

◆ 当代语言学新视野丛书 ◆

THEORIES
AND SCHOOLS
OF LINGUISTICS

语言学理论与流派

刘润清 封宗信

南京师范大学出版社

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Preface

Three years after the publication of my *Schools of Linguistics*' (1995) in Chinese, I thought of revising and updating it. At the same time, I felt a need to write an updated English version. Although there are similar works published abroad, they are not very suitable for our Chinese students because they either somewhat favour one school of thought while ignoring other schools or assume too much background knowledge, making them less accessible to Chinese students. Thus, it seemed necessary to have an English version specially designed and written for Chinese readers—presenting things from a Chinese reader's perspective.

Almost at the same time, Nanjing Normal University Press planned to publish a series of English course-books in linguistics for graduate students. They asked me to write a book on theories and schools of linguistics for the series. I was ready for the work, but felt unable to accomplish the task within the required period of time. Just as I was hesitating between two minds, Mr. Feng Zongxin came to our Research Centre to do his post-doctorate. He was interested in this project and we started our cooperation right away.

Together we collected the needed materials—I gave him everything I had accumulated these years and he had to find a lot more. Together we formulated the guiding principles for this book—to be informative and impartial, intended for graduate students and other readers in China. If these principles are ideally realised, the book should be a medium-sized introductory work with a fairly balanced overview of major theories and schools of thought in modern linguistics influential enough to be included, readily accessible to graduate students educated within China's borders.

Also together we worked out the major chapters and the major headings within each chapter. In deciding the headings, we had one important consideration: to be more factual and informative than critical and judgmental. The reason is simply that we are not in a position to offer a fair and insightful evaluation of all schools of theories. We need to

know a lot more to do that well.

Mr. Feng undertook the writing, not without difficulties and headaches, certainly with amazing perseverance. I read each draft and offered my suggestions, with delight at the drastic changes and various improvements while making further suggestions here and there. All the time I was aware that a suggestion could be easily made but it sometimes meant a great deal of work for Feng. Completely exhausted by the time the book was finished, we both felt it had been a greatly rewarding process.

It is easy to do one's best, but it is not always easy to achieve one's goal. By no means do we intend to deplore existing works which are really well-done and from which we benefited, considering their systematicity and insight. We do, however, mean to emphasize the fact that we felt it demanding and challenging to be informative and unbiased. While presenting what has been widely recognised in the general linguistic scholarship, we made some efforts in highlighting what has hitherto been less discussed, if not totally neglected, for example, Chinese linguistics.

Certainly there may be limitations inherent in a book of this nature, particularly in terms of selections of topics to be covered and the manner of presentation. We'd like to express our sincere gratitude to all writers from whom we have learned linguistic theories and from whose works we have frequently quoted in the present book. We'd also like to express our gratitude to all those who have given us advice on various occasions.

Liu Runqing

Professor of English language and linguistics
Director of National Research Centre for Foreign Language Education
Beijing Foreign Studies University

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Chapter 1 Introduction: Language and Linguistics

Language is a sophisticated and versatile means for human communication. Since the ancient times people have concerned themselves with language. For example, the ancient Indians saw language as the means of getting to know such matters as heaven and earth, gods and humans, beasts and birds, right and wrong, true and false, good and bad, etc. The ancient Hebrews were concerned with the names of such phenomena, attributing the origin of some names to God, of others to humans. Nearly every civilisation had its own way of studying language. However, none of these early efforts was scientifically based because they did nothing to reveal the essential nature of language.

Human language is a phenomenon more complex than has been realised, but few people would bother to think about the meaning of the word "language". In fact, everyday use of the term involves several different senses that need to be distinguished. At the most specific level, it may refer to the concrete act of speaking in a given situation, or the expression that one uses in speech in one instance. This is why we may hear people say that someone has expressed himself/herself in good or bad language. Secondly, it may refer to an individual's personal dialect, called idiolect. One does not speak in a particular way only on one occasion, but has a consistent way of speaking or writing. The linguistic system underlying an individual's use of language in a given time and space (idiolect) is often extended to the synchronic analysis of the whole of a person's language (e. g. Shakespeare's language, Dickens' language, Lu Xun's language, etc.). Thirdly, language refers to a particular variety or level of speech/writing, such as literary language, scientific language, formal language, colloquial language, etc. This may be related to the sociolinguistic or stylistic restrictiveness involved in such terms as "language for business", "language for special purposes", etc. Fourthly, it may refer to the abstract system underlying the collective totality of the speech/writing behaviour of a community, or the

knowledge of this system by an individual, for example, the English language, the first language, the second language, etc. All these are natural languages, in opposition to artificially constructed systems used to expound a conceptual area (e.g. formal, logical, computer languages) or to facilitate communication (e.g. Esperanto). Finally, in an even more abstract sense, language refers to the common features of all human languages. In contrast to these instances of individual languages, dialects, varieties, etc., it refers to the biological faculty which enables individual human beings to learn and use their language. At such an abstract level, "language" is seen as a defining feature of human behaviour, often used in opposition to animal cry systems.

Modern linguists have given various definitions on language. For example, Sapir (1921: 8) defines language as "a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols". Bloch and Trager (1942: 45) define language as "a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates". And Hall (1968: 158) says that language is "the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols". However, all these definitions seem to leak. Since human communication may be both verbal and non-verbal, what about gestures, postures, facial expressions, etc.? Robins (1980: 9-14) points out that such definitions "tend to be trivial and uninformative, unless they presuppose... some general theory of language and of linguistic analysis". He notes that languages are "symbol systems... almost wholly based on pure or arbitrary convention".

A quite different definition is given by Chomsky (1957: 13), who considers a language to be "a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements". However, language is related to mind and closely bound with thought, since it is only interesting when we see it as a living process. Language is also related to society, for it is a social phenomenon, an artefact based on social conventions. It is given to the individual by the society in which he/she lives, and it is the key instrument in socialisation. Apart from

serving the basic functions of communication, e. g. asking for and giving information, it is a social and cultural tool for shaping human thought and reflecting human culture. It is also a political and ideological tool for exercising power and control. As the structure of language is not autonomous, one has to know who is speaking, under what social circumstance and what their assumptions are before he can assign appropriate form to a sentence, or relate the form of the sentence accurately to a meaning.

For certain purposes, language is defined as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication. It is a system of systems, consisting of a system of sound and a system of meaning. It is arbitrary because there is no physical or intrinsic connection between the words and the entities in the world to which they refer. It is vocal because the primary medium of language is sound. It is used for human communication because there is no system of animal communication quite like the human language. Language is one of man's most remarkable attributes. It is an absolute precondition for nearly all our social life, and it is the medium in which most organised thought and communication proceed.

1.1 What Is Linguistics?

The essential difference between man and animals is that man has the ability to invent, make, and use tools. Language is a tool, but it is human-specific. People who use tools or invent and make other tools do not necessarily have a set of theories on them. A carpenter or a blacksmith, for example, may use a tool and develop a new one that greatly improves his own work, without any theory on it, even though such a theory will eventually revolutionise tool-using and tool-making. One who can objectively analyse the tools and develop theories on them is not necessarily a skilled workman, although he may be a highly skilled user of the tools. But language is a different tool and its users are all skilled workmen. Language users do not simply use the tool, but also use their faculty of it without realising doing so. This is why it is not easy to analyse such a tool objectively, and hence why people rarely relate the

study of language to its being something special.

Apart from the fact that linguistics is simply too young a discipline, there are at least four other reasons why the area continues to present problems to linguists and laymen alike. First, human language has shown itself to be a complex phenomenon, far more complex than most “educated” people appreciate at present. Second, unlike other sciences, which use language to handle something else, linguistics has to use language to talk about language. This is a very demanding exercise, but we have no means of getting outside language in order to examine it better. Third, language is, by its very nature, beyond the total grasp of any one human or group of humans. It extends from the past to the present into the future, and it extends across millions of users who will not communicate directly with each other, even where they share what is regarded as “the same language”. Fourth, like thought, language is both a private and a shared phenomenon. Before we understand the reality behind such terms as “the brain” and “the mind” we can only have an appreciation of the product rather than how it is produced, stored, memorised, retrieved and used as part of our “consciousness”, and so on.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the research, argumentation, claims and counter-claims of linguists may appear strange, irritating, or sometimes absurd to outsiders. It is even less surprising that many people professionally concerned with language (e.g. writers, journalists, translators, literary critics, grammarians, and language teachers) should have mixed feelings about the development of linguistics. In spite of the new ambiguity infused into the word “linguist” (which may mean someone who knows a lot of languages or someone who is devoted to the study of language or languages), the objective study of language has proceeded steadily. Even in this early stage of development, linguistics has produced a range of interesting propositions which, like developments in physics and chemistry in the past, have certain important consequences for all members of the society.

Linguistics used to be a field related to language teaching. In the past few centuries, it was recognised to be something more than that. In the twentieth century, linguistics was seen as something influencing a

large number of other disciplines, both natural and social. Now language is not only studied by philologists or philosophers, but has attracted the attention of anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, behavioural scientists, mathematicians, computer scientists, and even medical professionals including neurologists and speech therapists. Even machines are programmed to speak or to translate between one language and another. The nature of language is all the more important for us if we find traditional assumptions inadequate for its functioning in the modern society.

Thus, the study of language—linguistics—can be defined as the scientific study of language. Such a study deals with the general principles upon which all languages are constructed and operate as systems of communication in the societies in which they are used. The task of the linguist is not to learn to use any particular language, but to study how a language is constructed, how it is used, and how it is related to other languages.

1.2 Is Linguistics a Science?

The very specific implications of the English word “science” refer to the natural sciences and the methods of investigation characteristic of them. And the term covers a much narrower sense than many of its conventionally accepted translation-equivalents in other languages, such as “Wissenschaft” in German, “НАУКА” (nauka) in Russian, and even “science” in French. Thus, linguistics suffers more than most disciplines do from these implications. Therefore, Lyons (1981: 37) interprets the word “science” as “properly constituted academic discipline”.

In spite of some of the implications of “scientific” and “science”, people would generally agree that there is certainly a distinction between a scientific and a non-scientific way of doing things. First, linguists agree that linguistics is empirical rather than speculative or intuitive: it operates with publicly verifiable data obtained by means of observation or experiment. This is the very hallmark of science. Closely related to the property of empiricism in linguistics is that of objectivity. Since language is something that we tend to take for granted (something with which we

are familiar from childhood in a practical, unreflecting manner), to study it empirically, objectively, and systematically is what makes linguistics a “science”.

Second, like physics and chemistry at their early stages of development, linguistics is in a state where a variety of more or less competing hypotheses and systems of description have not totally given way to one agreed view. A basis of received knowledge agreed upon by a majority of linguists is only now emerging, although a consensus about the terminology to use is still some way off in the future. Compared with traditional grammar, modern linguistics is undoubtedly more empirical and objective, in its pledged attitudes and assumptions at any rate. But to what extent is modern linguistics empirical and objective in practice as it claims to be? There is certainly room for doubt. There is also room for dispute as to the nature of scientific objectivity and the applicability to the study of language of what is commonly referred to as the scientific method.

Just as the old saying goes, “There is more than one way to skin a cat”, scientists and philosophers of science agree that there is not only one single method of enquiry applicable in all branches of science. Although it is often suggested that scientific enquiry must necessarily proceed by means of inductive generalisation on the basis of theoretically uncontrolled observation, few scholars have ever worked in this way even in the natural sciences. Whatever scientific objectivity means, it certainly does not imply that the scientist should refrain from theorising and from the formulation of general hypotheses until he has accumulated a sufficiently large amount of data. Scientific data are not given in experience, but taken from it. Observation implies selective attention. There is no such thing as theory-neutral and hypothesis-free observation and data collection. As Popper once pointed out, observation is essentially theory-laden.

Third, every discipline has its own technical terminology. Linguistics uses a large number of technical terms, which are often regarded as unnecessarily complex. Not content to talk about sounds, words and parts of speech, linguists invented such new terms as