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The Routledge Handbook of Linguistics

Edited by Keith Allan

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1
What is linguistics?

Keith Allan

1.1 Linguistics studies language and languages

Linguistics is the study of the human ability to produce and interpret language in speaking, writing and signing (for the deaf). All languages and all varieties of every language constitute potential data for linguistic research, as do the relationships between them and the relations and structures of their components. A linguist is someone who studies and describes the structure and composition of language and/or languages in a methodical and rigorous manner.

1.1.1 Human language

Linguistics inquires into the properties of the human body and mind which enable us to produce and interpret language (see Chapter 19). Human infants unquestionably have an innate ability to learn language as a means of social interaction (see Chapters 2, 13, 14, 17 and 20). Most likely it is the motivation to communicate with other members of the species that explains the development of language in hominins. It follows that linguists study language as an expression of and vehicle for social interaction. They also research the origins of human language (see Chapter 2), though there is controversy over when language first became possible among hominins. Neanderthals (*Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*, *c.*300,000 to 30,000 years BP) almost certainly came to have the mental and physical capacity to use language naturally. No extant non-human animal has a communication system on a par with human language. Some creatures learn to respond to and even reproduce fragments of human language, but they never achieve what a human being is capable of. The so-called 'language' used within some animal communities may have a few identifiable meaningful forms and structures, but animal languages lack the depth and comprehensiveness of human language.

Human language is the most sophisticated means of communication among earthly life forms. It is a kind of interaction with our environment; and it is intentionally communicative. Inorganic matter interacts with its environment without intention, e.g. moving water reshapes land. Plants interact with their environment as individuals, e.g. many plants

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turn towards a light source and some insectivorous plants actively trap their p[illegible] this interaction does not result from intention. Non-human creatures often do intentionally communicate with each other, for instance when mating or seeking food, but only in very limited ways. Humans interact with their environment in many ways, of which human communication using language is the most sophisticated and results from intentional behaviour.

1.1.2 Some general characteristics of language(s)

Language has physical forms to be studied. You can hear speech, see writing and signing, and feel Braille. The forms can be decomposed into structured components: sentences, phrases, words, letters, sounds. These language constituents are expressed and combined in conventional ways that are largely (if not completely) rule-governed.

Chapter 3 examines gesture and sign as used in place of and along with spoken language. Gestures of various kinds accompany most spoken language (even when the speaker is on the telephone). Sign languages of the deaf vary from nation to nation, though each national sign language is also a complete language largely independent of the language spoken in the signer's community.

Speech precedes writing both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. The creation of a writing system around 5,000 years BP (see Chapter 4) is the earliest evidence we have of linguistic analysis: all writing systems require the creator to analyse spoken language into chunks that correspond to words, syllables, phonemes or other phonic data in order to render them in a visual medium. Although writing systems usually begin with a pictographic representation, this very quickly becomes abstract as representations of sounds, syllables, and/or elements of meaning come to replace pictographs. Thus did writing become more symbolic than iconic.

Chapter 5 discusses the phonetic inventory of sounds that can occur in human languages and reviews the character of human speech mechanisms. Phoneticians research the physical production, acoustic properties, and the auditory perception of the sounds of speech.

Less than a quarter of the sounds humans have the ability to make are systematically used within any one language and Chapter 6 focuses on properties of the various phonological systems to be found in the world's languages. Phonologists study the way that sounds function within a given language and across languages to give form to spoken language. For instance the English colloquialism *pa* 'father' in most dialects is pronounced with initial aspiration as [p^{h}aa] but in a few dialects without aspiration as [paa], which does not change the meaning.[1] In Thai, however, the word [p^{h}aa] means 'split' whereas the word [paa] means 'forest', so the difference between [p^h] and [p] makes a meaningful difference in Thai, but not in English. This is just one instance of different phonological systems at work and there is, of course, much more.

Morphology (see Chapter 7) deals with the systematic correspondence between the phonological form and meaning in subword constructions called 'morphemes'. A morpheme is the smallest unit of grammatical analysis with semantic specification. A word may consist of one or more morphemes: for example, the morpheme *–able* may be suffixed to the verb root *desire* to create the adjective *desirable*. This adjective may take a negative prefix *un–* to form *undesirable* which can, in turn, be converted into the noun *undesirable* by a process sometimes called 'zero-derivation' because there is no overt marker of the nominalization. This noun may then be inflected with the abstract morpheme PLURAL which in this instance has the form of the suffix *–s* yielding the plural noun *undesirables*. Morphology deals with

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the creation of new word forms through inflections that add a secondary grammatical category to an existing lexical item (word) but do not create a new one. As we have seen, morphology is also concerned with the creation of new lexical items by derivational processes such as affixation, compounding (*chairwoman*), truncation (*math(s)* from *mathematics*), and stress change (*perVERT* [verb] vs *PERvert* [noun] – where upper case indicates the stressed syllable).

Syntax studies the manner in which morphemes and lexical items combine into larger taxonomic structures such as phrases, sentences and longer texts (see Chapters 8 and 9). Some languages incorporate many morphemes into a single word that requires a sentence to translate it into English. Relationships between sentence constituents can be signalled (1) by inflection, in which case word order can be comparatively free (as in Latin), or (2) by the sequence of items – making word order relatively rigid (as in English). Latin *dominus servos vituperabat, vituperabat dominus servos, servos dominus vituperabat* are all translated by the English sentence *the master* [dominus] *cursed* [vituperabat] *the slaves* [servos]. Although there are many ways of depicting syntactic structure, rooted labelled trees have become the norm in modern linguistics, e.g. the oversimplified tree in Figure 1.1. Chapter 9 argues that syntax should reflect the dynamics of language processing allowing for structural underspecification and update such that the patterns of dialogue can be shown to follow directly from the integrated account of context-dependent phenomena.

Language is metaphysical in that it has content; i.e. language expressions have meaning. Semantics investigates the meanings of sentences and their constituents and, also, the meaning relationships among language expressions. Linguistic semantics is informed by insights from philosophy, psychology, sociology and computer science. Notions of truth and compositionality are crucial in determining meaning (see Chapters 33 and 9). But so too are the cognitive processes of language users (see Chapters 29 and 35). There is a question of how lexical content corresponds with conceptual content and the structure of concepts. There is controversy over the place within lexical and discourse semantics of encyclopaedic knowledge about referents (things spoken of) and the domain within which a language expression occurs. There is also controversy about the optimal means of representing meaning in theoretical semantics. All these matters are reviewed in Chapters 10 and 11.

Every language comes with a lexicon – loosely equivalent to the vocabulary of that language. A lexicon (see Chapter 12) can be thought of as the mental counterpart to (and original model for) a dictionary such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Lexical items are stored as combinations of form and meaning, together with morphological and syntactic (morphosyntactic) information about the grammatical properties of the item and links to

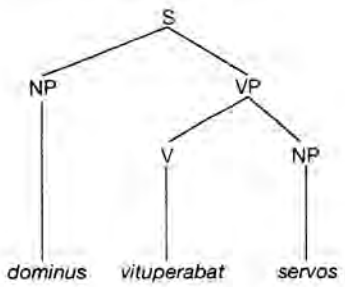

Figure 1.1 An oversimplified tree structure [S = sentence, NP = noun phrase, VP = verb phrase, V = verb]

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encyclopaedic information about the item – such as its history and information abo... it may be used to refer to. Typically, a lexical item cannot be further analysed into meaningful chunks whose combination permits its meaning to be computed. For instance, the lexical items *a*, *the*, *dog*, *sheep*, *kill* and morphemes like *–s* (PLURAL), *–ed* (PAST) can combine together under certain conditions, but none of these is subject to morphosyntactic analysis into smaller constituents.

The lexicon of a language bundles meaning with form in versatile chunks that speakers combine into phrases, sentences, and longer texts whose meanings are computable from their constituents. The lexical items and morphemes listed above can combine into the sentence in (1), the meaning of which is composed from not only the words and morphemes but also the syntactic relations between them.

(1) The dogs killed a sheep.

(1) has much the same meaning as (2) and a very different meaning from (3).

(2) A sheep was killed by the dogs.
(3) A sheep killed the dogs.

In (1) and (2) the dogs do the killing and the sheep ends up dead, whereas in (3) the sheep does the killing and it is the dogs which end up dead. Notice that the meanings of *dogs* and *killed* can be computed from their component morphemes: DOG+PLURAL and KILL+PAST; Similarly for the phrases *the dogs* and *a sheep* and the whole of the sentences (1), (2) and (3).

If you find (1) and (2) more believable than (3), that is because you are applying your knowledge of the world to what is said. These judgements arise from pragmatic assessments of the semantics of (1), (2) and (3).

As said earlier, semantics is concerned with the meanings of, and the meaning relationships among, language expressions. For example, there is a semantic relationship between *kill* and *die* such that (4) is true.

(4) If X kills Y, then Y dies.

In (4) X has the role of actor and Y the undergoer. There are many other kinds of relationship, too. In order to die, Y has to have been living. If Y is a sheep, then Y is also an animal. In English, dogs and sheep are countable objects, i.e. they can be spoken of as singulars, like *a sheep* in (1)–(3), or as plural entities like *the dogs* in (1)–(3). Words referring to meat (such as *mutton*, *lamb*, *pork*) do not normally occur in countable noun phrases; the same is true of liquids like *beer* and granulated substances like *sugar*, *coffee* or *rice*. However, these nouns are used countably on some occasions to identify individual amounts or varieties, as in (5)–(7).

(5) Two sugars for me. [Two spoons of sugar]
(6) Three beers, please. [Three glasses or cans of beer]
(7) Two coffees are widely marketed in Europe. [Two species or varieties of coffee]

What this shows is that the grammatical properties of linguistic items can be, and regularly are, exploited to generate communicatively useful meaning differences.

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When speakers employ language they add additional aspects of meaning. Although this is not obvious from (1), it is observable from the interchange between X and Y in (8).

(8) X: I don't understand why you are so upset.
Y: The dogs killed a sheep.

Pragmatics (see Chapters13 and 14) studies the meanings of utterances (an utterance is a sentence or sentence fragment used by a particular speaker on some particular occasion) with attention to the context in which the utterances are made. In (8) the reference of 'I' and 'you' is determined from context, as is the relevant time at which the addressee is judged upset and also the estimated degree of relevance of Y's response to X's statement. Language interchange is one form of social interactive behaviour and it is governed by sets of conventions that encourage cooperativeness in order that social relations be as harmonious as possible. There are competing notions of what constitutes cooperativeness, whether it exists independently of particular interlocutors or whether it is negotiated anew in every encounter, but, nonetheless, cooperative behaviour seems to be the default against which uncooperative behaviour such as insult and offensive language must be judged (see Chapter 14). What this amounts to is that interlocutors are socialized into having certain expectations of and from each other. These expectations are learned in childhood as one aspect of competent language usage; they are part of one's induction into being a member of a social group. Typically they constitute a part of common ground between interlocutors that enables them to understand one another. Looking again at (8) we observe that Y's response to X's question is apparently relevant, because we know that many people get upset when dogs kill a sheep. Y has assumed this knowledge is part of the common ground with X, enabling X to take Y's response as an appropriate one. This appropriateness is independent of whether or not Y is speaking truly. The default assumption for almost all language interchange is that speakers will be honest, which is the reason why lying is castigated in Anglo communities (and many others).

We see from (8) that spoken discourses have structures and constraints that render them coherent so as to be lucid and comprehensible to others. Were that not the case, the discourse in (9) between a therapist and a schizophrenic patient would not seem abnormal.

(9) THERAPIST: A stitch in time saves nine. What does that mean?
SCHIZOPHRENIC: Oh! That's because all women have a little bit of magic in them. I found that out. And it's called, it's sort of good magic. And nine is a sort of magic number. Like, I've got nine colours here you will notice. I've got yellow, green, blue, grey, orange, blue and navy. And I've got black. And I've got a sort of clear white. The nine colours, to me they are the whole universe; and they symbolize every man, woman, and child in the world.

(Rochester and Martin 1979: 94f)

Chapter 15 discusses the structures of spoken and written texts and narratives. What linguistics looks at in a text is not its literary or aesthetic quality, but the language used in order to give structure to the text so that hearers and readers can readily follow the speaker's or writer's intended meaning. Linguists identify what enables the hearer/reader to recognize the topic of discourse and to correctly distinguish the (animate and inanimate) participants in the narrative/conversation and what happens to each of them as the narrative/conversation unfolds.

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1.1.3 The intersection of linguistics with other disciplines

Language is used within all human communities, many of which have no regular written form for their language, or did not until the twentieth century. Although it is now fairly common for linguists to enter a pre-literate community and attempt to describe their language, for most of the twentieth century it was anthropologists who undertook field work in such communities with the primary aim of describing their social structures and customs (see Chapter 16); to accomplish those goals most effectively, they needed to learn the people's language. Field linguistics applies the methods of data elicitation and data collection in order to document, describe and analyse languages and language practices in their natural habitat – within the community of native speakers under investigation. The primary mission of anthropological linguistics is to tie forms of language to the social structures and customs of a people.

There is a slight overlap here with the work of sociolinguists (see Chapter 17). A principal difference is that sociolinguistics focuses on the varieties of language used among different groups within a particular language community. Sociolinguists also investigate language change through time by plotting the spreading adoption of new forms and the decay of old ones, which is often accelerated during periods of social stress and change. Concepts of politeness and offensiveness (see Chapter 14) differ among different social groups, and such social conventions and their correlation with social relations are also topics relevant to sociolinguistics.

Psycholinguistics (Chapter 18) draws from linguistics, psychology, cognitive science and the study of language pathology. Psycholinguists research cognitive and psychological aspects of the perception of categorical similarities and differences among phenomena. They investigate language production on the one hand and language processing and comprehension on the other. Developmental psycholinguistics examines first language acquisition (Chapter 20) and psycholinguists also study the acquisition of second languages (Chapter 21). Knowing what is normal for human language use enables dysfunction to be recognized and potentially treated. Because linguistic dysfunction usually correlates with other mental dysfunction, language offers a path into (ab)normal cognitive behaviour.

Whereas psycholinguistics focuses on the human mind, neurolinguistics, the topic of Chapter 19, focuses on the allied physiological matter of the human brain: the organ that enables the cognitive abilities we associate with the mind. Since the mid-nineteenth century it has been known that trauma to certain parts of the brain causes fairly predictable linguistic deficiencies. Since the development of neural imaging techniques, knowledge of brain function has blossomed; as a result there has been progressive refinement in mapping the functions of different areas of the brain which has revealed the great extent to which different areas of the brain operate together to, among other things, facilitate language use.

1.1.4 Acquiring language

All normal human beings acquire language, even if they have a very low IQ. There is no doubt that human beings have an innate disposition to learn language, but they need exposure to the society of other humans in order to do so. Furthermore, many children are raised in multilingual situations and acquire two or more languages concurrently and they very quickly learn not to mix them. During the first year of life a child learns to discriminate the significant sounds of their care-givers' language(s) and they learn how to interact appropriately with people around them (see Chapter 20): it is the beginning of encultured

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socialization. By about one year old, a child supplements gesture and non-linguistic vocalization with words and later combines words into syntactic structures. The impetus is always to communicate with others.

Many people are taught a second or foreign language after they have already acquired native ability in their first language (see Chapter 21). The requirements for the process of second language learning apply insights from linguistics, and the primary focus of 'applied linguistics' is on language teaching. This means developing sound pedagogy that is responsive to research in linguistics. The instruction of phonology, morphology, vocabulary, semantics and syntax is important but so too is pragmatics, because it is not enough to know the grammar of a language: learners also have to know how to use the expressions from within the new language appropriately under any circumstances and in any context.

1.1.5 Languages through time

Every language has developed over time and most languages are related to some other languages; this is grist to the mill of historical (diachronic) linguistics (Chapter 22). All languages change over time and distinct varieties of a language may develop in the different regions where it is spoken. In recent times there has been overlap with sociolinguistics in that historical linguists have researched language variation and the social factors that generate language change at various points in time (synchronic change). Historical linguistics was launched in the nineteenth century by comparing and correlating sound changes in Indo-European languages as a way of identifying which languages belong to that family. Very quickly interest expanded to the cataloguing of lexical, morphological, syntactic and semantic change in Indo-European and other language families. Comparative studies of language contact and genetic relationship have led to well-accepted descriptions of relations among different languages and their grouping into families.

There is some commonality between Chapter 22 and Chapter 23 on linguistic change. All living languages change constantly, but how predictable are the results of the change? Internal changes are driven by variation due to children using language a little differently from their parents and from mutations in discourse conventions. Some changes arise through the grammaticalization of metaphorical extensions or the regularizing and standardization of pragmatic inferences: some of what begin as spontaneous novel meaning extensions achieve popularity and lose their novelty to become conventionalized. External influences include a need to create novel expressions for new phenomena, including cultural and social changes. Innovations begin within the dialect of one social group (sociolect) but must spread to the whole community to count as language change. Change that may seem to have been motivated by human cognition because it is so widespread may in fact result from contact between different sociolects, dialects or languages. Predicting the direction of language change seems to be almost impossible.

Chapter 24 takes up the topic of language endangerment. Languages are fast becoming extinct with the growth of urbanization and the dominance of linguae francae leading to the abandonment of languages that are spoken by only a small handful of people. Such people usually need to use a more dominant language to communicate with the wider community and their children will typically be schooled in the dominant language. Language documentation has the aim of recording for posterity not only the phonology, grammar and vocabulary of dying languages but their stories, songs, and the social and cultural contexts in which the language is or was used. The documentation requires audio and video recording and techniques of archiving samples of language interchange and language performance

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that can be readily updated as technology advances. One strand of this work is to communities whose language is dying into language management that encourages language maintenance and revitalization.

1.1.6 Looking across languages

Cross-linguistic research is the *sine qua non* of linguistic typology, discussed in Chapter 25. Languages fall into different types. For instance, there are tone languages like Chinese, Thai, Maa (Nilotic, East Africa), and Yoruba (Niger-Congo, West Africa), stressed timed languages like English, and syllable timed languages like French. More important, however, are the differences in morphological and syntactic properties: a language like Latin has many inflections that indicate syntactic and sometimes semantic relations between the constituents of a sentence; in English and Chinese, word order does a similar job. In an agglutinating language such as Turkish, morphemes adjoin to form very complex words such as *ceplerimizdekilerdenmiş* = pocket + plural + our + in + relativizer + plural + from + dubitative '[it] was supposedly from among those that are/were in our pockets'. An incorporating or polysynthetic language, like Chinook, has words like *ania'lot* = present tense [*a*] + him [*ni*] + her [*a*] + I to [*'l*]+from [*o*] + give [*t*] 'I gave it/him to her' where the constituents do not form morphemes that can regularly stand alone in other constructions. Linguistic typologists look for what is more probable versus less probable in a human language. There are implicational universals because if a given type of language has one kind of structure it will usually have another: for instance, verb-initial languages (like Maa) almost all have prepositions and not postpositions. So, one result of typological studies is the identification of language universals to throw light on the nature of human language.

Traditionally, translation has not been of much concern within linguistics, perhaps because linguistics has been predominantly theoretical whereas translation has been primarily practical. The typical analysis of a sentence in a linguistics textbook will be of very little value at all to the practical translator because it is simply too fragmentary and simplistic – not least because semantic analysis is its weakest aspect. As we see in Chapter 26, although we tend to think of translation as rendering a sentence of the source language into a semantically equivalent sentence in the target language, this grossly oversimplifies the notion of equivalence. In fact what needs to happen is that the sentence in the source language has to be understood with all its cultural nuances and then recast into what a native speaker of the target language would have said if s/he had spontaneously wanted to utter the 'same' thing. For instance, because Hungarian nouns and pronouns are not marked for gender, *He said yes and she said no* cannot be straightforwardly translated; on the other hand, the subtleties of the Hungarian levels of address will often be lost on translating a Hungarian novel into English. Recasting to take account of such intercultural differences forefronts the translator's interpretation of the source utterance which is obviously likely to deviate from it subjectively and therefore is open to criticism on grounds of accuracy.

1.1.7 Approaches to linguistics

It is sometimes said that modern linguistics began with the posthumous publication of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale* in 1916 (see Chapter 27). Certainly that work inspired structuralist linguistics in Europe, although Leonard Bloomfield's *Language* of 1933 was a greater influence on American structuralist linguistics. The structuralist doctrine is based on relationships of contrast among elements in a language

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and, more widely, in a conceptual system. The structure is elicited from the taxonomic distribution of elements within the language system. The structuralist emphasis on contrast led to the development of phonemic theories (see Chapter 6). In Europe contrasts of function (Chapter 30) were as significant as contrasts of form, but American structuralism focused on contrasts of form to the near exclusion of function and meaning until late in the twentieth century – a position that persisted through Chomskyan linguistics (see Chapter 28). Saussure's dogma on the arbitrariness of the sign has had to be modified since the rise of cognitive linguistics (see Chapter 29).

The Chomskyan 'revolution' began with the publication of *Syntactic Structures* in 1957. Where structuralism induced language structures bottom-up from the constituent analysis of stretches of language, Chomsky's theory of syntax was rather a hypothetico-deductive model that proposed top-down analysis of a phrase marker generated from an initial symbol S (sentence) into its constituent phrases and their constituents such that the terminal constituents were morphemes entered from the lexicon.[2] These terminal strings were then phonetically interpreted. In later Chomskyan models the phrase markers were also semantically interpreted. Related structures such as active/passive and declarative/interrogative were related by transformational rules. In the early 1960s Chomsky favoured the 'mentalistic' cognitive basis for language as a guiding principle for his grammars (though it is questionable whether he ever sought confirmation of his postulates from psycholinguistic experimentation – which was not forthcoming). Since the 1980s Chomsky has been championing biolinguistics (see Chapter 28) which seeks to uncover the neurological origins that underpin the universal human capacity to acquire language. Nonetheless Chomskyan grammars still postulate an autonomous syntax at the core of grammar such that phonological and semantic components of grammar are interpretative of syntax.

Cognitive linguistics (Chapter 29) developed as an alternative vision to Chomsky's notions that syntax is autonomous and that the human language faculty is independent of other cognitive behaviour. For cognitivists, linguistic abilities are embedded in perception, attention, memory, categorization, abstraction, creativity and symbolic thought. Language is acquired from exposure to contextually dependent utterances on the basis of meaning, so corpora provide the most important source for data. Cognitivists focus on analogy and on the functional significance of metaphor and metonymy in language. In direct contrast with Chomskyan linguists, cognitive linguists argue that syntactic constructions are semantically and pragmatically motivated.

Functionalist linguistics (Chapter 30) has a lot in common with cognitive linguistics. Functionalism looks to the functions of language within society as the motivation for language structure and the motivation for the meaningfulness of linguistic elements. In other words, functional linguistics holds that linguistic structures can only be understood and explained with reference to the communicative functions of language, and it is a given that the primary function of language is to be a vehicle for social interaction among human beings. Thus communication influences, but does not necessarily determine, the forms that language takes. Functionalists assume that cognitive and socio-cultural factors explain linguistic phenomena. Syntax is semantically and pragmatically motivated: it exists for people to combine elements of meaning in a variety of dissimilar ways to capture different nuances of meaning. Corpora (see Chapter 32) and discourse (Chapter 15) are more relevant to functionalist theorizing than are the decontextualized sentences of Chomsky-style linguistics.

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Cover image: © JO YONG-HAK/Reuters/Corbis

ISBN 978-0-415-83257-1
9 780415 832571

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Taylor & Francis Group
www.routledge.com

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