

语言学教材系列

语言学简明教程

(英文版)

Linguistics: A Concise Course Book

胡壮麟 李战子 主编

北京大学出版社

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前 言

《语言学简明教程》终于成书,感慨万分。编写语言学教材的最大难处是如何定位。1987年在山东大学召开的《语言学教程》的审稿会上,评委们讨论的一个焦点便是教材应以学术性、原创性为主,还是以通俗性、趣味性为主?当时的讨论众说纷纭,各抒己见,没有定论,最后把两种意见作了一些调和,以满足高校教材的燃眉之急。经过十余年的大面积使用,在第一线老师的推动下,《语言学教程》(修订版)于2001年出版。修订版强调了学术性和原创性,同时调整了章节,使本科生能学到最实用的内容。遗憾的是我们对本科生的特点和要求考虑不够,编写者们总想把肚子里的货全部倒出来。为了解决这个矛盾,我们于2002年编写出版了《语言学高级教程》,以满足研究生的需要,减轻了《语言学教程》修订版在难度上的压力。尽管如此,有的学校仍反映修订版章节减少了,难度却增加了。与此同时,一些大专和高职高专学校也在开设语言学课程,修订版对这些学校的学生显然偏难。这一形势迫使我们不得不把编写一本供不同层次的学生使用的简明教材再次提上日程。

感谢中国人民解放军南京国际关系学院李战子教授、赵璞教授等老师们,他们勇挑重担,接受了这个任务。在编写思想上,选题以内部语言学为主,兼顾语法与语篇的关系,并在通俗性、趣味性方面作了积极的探索,这在语言学教程的编写中是尤其有益的尝试。需要说明的是,个别图片来源于互联网,作者名或网址均保留在图片中,在此我们对这些图片的作者表示衷心感谢。

《语言学简明教程》是编写者们近两年辛勤劳动的成果。我不敢说这些老师做得最好,但他们确实是用心了。我相信使用本教材的学校和老师今后会感受到这一点。我也相信教材使用者会将发现的问题和建议及时反馈给我们。我更相信我和战友们一定会听取大家的意见,本着改革的思想,不断完善。

参加编写本教材各个章节的老师有：

李战子 第 1, 6, 10 章

陆丹云 第 2, 3 章

叶建军 第 4 章

赵 璞 第 5, 7 章

周 翔 第 8 章

朱洪涛 第 9 章

在《语言学简明教程》基本完成之时，捷报传来，中国人民解放军南京国际关系学院已荣获英语语言与文学博士点的授予权。作为五十年代的转业军人，作为南京国关多年的兼职教授，我在分享这份荣誉之际，谨以我在策划和审定本教材中所参与的劳动，表示衷心的祝贺。祝南京国际关系学院的领导和战友们在新世纪取得更大的成就。

胡壮麟

2003 年国庆节

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Chapter 1 Language and Linguistics

Linguistics : a brilliant and fascinating exploration of the basic weapon by which man has advanced from savagery to civilization .

—Mario Pei

1.1 Introduction

If you have never experienced one of the following, please don't read this book:

A: You speak some English

B: You speak Chinese quite well, or

C: You plan to improve your English

This course book is about the basics of linguistics, including the main concepts and aspects of language studies. You'll see the names of some great thinkers who have influenced the 20th century humanity studies, and other names in brackets who have made linguistics an enlightening field of research. More important, you will arrive at the end of the book feeling you didn't actually know the things you thought you knew and already know more than some of the things the book talks about.

To know grammar and to know about grammar—how much difference is there between the two skills? What does it mean to study a language? What are the characteristics of different languages, and of the English language in particular? And then there is the difference between studying the structure of a language (e.g. its grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary) and the cultural aspects of language use (e.g.

its social and regional variations). . . . But to start with, let us take a quick look at how the subject of study came into being.

1.2 History of Linguistics

Like all modern subjects of social science, LINGUISTICS did not come into its present shape all of a sudden. Its origins lie quite specifically in one academic tradition, the European grammatical tradition. GRAMMAR was one of the “liberal arts”, taught by specialists and for centuries an important component in school and university studies. It was not until the nineteenth century that “linguistics” emerged under that name and was recognized as a field of scholarly inquiry distinct from neighboring fields (Harris, 1998: 7). So you will find such basic grammatical notions as “noun”, “verb” and “parts of speech” still used in linguistics today. But try to look at them in a new light in the process of studying linguistics.

In the west the study of language began in ancient Greece. For Plato, linguistics is the study of word origins and especially origins of Greek words. With the broadening of trade routes and colonialism, in the 15th century, Europe encountered other languages which forced scholars to look for a universal grammar. In the 18th century SANSKRIT—an ancient Indian language was found by British colonialism and linguists began to perceive the similarities between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin. In the 19th century, linguists were making historical comparisons between languages to sort out the relationship and inheritance between languages. By the end of the 19th century, people shifted their attention from the history and development of languages to their structure and function. Saussure’s general linguistics course book was first published in 1916 and he was considered the forefather of modern linguistics. Then we have American structuralism represented by Bloomfield and Chomsky, and functional linguistics represented by

M. A. K. Halliday, to mention here only an influential few. In this introductory course, we only have space to survey the basic concepts and fields of linguistic studies, leaving other things for further studies.

Now, what is linguistics? —The question may be still lingering on your mind when you have read this far.

Type in the word “linguistics” on the internet search engines, and you find a lot of descriptions of it from the websites as a course from the linguistics department of well-known universities. For example, this one from Stanford University:

Linguistics concerns itself with the fundamental questions of what language is and how it is related to the other human faculties. In answering these questions, linguists consider language as a cultural, social, and psychological phenomenon and seek to determine what is unique in languages, what is universal, how language is acquired, and how it changes. Linguistics is, therefore, one of the cognitive sciences; it provides a link between the humanities and the social sciences, as well as education and hearing and speech sciences.

Other descriptions may vary in its scope of study and its theoretical orientations. In short, linguistics is commonly conceived as an “objective” investigation of a language or languages. We are invited to see linguistics as a branch of science as well as a body of knowledge. In this book you are invited to approach it as a useful skill of using language more efficiently and reflecting on language more fruitfully.

1.3 Why Study Linguistics?

Why do some people say “past” as in “bad” and other pronounce “past” as in “park”? Why do you say “Good morning” to some people, and “Hi” to others? What makes a text a text? Is there a standard English? Where do words in English come from? Linguistics can

answer these questions and many more that you won't think of asking at the moment.

One thing you may surely ask at the outset: what use is linguistics for language learning? As learners of a language, we deal with meaning all the time. But what is meaning? We often ask "What's the meaning of...?" and "What do you mean by saying...?" These actually touch on two branches in linguistics: semantics and pragmatics.

With the help of linguistics we can determine the authenticity of documents, not only by features of handwriting, but also by the manner and frequency of grammatical features.

We not only use language to do seemingly trivial things such as greeting, gossiping and shopping, we also use it to shape reality. And to critically examine reality, we need the toolkits offered by linguistics. For instance, with the help of linguistics, we can watch out for loaded words as they can be hurting, insulting or even destructive.

We are not going to list all the possible applications of linguistics here, for we hope at the end of the book, you will reach a clearer view of them yourself.

1.4 Properties of Language

1.4.1 Arbitrariness

Sapir (1921: 8) gave a definition of language that sees it as a social and arbitrary communication system:

Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.

NON-INSTINCTIVE here implies convention, i.e. as users of a language, we all agree to call a certain thing in a certain name. We use "rose" to refer to the kind of flower that is thorny, fragrant and lovely-looking. Here, rose is used instead of "bose" or any other name

because of the convention—the starting point of which being arbitrary. There is no connection between the sound “rose” and the flower it represents at the very beginning.

The ARBITRARINESS of language is a key feature that makes it different from other signs that we are familiar with in daily life. Daily-life signs can have different degrees of ICONICITY.

For instance, many signs contain a pictorial connection with the thing they represent. The road traffic signs warns us of crossroads, slippery road, traffic lights and pedestrian crossing. There is a clear pictorial link with the meanings. Such signs are called ICONIC by Peirce(1931—1958). On computer desktop we have all kinds of icons like a dustbin for “recycling” and a file folder for “file”. What about letter “e” with a circle for Internet Explorer?

Peirce’s second type of signs is INDEXICAL, i. e. it is partly motivated to the extent that there is a connection, usually of causality, between SIGN and REFERENT. For example, smoke is indexical of fire, spots on the skin indexical of disease like measles, and dark clouds indexical of the coming rain. Can you state the countries that are frequently identified by the following signs: *bear*, *maple leaf*, *pyramids*, *kangaroo* and *red dragon*?

Peirce’s third type of signs is SYMBOLIC. The word in language, the formula in mathematics are all arbitrary. To come back to rose, “A rose is still a rose by any other name.” — There is only half truth in this familiar saying. Why is that? Because a rose (red, with thorns, fragrant, beautiful layered petals) has to be a “rose” (pronounced as [rouz] and spelled as r-o-s-e). If it has other names, they must be agreed by the people who speak the language. For example, if we agree to call a rose a “love-flower”, or a “bose”. The key word here is “agree”; in other words, CONVENTION. The relationship between sound and meaning is set by convention. In still another word, linguistically, we call this relationship arbitrary. There is no good reason why a rose should be called a rose, but not a “bose” or “raze”. If you think “rose” sounds like the proper name for that beautiful flower, this is

because you have got used to the arbitrariness and readily accept the convention.



Fig. 1-1 Why do you call it “leaf”?

In short, arbitrariness means that the relationship between sound and meaning has no rational basis. Or there is no natural and inevitable link between the sound and the meaning it signifies.

Given that any language requires a complex set of arbitrary choices regarding sounds, words, and syntax, it is clear that the foundation of a language lies not in any “natural” meaning or appropriateness of its features, but in its system of rules—the implicit agreement among speakers that they will use certain sounds consistently, . . . and that they will observe certain grammatical patterns in order to convey messages. It takes thousands of such rules to make up a language. Many linguists believe that when each of us learned these countless rules, as very young children, we accomplished the most complex cognitive task of our lives. (Clark et al, 1985: 21)

Now suppose you are a native English speaker. As you grow up, you learn how to change regular verbs to their past tense forms. There must be a period in your life (about four years old) when you would say “taked” and “goed”. People around you have no problem understanding you. However, you would not use them this way today even if you think “goed” is a rational form of past tense. Why?

As Hudson points out, “Such conformity goes well beyond the needs of efficient communication and is motivated, apparently, only by

the desire to be the same as everyone else, down to the finest detail” (Hudson, 1995: 35). So don’t you think linguistics can tell us not only about language itself, but also about what we are as human beings?

1.4.2 Duality

Duality might be more accurately called multi-layeredness. The lowest level of language is phonetics. The English sounds themselves are limited in number, but once they combine to form words, there could be endless words. Words can combine to form endless sentences. As for sentences, they can combine to form endless texts. If we compare this feature of the human language with animal languages, we can see the latter lack such duality. A cat’s mew and a monkey’s pose can mean something—most likely in a primitive one-to-one correspondence way. Let us take another instance of the traffic lights. The language of the traffic lights does not have duality, as “red” means “stop” and “green” means “go”. These low level elements—the colors of the lights are given specific meaning and they cannot form high-level meanings by combining “red + green” or “red + yellow + green”.

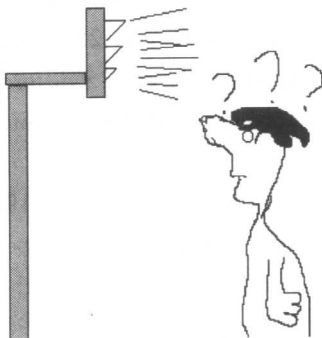


Fig. 1-2 What does it mean—“red + yellow + green”?^①

① Special thanks to Han Jiexing for some of the pictures in Chapter 1, 6 and 10.

1.4.3 Productivity

When our new experiences call on us to express, we can always think of things never heard of before to say. We take this PRODUCTIVITY for granted. In fact it is one of the things that make human languages unique.

We learn words as building blocks of sentences, and a certain amount of vocabulary will enable us to communicate at a minimum level. Why is it we do not learn sentences? True there are some sentence patterns we must learn. But it is impossible for us to learn sentences in an exhaustive way, if we take into consideration the productive nature of language. We can speak an endless number of sentences with a limited vocabulary, and one sentence can expand into endless theoretically possible sentences in the way of recurring. E. g.

He came into a room that had a big shelf which was full of books which were covered by thick layers of magazines which were put there by the lady who used to...

In fact, this is how Chomsky undertakes to study the nature of language, namely, by starting from its inventiveness.

A university professor in the US has made an interesting experiment. He showed a simple cartoon to 25 people and asked them to describe it using one sentence. He got 25 different answers. Then he input the result into his computer program, which is designed to work out how many grammatically correct sentences can be organized using the words in the 25 sentences. The answer is 198 billion possibilities. Similarly, 20 English words can make the number of possible sentences which if said aloud will call for one hundred thousand years' time—2000 times the age of the earth (Cogswell, 1996/1998: 61).

1.4.4 Cultural Transmission

A kitten grown up among human beings speaks no human language. It says “meow”. Its “language” is determined by the genetic