Introduction to Linguistics

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Prepared for Maggie Enow's school of English Modern Letters.

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Contents

- Chapter 1: What Is Linguistics? Language and Its Study
- Chapter 2: The Design Features of Human Language
- Chapter 3: Morphology: The Structure of Words
- Chapter 4: Syntax: The Structure of Sentences
- Chapter 5: Semantics and Pragmatics: Meaning in Words and in Use
- Chapter 6: Language Variation, Change and Acquisition
- A Final Word to the Reader

Chapter 1: What Is Linguistics? Language and Its Study

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- define linguistics and distinguish it from the traditional study of grammar;
- explain the difference between descriptive and prescriptive approaches;
- distinguish language, langue and parole, and competence and performance;
- name the main branches of linguistics and say what each one studies.

1.1 A Science of Language

Linguistics is the scientific study of language: of its sounds, its structures, its meanings, and its life in society. It is scientific not because it uses laboratories (though it may) but because of its method: it begins from observed data — real utterances by real speakers — forms hypotheses, tests them against more data, and revises them when the data object. The linguist's first loyalty is to the facts of how people actually speak.

This sets linguistics apart from the older tradition of **prescriptive grammar**, which tells speakers how they *ought* to speak according to rules inherited from earlier authorities. The prescriptivist condemns *I didn't see nobody* as illogical; the descriptivist notes that double negatives were normal in Chaucer's English, are systematic in many modern dialects, and were standard in the English of the King James Bible era's predecessors — and asks instead how the pattern works and where it is used. Description does not abolish standards: every student needs the standard variety for examinations and formal life. But linguistics insists that the standard is one variety among many, chosen by history and power, not by

superior logic. A linguist describes all varieties with the same respect and the same tools.

1.2 Language and Languages

The word *language* names two things at once: the human faculty itself — the capacity every child brings to the task of learning to speak — and each particular system such as English, French, Ewondo or Pidgin English. Linguistics studies both: what is common to all languages (their shared design, the subject of Chapter 2) and what is particular to each.

Two famous distinctions organise the field. Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss scholar whose lectures, published after his death as the *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), founded the modern discipline, separated **langue** — the shared system stored in the minds of a speech community — from **parole** — the individual acts of speaking that the system makes possible. A generation later, Noam Chomsky drew a parallel line between **competence**, the speaker's internal knowledge of the language, and **performance**, its use in real time, with its hesitations, interruptions and slips. Both distinctions say the same essential thing: behind the messy stream of speech stands an orderly system, and the system is the linguist's true object.

Saussure also gave us the idea of the **linguistic sign**: a pairing of a form (a sound pattern, which he called the signifier) with a meaning (the signified). The pairing is **arbitrary**: nothing in the sound /tri:/ compels it to mean a tree — French says /aʁbʁ/, and another language says something else again. Arbitrariness, far from being a defect, is what frees language from the world it describes, as Chapter 2 will show.

1.3 The Branches of Linguistics

The discipline is a house of many rooms, each named in this book's companions and successors.

- **Phonetics** studies the sounds of speech as physical events.
- **Phonology** studies how languages organise sounds into systems.
- **Morphology** studies the internal structure of words (Chapter 3).
- **Syntax** studies how words combine into sentences (Chapter 4).
- **Semantics** studies meaning in the language system; **pragmatics** studies meaning in use (Chapter 5).
- **Sociolinguistics** studies language in society — variation by region, class, age and situation.
- **Psycholinguistics** studies how language is learned, produced and understood by the mind.
- **Historical linguistics** studies how languages change over time and how they are related.
- **Applied linguistics** puts the findings to work: in teaching, translation, speech therapy, dictionary-making and language policy.

Two axes cross all of these. **Synchronic** study describes a language at one moment in time; **diachronic** study follows it through history. And **theoretical** linguistics seeks the general laws of language, while **applied** work solves practical problems. Every study you will ever read sits somewhere on these maps; knowing the maps keeps you from mistaking one room for the whole house.

1.4 Why Study Language Scientifically?

Because language is the most human of our possessions and the least examined. We speak thousands of sentences a day, nearly all of them new, without knowing how we do it. Linguistics makes the familiar strange and then intelligible. For the student of English Modern Letters it has a practical gift as well: literature is made of language, and the critic who understands how language works — its sounds, structures, ambiguities and registers — reads poems and plays with sharper eyes than the critic who does not. This book is your foundation; the two companion volumes on grammar and on phonetics give you the working tools of the two branches you will use most.

Worked Examples

Example 1. Classify the statement: "People should never end a sentence with a preposition." This is prescription: it issues a command about usage rather than describing it. The descriptive linguist replies that English speakers have ended sentences with prepositions for a thousand years — the practice is found throughout the literature of every century — and that the "rule" was imported from Latin, whose structure forbids what English freely allows.

Example 2. A child says, "I goed to school." Competence or performance? The error is a window into competence: the child has internalised the regular past-tense rule and applied it where adults use an irregular form. The slip is not carelessness but evidence of a system at work — performance revealing competence.

Example 3. Sort the questions by branch: (a) How is /ŋ/ distributed in English words? — phonology. (b) What is the smallest meaningful unit in *unhappiness*? — morphology. (c) Why do teenagers speak differently from their grandparents? —

sociolinguistics. (d) How did English lose most of its case endings? — historical linguistics.

Exercises — Chapter 1

1. Write one prescriptive and one descriptive statement about the sentence *Me and John went home.*

2. Explain, with an example, the difference between competence and performance.

3. Give two pieces of evidence that the link between a word's form and its meaning is arbitrary.

4. Assign each research topic to a branch: (a) the vowel system of a language; (b) how bilingual children mix languages; (c) the origin of the word *algebra*; (d) what makes a polite request polite.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 1

1. Prescriptive: "One should say *John and I went home*." Descriptive: "In informal speech, many speakers use *me* as part of a coordinated subject; the standard written variety uses *I* in that position." Any pair where the first commands and the second observes earns the mark.

2. Competence is the internal system (the rules a speaker knows); performance is its real-time use, subject to memory limits, noise and slips. Example: a speaker who produces a spoonerism knows the words perfectly — the error is in performance, not knowledge.

3. Different languages use unrelated forms for the same meaning (English *dog*, French *chien*); the same form carries unrelated meanings in one language (*bank*

of a river, *bank* for money); speakers accept new coinages instantly, which they could not do if form dictated meaning. Any two.

4. (a) Phonology (or phonetics, if the physical sounds are measured). (b) Psycholinguistics / sociolinguistics — accept either with a reason. (c) Historical linguistics. (d) Pragmatics.

Chapter 2: The Design Features of Human Language

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- list and explain the design features proposed for human language;
- compare human language with animal communication systems fairly and precisely;
- explain duality of patterning and productivity and why they matter;
- discuss what the comparison does and does not prove about human uniqueness.

2.1 A Checklist for Language

In the middle of the twentieth century the American linguist Charles Hockett proposed a set of **design features**: properties that, taken together, characterise human language and against which any communication system — animal, human or machine — can be measured. The list has been revised since, but its core remains the standard teaching tool, because it turns the vague question "do animals have language?" into a series of exact questions, most of which have clear answers.

2.2 The Features

Vocal-auditory channel. Human language is normally produced by the voice and received by the ear. This frees the hands and eyes during communication and lets speech work in the dark. (Sign languages show the channel can change while the rest of the design survives — an important qualification.)

Arbitrariness. As Chapter 1 explained, the form of a sign does not resemble its meaning: there is nothing dog-like in the sound *dog*. A dog's bark, by contrast, is not arbitrary — it is a direct expression of the animal's state.

Displacement. Human beings speak of things removed in time and space: yesterday's journey, next year's harvest, a city never visited, creatures that do not exist. Animal signals are almost entirely bound to the present stimulus: the alarm call sounds when the predator is there.

Productivity (creativity). From finite means, speakers produce and understand an unlimited number of new sentences. You have never before read the sentence *The purple bicycle dreamed of the sea*, yet you understand it instantly. Animal systems are closed inventories: a fixed set of calls, each with its fixed occasion.

Duality of patterning. Language is organised on two levels at once. A small stock of meaningless units — the phonemes — combines into a large stock of meaningful units — words and morphemes — which combine again into sentences. A few dozen sounds thus yield hundreds of thousands of words. No animal system shows this double articulation, and it is arguably the deepest feature of the design: economy at the bottom buys infinity at the top.

Cultural transmission. Language is learned from the community, not inherited in its particulars. A child born in Yaoundé and raised in London speaks English with a London accent, whatever her ancestry. Animal systems are largely innate in their particulars: a bird separated from its kind may sing a simplified song, but it does not learn the song of another species.

Reflexiveness and prevarication. Language can talk about itself (this book is language about language) and can be used to lie, to hypothesise and to tell stories — uses impossible for a system of honest, stimulus-bound signals.

2.3 The Animal Evidence, Fairly Weighed

The honest comparison grants animals more than tradition did, and less than enthusiasm claims. The honeybee's dance communicates the direction and distance of food — a genuine case of displacement, since the food is absent when the dance is performed — but the dance is confined to one topic and its "sentences" cannot be recombined to discuss anything else. Vervet monkeys give distinct alarm calls for eagles, leopards and snakes, and listeners respond appropriately: the calls are referential, almost word-like. Yet the inventory is small, fixed, and never combined into larger structures. Trained apes have learned signs and symbols in impressive numbers and can combine two or three — but the long, hierarchically structured sentence, built fresh each time, remains beyond them. The verdict of the design-feature checklist is therefore nuanced: animals share several features with us, sometimes surprisingly; no known animal system shows all of them, and duality with productivity — the engine of the open-ended sentence — appears to be ours alone.

2.4 Why It Matters

The features are not a trophy list. Each one explains a power you use daily. Displacement makes history, planning and fiction possible. Arbitrariness lets us coin words for things never seen. Duality explains how a child can master a vocabulary of thousands with a few dozen sounds. And productivity is the reason this book can be written at all: the sentences in it are new, yet you follow them without effort. When later chapters analyse words and sentences, keep the design in mind — morphology and syntax are the machinery that duality and productivity require.

Worked Examples

Example 1. A dog barks at the door. Which features are present, which absent? Present: vocal-auditory channel. Absent: arbitrariness (the bark expresses its state directly), displacement (it concerns the present moment), productivity (the bark cannot be combined into novel messages), duality (no meaningless units recombine below it).

Example 2. "We will plant the field behind the hill when the rains come, if the seed money arrives." The sentence shows displacement twice over (a future time, a conditional event), productivity (a new combination), and cultural transmission (every word learned from a community). One ordinary sentence exercises nearly the whole design.

Example 3. A parrot repeats "Good morning." Channel and sounds are present, but the parrot does not use the form productively or displacedly; imitation of a signal is not possession of the system. The test is never whether a creature can produce a human sound, but whether it can do with sounds what humans do.

Exercises — Chapter 2

1. Define: arbitrariness, displacement, duality of patterning, productivity.

2. A traffic light communicates. Test it against four design features.

3. Explain why duality of patterning is an economy: use the numbers involved in English.

4. A student says, "Bees have language because they communicate information." Answer fairly, using the features.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 2

1. Arbitrariness: no natural resemblance between form and meaning. Displacement: reference to things absent in time or space. Duality: meaningless units (phonemes) combine into meaningful units (morphemes/words), which combine into sentences. Productivity: unlimited novel sentences from finite means.

2. Traffic light: not vocal-auditory (visual channel — acceptable in itself, since sign languages are visual); arbitrary in part (colours are conventional); no displacement (it speaks only of the present junction); no productivity (three fixed messages, uncombinable); no duality. Conclusion: a signal system, not a language.

3. English uses roughly forty-four phonemes. Combined into morphemes and words, they yield a vocabulary in the hundreds of thousands; combined again into sentences, the yield is unlimited. Without duality, every meaning would need its own unanalysable signal, and no memory could hold the inventory.

4. Communication is necessary but not sufficient. The bee dance shows displacement on one topic, but it lacks productivity (no new messages), duality (no recombining units) and arbitrariness in the linguistic sense (the dance maps the geography iconically — angle and duration picture the facts). It is a remarkable communication system; by the checklist, it is not a language.

Chapter 3: Morphology: The Structure of Words

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- define morpheme, and distinguish free from bound morphemes;
- analyse words into roots and affixes, and inflectional from derivational morphology;
- describe the main word-formation processes of English;
- explain allomorphs and why *cats, dogs* and *horses* carry one morpheme in three shapes.

3.1 The Morpheme

Morphology studies the internal structure of words. Its basic unit is the **morpheme**: the smallest unit of language that carries meaning or grammatical function. *Cat* is one morpheme; *cats* is two — *cat* plus the plural morpheme. *Unbreakable* is three: *un-* (negation), *break* (the root), *-able* (capable of being). A morpheme is not the same as a syllable: *banana* has three syllables but one morpheme, since no part of it carries a separable meaning, while *cats* has one syllable and two morphemes.

Free morphemes can stand alone as words: *cat, break, teach, happy*. **Bound morphemes** must attach to something: *un-, -able, -ed, -s*, and also certain roots borrowed from Latin and Greek, such as *-ceive* in *receive, perceive, conceive*, which never stands alone in English. The central free morpheme of a word is its **root**; bound morphemes attached to it are **affixes** — **prefixes** before the root (*un-, re-, pre-*), **suffixes** after it (*-ness, -ly, -ed*), and in some languages infixes and circumfixes, which English lacks. The form to which an affix attaches is the **stem**

or base: in *unhappiness*, *un-* attaches to *happiness*, which is itself built from *happy* plus *-ness* — structure within structure, like boxes in boxes.

3.2 Inflection and Derivation

Bound morphemes divide by their job. **Inflectional morphemes** mark grammatical relations without creating a new word: English has exactly eight — plural *-s* (*books*), possessive *'s* (*John's*), third-person singular *-s* (*she walks*), past *-ed* (*walked*), past participle *-en/-ed* (*taken, walked*), present participle *-ing* (*walking*), comparative *-er* (*taller*) and superlative *-est* (*tallest*). Inflection never changes word class and is fully regular across the vocabulary: every countable noun takes the plural, every adjective of the right shape the comparative.

Derivational morphemes create new words, often of a new class: *teach* (verb) → *teacher* (noun); *happy* (adjective) → *happiness* (noun) → *unhappiness*; *modern* → *modernise* → *modernisation*. Derivation is partly irregular: we say *teacher* but not *cook* → *cooker* for the person (a *cooker* is the stove), and *-ity* attaches to *electric* (*electricity*) but not to every adjective. The difference matters for learners: inflection is a closed, learnable system; derivation is an open, historical accumulation, learned word family by word family.

3.3 Word-Formation Processes

English grows new words by several roads. **Compounding** joins free morphemes: *blackboard, bookshelf, pickpocket, mother-in-law*. **Conversion** (or zero derivation) shifts a word to a new class without any affix: *to bottle* (from the noun), *a run* (from the verb), *to empty* (from the adjective). **Blending** fuses pieces of two words: *brunch* (breakfast + lunch), *smog* (smoke + fog), *motel* (motor + hotel). **Clipping** shortens: *exam, phone, fridge, lab*. **Acronyms and initialisms** build from first letters: *laser, scuba* (pronounced as words); *BBC, HIV* (pronounced as

letters). **Borrowing** imports words wholesale — English has taken from French, Latin, Greek and hundreds of other languages across its history. **Coinage** invents from nothing, rare and usually commercial. A living language uses all of these daily; the dictionary is a snapshot of a river.

3.4 Allomorphs: One Morpheme, Several Shapes

The plural morpheme is written *-s* but pronounced three ways: /s/ in *cats*, /z/ in *dogs*, /ɪz/ in *horses*. These variants are **allomorphs** — different forms of one morpheme, chosen by the sounds around them (the choice is phonology at work, as the companion volume shows). The past-tense morpheme behaves identically: /t/ in *walked*, /d/ in *played*, /ɪd/ in *wanted*. Morphology names the unit; phonology predicts its shape. Irregular forms — *men, went, children, oxen* — are fossils of older systems, memorised word by word; children who say *mans* and *goed* are not failing morphology but applying its regular rule before learning the exceptions, exactly as Chapter 1 described.

Worked Examples

Example 1. Analyse *disagreements*: *dis-* (prefix, negation/reversal) + *agree* (root, free) + *-ment* (suffix, makes a noun) + *-s* (inflectional plural). Four morphemes; three derivational or root elements build the word, and one inflectional morpheme fits it into the sentence.

Example 2. Build the tree of *unhappiness* in words: *happy* + *-ness* = *happiness* (adjective → noun); *un-* + *happiness* = *unhappiness*. The order matters: *un-* attaches to adjectives (*unhappy*) and to some nouns, but *ness* must attach first here, since *unhappy* + *-ness* gives the same result by the other route — both bracketings exist, and discussing which is right (the meaning is "the state of being unhappy",

favouring [*un-* [happy]] + *-ness*... precisely: [[*un-happy*] *-ness*]) is a fine exercise in morphological reasoning.

Example 3. Classify the formations: *toothpaste* — compounding; *to email* (from the noun *email*) — conversion; *advert* from *advertisement* — clipping; *sitcom* (situation + comedy) — blending; *UNESCO* — acronym.

Exercises — Chapter 3

1. Count and list the morphemes in: *reopened, teachers, unbelievable, cats*.

2. Mark each affix inflectional (I) or derivational (D): *-ed* (past), *-ness*, *-s* (plural), *-ful*, *-er* (comparative), *-er* (agent, as in *writer*), *un-*, *-ing*.

3. Name the formation process: *flu, blackbird, brunch, to referee (from referee, noun), NATO, babysit (formed on the pattern of babysitter)*.

4. Give the three allomorphs of the plural morpheme with an example of each, and state what chooses between them.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 3

1. *Reopened*: *re-* + *open* + *-ed* = 3. *Teachers*: *teach* + *-er* + *-s* = 3. *Unbelievable*: *un-* + *believe* + *-able* = 3. *Cats*: *cat* + *-s* = 2.

2. I: past *-ed*, plural *-s*, comparative *-er*, *-ing* (as participle). D: *-ness*, *-ful*, agent *-er*, *un-*. Note that *-er* appears in both lists with different jobs — form does not decide; function does.

3. *Flu* — clipping (from *influenza*). *Blackbird* — compounding. *Brunch* — blending. *To referee* — conversion. *NATO* — acronym. *Babysit* — back-formation (a legitimate extra answer: a verb formed by removing an imagined affix from *babysitter*).

4. /s/ after voiceless consonants (*cats*), /z/ after voiced sounds (*dogs, days*), /ɪz/ after sibilants (*horses, churches*). The preceding sound chooses — a phonological condition on a morphological unit.

Chapter 4: Syntax: The Structure of Sentences

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- explain what syntax studies and what a phrase structure rule is;
- draw and read a simple tree diagram for a sentence;
- use tests — substitution, movement and coordination — to identify constituents;
- explain ambiguity as a difference of structure, and recursion as the source of productivity.

4.1 Sentences Have Structure

Syntax studies how words combine into phrases, phrases into clauses, and clauses into sentences. Its central discovery is that a sentence is not a string of words in a row, like beads, but a hierarchy of **constituents**: groups of words that function as units inside larger groups. In *The old farmer sold the horse*, the words *the old farmer* behave as one unit (the subject) and *the horse* as another (the object). Proof comes from **constituency tests**. A constituent can be replaced by a single word: *He sold it.* It can be moved as a block: *The horse, the old farmer sold* (marked but grammatical). It can be coordinated with a like unit: *The old farmer and his son sold the horse and the goat.* And it can stand alone as the answer to a question: *Who sold the horse? — The old farmer.* Strings that fail the tests — *old farmer sold the* — are not constituents, whatever their position in the row.

4.2 Phrase Structure

Grammars capture constituency with **phrase structure rules**, of which the following simplified set describes a fragment of English:

- S → NP VP (a sentence consists of a noun phrase and a verb phrase)
- NP → Det N (PP) (a noun phrase: determiner, noun, optional prepositional phrase)
- VP → V (NP) (PP) (a verb phrase: verb, optional object, optional prepositional phrase)
- PP → P NP (a prepositional phrase: preposition plus noun phrase)

Apply the rules and a **tree diagram** grows: S at the top, dividing into NP and VP; the NP dividing into Det (*the*) and N (*farmer*); the VP dividing into V (*sold*), NP (*the horse*) and PP (*to the trader*), whose NP divides again. The tree is not decoration: it is the sentence's anatomy, showing which words belong together and which merely stand adjacent. *The farmer sold the horse to the trader* and *The farmer sold the horse trader* contain nearly the same words, but their trees differ — in the second, *horse trader* is one NP (a compound noun: a trader of horses) — and the meanings differ with the trees.

4.3 Ambiguity: One String, Two Structures

Structural ambiguity is the tree diagram's finest advertisement. *The police shot the thieves with guns* has two readings: the guns were the instrument (PP attaches to the VP) or the thieves had the guns (PP attaches inside the NP). *Visiting relatives can be boring* divides two ways: the activity of visiting them (gerund subject) or the relatives who visit (participial modifier). *She saw the man with the telescope* — whose telescope? A famous line from Shakespeare's time makes the same point in literature: in *King Lear* and elsewhere, editors dispute attachments exactly as syntacticians do. Where words are ambiguous, grammar books speak of lexical ambiguity; where structures are, of structural ambiguity — and only the tree separates them.

Note on sources: Shakespeare's plays are public-domain works; the reference here is to the general phenomenon of editorial disputes over attachment in early modern texts, not a quotation.

4.4 Recursion and the Infinite Sentence

One rule in the fragment above hides a universe: PP contains NP, and NP may contain PP. So *the key* grows into *the key to the box*, then *the key to the box in the cupboard*, then *the key to the box in the cupboard under the stairs in the house on the hill* — without limit. This property, **recursion**, is the syntactic engine of the productivity of Chapter 2: finite rules, infinite output. Relative clauses recurse the same way: *the house that Jack built* expands into the nursery rhyme's ever-growing chain — the malt that lay in the house that Jack built, and so on — a public-domain traditional rhyme that children learn as a game and linguists cite as recursion made audible. There is no longest sentence of English; there are only speakers who tire. Any theory of syntax that cannot generate the infinite from the finite has failed at the first fence, and phrase structure with recursion clears it.

4.5 Beyond the Fragment

Real syntax must also handle questions (which move constituents: *What did she sell?* — the object stands first), passives, agreement, and the constraints that forbid such strings as *Who did you say that left?* in some dialects and allow them in others. Modern theories differ in their machinery — some enrich phrase structure, others begin from the verb's requirements — but all keep the twin insights of this chapter: sentences are hierarchies of constituents, and recursion makes them endless. The companion grammar volume puts these insights to work on English clause patterns in detail.

Worked Examples

Example 1. Test the constituency of *in the garden* in *She planted roses in the garden*: substitution — *She planted roses there* (one word replaces the group); movement — *In the garden, she planted roses*; question answer — *Where did she plant roses? — In the garden.* Three passes: a constituent (a PP).

Example 2. Draw in words the tree for *The dog chased a cat*: S → NP (Det *the*, N *dog*) + VP (V *chased*, NP (Det *a*, N *cat*)). Every word is dominated by the nodes that the rules predict, and no rule is broken.

Example 3. Explain the ambiguity of *Old men and women attended*: either [old men] and [women] (only the men are old) or old [men and women] (both are old). Two bracketings, two meanings — structural ambiguity in four words.

Exercises — Chapter 4

1. Apply two constituency tests to *the tall girl* in *The tall girl won the prize*.

2. Write phrase structure rules for a simple adjective phrase inside the NP (e.g. *the tall girl*), extending the set in section 4.2.

3. Give both readings, with bracketings, of: *He saw the ships with the flag.*

4. Extend by recursion, twice, using relative clauses: *the book*.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 4

1. Substitution: *She won the prize.* Question answer: *Who won? — The tall girl.* Movement: *The tall girl, she won the prize* (topicalised, marked). Any two clear tests earn the marks.

2. NP → Det (AP) N; AP → (Adv) A. Sample: *the very tall girl* — Det *the*, AP (Adv *very*, A *tall*), N *girl*.

3. Reading 1: the flag was his instrument of seeing (improbable but structural: PP attaches to VP — he used the flag to see with). Reading 2: the ships that carried the flag (PP inside the object NP). The natural reading is 2; the exercise is to see that grammar permits both structures and world knowledge chooses.

4. Sample: *the book that she wrote → the book that she wrote about the town that the river made famous*. Any chain where each clause contains a new NP that hosts the next clause shows recursion.

Chapter 5: Semantics and Pragmatics: Meaning in Words and in Use

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- distinguish sense from reference, and denotation from connotation;
- describe the main sense relations: synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, polysemy and homonymy;
- explain entailment and presupposition with examples;
- apply Grice's cooperative principle and the idea of implicature to real exchanges.

5.1 Two Kinds of Meaning

Semantics studies the meaning that belongs to the language system itself: what words and sentences mean wherever they are used. **Pragmatics** studies the meaning speakers create in context: what a particular utterance means, here, now, between these people. The sentence *It is cold in here* has one semantic content — a statement about temperature — but as an utterance it may be a request to close the window, a complaint about the host, or a hint to leave. Semantics gives the sentence its meaning; pragmatics gives the utterance its force.

Within semantics, a classic distinction separates **sense** from **reference**. Reference is the thing in the world an expression picks out; sense is the meaning by which it picks it out. *The morning star* and *the evening star* refer to the same planet, Venus, but differ in sense — which is why the discovery that they were one was news. **Denotation** is a word's core, dictionary meaning; **connotation** is

the halo of associations around it: *home* denotes a dwelling and connotes warmth and safety; *residence* denotes the same and connotes officialdom.

5.2 Sense Relations

Words live in networks. **Synonymy** pairs words of similar sense — *begin/commence, buy/purchase, freedom/liberty* — though perfect synonyms are rare: register or collocation always separates them slightly (*commence* is formal; we *buy bread* but *purchase property* in formal prose). **Antonymy** pairs opposites, of several kinds: gradable pairs on a scale (*hot/cold*, with *warm* and *cool* between), complementary pairs that divide their world (*alive/dead*), and relational pairs that define each other (*buy/sell, teacher/pupil, lend/borrow*). **Hyponymy** is inclusion: *rose* is a hyponym of *flower*, which is a hyponym of *plant*; the including term is the superordinate. **Polysemy** is one word with related senses: *head* of a person, of a school, of a queue. **Homonymy** is two words accidentally sharing a form: the *bank* of a river and the *bank* that keeps money — unrelated histories, one spelling. Dictionaries mark the difference by giving polysemes one entry with numbered senses and homonyms separate entries.

5.3 Entailment and Presupposition

Sentence relations matter as much as word relations. **Entailment**: one sentence guarantees another. *Ada killed the goat* entails *The goat died*; if the first is true, the second cannot be false. **Presupposition** is what a sentence takes for granted: *John has stopped smoking* presupposes that John once smoked — and the presupposition survives negation: *John has not stopped smoking* still assumes he smoked. Advertisers and examiners both exploit the difference: a presupposition smuggles content past the listener's guard, because challenging it requires

interrupting the frame ("Wait — did he ever smoke?") rather than simply denying the claim.

5.4 Grice and the Cooperative Principle

The philosopher H. P. Grice observed that conversation runs on a **cooperative principle**: speakers assume each other to be contributing appropriately, under four maxims — **quantity** (say enough, not too much), **quality** (say what you believe true), **relation** (be relevant), and **manner** (be clear and orderly). When a speaker openly departs from a maxim, the listener does not conclude that cooperation has ended; she computes an **implicature** — a meaning implied beyond what was said. Asked "How was the examination?", the reply "The questions were printed beautifully" flouts quality and relation on the surface, and implicates, unmistakably, that the examination went badly. Asked where the petrol station is, "There is a garage round the corner" implicates that it is open and sells petrol — information no word of the reply states. Politeness, irony, tact and most of humour live in this gap between saying and meaning, which is why pragmatics, the youngest branch in this book, is the one students recognise most quickly from their own daily lives.

5.5 Reference, Deixis and Speech Acts

Some words mean nothing without their occasion: *I*, *you*, *here*, *now*, *this*, *yesterday* — the **deictic** expressions, whose reference shifts with the speaker and the moment. A note reading *I will be back here tomorrow*, found a week later by a stranger, has lost almost all its content. Finally, utterances do things: following the philosopher J. L. Austin, we call these **speech acts**. *I promise to come* does not describe a promise; it makes one. *I name this ship…*, *You are under arrest*, *I apologise* — each performs its act in the saying, provided the conditions are right

(the speaker must have the standing to perform it: a passer-by cannot arrest you by reciting the words). Pragmatics ends where philosophy begins: with the discovery that to speak is to act.

Worked Examples

Example 1. Classify the relation: *hot/cold* — gradable antonymy; *uncle/aunt* — not antonyms but co-hyponyms of *relative*-type terms (they share a superordinate and contrast by sex: a useful reminder that not every contrast is antonymy); *car/vehicle* — hyponymy (*car* is the hyponym).

Example 2. *The headteacher has closed the school again.* Presupposition: the school has been closed before (carried by *again*). Entailment: the school is now closed. Negate the sentence — *has not closed the school again* — and the presupposition survives while the entailment vanishes: the test separates the two.

Example 3. Implicature: A: "Did you enjoy the concert?" B: "The hall had excellent seats." B flouts relation on the surface; the implicature is that the music disappointed. If B had meant the seats literally, cooperation would require saying more.

Exercises — Chapter 5

1. Label each pair: synonymy, antonymy (say which kind), hyponymy, polysemy or homonymy: (a) *deep/shallow*; (b) *sofa/couch*; (c) *mouth* (of a person / of a river); (d) *bat* (animal / sports equipment); (e) *dog/animal*; (f) *pass/fail*.

2. State one entailment and one presupposition of: *Ngozi has sold her bicycle.*

3. Identify the maxim flouted and the implicature: A: "Will the headteacher support our play?" B: "The headteacher supports everything that costs nothing."

4. Explain why *I promise* is a speech act but *I walk* is not, in Austin's terms.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 5

1. (a) Gradable antonymy. (b) Synonymy (near-perfect; register may differ slightly by region). (c) Polysemy — related senses of one word. (d) Homonymy — unrelated words sharing a form. (e) Hyponymy. (f) Complementary antonymy (in the examination frame: no middle ground).

2. Entailment: Ngozi no longer owns the bicycle / someone now owns it. Presupposition: Ngozi owned a bicycle (before the sale).

3. Relation (and arguably quantity): B's reply is about cost, not the play. Implicature: support is unlikely if the play costs anything — a guarded "probably not" delivered tactfully.

4. *I promise* performs the act it names, in the saying, when the speaker is sincere and able; *I walk* merely reports an act done with the legs, not the words. The first is performative; the second is a plain statement.

Chapter 6: Language Variation, Change and Acquisition

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- distinguish dialect, accent, register and style;
- describe how and why languages change over time;
- outline the stages by which children acquire their first language;
- discuss second-language learning and the position of English in Cameroon and the world.

6.1 Variation: No Two Speakers Alike

A language is not a single uniform code but a federation of varieties. A **dialect** is a variety marked by grammar and vocabulary as well as pronunciation; an **accent** concerns pronunciation alone. Every speaker has both: there is no accent-free speech, only accents of greater or lesser prestige. **Register** is variation by situation — the same speaker is formal at a job interview, relaxed at home, technical at work — and **style** is the finer shading within it. Cameroon is a living laboratory of variation: English and French as official languages, Cameroon Pidgin English as a widely shared lingua franca, and hundreds of home languages, each with its own grammar as complete as any in this book. Cameroon English itself is a recognised variety with its own systematic features of pronunciation, vocabulary and idiom. Sociolinguistics studies this landscape without ranking it: varieties differ, and each is adequate to its speakers' lives; standards are chosen for schools and examinations for practical reasons of reach, not because other varieties are broken versions of them.

6.2 Change: Languages Move

Languages change in every component, slowly and unstoppably. **Sounds** shift: the Great Vowel Shift between roughly the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries moved every long vowel of English, which is why *house* no longer rhymes with the pronunciation Chaucer knew. **Words** are born (by the processes of Chapter 3), change meaning — *nice* once meant "foolish", then "precise", now "pleasant" — and die. **Grammar** erodes and rebuilds: English lost most of its case endings and compensated with fixed word order and prepositions. Change is not decay; it is the normal life of a system transmitted by children, who regularise what they hear and occasionally innovate. Historical linguistics reconstructs family trees of languages from shared inheritance: English, German, Dutch and the Scandinavian languages descend from a common Germanic ancestor, itself a branch of Indo-European — kinship proven by systematic sound correspondences, such as the regular matching of English *t* with German *z/ss* in *ten/zehn, water/Wasser*.

6.3 First-Language Acquisition

Children acquire their first language in a predictable sequence, without lessons and without being able to state a single rule. **Babbling** (from about six months) rehearses the sounds of the surrounding language. **One-word utterances** (around the first birthday) do the work of sentences: *milk!* may request, announce or demand. **Two-word combinations** follow (*more milk, daddy go*), then **telegraphic speech** — content words strung together with grammar words omitted — then a rapid flowering in which inflections, questions, negatives and complex sentences appear, largely in a fixed order across children. Errors are the milestones of progress: overregularisations like *goed* and *mans* prove the child is extracting rules, not parroting; no adult model says *goed*, yet every English-

learning child passes through it. By about age five the core grammar is in place — a feat of learning, achieved universally by children in every community, that no teaching method has ever matched for speed or completeness.

6.4 Second Languages and English in the World

Second-language learning differs: it begins from an existing system, proceeds unevenly, and is shaped by age, exposure, motivation and the distance between the languages. Learners pass through an **interlanguage** — a developing system with its own regularities, part first language, part target — and some features may stabilise (**fossilise**) if communication succeeds without them. For the teacher and the student of English Modern Letters, the practical conclusions are: expect transfer (French-influenced patterns in a Cameroonian learner's English are systematic, not careless); value communication while steadily raising accuracy; and remember that the target is a variety — the standard needed for examinations and international use — not the erasure of the learner's own voice.

English itself now belongs to its world community: more people speak it as a second language than as a first, and its varieties — British, American, Nigerian, Indian, Cameroonian and many more — form what scholars picture as concentric circles of use. The graduate of English Modern Letters stands in that world as a specialist: one who knows the standard, understands the variation, and can explain both. That is the whole subject of linguistics in a single sentence, and it is where this introduction ends and your further study begins.

Worked Examples

Example 1. Dialect or accent? A speaker says /bʌs/ where you say /bʊs/ for *bus* — accent (pronunciation only). A speaker says *I didn't see anybody* where another

says *I saw nobody* — and both are systematic in their communities — dialect (a grammatical pattern differs).

Example 2. A four-year-old says, "The dog runned away." Analysis: the child has applied the regular past-tense rule to an irregular verb — overregularisation. The error is evidence of rule-learning (competence growing), and it will disappear as the irregular form is memorised; correction is best given by modelling (*Yes, the dog ran away*), not by grammar lectures.

Example 3. Meaning change: *awful* once meant "inspiring awe" (full of awe); it now means "very bad". The word's form survived while its sense slid from reverence to disapproval — semantic change of the kind called pejoration. Its cousin *awesome* has lately travelled the other way in informal use.

Exercises — Chapter 6

1. Define dialect, accent and register, and give one example of each from your own experience of Cameroon.

2. A learner writes: *I am having a car* and *She explained me the lesson.* Offer a transfer-based explanation and a corrected model for each.

3. Put in order and name the stages: telegraphic speech; babbling; complex sentences; one-word utterances; two-word combinations.

4. Explain, with the *goed* example, why children's errors are evidence for rule-learning rather than imitation.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 6

1. Dialect: a variety with its own grammar and vocabulary (example: features of Cameroon Pidgin English or of a regional English). Accent: pronunciation only (example: differing vowel in *bus* between northern and southern British

speakers, or between varieties in Cameroon). Register: variation by situation (example: the English of a formal letter versus a market conversation by the same speaker). Any accurate, genuinely local examples earn the marks.

2. *I am having a car*: transfer of a possessive pattern and overuse of the progressive with a state verb; model: *I have a car. She explained me the lesson*: transfer of a French-type pattern (*expliquer quelque chose à quelqu'un* reorganised); standard model: *She explained the lesson to me* — *explain* takes the thing explained as its object, with the person in a *to*-phrase.

3. Babbling → one-word utterances → two-word combinations → telegraphic speech → complex sentences.

4. Children say *goed* although no adult says it, so it cannot be imitated; it must be generated by a rule the child has extracted (add *-ed* for past time) and over-applied. Errors of this kind show acquisition is creative rule-formation — the same conclusion Chapter 1 drew from the example.

A Final Word to the Reader

You began with a question — what is language, and how can it be studied? — and you now hold the map of the whole territory: the design of the system, its sounds, its words, its sentences, its meanings in the system and in use, and its life in society, in history and in the growing mind of the child. Linguistics is the foundation beneath every other study in English Modern Letters: the grammar you apply, the poems you scan, the plays you hear in the mind's ear all run on the machinery described in this book. Keep it, reread it, and let it sharpen everything you study next.

— Maggie Enow, Graduate of the University of Yaoundé I, English Modern Letters