


外语语言文学系列教材

普通语言学概论

陈佑林 何举纯 主编

 华中师范大学出版社



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前 言

在华中师范大学出版社的大力支持和帮助下,《普通语言学概论》这本书终于得以面世,这是一件值得庆贺的事。

多年以来,我们几位从事语言学教学工作的教师就一直想为师范院校英语专业的本科生编写一本语言学导论性质的教材,并就教材的内容、重点、编写原则等问题进行过多次讨论。经过仔细的讨论和协商,我们就编写原则形成了以下共识:

1. 本教材以介绍语言学的基本概念和知识为主,不进行详细的阐述和讨论。
2. 本教材应反映语言学研究的最新动态与成果。
3. 本教材在介绍基本概念和知识时,主要以英语语言为例进行阐述,偶尔也可使用汉语或其他语言的例证。
4. 本教材的英语撰写,语言应简单明了、通俗易懂。

后来又在仔细分析了师范院校英语专业本科生职业需求的基础上确定了教材的内容与重点,并制定出了该教材的所有章节内容及重点。

该书的出版得到了出版社领导的大力支持。他们不仅提出了许多宝贵的修改意见,同时还将该教材纳入了出版计划。另外,江汉大学外国语学院的李磊老师曾为本书的出版做出过贡献,我们也在此表示谢意。

尽管我们在教材的编写过程中付出了很多努力,但是由于我们的水平有限,书中肯定还有一些我们尚未发现的错误和不妥之处。希望读者在使用过程中发现后能转告我们,以便该书在修订时能够得以更正。

编 者

2010年5月

Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction	(1)
1.1 What is language?	(1)
1.1.1 Definition of language	(1)
1.1.2 Distinctive features of language	(3)
1.2 What is linguistics?	(9)
1.2.1 Definition of linguistics	(9)
1.2.2 Principles for linguistic study	(10)
1.2.3 The scope of linguistics	(11)
1.2.4 Some basic distinctions in linguistics	(13)
Exercises	(17)
Chapter 2 Phonetics	(21)
2.1 Study of speech sounds	(21)
2.2 Definition of phonetics	(21)
2.2.1 Analysis of speech sounds	(21)
2.2.2 Process of speech production and perception	(22)
2.3 Speech organs	(23)
2.4 Production of a sound	(24)
2.5 Transcription of speech sounds	(25)
2.6 Classification of English speech sounds	(29)
2.6.1 Classification of English consonants	(29)
2.6.2 Classification of vowels	(33)
Exercises	(35)
Chapter 3 Phonology	(37)
3.1 Phonetics and phonology	(37)

3.2	Phone, phoneme and allophone	(37)
3.3	Distinctive features	(39)
3.4	Minimal pairs	(40)
3.5	Complementary distribution	(40)
3.6	Phonological rules	(41)
3.7	Suprasegmental features	(42)
3.7.1	Stress	(43)
3.7.2	Tone	(44)
3.7.3	Intonation	(45)
	Exercises	(45)
Chapter 4	Morphology	(47)
4.1	Definition of morphology	(47)
4.2	Classification of morphology	(48)
4.3	Morpheme and allomorph	(50)
4.3.1	Morpheme	(50)
4.3.2	Morpheme and phoneme	(51)
4.3.3	Allomorph	(51)
4.3.4	Types of morphemes	(52)
4.4	Morphological rules—compounding	(56)
4.4.1	Compounding	(57)
4.4.2	Types of compound words	(57)
4.4.3	Features of compounds	(58)
	Exercises	(61)
Chapter 5	Syntax	(63)
5.1	Definition of syntax	(63)
5.2	Syntax as a system of rules	(63)
5.3	Sentence structure	(65)
5.4	Types of sentences	(66)
5.5	Linear and hierarchical structures of sentences	(68)
5.5.1	Linear word order of a sentence	(68)

5.5.2	Hierarchical structure of a sentence	(69)
5.5.3	Tree diagrams of sentence structure	(70)
5.6	Syntactic categories	(72)
5.6.1	Lexical categories	(72)
5.6.2	Phrasal categories	(73)
5.6.3	Grammatical relations	(74)
5.6.4	Combinational rules	(75)
5.7	Syntactic movement and movement rules	(79)
5.7.1	NP-movement and WH-movement	(79)
5.7.2	Other types of movement	(80)
5.7.3	Move α —a general movement rule	(81)
5.8	D-structure and S-structure	(81)
5.9	Theory of Universal Grammar	(82)
5.9.1	General principles of Universal Grammar	(83)
5.9.2	The parameters of Universal Grammar	(83)
	Exercises	(85)
Chapter 6	Semantics	(88)
6.1	Definition of semantics	(88)
6.2	Some major views concerning the study of meaning	(88)
6.3	Lexical meaning	(91)
6.3.1	Sense and reference	(91)
6.3.2	Major sense relations	(92)
6.4	Sense relations between sentences	(97)
6.5	Semantic analysis	(100)
	Exercises	(102)
Chapter 7	Pragmatics	(106)
7.1	An introduction to pragmatics	(106)
7.1.1	Definition	(106)
7.1.2	Pragmatics vs. semantics	(106)
7.1.3	Context and meaning	(107)

7.1.4	Sentence meaning vs. utterance meaning	(107)
7.2	Speech act theory	(108)
7.2.1	Austin's model of speech acts	(108)
7.2.2	Searle's classification of speech acts	(110)
7.2.3	Indirect speech act	(112)
7.3	Conversational analysis	(114)
7.3.1	The structural features of conversation	(114)
7.3.2	Conversational implicature and the Cooperative Principle	(117)
7.3.3	The Politeness Principle	(121)
	Exercises	(129)
Chapter 8	Historical Linguistics	(132)
8.1	A brief history of English language	(132)
8.1.1	Old English (449—1100)	(133)
8.1.2	Middle English (1100—1500)	(134)
8.1.3	Modern English (1500—the present)	(135)
8.2	Linguistic changes of English	(136)
8.2.1	Sound change	(136)
8.2.2	Lexical change	(137)
8.2.3	Morphological change	(141)
8.2.4	Syntactic change	(141)
8.2.5	Semantic change	(142)
8.3	Language family and language typology	(144)
8.3.1	Historical comparative linguistics	(145)
8.3.2	Language family	(146)
8.3.3	Language typology	(149)
8.4	Causes of language change	(152)
8.4.1	Sociological factors	(152)
8.4.2	Development of science and technology	(152)
8.4.3	Phonological and grammatical simplification	(153)

8. 4. 4	Children's language acquisition	(154)
Exercises	(155)
Chapter 9	Sociolinguistics	(156)
9. 1	Variety of language related to the user	(156)
9. 1. 1	Notion of variety	(156)
9. 1. 2	Dialect	(157)
9. 1. 3	Language variety and social class	(158)
9. 1. 4	Language variety and race	(159)
9. 1. 5	Language variety and sex	(159)
9. 1. 6	Language variety and age	(160)
9. 1. 7	Idiolect	(160)
9. 1. 8	Standard dialect	(161)
9. 2	Variety of language related to the use	(161)
9. 2. 1	Register	(161)
9. 2. 2	Scales of formality	(163)
9. 3	Standard and non-standard dialects	(165)
9. 3. 1	Standard dialect	(165)
9. 3. 2	Non-standard dialect	(167)
9. 3. 3	Lingua franca	(167)
9. 3. 4	Esperanto—an artificial lingua franca	(168)
9. 4	Pidgin, creole, bilingualism and diglossia	(169)
9. 4. 1	Pidgin and creole	(169)
9. 4. 2	Bilingualism and diglossia	(171)
Exercises	(173)
Chapter 10	Psycholinguistics	(174)
10. 1	Language and thought	(174)
10. 1. 1	Early views on language-thought relationship	(174)
10. 1. 2	Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis	(175)
10. 2	First language acquisition	(177)
10. 2. 1	Language acquisition	(177)

10.2.2	Stages in first language acquisition	(178)
10.2.3	Children's development of linguistic system	(179)
10.3	Theories on child language acquisition	(184)
10.3.1	Reinforcement theory	(184)
10.3.2	Innate linguistic competence theory	(185)
10.4	Error analysis and second language acquisition	(186)
10.4.1	Acquisition vs. learning	(186)
10.4.2	Second language acquisition vs. first language acquisition	(186)
10.4.3	Transfer and interference	(187)
10.5	Types of errors	(189)
10.5.1	Inter-lingual errors	(189)
10.5.2	Intra-lingual errors—over-generalization	(191)
10.5.3	Errors due to communication strategies	(192)
10.5.4	Performance errors	(192)
10.5.5	Errors due to cross-association	(193)
	Exercises	(194)
	Answers to Exercises	(195)
	Bibliography	(216)
	An English-Chinese Glossary	(220)

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 What is language?

Hardly can we imagine a human world without language. We have been on this earth for millions of years, and we have always been depending on language to develop for this long. When we speak, we use language. When we write, we also use language. Indeed, language is essential to mankind. Today, even machines are “learning” to use language. It is language, so to speak, that makes the world go round.

Up to now, we have known much more about things around us (the sun, the moon, the earth, etc) than those things inside our brains. Language comes to every normal person so naturally that we seldom stop to ask any basic questions about language. For example, “What is language?” “Where does language come from?” “How does language work?” “What language did the first group of human beings speak?” “Why do people in the world speak different languages?” “What is language like in the future?” “Why does language change?” Obviously, we cannot answer these questions easily, though we use language every day, if not every minute.

Some people are quite interested in these questions and have been trying to work out the answers. Their work brings about the birth of a discipline that is called “linguistics”—the science of language. These people are called “linguists”.

1.1.1 Definition of language

As said above, the question “What is language?” seems so simple that few of us would want to think about it. Yet, this everyday phenomenon is far more.

complex than most of us could imagine, and thus it is rather difficult to give a satisfactory definition.

When we define “language”, like to define a flower, we have to find out its distinctive characteristics, i. e., what is it like? These characteristics must best describe what language (the “flower”) actually is. The problem is that while the “flower” is a concrete, natural thing, language is man-made (though it is called “natural language”) and abstract.

Some linguists, philosophers and psychologists have tried to define “language”, but they observe language from different angles, and cannot make a “perfect” definition that covers all characteristics of “language”. When we try, in our effort, to describe what language is, the following aspects cannot be neglected:

1) Any language is governed by some “rules”. For example, in English, we always put the definite article “the” before a noun or an adjective, as in “the apple” and “the rich”. This is one of the many “rules” of the English language. According to this rule, we may say,

Ex. 1-1 The apple is red.

Ex. 1-2 The rich should help the poor.

So, the following “sentences” are not correct although they have the same words:

Ex. 1-3 * Apple the is red.

Ex. 1-4 * Rich the help should poor the.

From these examples we may see that language is a rule-governed system.

2) We use language to express ourselves and understand others. So, language is for communication. This is the most important function of language. Take the telephone conversation as an example. The message goes from the speaker’s mouth to the hearer’s ears through the line. The speaker produces the message in a certain language. On the other side of the line, the hearer shares the same language and so he understands what the speaker says. This process of communication continues till the end of their conversation.

3) There is no necessary relation between a word and the notion it stands for. Different languages use different words to refer to the same thing. Take the chemical substance “H₂O” as an example. It is *water* in English, “水” in Chinese,

and *eau* in French. If the ancient English had used * *awter* to mean “H₂O”, we would have been using this word ever since. We may conclude, therefore, that language is arbitrary. This example also shows that different languages associate objects, actions, ideas, etc with different “symbols”.

4) There is no doubt that the written form of language came much later than its spoken form. The written form was “invented” to record the spoken language when there was the need. Moreover, even today, some languages do not have their written forms. On the other hand, every normal child is a “born listener”. He listens and learns to speak before he can read and/or write. So, language is, first of all, a system of sounds, i. e. , a vocal system.

After we have discussed the above features of language, we can define “language” as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication.

1.1.2 Distinctive features of language

If you carefully think about the definition of language, perhaps you will ask, “Why is language only for human communication?” or “Do animals have languages?” These questions raise another interesting issue in the study of language.

Maybe none of us would believe that a cat can “talk” with a mouse except in cartoon shows of Disney. But it seems that the same kind of animals can “talk” among themselves. When you are walking your dog in the park and meet another dog, they might bark at each other. They appear to be saying “Hello!” or “Shut up, you fool!” or anything that can only be understood by dogs. Naturally you will think the dogs have their own language as “Dog-ish” or “Dog-ese”. Whatever you call it, it is obvious that they can communicate with each other. And the dog is not the only animal that “talks”. You may also find bees, ducks, and lions “talking”, or “buzzing”, or quacking, or roaring.

A lot of scientists want to find out how animals communicate among their own kinds. The “bee-dance”, for example, arouses their interest. Some other scientists make a research of “the dolphin’s signals”. However, up to now, we have not found out much about the animal’s communication systems. This field leaves much

room for further study.

On the other hand, however, linguists know more and more about human language. Their research has proved that language has its own features that distinguish it from any animal communication system. In other words, "being able to use language" is one of the human characteristics that separate man from animals. (Other human features are walking erectly, being able to use tools, etc.)

Charles Hockett, an American linguist, named these distinctive characteristics of language "design features". These design features distinguish language from any "animal communication system". That is to say, these features are "human specific". In this part, we shall discuss some of them so as to reach a better understanding of the nature of language.

1. Arbitrariness

As mentioned earlier, language is arbitrary. This means there is no logical connection between meanings and sounds. Why should we use the sound [bi:] (bee) in English to refer to the dancing, honey-collecting insect? No reason at all. Why should we use the similar sound [bǐ] (笔) in Chinese to mean the tool for writing? No reason, either.

We live in this world with a lot of things around us. When we meet anything new, we first build up a "notion" of it. And then we need to give a "name" or "label" to this "notion". This is the process of connecting meanings with symbols. Such a process, in most cases, without any significant reason, occurs at our free will, so to speak, quite arbitrarily. The feature of arbitrariness is obvious in all human languages. It is the arbitrariness of language that enables man to create numerous symbols to meet the needs in the social development of human beings.

You may find, however, that language is not completely arbitrary. First, every language has certain words which imitate natural sounds, such as *bang*, *meow* and *wow-wow* in English, "砰", "喵", and "汪汪" in Chinese. These words are in accordance with the sounds they imitate. Therefore, they are not arbitrary. Second, some compound words are not entirely arbitrary, either. For example, since there already exist the words "news" and "paper", then the paper on which news is printed is called "newspaper". The reason for how such words and names

came into being is obvious.

Also, we can easily find non-arbitrary examples in Chinese. Take the symbol “木” for example. It looks like the shape of a tree and means “wood” which comes from the plant “tree”. In this sense, the symbol “木” is not arbitrarily made. And then, if we put two such symbols together, we have another symbol “林”, which means “woods”. Furthermore, when three such symbols are combined, as in the shape of “森”, the meaning becomes “a forest”.

From this example we can see that when we are creating a name for a notion, sometimes, there does exist some logic or reason instead of arbitrariness.

Again, we have to point out that these “logically made” symbols only form a small portion of the vocabulary of a language. Let's put it more clearly with the following example:

In Chinese, a single horizontal line “一” means “one”, two horizontal lines “二” means “two” and three horizontal lines “三” means “three”. But, we cannot make an analogy that four horizontal lines means “four” or ten horizontal lines means “ten”. This example shows that by form/shape, such symbols as “一”, “二”, and “三” are not arbitrarily made. However, if we think about their sounds, we cannot find any reason why they are pronounced [yī], [èr], and [sān] respectively. So, these symbols are not completely arbitrary in that they are arbitrary in sound (phonologically arbitrary) but non-arbitrary in form (morphologically non-arbitrary). Thus, with the feature of arbitrariness of language, we may come to the conclusion that language is arbitrary in nature, with more or less non-arbitrary elements.

It is the arbitrariness of language that enables man to create an infinite number of “names” for countless “notions”, no matter how abstract the notions are. But animals are not as able. However loudly a dog may bark, he cannot tell you his father, an old male dog, is poor but honest. Nor can a lion sadly tell you that he is old and lonely and needs a new wife.

2. Productivity

Language is productive in the sense that language users can understand and produce sentences they have never heard before. Much of what we say and hear

happens for the first time, but we can understand these messages perfectly well, even if some messages may be beyond our knowledge.

As a matter of fact, not only can we deal with messages about our daily life, we are also able to produce and understand sentences in strange contexts. If we read or hear such a sentence as "The three-eyed horse is smoking in Mr. Black's bedroom closet", we may feel this sentence is surely "new", only possible in a fairy tale. However, there seems to be no problem of understanding. This also owes to the productivity of language. With this feature, we are able to publish new books, tell new stories, enjoy new songs, teach new lessons, etc.

Productivity is unique to human language. In other words, no animal communication system has such a feature. Although animals can transmit messages among themselves in one way or another, the messages they send and receive are quite limited in number. Their "topics" of communication, if any, are highly restricted by their basic needs as searching for food, warning of danger, desire for mating, etc. We do not believe that a dog is able to ask his baby, "Is this bone long enough to make a rafter of our new house?"

3. Duality

As said earlier, language is a system made up of sounds, i. e., a vocal system. Our speech organs, including the tongue, the lips, the teeth, the nose, etc, can produce a lot of sounds. But, in any language, only SOME of them are used, no matter how complex that language is. And, certain sounds are used in one language but not in another. For instance, [tr] and [dr] are used in English, but not in Chinese. We have [nja] and [gja] in Japanese, but they are not found in English. This is one of the basic concepts we should bear in mind. Therefore, basic sound units in a language are limited in number, and these sound units, such as [tr] and [dr], do not have any meaning. They are just vocal symbols. Language is based on these fundamental sound units. In other words, these basic units of sound combine to form larger, meaningful units, by certain "rules", so as to make up a language.

Let's take the English language as an example. Though it is very complex as a system, it has only 48 basic sound units such as [i:], [t], [m], etc. These sound units themselves are meaningless. They are lying at the "lower level" of the

language system, according to linguists. If the English language only stayed at this “lower level” and gave each of the 48 sounds a meaning, for example [i:] = I, [t] = love, [m] = you, etc, then English would have only 48 meaningful units! Obviously, these 48 units can never completely express all that we want to say.

Fortunately, however, the 48 basic sound units at the “lower level” can be put together, according to some rules, to form larger meaningful units. The three sound units in the above example can be combined in the following ways:

[i:] + [t] → [i:t] *eat*
 [t] + [i:] → [ti:] *tea*
 [m] + [i:] → [mi:] *me*
 [t] + [i:] + [m] → [ti:m] *team*
 [m] + [i:] + [t] → [mi:t] *meet*

These “rule-governed” combinations arrive at the “higher level”. Thus, English, as a system, has “two levels of structures”. The meaningful units at the “higher level”, such as “teach” and “cheat”, may also be arranged and rearranged, by certain “rules”, into as many sentences as we need. It is the same case with any other languages. This feature of language is what we mean by “duality”.

Animals do not enjoy this feature in their communication system. They can transmit some information with different kinds of signals, but their signals are always at the “lower level”, i. e. , they cannot set up a “rule” or “rules” to arrange their signals to fit in with the “higher level”. To be more exact, there is only “one level” of signals in animals’ communication system.

4. Displacement

Young parents often amuse their babies with stories. Many of the stories are fairy tales. Some of the stories begin like this, “Long, long ago, there was a small rabbit in the forest. He was clever but naughty. And his mother loved him very much. . .”

Obviously, those details in such stories are not real in life. They are imagined. However, a normal child has no difficulty in understanding them and is always carried away to some wonderful fairyland. On the other hand, children sometimes create stories by themselves. And, when they make mistakes, they even tell lies!