



高等学校英语专业系列教材

语言导论

Facets of Language

蓝 纯 主编



外语教学与研究出版社

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND RESEARCH PRESS



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前言

北京外国语大学英语学院为本科生开设语言导论课已经有很长的历史了。笔者还是一名大三学生时，就有幸选修了刘润清教授主讲的这门课程，至今仍记得刘老师在阐述 linguistic relativity (语言相对论) 时，提到阿拉伯语有很多关于“骆驼”的词汇，爱斯基摩语有很多关于“雪”的词汇，而汉语的亲属称呼 (kinship terms) 相比英语要丰富得多。这些有趣的知识宛如为我掀开盖帘，让我看到了镜子里面奇妙的语言世界。

光阴荏苒。十多年后，笔者完成了在香港的学业，回到英语学院，有些惊讶地得知在刘老师退休之后，语言导论课仍在开设，而且有了一个老中青相结合的新的授课队伍。授课老师以讲座的形式开设这门课程，每位老师根据自己的专长承担一到两讲，在教了两到三轮之后，根据学生的反馈将讲义写成章节，然后再通过新一轮的教学对初稿进行检验和提高。在吴一安老师和王立弟老师的主持下，英语学院语言学研究中心申报了语言导论课的211项目。

其后几年间，吴老师和王老师因为承担了新的教学、科研和行政任务，相继离开了编写队伍。因为他们的信任，将各位主讲教师的心血之作汇编成书的责任最后落在笔者身上。在此我想就本书的编写特点做几点说明：

首先，因为我们的授课对象是毫无语言学基础的英语专业大学三年级学生，不是语言学专业的研究生，所以在内容的选取上我们力求视角尽可能宽，而切入尽可能浅。一方面我们避免过多出现 phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics 等语言学术语，有些艰深的内容我们只是一带而过（比如把 phonology, morphology, syntax 并在第二章 The Structures of Language 里讲）；另一方面我们有意强调能引起学生兴趣和共鸣的 language 的不同侧面，所以对于 Origins of Language, Language and Power, Language and Gender 等设置了专门的章节进行介绍。

其次，由不同的教师共同承担一门课程、合编一部教材可以集各家之长，但各人授课方式、写作风格上会存在差异。为了避免在汇编成书时产

生各自为阵、丢失主线的情况，笔者在后期统稿时做了很大的努力，力求使各章在体例、结构、语言风格上保持前后一致。

给本科生开设语言学课程不是件容易的事情。我们的学生在中学、大学十几年的英语学习过程中，并没有机会接触语言学，他们对语言学的印象就是“那是讲授枯燥的语法规则的课程”。很多学生抱着这种先入为主的偏见无可奈何地走进语言学课堂（因为在北外英语学院，这是英语专业的必修课），从一开始就将脑袋锁起来，拒不接受任何信息。所以教师在课程之初需要花费很多心思，不动声色地让学生竖起耳朵、睁开眼睛、开动大脑。只有在学生解除了戒备和抗拒之后，他才会愿意接受课堂上老师传授的知识，进而参与到互动活动中，通过自己的努力去感受语言学的魅力。

在这一点上，北外英语学院的语言导论课只是迈出了第一步。笔者和本书各章的作者愿意与各校老师进行切磋，我们期待着您的宝贵意见。

本书各章的作者如下：王立弟撰写第1、2章，高原撰写第3章，蒋素华撰写第4章，蓝纯撰写第5、11章，林岩撰写第6章，晏小萍撰写第7章，陈亚平撰写第8、10章，金利民撰写第9章。

最后我想对吴一安老师和王立弟老师的无私支持，对参与编写的每一位老师的通力合作，对本书责任编辑胡伟春老师的认真严谨真诚地说一句：谢谢你们！

蓝 纯

2006年10月

北京外国语大学

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Chapter 1

Properties of Language

1. Introduction—Nature or Nurture?

When we reflect on the nature of language, one of the basic questions that we tend to ask is whether language is a natural ability of human beings. What is a natural ability, then? Well, walking can be seen as a natural ability of humans. When a baby is about 12 months old, it begins to develop the ability to walk without explicit instructions from adults. Similarly, most species of birds develop the ability to fly as they mature. The walking of humans and the flying of birds are abilities that come about naturally to individuals of the human species and most birds species respectively. On the other hand, a person's ability to play the piano or to do arithmetic must be taught, so must an elephant's ability to waltz or a parrot's ability to say "hello". We might just as well reformulate our initial question as whether language is an ability comparable to humans' walking/birds' flying or to humans' piano-playing/elephants' dancing.

No one would deny that "learning" plays a very important part in a child's mastery of a particular language, be it English, Chinese, or Navajo. The crucial question is whether children are born with "blank sheets" in their head as far as language is concerned or whether they are "hard-wired" with certain fundamental aspects of the structure of language that enable them to pick up the language around them effortlessly.

To put it in a more technical way, is language partly due to *nature* or is it wholly due to learning or nurture? This so-called **nature-nurture** controversy has been discussed for centuries. For example, it was the topic of one of

Plato's dialogues, *Cratylus*. A commonly held view among the ancient Greeks, expressed by Socrates in this dialogue, is that at some ancient time there was a "legislator" who gave the correct, natural name to everything, and that words "echoed" the essence of their meanings.

Despite all the contrary evidence, the idea that the earliest form of language was imitative, or "echoic", was maintained up to the 20th century. Called the bow-wow theory, it claimed that a dog was designated by the word *bow-wow* because of the sounds of its bark. A parallel view states that language at first consisted of emotional ejaculations of pain, fear, surprise, pleasure, anger, and so on. A similar proposal that the earliest manifestations of language were "cries of nature" was proposed by Jean Jacques Rousseau in the middle of the 18th century.

The nature-nurture controversy was brought up again in the late 1950s by two prominent scientists of that time, B. F. Skinner, a Harvard psychologist, who wrote *Verbal Behavior*, and Noam Chomsky, then a young linguist at MIT. Skinner claims in his book that language can be "explained as a set of habits gradually built up over the years". In his view, no complicated innate (天赋的) or mental mechanisms are needed. All that is necessary is systematic observation of the events in the external world, which prompts the speaker to utter sounds.

Skinner's hypothesis concerning the nature of language is based on his work with rats and pigeons. He has proved that, given time, rats and pigeons could be trained to perform an amazing variety of seemingly complex tasks, provided two basic principles were followed. Firstly, the tasks must be broken down into a number of carefully graduated steps. Secondly, the animals must be repeatedly rewarded.

Chomsky makes two major criticisms of Skinner's work. Firstly, the behavior of rats in boxes is irrelevant to human language. Secondly, as Chomsky puts it, Skinner fundamentally misunderstands the nature of language. But what is there about language that makes it so special? There are a large number of human activities such as learning to drive or learning to knit which seem to be learnt in the same way as bar-pressing by rats. Why

not language as well? We next turn to examine some of the **design features** (设计特征) of language to answer the question whether language is **species-specific**, that is, exclusive to humans.

2. The Nature of Language

What is language? It proves to be no easy matter to provide a precise definition of language. The following definition turns out to be quite loose: The faculty of language consists in man's ability to make noises with the vocal organs and marks on paper or some other material, by means of which groups of people speaking the same language are able to interact and cooperate as a group. This definition does not seem to hold because the use of vocal organs or marks on some material is neither exclusive to humans nor a necessary condition for human communication.

A more plausible way of defining language is to ask what are the features that are essential to human communication. Linguists have proposed different lists of such features, called the design features of language. While the exact number of such features differs from one version to another, linguists agree that such features, as a whole set, do not occur in animal communication. That is to say, they are characteristic of human communication alone. In what follows, we are going to examine five such features, namely creativity, arbitrariness, duality, displacement and structure-dependence.

2.1 Creativity

Any language permits its users to produce new sentences never spoken before and to understand sentences never heard before. This property is referred to as the “creative aspect” of language use (also known as **productivity** or **openness**).

This “creative ability” is due to the fact that language use is not limited to stimulus-response behavior. Even some involuntary cries like *ouch* are constrained by one's own language system (in Chinese people will cry 哎哟 instead), as are the filled pauses that are sprinkled through conversational



speech—*er* or *uh* or *you know* in English; 啊, 这个, 就是说, 你知道吧, etc., in Chinese.

In principle, it is impossible to memorize all the possible sentences in a language. For every sentence in the language a longer sentence can always be formed and theoretically there is no limit to the length of any sentence and therefore no limit to the number of sentences. Take the following famous rhyme in English for example:

Example 1

- a) This is the house.
- b) This is the house that Jack built.
- c) This is the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.
- d) This is the dog that chased the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

With a simple sentence such as the one in 1a) “This is the house”, it is possible to add an embedded attributive, resulting in 1b) “This is the house that Jack built”. The same process can be repeated, giving rise to 1c) and 1d). In fact, there is no limit to the number of cycles for the process to stop and therefore no limit to the length of the sentence. All human languages permit their speakers to form indefinitely long sentences. In this lies the creativity of human language, something that no animal communication system shares.

Not only are sentences unlimited in their length, the same structural repetitiveness is also found in words and phrases. For example, there is no limit to the number of syllables a word can have, even though words in English normally consist of one to five syllables. The word *unestablishmentarianism* is often cited to show that, in theory, there is no limit to the length of a word. The same is true with groups of words. A noun, for example, can be modified by an unlimited number of adjectival, prepositional and participial modifiers as attested by the phrase taken from a recent article from *Herald Tribune*: *many irreplaceable antiquities looted from the National Museum during the chaotic fall of Baghdad*. In this phrase the noun *antiquities* is flanked by five different modifiers and there is no stopping for further modifiers to be added.

Another important aspect of language creativity is manifested by the constantly expanding expressions of new ideas. Each day the world around us offers new technologies, inventions, discoveries and concepts. Language is such that it finds little difficulty in coming up with expressions to describe this changing world. Words such as *nuke*, *hacker*, *dirty bomb* or *SARS* are added to our everyday vocabulary with scant notice. The word *nuke*, for example, is an informal way of talking about nuclear warheads and could only come into existence when the world had become shadowed by the threat of a nuclear war in the last 50 years of human history. The story of the word *hacker*, used in the sense of an illegal intruder into other's computer files, is even more recent. The newly-coined compound *dirty bomb* refers to a crude nuclear device for a possible terrorist attack. It made its first appearance only after the 9.11 attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. The acronym *SARS*, standing for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, entered into newspaper headlines in the spring of 2003 when the deadly virus caught Asia and the rest of the world in a hysteria and almost paralyzed the world economy.

2.2 Arbitrariness of linguistic signs

Language is a symbolic system, making use of signs. The most commonly used medium for language is the utterances we produce or hear others produce. There are of course other substitute media for language, for example gestures used in sign languages by the deaf or orthography in writing. Whichever form language happens to take, it is an essential property of linguistic signs that they stand for something else, and the relationship between a linguistic sign and what it stands for is an arbitrary one.

Let us just concentrate on the oral form of language. The union of form (sounds) and meaning (concepts) of a word is as inseparable as the two sides of a coin. Knowing a language means, at least in part, knowing how to pronounce the words in that language and knowing what they mean. Such knowledge must be stored in the long-term memory of the users of the language. If you are a speaker of English, you will know that the word *dog* is pronounced [dɒg] and that it refers to a particular type of domestic animal.