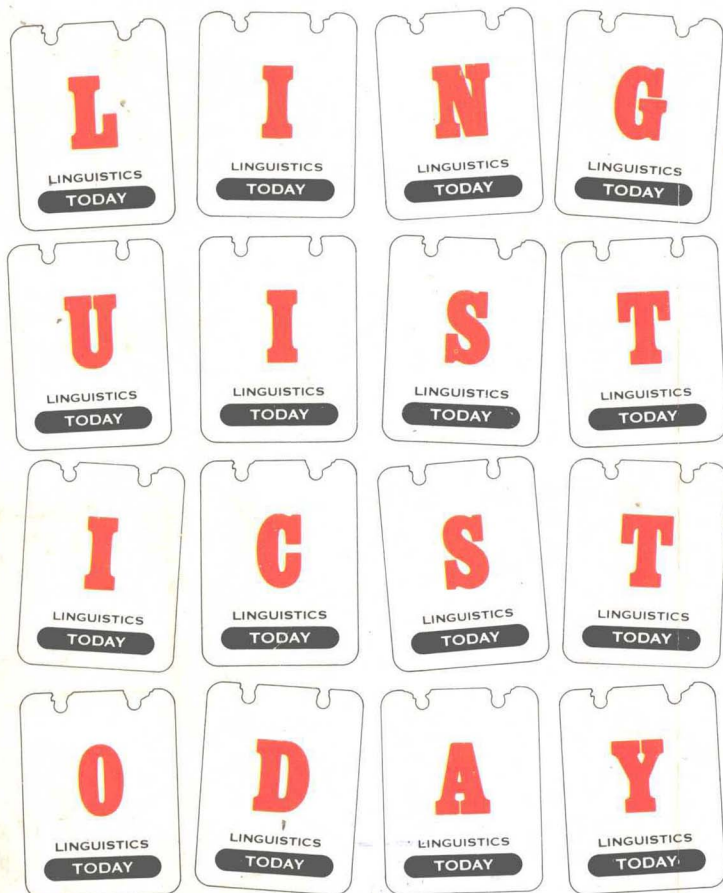


A FONTANA ORIGINAL

# LINGUISTICS TODAY

Keith Brown



# Linguistics Today

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## Fontana Linguistics

### Published

*Language Change: Progress or Decay?* Jean Aitchison

*Linguistics Today* Keith Brown

*Language and Society* William Downes

*Language, Meaning and Context* John Lyons

*Understanding and Producing Speech* Edward Matthei  
and Thomas Roeper

Keith Brown

# Linguistics Today

Fontana Paperbacks

First published by Fontana Paperbacks 1984

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Set in 10 on 11.7 point Times

Made and printed in Great Britain by  
Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press),  
Bungay, Suffolk

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# *Introduction to Fontana Linguistics*

In the past twenty-five years, linguistics – the systematic study of language – has come of age. It is a fast expanding and increasingly popular subject, which is now offered as a degree course at a number of universities. As a result of this expansion, psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists, teachers, speech therapists and numerous others have realized that language is of crucial importance in their life and work. But when they tried to find out more about the subject, a major problem faced them – the technical and often narrow nature of much writing about linguistics.

The Fontana Linguistics series is an attempt to solve this problem by presenting current findings in a lucid and non-technical way. Its object is twofold. First, it hopes to outline the 'state of play' in certain crucial areas of the subject, concentrating on what is happening now, rather than on surveying the past. Secondly, it aims to show how linguistics links up with other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, speech therapy and language teaching.

The series will, we hope, give readers a fuller understanding of the relationship between language and other aspects of human behaviour, as well as equipping those who wish to find out more about the subject with a basis from which to read some of the more technical literature in textbooks and journals.

Jean Aitchison  
London School of Economics



# *1 Language and Communication*

Communication of all kinds is like painting – a compromise with impossibilities.

(Samuel Butler)

Language is the most sophisticated and versatile means available to human beings for the communication of meanings. We communicate primarily by the use of language, by the manipulation of words. The principal task of linguistics is to investigate and describe the ways in which words can be combined and manipulated to convey meanings. This is generally labelled 'syntax'.

In this book we shall be primarily concerned with the part that syntactic structures play in this communicative process and how linguists have chosen to model this contribution. Before turning to this particular concern, however, it will be helpful to set the scene in more general terms so that we can see just what kind of contribution syntax has to make. A number of preliminary questions arise. What range of meanings can be communicated through language? What other channels of communication are open to us, and how do they differ from language? What are the particular properties that distinguish language from other systems of communication? The questions are interrelated, and, not surprisingly, there is no straightforward answer to any of them. But we need to have some views on such matters, or at least see what the problems are, before we can proceed to our particular interests. We need, in other words, to have some idea about the objectives of a syntactic description, and of its limitations.

As we shall see, there is some agreement over certain basic facts, but there is also violent disagreement as to the relative importance of some of these facts, and whether and how they

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should be incorporated into a theory of language. Suppose that it is agreed that language is realized by words, which are constructed according to certain principles, and that words, again in accordance with certain principles, can be structured into sentences which in turn relate to meanings. Clearly, then, we need to establish what these principles are and how they interact, and then describe a language according to these principles. We are immediately confronted with a series of questions. Should we start with a description of how words and sentences are constructed and then see how these relate to meanings? Or should we investigate the properties of meanings, and then see how these might be related to sentences and ultimately realized in words? Or should we perhaps try to develop a semantic description (a description of meaning) and a syntactic description (a structural description) side by side? And what sort of general principles should guide our choice? Each of these positions is adopted by some linguistic theory and the resultant grammars are rather different, and focus on different aspects of language. Nor is this all. Should we draw a distinction between 'language' and 'the use of language', and if so, how? Again the resultant grammars will look rather different, depending on what sort of choices we make. It is a matter of considerable controversy how a description of a language should, as it were, carve up the descriptive cake in order to arrive at an illuminating description of how language conveys meanings, and language, like cake, is not 'naturally' divided into slices!

This leads to yet another series of questions. We will presumably be looking for the best description of the 'facts'. But what *are* the relevant facts? If we are attempting to produce a description that is psychologically 'real', a description that is in harmony with what we believe is going on in the minds of speakers, and what other investigations tell us about the production and comprehension of language, then we will want to call on one type of 'fact'. If, on the other hand, we wish to describe the way in which language is used in society as a vehicle for the expression of our wishes and desires, and as an instrument for interacting with other people, this will call on a rather different set of 'facts'. Or again, we may wish to consider

language as an abstract 'calculus', relatively independent of social and psychological issues. This will involve different 'facts' again. Descriptions will differ according to what particular aspect of language they focus on, and linguistics today does not suffer from a shortage of different approaches to language.

### **1.1 Language and non-linguistic communication**

We began with the assumption that using language involves manipulating words to convey meanings, so let us consider briefly the range of meanings that can be communicated through words. These are diverse, and any attempt to distinguish between different kinds of meaning is difficult and controversial. Largely following the taxonomy of Halliday (1970), we will, however, distinguish three.

An obvious use of language is to communicate information about the world about us and to get things done. This 'transactional' use of language is often thought to be in some sense the primary use of language, and when we use language in this way, especially when we use it to refer to things and events in the world, the statements we make are generally susceptible to public judgements of truth and falsity. So, if I say *It is snowing*, you can determine whether what I say is true or false by inspecting the state of the weather. By extension, we can use language to refer to hypothetical states of affairs, to imaginary worlds, and to our own and other people's ideas, wishes and desires, and we know what the world would have to be like for these statements to be true or false. Novelists obviously do this all the time. They invite their readers to enter an imaginary world and use language to refer to events and so on in this world. This use of language to convey information is often thought of as involving the 'literal' use of language and has been called 'cognitive' or 'descriptive'.

A somewhat different, but equally important, use of language is closely tied up with the first. This is our use of language to describe our reactions to events and to regulate our interactions with other people. In this 'interactional' use of language, judgements of truth and falsity are difficult or impossible, since

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this use is concerned with evaluations and relationships rather than facts, and is often private rather than public. If I say *I am pleased that it is snowing*, I imply that it is in fact snowing, and the truth of this is ascertainable; you cannot, however, always correctly judge whether this does or does not please me. The same is true of the way we use language in our relationships with other people. An obvious instance is the words we use on greeting and parting. Here, what is said is usually conventional and is sometimes factually untrue or insincere or both. Judgements of this sort, however, miss the point since what is most important in this kind of language is the fact of speech itself. When someone says *How are you* on meeting, the function of the utterance is not to ask for a detailed health report, but rather to offer a conventional politeness that indicates goodwill and may serve as an ice-breaker to initiate conversation. This use of language to maintain social bonds occurs all through many verbal interactions and sometimes, indeed, seems to be the sole purpose of conversation: this is certainly the typical caricature of 'cocktail party' chat. More seriously, it can be thought of as the use of language that regulates the function of utterances in interchanges – a question invites a reply, an apology is often responded to with its acceptance and so forth. It has been called the 'interpersonal' or 'social' use of language.

A quite different, but again important, use of language is to signpost the way round communication itself. For example, the introductory words of the preceding paragraph, *A somewhat different use of language*, indicate a new topic and relate it to the preceding paragraph. Other phrases indicate that an example is going to be produced, that the sense of the paragraph is about to be summarized, and so on. This signposting function of language is extremely important, since we clearly need to be shown our way through other people's meanings and to guide them through our own. This use of language is obviously very different to the first and second uses, since its purpose is to structure information carried elsewhere rather than convey information or evaluate. It can be referred to as a 'textual' use of language since it conveys information about the structure of stretches of language.

These types of meaning are clearly not in self-contained

compartments. There are important interactions between them, and a fully comprehensive description would need to take account of them all, and of the interactions between them. In practice, however, linguistic descriptions tend to concentrate on one or the other. Some concentrate primarily on the first, and these tend to focus their attention on the structure and meaning of sentences in isolation. In this case, a grammatical description will concentrate on the rules that govern well-formed sentences, and a semantic description will tend to seek a representation of the 'basic' or 'literal' meaning of sentences, independently of their use in context. And a representation of meaning often involves the use of formulae derived from logic. Other descriptions concentrate on the meaning of language in use. These clearly cannot ignore the first use we mentioned, but are likely to be particularly concerned with the second and third. Here a grammatical description will be interested not only in rules for the well-formedness of complete sentences but also in the ways sentences and fragments of sentences relate to each other in a text. The corresponding semantic description will now be interested not only in literal meanings, but also in 'functional' meanings (the purpose behind the utterance) and in the 'pragmatic' meanings (the meanings that can be directly related to the context of utterance) that can be inferred from sentences in context. To contrast the two approaches, consider again the sentence *It is snowing*. Let us suppose the literal meaning of this is 'It is snowing', and that the truth of this literal meaning can be checked. In context, other meanings no less important from a communicative point of view may also be intended. If I look out of the window and utter the words, my intention may simply be to 'inform', particularly if I think my interlocutor does not know this information and would be interested to have it. If I use the words in answer to the question *What's the weather like?*, my words will not only inform but will have the function of a 'response'. If I use the words to reply to the question *Would you like to go for a walk?*, I may or may not inform my interlocutor. It could be that my interlocutor already knows that it is snowing, and that I know that he knows. In this case the function of my utterance may be to refuse the invitation without actually saying 'no'.

The sorts of meanings mentioned in the preceding section can obviously be conveyed through language, the use of words. But this is not the only way in which such information can be conveyed and when we use language it is inevitably accompanied by other communicative signals. If language is written, then the properties of this medium are themselves communicative: handwriting is said to be an indication of character, and the choice of font, the layout and so forth can be used to effect in printing. Equally, when language is spoken, the acoustic and auditory properties of this medium are communicative, and spoken language is generally also accompanied by visual and gestural signals, some of which are closely related to language, and others hardly related to language at all. We can see that this is so by considering how information is conveyed in a conversation.

When, how, and how often we look at each other is communicative. Lovers are said to 'feed on each other's eyes'. This behaviour is clearly not language, although it may well be more communicative than language, and is indeed often said to 'speak more clearly than words'. Gaze and eye contact are, however, important regulators of language behaviour, and the manner in which they are manipulated in conversation provides important clues to the way conversational 'turns' are negotiated, to the nature of the relationship between speakers, the level of attention one is paying to the other, and so forth. The same is true of gesture. The way we sit can indicate that we are bored or interested and, like visual behaviour, gestures can be intimately connected with verbal communication. We can point in order to establish reference – *I'd like a pound of those, please* – and gesture and posture can also be involved in conversational 'turn taking'. Nor should we forget non-linguistic vocal communication, for everything we utter is not language. Coughs, sneezes, 'clicks of the tongue' and so on are communicative but are not language. Similarly, various features of voice quality and articulation can be a guide to how old a person is, whether he has a cold or has food in the mouth, or is smiling or scowling.

'Paralinguistic' features of this sort found in association with language need to be distinguished from language itself, but they

can be fruitfully discussed in terms of the types of meaning mentioned in the preceding section. As far as cognitive meanings are concerned, paralinguistic communication is generally rather restricted. We can use gestures to draw attention to objects we want to refer to, we have a range of signs – some conventional and others *ad hoc* – for various objects and actions, and we can use gesture to indicate dimensions, to agree and disagree and so forth. However, the range of gestures available to most speakers would hardly permit the transfer of much cognitive information on their own, and certainly not the wide range of such meanings that we normally wish to convey. This does not mean that gesture is in principle incapable of expressing a range of cognitive meanings, and indeed, conventionalized into a proper system, as in the sign languages of the deaf, it can be as expressive as 'verbal' language: cf. Klima and Bellugi (1979).

Emotive meanings, by contrast, are often rather well conveyed by non-verbal means. Utterances can be modified by the manipulation of the pitch range, the speed of speech and such facial expressions as smiling, scowling and 'speaking through the teeth'. These can often convey depression, interest, excitement or boredom more effectively than language itself, and we are in general rather sensitive in such matters. Interpersonal meanings, too, are importantly conveyed by non-verbal means. We have already mentioned that the way people look at each other provides clues to their relationships, the level of attention they are paying to each other, and so on. Functional meanings and pragmatic inferences can also be conveyed by paralinguistic means, particularly through intonation. Textual meanings, too, are frequently conveyed by gesture, vocally and, perhaps most importantly, by the manipulation of eye contact and gaze. We have already mentioned the importance of these regulators of conversation, and it is not hard to think of other non-verbal signposting round the structure of speech.

Verbal language, the use of words, is, then, not the only means we have of conveying meanings. When language is used, it is typically accompanied by other, paralinguistic, communicative signals. The extent to which linguists interest themselves in such matters will depend on the aim of the investigations. Approaches which concentrate largely on the analysis of sentences and their

cognitive meanings will tend largely to ignore paralinguistic phenomena. They will, however, be important for approaches which take account of language in use; for instance, anyone interested in a description of the way conversation is structured will obviously wish to pay attention to paralinguistic features of the kind we have just been discussing, and to consider just how these features interact with language. They will clearly be particularly interesting to those concerned with the study of language in use – the analysis of conversation, for example. We do not, however, have the space to concern ourselves with them in this book, since we shall be concentrating on the role of language itself.

It will be appreciated that concentrating on language itself, rather than on the total communicative process, inevitably involves a degree of abstraction. Furthermore, it immediately invites us to draw a further distinction: between ‘language’ and ‘using language’. This distinction involves yet a further abstraction since it opens up the question of the extent to which we wish to consider language as a relatively concrete phenomenon or as a more or less self-contained abstract system. What is at issue can be illustrated by calling on de Saussure’s well-known analogy between language and chess (de Saussure, 1916). He compares the abstract rules of chess – rules that determine how pieces can move, how the game is won, and so on – with the abstract rules of language, and the strategies used in chess with the rules governing the use of language. A particular game of chess will then be the product of both the rules of chess and the strategies used in that particular game, and might then be compared with a particular concrete instance of language use. Someone anxious to describe chess might wish to concentrate on any one of these, but it will be clear that a description of the rules of the game, a discussion of the strategies used in playing the game and an account of a particular game are all quite different kinds of things, and each is at a different level of abstraction.

As far as language is concerned, we can and do treat it as both an abstract and a concrete phenomenon. When we write, we write words and sentences. These can be regarded as concrete objects in the sense that we can observe them on the page, count