

General Linguistics: Theories & Schools

普通语言学： 理论与流派

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Preface

Linguistics as an independent subject is relatively young in the traditional sphere of humanities. The subject in the modern sense is believed to have started from Saussure, the man who for the first time made a systemic investigation of the structure and function of language, therefore his work set a borderline between philology and linguistics. Philology is a cover term for the traditional approach of linguistic study. It is biased towards the historical interpretation of language with which classical documents are understood. This is true to scholars in both China and European continent of the classical times. It is the birth of linguistics that the study deviates from the philological approach and is done in the ontological sense, namely, language is studied in its own right.

A recent domain as linguistic is, the focus of language might be traced back to a much earlier time, say from ancient Greece in the west. In those years, some of the philosophers cast brilliant remarks upon language, which have built the foundation the understanding of language rests upon in the western vein. Linguistic study began to follow the philosophical and anthropological tradition. Almost all of the contemporary schools are updated versions of the two traditions. Of course we should not neglect the scientific influence upon language study. Linguistics has benefited from the approaches and theories out of the new scientific discoveries, particularly those in the cognitive science. The only advantage in terms of various contributions to the linguistic theory is that it is both theoretically based and experimentally based.

The contemporary linguistics has developed to a rather mature level. It is a subject that can either be understood in terms of its components or be a result of merging with other related subjects. In the former category, there

are phonetics and phonology (sound component), morphology and syntax (structure component), and semantics and pragmatics (meaning component). In the latter, language is mainly considered according to two parameters: mind and society. Hence psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. Besides language is understood in some other directions: applied linguistics, computational linguistics, stylistics, etc. . With the booming development, theories emerge to interpret the nature and use of language. Since the theories are built upon subjectivity, there might be different interpretations towards language relative to the perspective each anchors on. In this sense, there are mainly two linguistic schools currently: transformational – generative linguistics and systemic – functional linguistics. The two theories could be analogically comparable to the relativity and quantum mechanics in the contemporary physics. They represent two supplementary aspects of a language system, two potentials co – existing in a competing fashion. The actual language is the resultant product of the two forces.

Linguistics began to be learned and studied in China ever since the country's opening to the world. It has been here to stay mainly as a course component for English students in universities and colleges. By and large, the learning is carried out for utilitarian purpose, which is expected to qualify college students as a candidate for MA or PhD in English. Many textbooks are produced and published *ad hoc*. The current book entitled *General Linguistics: Theories & Schools* has been written under such a macro – context. The book is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of language and its relevant theories. It is divided into four parts. The first part, as is usually done, is concerned with the classical theories of language. It works by mainly following the traditions of the historical linguistics. The second and the third deal with the established theories in linguistics. The former is considered in relation to the internal configurations of language including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. This part is presented based upon the traditional structural linguistics save pragmatics. The latter part is intended to give an overview of

the interdisciplinary subjects as a result of merging linguistics and other subjects. In another sense, language will be studied from other perspectives. The last part of the book is a supplementary component that is used to exhibit various postulations concerning language.

The current book of linguistics could be addressed to those who have interests in the study of language as well as the related subjects like philosophy, psychology, sociology, computer science, literature, and the like. It is also accessible to those college students who are likely to prepare for the examinations to be MA candidates. The book, hopefully, equip them with the necessary background knowledge in achieving the academic ends. Since the author is limited in the know - how of linguistics, and above all, the book has been prepared in haste, there would be inevitable mistakes. If there are any, I would apologize for the inconvenience in reading. The fault is mine.

The Author

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Part 1 Language & Linguistics

Chapter 1 What is Language?

Like any other subjects in physical or humanity sciences, it is not easy to give a brief and all-embracing definition to language. If given, it has to be done according to many criteria that vary from situation to situation. Any description of a particular discipline is made out of human subjectivity to some degree without which that explanation is actually impossible. However indeterminate it is to delineate a sphere, there ARE some essential features used to define the configuration of a subject. So it is with language.

1 Definitions

Practically there is not a one-sentence definition of language, but in fact many, many as long as they are necessary. They are given relative to linguists or contexts. And in each definition at least some of the features turn out regarding what language is, how it is used, what external factors it is related to or depends upon, *etc.*. However, there follow some remarks, quoted by John Lyons¹, which have been given by “VIP” linguists. The quotations could be referred to as a comprehensive set of definitions.

Firstly, **“Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicative ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols”**, according to Sapir. From the definition, language has been obviously concerned with from anthropological or sociological point of view. It performs interpersonal functions by virtue of symbolic systems, either oral or written. By the wording “non-instinctive”, language is more acquired in postnatal life than biologically inherited. It implies that language emerged and evolved as a result of interaction among human beings when they became the genuine *Homo sapiens* out of cave.

A second definition is from Blotch and Trager that **“a language is a**

system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates". The definition is similar to that of Sapir in that language is symbolic, but dissimilar in that social rather than communicative aspect is considered in priority. In this definition, two features have been highlighted to a salient importance. They are "arbitrariness" and "oral priority". By the former, language is conventional, a set of rules and symbols agreed and shared by all in a language community. In the second, speech is logically prior to writing.

There is another definition that is partially the same with the aforementioned. It is Hall's: "**Language is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols.**" Like Sapir, Hall treats language as a human institution. But what is remarkable in the definition, a feature undiscovered otherwise in the other two, is revealed from the verbal phrase "habitually used". It means language is reared with long-term exposure to external stimuli, a theory preferred by American behavioural psychologists who contend speech is a result from a series of conditional response. In this regard, language is a product of habit-forming process.

The last but not the least, quoted by Lyons, is taken from Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structure*: "**From now on, I will consider a language to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.**" Obviously language is here treated as logic, whose structures could be deduced from a set of rules. The definition focuses upon the linguistic creativity, an innate calibre to produce infinite sentences based upon finite rules. This is a rationalistic or formalistic view that is free from communicative nature of language.

The definitions are by no means exhaustive. There might be others that interpret language with reference to some of the norms: sociological, cultural, psychological, or cognitive.

2 Distinctive Features

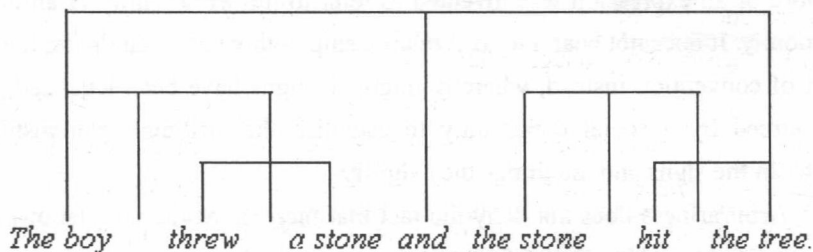
The definitions of language show that it has quite a few attributes which

make a unique thinking and communicating system. It is like human ID defined by distinctive features discriminated from other communicative systems, like **American Sign Language**, **road signs**, **Morse code**, **graphs**, **bee dance**, *etc.*, in the following main aspects.

2.1 Hierarchy

Hierarchy is a distinctive feature to suggest that any language can be segmented into smaller discrete units. It is a universal fact no matter what language is referred to, regardless of Chinese or English or even “primitive” tribal languages. Like the case in chemistry, a meaningful unit is a structured compound that is composed of different elements arranged according to fixed proportions. It is also atomically structured so that there is always a focus that is laid on the text, which is termed “topic” or “head”.

The segmentation continues until the structure is no longer divisible. A hierarchical English sentence, for example, ranges from the smallest units to a sentence, as seen in:



From the above example, we have a strong reason to conclude that language is not made of jumbled structures, but quite rule-governed. The filling of grammatical elements is predictable and the product of the combination makes a linear sequence that makes sense.

2.2 Arbitrariness

By and large, language is a medium to mean. It is used to exchange information, which is dependent upon the use of signs to be associated with world experiences. In practice of it, language is encoded and decoded by linguistic signs, both acoustically perceptible and visually readable. Signs or

symbols have nonlinguistic associations, concrete (*table*) and abstract (*philosophy*) alike. They indicate what exists in the world of experiences, namely, referent² or idea. For example, the word *dog*, a three-letter word, is a sign in terms of semiotics, which reminds us of a dog image in the mind. Hence the word is used to mean a dog, or the other way round represents a dog. However, it is generally accepted that a linguistic token is not arbitrarily related to what it denotes. There is not a natural connection between form and meaning. The word *dog* can also be used to direct to a cat or something else, since there is not an inherent relationship between that word and a four-legged barking animal. It is supported by the expressions of the animal in various languages other than English, 狗 in Chinese, *Hund* in Germany and *chien* in French. Or are there differences of expressions to refer to the same thing even in the same language, say *lift* and *elevator* in English.

The chance interlocking between linguistic symbols and their referents is revealed by a linguistic property called **arbitrariness**. By being arbitrary, a word or an expression was invented to refer to the world entity or an idea randomly. It does not bear a logical relationship with what it stands for, but is part of convention instead, whereby linguistic signs have been legalized, to be agreed by a social community to establish the artificial relationships between the signs and the things they signify.

Arbitrariness does not deny the fact that there is inevitable relationship between form and meaning. This comes out of the division between **nature** and **nurture**. The nature theory is mostly held by naturalists like French philosopher Jean Rousseau. They attempted to demonstrate that there is a fixed rule determining the use of signs. From this we can be brought to attention to some of the English words, say those that begin with letter "r" (*run, river, ripple, ride, race, rise, etc.*). They all denote motions. Onomatopoeia is another example, whose invention was based upon imitation.

2.3 Duality

One of the other features is **duality**. The duality property means any

language has two essential components: sound and meaning. They are mutually detachable as two autonomous systems, but can work synergistically to form ideas or to relay messages. The encoding and decoding of both involve the workings of different mechanisms in the brain. The process of sounds is carried out through sound recognition apparatus of the brain in coordination with hearing organ, the ear, while that of meaning is related to human cognition that is responsible for complex production and comprehension in semantic and pragmatic domains.

Take the word *table* as an example. At the level of sound, any English speaker knows its pronunciation by means of recognizing common phonological properties of the segmental phonemes, although the acquisition might be accompanied with idiosyncratic phonetic characteristics. At the level of meaning, a mental image or token is built in the acoustic perception and then conceptualized in producing and comprehending the actual table.

Duality detachment is a tremendous progress on the part of human intelligence. It improves our linguistic capacity in that sounds and meanings are combined freely and can be called on to work together whenever necessary.

2.4 Productivity

According to Noam Chomsky³, the use of language is a creative process by which finite rules are combined to produce infinite sentences. This is shown by daily life examples that we forever say or understand what we have never said or heard. This is **productivity**. As a matter of fact, every one of us is an inventor in the linguistic sense, constantly making new language that contributes to the literature of the life. Hence we are entitled to conclude language is not a **product**, but a **process**, as the biological analogy suggests. Roughly speaking, productivity is approached from two directions: psychological and sociological. In faculty, the production of language involves cognitive capacity to take advantage of limited mental grammar and based upon it, we manufacture as much as possible. In the language community, it is subject to change in terms of lexicon, meaning and syntactic

structure by echoing to social needs. It evolves with the disappearance of outmoded ideas and appearance of fashioned ideas.

In terms of productivity, we are brought to the famous distinction made by Chomsky, namely, between competence and performance. **Competence** refers to the idealized knowledge of language of the user while **performance** is the actual realization of that knowledge. The difference is like that of what you know and what you do. There might be a gap between them.

2.5 Displacement

Language is by and large semiotic by nature, as has been formerly mentioned. It undergoes an inductive process by means of abstraction, as a result of which linguistic symbols are a sum of the world entities sharing common properties. Again to take the word *table* to illustrate, it is a general term covering every piece of furniture in various shapes, designs, colours and even functions. The five-letter word stands for any member in the set. We can indicate the concept instead of the individual. This might be the essential difference between human language and other kinds of communication. Language is not only **iconic** as to refer to something specific, but **symbolic** as well, namely used to be a substitute for a class. The symbolic use of language is also the foundation upon which metaphoric extensions are made. We use one thing to name another.

One of the advantages of linguistic abstraction is **displacement**. It refers to an ability of humans who can talk about somebody or something that is not present at the moment of and in the place of speaking. It is a unique distinctive feature that makes us human. While we speak to each other, we refer to not only “here” and “now”, but “there” and “then”. Displacement is a means to transcend time and space. In the global perspective, displacement makes the history recording possible, which contributes to civilization.

2.6 Cultural Transmission

Cultural transmission implies that a language is not inherited from parental genes, but in a culture where it is acquired by bringing speakers