked it* rather than *I it broked* (an SOV word order, found in languages such as Japanese). Chapter 5 contains an extensive discussion of the syntax of English, specifically how words, phrases, clauses, and sentences are structured.

Semantics: Because meaning is at the core of human communication, the study of semantics cuts across all of the other levels thus far discussed. At the level of sound, in the words *kick* /kɪk/ and *sick* /sɪk/, the choice of /k/ vs. /s/ results in words with two entirely different meanings. At the level of morphology, placing the prefix *un-* before the word *happy* results in a word with an opposite meaning: *unhappy*. At the level of syntax, the sentence *Jose wrote to Carla* means something entirely different than *Carla wrote to Jose* because in English, word order is a crucial key to meaning. But even though meaning is present at all levels of linguistic structure, the study of semantics is typically focused on such topics as the meaning of individual words (**lexical semantics**) and the ability of words to refer to points in time or individuals in the external world (**deixis**). For instance, the verb *broked* in the child's utterance has a specific meaning (e.g. the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* defines *break* as "to separate into parts with suddenness or violence"), and is marked as occurring during a specific time (the past, as indicated by the past tense verb ending *-ed*). The utterance also contains the first person pronoun *I*, which refers to the speaker (in this case the child), and the pronoun *it*, which refers to something not in the text but in the context (the wheel on the child's car). Lexical semantics, deixis, and other topics related directly to the study of semantics are discussed in Chapter 6.

The various rules that were described above are part of the study of grammar. Grammar is a word with many meanings. To some, it involves mainly syntax: a study of the parts of speech (nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc.) or syntax in general ("I studied grammar in High School"). To others, it covers usage: correct and incorrect uses of language ("My grammar isn't very good"). For many linguists, however, grammar involves the study of linguistic rules that are part of our linguistic **competence**: the unconscious knowledge of the rules of a language that any fluent speaker possesses. Writing a grammar of a language therefore involves codifying the rules that are part of any speaker's linguistic competence: making explicit that in English, for instance, the voicing of a past tense marker depends upon whether the sound preceding it is voiced or unvoiced, or that when a pronoun is used as subject of a sentence the subject form of the pronoun will be used rather than the objective form.

When studying rules of grammar, one really does not leave the speaker's brain, since the focus of discussion is the abstract properties of language that any human (barring disability) is naturally endowed with. But understanding language involves more than describing the psychological properties of the brain. How language is structured also depends heavily on context: the **social context** in which language is used as well as the **linguistic context** – the larger body of sentences – in which a particular linguistic structure occurs. The study of this facet of language is conducted within the domain of **pragmatics**, which is concerned less with *how* grammatical constructions are structured and more with *why* they have the structure that they do.

Thus, to fully understand the meaning of *I broked it*, it is useful to see the larger context in which this construction occurred, specifically the father's response to it:

Child: I broked it.
Father: That's ok. Let's see if we can fix it.

When individuals communicate, they arrive at interpretations of utterances by doing more than simply analyzing their structure; their interpretations are also based on a variety of purely social considerations: the age of communicants as well as their social class, level of education, occupation, and their relative positions on the power hierarchy (i.e. whether they are **equals**, **disparates**, or **intimates**). In the excerpt above, the form of each utterance is very much determined by the ages of the father and son and the power relationship existing between them. Because the child is young and has not fully mastered the grammar of English, he uses a non-standard verb form, *broked*, rather than the standard form *broke*. And because of the child's age, the father does not respond with an utterance like *Did you mean to say "broke"?* because he understands the child is young and that it would be inappropriate to correct him.

If the child were older (say, in high school), the father may very well have corrected his speech, since in his role as parent, he and his son are disparates: he is a **superordinate** (i.e. is higher on the power hierarchy), his son a **subordinate** (i.e. lower on the power hierarchy). And given this imbalance in power, the father could feel entitled to correct his son's grammar. But other factors, such as education and social class, would also affect language usage in this situation. If both the son and father spoke a non-standard variety of English in which *broked* was commonly used, then a correction of the type described above might never occur. The role that the social context plays in language usage is discussed in Chapter 3.

In addition to describing the effect of the social context on language usage, it is important to also study the linguistic context and its effect on how language is structured. This involves studying language at the level of text. Texts are typically extended stretches of language. They have an overall structure (e.g. a beginning, a middle, and an end) and markers of **cohesion**: linguistic devices that tie sections of a text together, ultimately achieving **coherence** (i.e. a text that is meaningful). The exchange between the son and father above occurs at the start of a text. Many texts have standard beginnings. For instance, a conversation between friends may begin with a greeting: *Hi, how are you? – I'm fine, how are you?* Other texts, like the one between son and father, just start. The son utters *I broked it* simply because this is what he needs to say when his father enters the room. Many texts are highly structured: press reportage begins with a headline, followed by a byline and lead (a sentence or two summing up the main point of the article). Other texts are more loosely structured: while a conversation between friends might have an opening (greeting) and an ending (a salutation), the middle part may consist of little more than speaker **turns**: alternations of people speaking with few restrictions on topics discussed.

But a text will not ultimately achieve coherence unless there are linguistic markers that tie individual parts of the text together. The father responds to the son's utterance by saying *That's ok*. The word *That* is a pronoun that refers back to what the child said in the first utterance. Typically pronouns refer to a single noun phrase (e.g. *it* in the child's utterance refers to the broken wheel on his truck). But in casual conversation it is common to find pronouns with very broad **reference**, in this case a pronoun, *That*, referring to the entire sentence the child utters. This is one type of cohesion, what Halliday and Hasan (1976) refer to as reference: an expression that typically refers back to something said in a previous part of the text, and that serves to provide linkages in texts. The structure of texts is discussed in Chapter 4.

One major difference between the study of grammar and pragmatics is that grammar deals with "structure," pragmatics with "use." The rule of grammar for forming imperative sentences such as *Tell me how to get to the Kennedy Library* is fairly straightforward: the base (or infinitive) form of the verb is used, *Tell*, and the implied subject of the sentence, *you* (*You tell me how to get to the Kennedy Library*), is omitted. Every imperative sentence in English is formed this way (with the exception of first person imperatives like *Let's dance*). Thus, rules of grammar can be posited in fairly absolute terms. This is not to suggest that rules do not have exceptions. The rule of passive formation in English stipulates that a sentence in the **active voice** such as *The mechanic fixed the car* can be converted into a sentence in the **passive voice**, *The car was fixed by the mechanic*, by:

(1) making the direct object of the sentence (*the car*) the subject of the passive,
(2) adding a form of *be* (*was*) that agrees in number with the subject of the passive and retains the same tense as the verb in the active,
(3) converting the verb in the active into a participle (*fixed*),

(4) moving the subject of the active to the end of the sentence and making it object of the preposition *by* (*by the mechanic*).

However, not every sentence meeting this structural description can be converted into a passive. The verb *have*, for instance, cannot generally be passivized (e.g. *The woman has a new car* but not **A new car was had by the woman*), except in idiomatic constructions such as *A good time was had by all*.

Describing the use of imperative sentences, in contrast, is a much more complicated undertaking, particularly because imperative sentences in English are so closely tied to conventions of politeness. This is one reason why Leech (1983) posits "principles" of politeness rather than "rules" of politeness. It would be highly impolite to walk up to a complete stranger at the JFK/UMASS subway station in Dorchester, Massachusetts, and say *Tell me how to get to the Kennedy Library*. The sentence is certainly grammatical, but too direct to utter to a complete stranger. It would be more appropriate in this context to have said *Could you please tell me how to get to the Kennedy Library*, a form more conventionally associated in English with politeness.

It would be wrong, however, to simply posit a rule that states that imperatives should not be used with strangers. The same sentence, with slight modification, would be highly appropriate if placed farther into a conversation with the same stranger:

Speaker A (to stranger on subway platform): I'm lost. I'm trying to get to the Kennedy Library.
Speaker B: Oh, it's quite easy to get there. Would you like directions?
Speaker A: Yes, please tell me how to get there.

Because it is not possible to precisely specify which forms are polite and which are impolite, principles of politeness deal more with tendencies than absolutes: this form "tends" to be polite in this context but not in that context.

Rules and principles also raise issues of **grammaticality** and **acceptability**. A sentence is grammatical if its structure conforms to a rule of grammar. Thus, of the four sentences below, (a)–(c) are grammatical; only (d) is ungrammatical:

(a) I don't have any money
(b) I have no money.
(c) I ain't got no money.
(d) *Have I don't money any.

Sentences (a) and (b) conform to rules governing the placement of negatives in sentences: the negative can be placed either after the auxiliary (*do* in a) and optionally contracted with it, or before a noun phrase if the noun phrase contains a word such as *any* (as in b). Although sentences such as (c) containing *ain't* and double negation are often characterized as ungrammatical, they are actually grammatical: *ain't* now serves as a general marker of negation in English, and copying the negative (rather than simply moving it), creating an instance of multiple negation, is a grammatical process dating back to Old English. Objections to sentences such as (c) are more a matter of acceptability, not grammaticality. Only (d) is truly ungrammatical because the placement of words in this sentence violates rules of English word order (e.g. words such as *any* always come before nouns, not after them).

Acceptability judgments will vary from speaker to speaker and reflect the fact that we all have opinions about what we see as good and bad uses of language. Because *ain't* is a highly stigmatized word, many people will react very negatively to its usage, judging it as highly unacceptable in any context. Despite this attitude, *ain't* is still widely used, and those using it obviously find it acceptable, at least in some contexts. For instance, *ain't* occurs quite commonly in song lyrics: "You ain't nothin' but a hound dog," "Ain't that a shame," "There ain't no mountain high enough, Ain't no valley low enough, Ain't no river wide enough." One could hardly imagine these lyrics being changed: "You aren't anything but a hound dog." The distinction between grammaticality and acceptability is important because these notions describe what is possible in language versus what we prefer or do not prefer.

Language and ideology

The popular tendency to confuse grammaticality and acceptability illustrates a significant difference between what the general public feels about language and what the average linguist does. This ideological divide is the product of two very different belief systems, with linguists firmly committed to the scientific study of language and non-linguists typically preferring a much more subjective approach. The differences between these two very different ideologies are illustrated in the quotes below, both of which deal with the subject of language change.

The first quote is from an interview with John Simon, author of a book on English usage entitled *Paradigms Lost* and a former theater critic for *New York Magazine*. Simon was asked to give his views on language change and the current state of the language:

> Well it [the violation of rules of syntax and grammar] has gotten worse. It's been my experience that there is no bottom, one can always sink lower, and that the language can always disintegrate further ... [The current state of the language is] Unhealthy, poor, sad, depressing, um, and probably fairly hopeless ... the descriptive linguists are a curse upon their race, uh who uh of course think that what the people say is the law. And by that they mean the majority, they mean the uneducated. I think a society which the uneducated lead the educated by the nose is not a good society ... I mean maybe [language] change is inevitable, maybe, maybe dying from cancer is also inevitable but I don't think we should help it along.
>
> Excerpted from "Do You Speak American," which was narrated by Robert McNeil and originally broadcast on PBS, January 6, 2005

The second quote is from a book written by a linguist; it focuses on the relationship between language change and language decay:

> In brief, the puristic attitude towards language – the idea that there is an absolute standard of correctness that should be maintained – has its origin in a natural nostalgic tendency, supplemented and intensified by social pressures. It is illogical, and impossible to pin down to any firm base. Purists behave as if there was a vintage year when language achieved a measure of excellence which we should all strive to maintain. In fact, there never was such a year. The language of Chaucer's or Shakespeare's time was no better or no worse than that of our own – just different.
>
> Jean Aitchison, *Language Change: Progress or Decay* (1991)

Traditionally within linguistics, people like Simon have been labeled as **prescriptivists** because their goal is to prescribe usage: identify so-called correct and incorrect instances of language usage, and in essence tell people how they should speak and write. Aitchison, in contrast, is a **descriptivist**, an individual interested in describing how language is used, not in placing value judgments on particular instances of language usage.

As the two quotes illustrate, prescriptivists and descriptivists are often very antagonistic towards one another. In highly emotional language, Simon characterizes "descriptive linguists" as "a curse upon their race." Aitchison uses less emotionally charged language but is quite blunt in her assessment of critics of language like Simon, calling them "puristic," "nostalgic" for the past, and ultimately "illogical." Although Simon and Aitchison have very different views about language, both are engaging in what Deborah Cameron describes as verbal hygiene, the practice of discussing what is good and bad about language:

> neither the folk nor the expert [view of language] is neutral with respect to what is "good" linguistically speaking, and both views distinguish between language (perfect/natural) and speakers (corrupters of perfection/naturalness). Linguists and non-linguists each defend what they consider to be the natural order of things.
>
> (Cameron 1995: 4)

For Simon, speakers of English are "corrupting" the language, causing it to change from its natural state of "perfection." For Aitchison, speakers of English are participants in a very normal and "natural" process: language change. And there is no point in intervening in this process, since it will happen regardless of any external intervention.

It is important to acknowledge that all views of language are ideologically based because in discussions of prescriptivism and descriptivism, many linguists simply dismiss prescriptivists as wrong. But in discussing prescriptivism, it is worthwhile to distinguish reactionary prescriptivists from informed prescriptivists. Simon is a classic example of a reactionary prescriptivist. He has little positive to add to any discussions of language. Instead, he merely reacts to what he perceives as the deplorable state of the language. Aitchison is correct in criticizing his views as being "impossible to pin down to any firm base." How exactly does Simon want people to speak and write? What state of linguistic perfection should we strive towards? Simon's views of language are also highly elitist, especially his idea that there is a great linguistic divide between the "educated" and "uneducated" masses. People like Simon should be ignored; they have nothing constructive to offer to discussions about language.

But while reactionary prescriptivism has little to offer to discussions of language, informed prescriptivism can play a more useful role, particularly in discussions of language and its relationship to public policy and teaching practices. Whether linguists like it or not, all language is subject to linguistic norms, and how these norms are set is often a matter of public discussion. It is better that linguists participate in such discussions than delegate participation to the reactionary prescriptivists of the world. Consider how a descriptive linguistic perspective can contribute to discussions of gender equality in language – whether, for instance, a word such as *mailman* should be replaced with *mail carrier*, which because it lacks the masculine word *man* is gender neutral.

Historically, English has changed from a language that exhibited **grammatical gender** to one exhibiting **natural gender**. In Old English, gender was marked on nouns, adjectives, demonstratives, and pronouns. However, the gender given to a noun, for instance, was rather arbitrarily assigned, resulting in a system of grammatical gender, a system in which there is no systematic connection between biological gender and the gender marking that a linguistic item receives. Thus, the Old English word for *hand* (whose stem form was *hond*) was marked for masculine gender, *pride* (Old English *wlencu*) for feminine gender, and *body* (Old English *līc*) for neuter gender. As English changed over time, gender no longer was marked on nouns, with some notable exceptions, such as the use of *man* and *-ess* in words referring to certain professions (e.g. *mailman*, *fireman* for males and females; feminine *actress*, *waitress* in opposition with masculine *actor*, *waiter*). Gender is still marked on pronouns (e.g. *he*, *him*, and *it*) but the gender assigned to a pronoun matches the actual gender of the noun to which the pronoun refers, resulting in a system of natural gender. This is why so-called generic uses of *he* (e.g. *A student must try his hardest to obtain good grades*) have come under criticism, since in a system of natural gender a pronoun such as *he* can refer only to males – it excludes reference to females. A truly generic pronoun refers to all members of a class, both males and females.

Public discussions of the shift to gender-neutral language have typically ignored the linguistic motivation for this change. Instead, the shift is often framed within the context of discussions of "politically correct" language usage, a discussion with purely political motivations. Certainly there is a political dimension to advocating the use of *mail carrier* instead of *mailman*, or *flight attendant* instead of *stewardess*: gender-neutral vocabulary not only acknowledges that both males and females can be found in many professions but reflects the feelings of many that language should not privilege one gender (males) over another (females). But the kind of informed linguistic prescriptivism that can be brought to such linguistic debates can helpfully augment the purely political underpinnings of such discussions.

Informed prescriptivism can also be useful in teaching contexts, since English teachers, for instance, often have to teach non-native speakers of English, or individuals speaking non-standard dialects of English (such as African American Vernacular English, or AAVE). Having knowledge of the linguistic backgrounds of such students can give teachers a greater appreciation of the difficulties that these students face learning English and a linguistic awareness of the linguistic systems underlying the languages/dialects that the students speak. On one level, a teacher can observe a commonly used construction in AAVE such as *He late*, and tell a student using this construction that he or she is speaking incorrectly and should instead say *He is late* or *He's late*. But this same teacher will better understand students uttering *He late* by knowing that AAVE has a grammatical rule of copula deletion not found in Standard English: whenever in Standard English a form of the verb *be* can be contracted with the subject (e.g. *He is late* → *He's late*), in AAVE the process can be taken one step further and the entire verb deleted. A teacher with knowledge of this rule can view sentences exhibiting copula deletion as not simply random errors but as the result of the application of a linguistic rule. And with this knowledge the teacher can better help the student learn the conventions of Standard English.

Linguists are often criticized for having an "anything goes" attitude towards language: the belief that because a linguistic construction is the product of a linguistic rule, its use in any context is allowable. But by bringing a linguistic perspective to prescriptivism, linguists can better help the general public understand how language works, and assist them in making more informed decisions about language usage.

Theorizing about language

Linguists differ ideologically not only with the general public but among themselves too. As a result, linguists have developed a variety of different theories about language, each having a different emphasis. Since the advent of generative grammar in the 1950s, many linguists have been primarily concerned with developing theories that are **competence**-based, i.e. centered on the belief that language is mainly a property of the mind. Other linguists have developed theories that are more **performance**-based, that is, focused on language use in social contexts. Still others have attempted to develop theories that combine these two interests: that are grounded in the assumption that language is a product of both the mind and the social contexts in which it is used.

Noam Chomsky is the principal proponent of competence-based theories of language. Chomsky revolutionized linguistics (as well as philosophy and psychology) in the 1950s by publishing a book, *Syntactic Structures* (1957), outlining his theory of generative grammar, and by writing a highly influential critique of B. F. Skinner's *Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* (1959). Chomsky developed his theory of language during a period when behaviorist psychology dominated thinking about language. Because behaviorists viewed language as a product of experience, they believed that children entered life with a *tabula rasa* (blank slate), and learned language only after being exposed to it.

Chomsky countered that this view had to be wrong because children were able to produce linguistic structures that they could not possibly have encountered through everyday experience (the notion of poverty of stimulus). Chomsky therefore concluded that all human beings were born with an innate capacity for language, and that it was therefore more important to study what languages had in common rather than how they differed. To reflect this emphasis, he postulated the notion of **universal grammar**: the idea that every individual, regardless of the language they ultimately spoke, had within their linguistic competence a language acquisition device containing a set of universal principles.

These universal principles formed the basis of Chomsky's theory of generative grammar. In this theory, which has undergone numerous modifications since its inception in the 1950s, Chomsky developed a formal notation, grounded in mathematics, that explicitly described the knowledge of language that is part of any speaker's linguistic competence. A key tenet of this theory is the notion of creativity: the idea that from a finite set of rules within a speaker's competence, an infinite set of sentences could be generated. The notion of creativity became a defining characteristic of human language – something that distinguished it from all other systems of communication. Chomsky's notions about human language were so revolutionary and influential that they completely changed the field of linguistics, and ushered in what is now referred to as the modern era of linguistics.

Because generative grammar is competence-based, it is concerned only with linguistic rules creating structures up to but not beyond the level of the sentence. In addition, performance (i.e. language use) is completely ignored and is often viewed as consisting of "errors": slips of the tongue, mispronunciations, and so forth. Many linguists, however, disagree with this view of performance and feel that a complete understanding of language cannot be obtained unless one considers the wider contexts – social and linguistic – in which language is used as well as the rules responsible for structures from the sentence down to the individual speech sound. Although many different linguists have pursued this more expansive view of language, Michael A. K. Halliday's theory of systemic/functional grammar (see Halliday and Matthiessen 2004) is one of the more comprehensive theories of both competence and performance.

As a functionalist, Halliday believes that language exists to satisfy the communicative needs of its users; that is, that language is a communicative tool. To reflect this view, Halliday proposes that language has three general "metafunctions": an ideational function, an interpersonal function, and a textual function. Halliday's ideational function is concerned with specifying how language serves as a means of structuring the internal and external realities of the speaker. When the child utters *I broked it*, he encodes in linguistic form an experience he has just had. He is engaging in what Halliday describes as a "material process," specifically a process of "doing ... some entity 'does' something – which may be done 'to' some other entity" (Halliday 1994: 110). In this case, the child – the "actor" in Halliday's terms – engages in a process ("breaking") affecting the wheel – the goal – on the truck with which he has been playing. Material processes – "processes of the external world" – are one of the three primary kinds of processes within Halliday's system of transitivity. The two other primary processes are mental processes, consisting of processes of "inner experience" and "consciousness," and relational processes, allowing speakers "to relate one fragment of experience to another" and to engage in the process of "classifying and identifying" (ibid.: 107).

Language has two additional functions – the interpersonal and the textual – that reflect the fact that language is influenced by the social and linguistic contexts in which it is used. On one level, language plays a key role in our social interactions, functioning either as a means by which "the speaker is giving something to the listener (a piece of information, for example) or he is demanding something from him" (ibid.: 68). As was noted earlier in this chapter, how we "demand" something from another individual is very much determined by our social roles: our age, gender, level of education, and so forth. On another level, language is very dependent on the linguistic context. Texts are functional, Halliday and Hasan (1985: 10) argue, because they consist of "language that is doing something in some context, as opposed to isolated words or sentences." All texts exhibit two types of unity: unity of structure and unity of texture (ibid.: 52). Press reportage, as discussed earlier, has a prearranged structure: a headline, a byline, a lead. Texts also have texture, linguistic markers of cohesion that insure that all parts of the text fit together: the word *therefore*, for instance, signals that one clause is a logical consequence of a preceding clause or clauses.

Summary

While linguists may share a number of assumptions about language, they approach the study of language from different theoretical perspectives. Because linguists influenced by Noam Chomsky's views on language believe that language is primarily a product of the mind, they are more concerned with studying linguistic competence: the unconscious knowledge of rules that every human possesses. Other linguists take a more expansive view of language, believing that it is just as valuable to study language in social contexts and to consider the structure of texts as well as the structure of sentences occurring in texts. This book takes this second approach to the study of the English language. After a discussion in the next chapter of the history of English and the basic concepts that explain language change, the subsequent chapters focus on the social basis of the English language, the various principles affecting the structure of texts, and grammatical rules describing the form of the smaller components of language found in texts, from the sentence down to the individual speech sound.

Self-study activities

1. Match the structures in the left-hand column with the area of linguistics in which they are studied in the right-hand column.
   - (1) the structure of words
   - (2) word order/structure of clauses
   - (3) the meaning of words
   - (4) individual sounds

   - a. phonetics/phonology
   - b. morphology
   - c. syntax
   - d. semantics
2. If you are studying rules of syntax, are you studying linguistic competence or linguistic performance?
3. What is the difference between prescriptivist and descriptivist approaches to language study?
4. If you claim that the sentence *He don't know nothin'* is "incorrect," are you making a judgment about the grammaticality of the sentence or its acceptability?
5. American Sign Language (ASL) is gestured, not spoken, yet it is still considered a language. Explain how ASL is a language in the same sense that English or Spanish is?
6. While a language such as German has a system of "grammatical" gender, English has "natural gender." What's the difference between the two systems, and, in particular, why is it the case that Modern English employs a system of "natural" gender?
7. The Linguistic Society of America is a professional organization of linguists that periodically publishes statements dealing with linguistics and language policy. One of its statements, "Language Rights" (www.lsadc.org/info/lsa-res-rights.cfm, accessed June 22, 2008), describes the linguistic rights that speakers of languages other than English should have in the United States. The statement notes that "The vast majority of the world's nations are at least bilingual, and most are multilingual, even if one ignores the impact of modern migrations" and that "Multilingualism by itself is rarely an important cause of civil discord." The statement also lists specific rights that multilingual speakers should be accorded, such as being "allowed to express themselves, publicly or privately, in the language of their choice" and "to maintain their native language and, should they so desire, to pass it on to their children." Do the quotes provide examples of what Deborah Cameron describes as verbal hygiene?

Further reading

For an overview of the basic tenets of semiotics, see D. Chandler, *Semiotics: the Basics* (London: Routledge, 2002). A good introduction to Noam Chomsky's theory of generative grammar can be found in S. Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007). For a critique of Chomsky's views on language, see G. Sampson, *The Language Instinct Debate* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005). Functional grammar is described in detail in M. A. K. Halliday and C. M. I. M. Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar,* 3rd edn. (London: Hodder Arnold, 2004).