BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO LINGUISTIC SCIENCE

林铮 Lin zheng

语言科学入门

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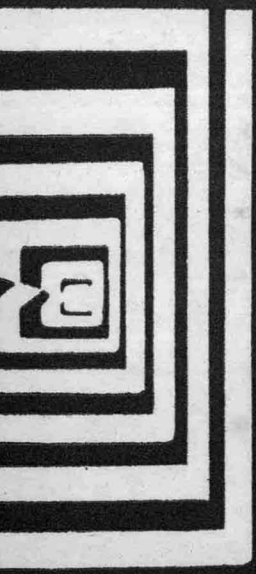

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Preface

The study of language may be traced thousands of years back in history, but modern linguistic science did not take shape until early this century, and its development was made mainly in the recent decades. Linguists all over the world undertook various studies of language in various respects and at various levels. They have made so significant contribution to it and have rendered it such an interdisciplinary subject that it has come to play a more and more important role in the fields which are related to language one way or another. Consequently, lingusitic science, as a promising subject, has attracted wide interest among the people in many walks of life.

It is believed that some knowledge of linguistic science may help a student of language to study it more methodically and to use the target language more efficiently and more appropriately. It is for this reason that I set out to write a book which is meant mainly for the Chinese learners of English, especially those who major in the English language. As I believe that a simple, introductory and comparatively comprehensive approach is desirable, it has become the principle on which the book has been planned and completed.

This book consists of nine chapters, with each chapter dealing with a particular subject in linguistic science. Chapter 1 - 6 are an introduction to linguistics per se; Chapter 8 - 9 are focused on the two interdisciplines: sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics; Chapter 7 is the one

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about discourse analysis and, just like its content, it serves as a link with lingusitics per se on one side and sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics on the other. In order to help the reader to grasp the major ideas, each chapter is attached with a series of questions. By answering those questions, the reader may sum up the key issues dealt in the chapter. Determined by the introductory nature of the book, it is not possible to acknowledge specifically the benefit that I enjoyed from other writers. Therefore, if anybody finds his brains have been drained without particular acknowledgement, I hope he will forgive me. If there should be any errors, the responsibility lies with me and I really welcome any comments or criticisms about the book.

Nevertheless, I should like to take the opportunity to offer my special thanks to Fujian Teachers University and Strait Literary and Art Publishing House. Without their kind support, there would not have been the book. I would also like to express my gratitude to my collegues and friends, Associate Professor Chen Weizhen and Mr. Zhang Minghui, who offered their help and encouragement when they were badly needed. Finally, I would like to dedicate the book to my wife and my son, who have made it possible for me to actually write the book.

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Chapter 1
Language and Linguistic Science

It is widely believed that language started to take shape when society came into being. But when it came to the question 'What is language?', people disagree with each other.

First of all, the term 'language' may refer to two different things: language in general or a particular language. (The artificial language, say, 'Basic' or 'Prolog', which is constructed artificially for particular purposes, is not included; nor is the language which utilizes no speech sounds such as 'sign language', 'body language'.) In the world, there are several thousand distinct natural languages spoken everyday. These languages differ from each other in various ways, depending on the way they are approached. Nevertheless, they share some features in general. It follows that when we discuss language in general, we are concerned with something that all natural languages have in common; and, similarly, when we discuss a particular language, we are concerned with something that makes it as such. The relationship between language in general and natural languages is that between the abstract and the particular. Putting it in another way, language in general does not have its own physical existence, because it always has to find expres-

sion in the form of a particular language like English, Chinese and French. We cannot talk about language in general without referring to a particular language just as we cannot eat fruit without consuming a particular instance of fruit, say, an apple or a pear. In this chapter, we shall discuss language in general.

Now we can turn back to the question 'What is language?' To this question, there are various answers provided by various philosophers and linguists. The differences among them are, in my opinion, due to the limitations imposed by history or the limitations of the relevant approaches. For all the differences, they seem to be conductive to the view that a language is a system of symbols designed for the purpose of communication. It follows therefore that language in general consists in the universals of natural languages.

Having thus put aside the controversial question about the definition of language, we may start to look at the linguistic, social and psychological properties of language.

1. 1. Language as a system of symbols

A symbol is something that symbolizes something else. If we use A to represent B, then we may say A symbolizes B. Here A, in terms of linguistics, is referred to as 'linguistic form', or simply 'form', and B is referred to as 'the meaning of A', or simply 'meaning'. Obviously, the form is something that can be auditorily or visually perceived while the meaning is something that has to be

interpreted from the form.

In an act of communication, the speaker produces a series of forms and the listener interprets them accordingly. Nothing seems simpler. But if we look into those features which we have long taken for granted, we may find that things are not so simple as they seem to be. In the present section, we shall consider some linguistic properties that distinguish human language, especially in relation to the typical flexibility and versatility of language.

1. 1. 1. Arbitrariness versus non-arbitrariness of language

Arbitrariness of language exists in the inexplicability in the formation of the relationship between the form and the meaning. Nobody knows why the English let 'water' mean something composed of H_2O. Equally inexplicable is the Chinese use '水' while the French use 'eau' to refer to the same thing —H_2O. But one thing we know for certain is that this arbitrariness of language opens up the possibility for humans to create numerous forms to meet the needs in the development of human society. But for this arbitrariness of language, we would have run short of vocabulary hundreds or even thousands years ago.

We must not forget, however, that language is also non-arbitrary in nature. The speaker of a particular language cannot create a form and set it to denote a certain meaning totally ignoring the rules of the language. The most frequently cited example is onomatopoeia in lan-

guage. In English, the relationship between the word 'cuckoo' and the bird whose call is like its name seems non-arbitrary, once the reading rules of English are established. For we cannot whimsically create a word form, say, 'ckaaqoa' for English and want it to be pronounced as /ˈkuku:/. This is due to the fact that the creation of a new word in English has to follow the regulations in English word formation and comes in conformity with the conventions. For the same reason, the learner of a particular language has to take the laborious trouble to memorize the spelling and pronunciation of the individual words. Therefore, it follows from what we have said that language is initially arbitrary, but it becomes non-arbitrary in most its subsequent issues.

1. 1. 2. Duality of language

Duality of language refers to the property of language in having two levels of structures. At the secondary or lower level, there are only a small number of elements whereas at the primary or higher level, an infinite number of units can be composed out of the few elements at the secondary level. Take English for example. At the secondary level, there are only forty-eight distinct souds such as /i:/ and /t/. But when it comes to the primary level, numerous words can be formed out of these few sounds.

Like arbitrariness of language, duality of language also contributes to the versatility and flexibility of language. It is very difficult to imagine what it would be if

duality were not exploited in language: Probably, the most capable person could only master hundreds of 'words'. Who knows?

1. 1. 3. Discreteness of language

Discreteness of language refers to the all-or-nothing characteristic of the elements at the secondary level in language. It must be understood in view of numerous variations in language. For example, we ask three Chinese people to write the word for 'H_2O'. The three words are bound to differ from each other. Suppose they look as follows:

1) 水　　2) 水　　3) 水

we shall not have much difficulty in identifying them with each other although they look quite different. Suppose it so happened that a fourth person offered to write the same word and it looks as follows:

冰

Although it looks almost the same except for the two extra dots, we are bound to consider it a different word. For this reason, we say that discreteness of language exists in the fact that identidying a form in language is a matter of all or nothing not a matter of more or less, just as we cannot say that Form 1 is more like /shuǐ/ while Form 2 and

3 are less like /shuǐ/ but that they are all /shuǐ/.

Discreteness of language also contributes to the flexibility and versatility of language. It enables a language to use the formally similar forms to denote very different meanings. Consequently, it helps to reduce the possibility of misunderstanding, because in most contexts, the occurrence of one particular form will be far more probable than the occurrence of others. For example, when we hear somebody say '/ ai aint ə bet taiəd/', we shall automatically interpret it as

I ain' t a bit tired

not as

I ain' t a bet tired.

For in this context, it is impossible for such a meaning as denoted by 'bet' to occur, even though it is idiosyncratically pronounced like 'bet'.

1. 1. 4. Productivity of language

Productivity of language refers to the possibility to construct or interpret such a string of forms as has never been produced or has never been encountered. To illustrate: productivity of language lies in the fact that the native speaker of a language can freely create as many different utterances as necessary to meet the needs that arise, as long as he follows the rules of the language and, on the

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