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普通高等教育“十五”国家级规划教材

新世纪高等院校英语专业本科生系列教材

总主编 戴炜栋

新编简明英语语言学教程

A NEW CONCISE COURSE ON LINGUISTICS
FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

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上海外语教育出版社 外教社
SHANGHAI FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION PRESS

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

新编简明英语语言学教程 / 戴炜栋, 何兆熊主编.

上海: 上海外语教育出版社, 2002

ISBN 7-81080-402-2

I. 新… II. ①戴…②何… III. 英语-语言学-高等学校-教材-英文 IV. H31

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2002)第015590号

出版发行: 上海外语教育出版社

(上海外国语大学内) 邮编: 200083

电 话: 021-65425300 (总机), 65422031 (发行部)

电子邮箱: bookinfo@sflep.com.cn

网 址: <http://www.sflep.com.cn> <http://www.sflep.com>

责任编辑: 孙 玉

印 刷: 上海信老印刷厂
经 销: 新华书店上海发行所
开 本: 890×1240 1/32 印张 6.875 字数 240 千字
版 次: 2002年7月第1版 2002年7月第1次印刷
印 数: 5 000 册

书 号: ISBN 7-81080-402-2 / H·165

定 价: 9.80 元

本版图书如有印装质量问题, 可向本社调换

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 What is linguistics?

1.1.1 Definition

Linguistics is generally defined as the **scientific study of language**. It tries to answer the basic questions “What is language?” and “How does language work?” It probes into various problems related to language such as “What do all languages have in common?”, “What range of variation is found among languages?”, “What makes language change?”, “To what extent are social class differences reflected in language?”, “How does a child acquire his mother tongue?”, and many others.

Linguistics studies not any particular language, e. g. English, Chinese, Arabic, and Latin, but it studies languages in general. It is a scientific study because it is based on the systematic investigation of linguistic data, conducted with reference to some general theory of language structure. In order to discover the nature and rules of the underlying language system, what the linguist has to do first is to collect and observe language facts, which are found to display some similarities, and generalizations are made about them; then he formulates some hypotheses about the language structure. But the hypotheses thus formed have to be checked repeatedly against the observed facts to fully prove their validity. In

linguistics, as in any other discipline, data and theory stand in a dialectical complementation; that is, a theory without the support of data can hardly claim validity, and data without being explained by some theory remain a muddled mass of things.

1.1.2 The scope of linguistics

The study of language as a whole is often called **general linguistics**. This deals with the basic concepts, theories, descriptions, models and methods applicable in any linguistic study, in contrast to those branches of study which relate linguistics to the research of other areas.

Language is a complicated entity with multiple layers and facets, so it is hardly possible for the linguists to deal with it all at once. They have to concentrate on one aspect of it at a time. This has given rise to a number of relatively independent branches within the area of linguistics.

What first drew the attention of the linguists were the sounds used in languages. The study of sounds used in linguistic communication led to the establishment of **phonetics**.

Then, as linguists became interested in how sounds are put together and used to convey meaning in communication, they developed another branch of study related to sounds called **phonology**.

The sounds used in linguistic communication are represented by symbols, i. e. morphemes. The study of the way in which these symbols are arranged and combined to form words has constituted the branch of study called **morphology**.

Then the combination of words to form grammatically permissible sentences in languages is governed by rules. The study of these rules constitutes a major branch of linguistic studies called **syntax**.

But the ultimate objective of language is not just to create grammatically well-formed sentences. In most general terms language is used to convey meaning. The study of meaning is known as **semantics**.

Language communication does not occur in a vacuum, it always occurs in a context. When the study of meaning is conducted,

not in isolation, but in the context of language use, it becomes another branch of linguistic study called **pragmatics**.

The study of all these aspects of language form the core of linguistics.

Then, language is not an isolated phenomenon; it is a social activity carried out in a certain social environment by human beings. Naturally, in the course of time the study of language has established close links with other branches of social studies, resulting in some interdisciplinary branches of linguistic study.

Language and society are closely connected. The language a person uses often reveals his social background, and there exist social norms that determine the type of language to be used on a certain occasion; and language changes are often caused by social changes. The study of all these social aspects of language and its relation with society form the core of the branch called **sociolinguistics**.

Psycholinguistics relates the study of language to psychology. It aims to answer such questions as how the human mind works when we use language, how we as infants acquire our mother tongue, how we memorize, and how we process the information we receive in the course of communication.

Findings in linguistic studies can often be applied to the solution of such practical problems as the recovery of speech ability. The study of such applications is generally known as **applied linguistics**. But in a narrow sense applied linguistics refers to the application of linguistic theories and principles to language teaching, especially the teaching of foreign and second languages.

1.1.3 Some important distinctions in linguistics

1.1.3.1 Prescriptive vs. descriptive

Prescriptive and descriptive represent two different types of linguistic study. If a linguistic study aims to describe and analyze the language people actually use, it is said to be **descriptive**; if the linguistic study aims to lay down rules for “correct and standard” behaviour in using language, i. e. to tell people what they should say

and what they should not say, it is said to be **prescriptive**.

Modern linguistics is mostly descriptive. It differs from earlier studies of language normally known as “grammar” in that the latter is based on “high” (religious, literary) written language. It aims to set models for language users to follow. On the other hand, modern linguistics is supposed to be scientific and objective and its task is to describe the language people actually use, be it “correct” or not. Modern linguists believe that whatever occurs in the language people use should be described and analyzed in their investigation.

1.1.3.2 Synchronic vs. diachronic

Language exists in time and changes through time. The description of a language at some point of time in history is a **synchronic** study; the description of a language as it changes through time is a **diachronic** study. A diachronic study of language is a historical study; it studies the historical development of language over a period of time.

In modern linguistics, a synchronic approach seems to enjoy priority over a diachronic one. It is believed that unless the various states of a language in different historical periods are successfully studied, it would be difficult to describe the changes that have taken place in its historical development. Synchronic descriptions are often thought of as being descriptions of a language in its current existence, and most linguistic studies are of this type.

1.1.3.3 Speech and writing

Speech and writing are the two major media of linguistic communication. Modern linguistics regards the spoken language as the natural or the primary medium of human language for some obvious reasons. From the point of view of linguistic evolution, speech is prior to writing. The writing system of any language is always “invented” by its users to record speech when the need arises. Even in today’s world there are still many languages that can only be spoken but not written. Then in everyday communication, speech plays a greater role than writing in terms of the amount of information conveyed. And also, speech is always the way in which every

native speaker acquires his mother tongue, and writing is learned and taught later when he goes to school. For modern linguists, spoken language reveals many true features of human speech while written language is only the “revised” record of speech. Thus their data for investigation and analysis are mostly drawn from everyday speech, which they regard as authentic.

1.1.3.4 Langue and parole

The distinction between *langue* and *parole* was made by the Swiss linguist F. de Saussure in the early 20th century. **Langue** and **parole** are French words. *Langue* refers to the abstract linguistic system shared by all the members of a speech community, and **parole** refers to the realization of *langue* in actual use. *Langue* is the set of conventions and rules which language users all have to abide by, and *parole* is the concrete use of the conventions and the application of the rules. *Langue* is abstract; it is not the language people actually use. *Parole* is concrete; it refers to the naturally occurring language events. *Langue* is relatively stable, it does not change frequently; while *parole* varies from person to person, and from situation to situation.

Saussure made this distinction in order to single out one aspect of language for serious study. In his opinion, *parole* is simply a mass of linguistic facts, too varied and confusing for systematic investigation, and what linguists should do is to abstract *langue* from *parole*, i. e. , to discover the regularities governing the actual use of language and make them the subjects of study of linguistics.

1.1.3.5 Competence and performance

Similar to Saussure’s distinction between *langue* and *parole* is the distinction between competence and performance, which was proposed by the American linguist N. Chomsky in the late 1950’s. Chomsky defines **competence** as the ideal user’s knowledge of the rules of his language, and **performance** the actual realization of this knowledge in linguistic communication. According to Chomsky, a speaker has internalized a set of rules about his language, this enables him to produce and understand an infinitely large number of

sentences and recognize sentences that are ungrammatical and ambiguous. Despite his perfect knowledge of his own language, a speaker can still make mistakes in actual use, e. g., slips of the tongue, and unnecessary pauses. This imperfect performance is caused by social and psychological factors such as stress, anxiety, and embarrassment. Similar to Saussure, Chomsky thinks that what linguists should study is the ideal speaker's competence, not his performance, which is too haphazard to be studied. Although a speaker possesses an internalized set of rules and applies them in actual use, he can not tell exactly what these rules are. So the task of the linguists is to discover and specify these rules.

While Saussure's distinction and Chomsky's are very similar, they differ at least in that Saussure took a sociological view of language and his notion of *langue* is a matter of social conventions, and Chomsky looks at language from a psychological point of view and to him competence is a property of the mind of each individual.

1.1.3.6 Traditional grammar and modern linguistics

It is generally believed that the beginning of modern linguistics was marked by the publication of F. de Saussure's book "Course in General Linguistics" in the early 20th century. But we have to be aware that before that language had been studied for centuries in Europe by such scholars as philosophers and grammarians. The general approach thus traditionally formed to the study of language over the years is roughly referred to as "traditional grammar." Modern linguistics differs from traditional grammar in several basic ways. Some of these have already been briefly mentioned before.

Firstly, linguistics is descriptive while traditional grammar is prescriptive. A linguist is interested in what is said, not in what he thinks ought to be said. He describes language in all its aspects, but does not prescribe rules of "correctness". He does not believe that there is some absolute standard of correctness concerning language use which linguists or school teachers should view as their duty to maintain. Instead, he would prefer to be an observer and recorder of facts, but not a judge. He might recognize that one type of

speech appears to be more socially acceptable than others because of the influence of fashion. But this will not make him think that the socially acceptable variety can replace all the other varieties, or the old words are always better than new ones or vice versa. He will regard the changes in language and language use as the result of a natural and continuous process, not something to be feared.

Second, modern linguistics regards the spoken language as primary, not the written. Traditional grammarians, on the other hand, tended to emphasize, maybe over-emphasize, the importance of the written word, partly because of its permanence. Before the invention of sound recording, it was difficult for people to deal with utterances which existed only for seconds. Then, the traditional classical education was also partly to blame. People were encouraged to imitate the “best authors” for language usage. Many of the rules of traditional grammar apply only to the written language; they cannot be made meaningful in terms of the spoken language, without much qualification and addition.

Then, modern linguistics differs from traditional grammar also in that it does not force languages into a Latin-based framework. For a long time on the European continent it was unquestionably assumed that Latin provides a universal framework into which all languages fit. As a result, other languages were forced to fit into Latin patterns and categories, especially its case system and tense divisions of past, present and future. To modern linguists, it is unthinkable to judge one language by standards of another. They are opposed to the notion that any one language can provide an adequate framework for all the others. They are trying to set up a universal framework, but that will be based on the features shared by most of the languages used by mankind.

1.2 What is language?

1.2.1 Definitions of language

If we take linguistics to be the scientific study of language, our next

question then is “What is language?”

This may at first sound like a naive and simple question. Yet to this extremely familiar, everyday phenomenon, it is difficult to give a satisfactory definition. Some people probably will say “language is a tool for human communication”. Far from a definition, this only tells us what language does, or what it is used for, i.e. its function. Alternatively, one might say “language is a set of rules.” Then this tells nothing about its functions, and there are actually other systems that are also rule-governed.

Modern linguists have proposed various definitions of language, some of them are quoted below:

“Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.” (Sapir, 1921)

Language is “the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols.” (Hall, 1968)

“From now on I will consider language to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.” (Chomsky, 1957)

Each of these definitions has its own special emphasis, and is not totally free from limitations. However, there are some important characteristics of human language linguists have agreed on; these are embraced in the following generally accepted definition:

Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication.

Short as it is, this definition has captured the main features of language. First of all, language is a system, i.e., elements of language are combined according to rules. This explains why “iblk” is not a possible sound combination in English, and also why “Been he

wounded has ” is not a grammatically acceptable sentence in English.

Second, language is arbitrary in the sense that there is no intrinsic connection between a linguistic symbol and what the symbol stands for, for instance, between the word “pen” and the thing we write with. The fact that different languages have different words for the same object is a good illustration of the arbitrary nature of language. This also explains the symbolic nature of language: words are just symbols; they are associated with objects, actions, ideas, etc. by convention. This conventional nature of language is well illustrated by a famous quotation from Shakespeare’s play “Romeo and Juliet”: “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

Third, language is vocal because the primary medium for all languages is sound. All evidence points to the fact that writing systems came into being much later than the spoken forms and that they are only attempts to capture sounds and meaning on paper. The fact that children acquire spoken language before they can read or write also indicates that language is primarily vocal.

The term “human” in the definition is meant to specify that language is human-specific, i. e. , it is very different from the communication systems other forms of life possess, such as bird songs and bee dances.

1.2.2 Design features

Design features refer to the defining properties of human language that distinguish it from any animal system of communication. By comparing language with animal communication systems, we can have a better understanding of the nature of language. A framework was proposed by the American linguist Charles Hockett. He specified twelve design features, five of which will be discussed here.

1) Arbitrariness

As mentioned earlier, language is arbitrary. This means that there is no logical connection between meanings and sounds. A