

LINGUISTICS

An Introduction to Language and Communication

Sixth Edition

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Introduction

In this section we will examine the structure of human language, and in doing so we will discover a highly complex system. Beginning students of linguistics are often surprised to find that linguists spend considerable time formulating theories to represent and account for the structure (as well as the functioning) of human language. What is there, after all, to explain? Speaking one's native language is a natural and effortless task, carried out with great speed and ease. Even young children can do it with little conscious effort. From this, it is commonly concluded that aside from a few rules of grammar and pronunciation there is nothing else to explain about human language. Analogously, it's like saying that since it's easy for sighted people to see objects in the world, there's nothing interesting to be learned from studying the visual system.

But it turns out that there is a great deal to explain. If we "step outside" language and look at it as an object to be studied and described and not merely used, we discover an exciting sphere of human knowledge previously hidden from us.

In beginning the study of the structural properties of human language, it is useful to note a common theme that runs throughout part I: the structural analysis of human language can be stated in terms of (1) discrete units of various sorts and (2) rules and principles that characterize the way these discrete units can be combined, recombined, and ordered. In the sections on morphology (chapter 2), phonetics (chapter 3), phonology (chapter 4), and syntax (chapter 5), we will discuss the significant discrete units that linguists have postulated in the study of these subareas of linguistics. In addition to isolating discrete units such as morphemes, phonetic features, and syntactic phrases, we will be discussing the rules and principles by which words are formed, sounds are combined and varied, and syntactic units are structured and ordered into larger phrases.

In addition to discussing the core areas of morphology, phonology, syntax, and semantics (chapter 6), we will discuss two subfields of linguistics that draw heavily on those core areas, namely, language variation (chapter 7) and language change (chapter 8). In these chapters we will consider the ways in which language varies across individual speakers and dialect groups (regionally, socially, and ethnically) and how languages vary and relate to each other historically. Thus, having isolated important structural units in chapters 2–5, we will then examine how such units can vary along a number of dimensions.

The subfields represented in chapters 2–6 form the core of what has classically been known as *structural linguistics* (as practiced in the United States from the 1930s to the 1950s), and they continue to form a central part of *generative linguistics*, the theoretical perspective we adopt here. The latter dates from the publication of Noam Chomsky's 1957 work *Syntactic Structures* and has been the dominant school of linguistics in the United States since that time. It has also come to be a dominant school in Western Europe and Japan and has increasing influence in several Eastern European countries as well.

Assuming that the majority of our readers are native speakers of English, we have drawn the language data used in this book almost exclusively from English (see *A Linguistics Workbook: Companion to Linguistics, Sixth Edition*, also published by the MIT Press, for exercises based on over 20 languages). We encourage you to use your native linguistic judgments in evaluating our arguments and hypotheses. It is important that you test hypotheses, since this is an important aspect of doing scientific investigations. We should also stress that the general aspects of the linguistic framework we develop here are proposed to hold for all languages, or at least for a large subset of languages, and we encourage you to think about other languages you may know as you study the English examples.