

INTRODUCTION TO LINGUISTICS

Second Edition

RONALD WARDHAUGH

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McGraw-Hill Book Company

New York St. Louis San Francisco Auckland Bogota Düsseldorf
Johannesburg London Madrid Mexico Montreal New Delhi Panama
Paris São Paulo Singapore Sydney Tokyo Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Wardhaugh, Ronald.

Introduction to linguistics.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Linguistics. I. Title.

P121. W22 1977 410 76-14974

ISBN 0-07-068152-X

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2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 **FGFG** 7 8 3 2 1 0 9 8 7

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PREFACE

Like the first edition of this book, the second edition is designed to provide beginning students in linguistics with a basic knowledge of the kinds of questions linguists have asked and are asking about language. Some of the various answers that have been proposed are indicated and discussed. The chapter headings show the range of concerns.

The book espouses no particular theoretical viewpoint to the exclusion of all others. However, some preference is given to generative-transformational theory, the most influential of recent linguistic theories. Linguistics continues to be a very exciting discipline, and change occurs rather rapidly; this book also seeks to show why that is the case.

The material comes from a variety of sources, most of which will be readily apparent to those knowledgeable in the discipline. The general approach has been worked out over the years through teaching many students in introductory linguistics courses before they go on to further work in a variety of disciplines. Such students need an overview of linguistics, and this book seeks in its way to provide such an overview.

As a help to beginning students, each chapter concludes with a brief note indicating further sources for material covered in the chapter. A full bibliography

appears at the end of the book. A glossary of terms is also included to help students gain a better grasp of the concepts discussed and the terms used in the text. Each chapter concludes with exercises which provide students with further examples of the material included in that chapter. Some of the exercises are open-ended, to encourage students to raise their own questions and formulate their own answers.

An introductory book of this kind draws on the work of many others. Therefore, my thanks go out to all those colleagues, students, secretaries, readers, and friends who have helped make this book possible. What strengths it has I owe to them; its weaknesses are all my own.

Ronald Wardhaugh

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THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE

People have long been interested in language, in such matters as its origin, its nature, and its uses, whether in persuasion, poetry, or prayer. Language has always been something of a mystery, not unlike the mysteries of creation, the origin of the sun, and the coming of fire. As such, it has provided people with such a rich source of myth that even today much of the mystery of language prevails.

One important difference which distinguishes linguists from nonlinguists lies in those aspects of language that the two groups consider to be either mysterious or interesting, and another, in how they choose to investigate and discuss the mysteries and problems that are perceived. The central purpose of this book is to show what linguists do when they work with language. They do different things at different times, but everything they do is motivated by principles derived from modern science. Consequently, this book is an introduction to linguistic science. It seeks to provide an overview of how linguists look at language by showing what questions they ask, what evidence they seek bearing on those questions, and what answers they propose.

SOME VIEWPOINTS ABOUT LANGUAGE

One of the greatest mysteries that have confronted people has been the origin of language, a topic on which there has been much speculation. Many of us are familiar with the stories in Genesis concerning the giving of names by a deity and the diffusion of different tongues following the destruction of the Tower of Babel. Another story, this one not biblical, about a Swede, Andreas Kemke, has him conjecturing that in the Garden of Eden Adam spoke in Danish, the serpent in French, and the deity in Swedish (Eve was not mentioned). This conjecture tells us much more about Kemke than it does about the origin of language. A multitude of theories abound on this topic: "bowwow," "singsong," "dingdong," "pooh-pooh," and "gestural" to name some of the more exotic. In each case the concern of the person or persons proposing the theory has been with explaining how human language could have originated in the world, either by referring to other forms of communication, both human and animal, or by invoking a *deus ex machina* solution. Linguists themselves have tended not to become involved in such "theorizing." Indeed, in 1866 the Linguistic Society of Paris banned papers on the possible origins of language from its meetings and publications.

At times, theorists with an inclination toward experimentation have even gone so far as to try to recreate the conditions which they consider necessary for the origin of language. Herodotus, the Greek historian, tells how the ancient Egyptian king Psammetichus raised two children in complete isolation from human speech to see what language they would "naturally" speak. The children's first word is reported to have been *bekos*, the Phrygian word for bread; consequently, Psammetichus decided that children would naturally speak Phrygian and that Phrygian was an "older" language than Egyptian. James IV of Scotland performed much the same "experiment" in the early sixteenth century, but his children reportedly spoke "good Hebrew." Needless to say such conjectures and such experimentation do not qualify as scientific inquiry as such inquiry is understood today.

In the modern world, people still continue to have only the vaguest notions about what language is. These notions are oftentimes just as vague as those of the Spanish Emperor Charles V, for whom English was the proper language for commerce, German for warfare, French for women, Italian for friends, and Spanish for the worship of God. Even today many people regard Italian as "musical," the English spoken by the Welsh as "singsong," German as "guttural," French as "flowing," and American Indian languages as "monotonous and grunt-filled."

Many people think of languages as dictionaries of some kind and consider that learning a new language is equivalent to learning a new set of words which may be related, often on a one-to-one basis, to the set they know in the first language. Another common confusion is that of language with writing. Speech is often perceived to be a less precise, more transitory, and somewhat debased form of the language, which finds its purest or essential expression in its written forms.

We have poorly developed vocabularies for talking about linguistic matters and we do not know which matters are significant. Then again, in our actual use of words we reveal our attitudes about language and the functions of language. We regard some expressions as taboo, so we carefully avoid them by using **euphemisms**; nevertheless, we consider other expressions to be permissible profanities in

certain circumstances. We adopt pseudonyms, stage names, and nicknames, either as members of a religious order, stage troupe, or social group. We continue to worship in special languages such as classical Arabic, Latin, or Sanskrit, and we allow ourselves to be controlled by such formulas as *I now pronounce you man and wife* or *I divorce thee* thrice repeated. We joke, pun, delight in riddles, and occasionally fall under verbal spells of one kind or another, which, though no longer as potent as those of the witches in *Macbeth* or of *Rumpelstiltskin*, still exercise some control over our behavior.

We are assailed on every side by language; yet very few of us know what language is. We are told to think positively, constructively, or imaginatively, but there is little agreement on how language is to be used in such thinking. There is considerable anxiety about how language is used in society. We encounter very few other phenomena as important to us as language. Toward many of these phenomena we have adopted a scientific attitude, as for example in the matters of health and well-being. For most of us too astrology has given way to astronomy. However, we must observe that in general the study of language more closely resembles primitive astrology than it does sophisticated astronomy.

A DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE

Linguists are in broad agreement about some of the important characteristics of human language, and one definition of language widely associated with linguistics may be used to illustrate areas of agreement. This particular definition states that *language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication*. The definition is rather imprecise in that it contains considerable redundancy, particularly in employing both the terms *system* and *arbitrary*; some redundancy is perhaps excusable, however, for it allows certain points to be more heavily emphasized than they would otherwise have been.

Language as System

The key term in the above definition is **system**. It is also the most difficult term to discuss. We may observe that a language must be systematic, for otherwise it could not be learned or used consistently. However, we must also ask in what ways a language is systematic. A very basic observation is that each language contains two systems rather than one, a system of sounds and a system of meanings. Only certain sounds are used by speakers of any language, and only certain combinations of these sounds are possible. A speaker of English can say *I saw the bank* but he cannot say the following two sentences, which are starred (*) to show their unacceptability to a native speaker: **I saw the banque*, which makes him sound partly like a Frenchman, or **I saw the nbka*, which makes him feel that he is saying some kind of tongue twister rather than a completely well-formed English sentence. Likewise, he can say *I saw the bank* but not **I bank saw the*, which is nonsense, and, if he says *I bank the saw*, that sentence means something quite different and is rather absurd. The sound system of a language allows a small number of sounds to be used over and over again in various combinations to form units of meaning. The meaning system allows these units of meaning to be

arranged in an infinite number of ways to express both simple and complicated ideas.

All languages have dual systems of sounds and meanings, **duality** being a design feature of language, as Chapter 2 will show. Linguists concern themselves not only with characteristics of the two systems but also with how the systems relate to each other within one overall linguistic system for a particular language. The nature of this relationship in all languages is very important and constitutes a most interesting problem. Reference will be made to it throughout this book, particularly in Chapters 4, 7, and 8.

A related problem concerns the coverage of the system; that is, the kind of phenomena that must be accounted for, the principles to be used in deciding which phenomena are relevant, and how relationships are to be expressed. One kind of coverage would require us to do no more than make a catalog of observations of certain kinds of linguistic phenomena according to a preconceived plan. A dictionary is such a catalog of observations about words and their meanings, with different dictionary makers following different plans concerning what is to be included and how included material is to be described. However, we could not possibly make a dictionary of the sentences in a language in the same way that we can make a dictionary of the words in a language: the supply of words is finite but their possible combinations are infinite. A language offers its speakers the opportunity to speak about anything within their knowledge—and many things outside that knowledge, too. It is essentially a creative system in that much of what we say and hear we say and hear for the first time. We must search for satisfactory ways of describing sentences and parts of sentences, and also sounds and combinations of sounds. And we must do so in the knowledge that any system we propose must recognize the unlimited possibilities any language offers its speakers. As we shall see in later chapters, we can devise various sophisticated ways of saying something of interest about the systematic, creative nature of language.

Linguists are also concerned with the units and processes within the system. An utterance is not a continuous phenomenon: it is broken into discrete units of various sizes, and these units are arranged according to various processes. We must seek to understand what these units and processes are. Very likely they are not those that the educated public holds dear, or at least not as they are defined by that public, for example such units as letters and words and such processes as sentences constructed according to some “sense-making” formula. As we shall see in later chapters, we can postulate such units as phonemes and morphemes, and such arrangements and processes as constituent structures and transformations. Our search must be for those discrete units and processes which systematically account for interesting data within a theory that says something of significance to fellow scientists.

Language as Arbitrary

The term **arbitrary** in the definition does not mean that everything about language is unpredictable, for languages do not vary in every possible way. It means that we cannot predict exactly which specific features we will find in a particular language

if we are unfamiliar with that language or with a related language. There will be no way of predicting what a word means just from hearing it, of knowing in advance whether or how nouns will be inflected, or of saying whether pronouns will fall into any particular pattern. Likewise, there will be no way of predicting exactly which sounds will occur, of knowing what the ratio of consonants to vowels will be, or of saying whether the nasal passages will be involved in the production of certain vowels. If languages were completely unpredictable in their systems, we could not even talk about nouns, verbs, pronouns, consonants, and vowels at all. However, linguistic systems are not completely unpredictable: all the phenomena mentioned in the previous sentence will be found in any language we choose to examine, taking different realizations, of course, in different languages.

For example, the process of deletion—that is, the permissible omission of a part of a sentence when that part can be predicted from what remains—may be illustrated by the following deletions in a series of English sentences: *I could have gone and Peter could have gone too*; *I could have gone and Peter could have too*; and *I could have gone and Peter too*. This deletion process will be found in all languages, but the particular variation will depend on the language. All languages will have devices for negation, as in the English example of *The boy ran* negated to *The boy didn't run*. In this example the positive sentence is negated by the insertion of *n't*, the introduction of the verb *do*, and assignment of the “past tense” from the verb *run* to the verb *do*. This particular negation process is rather complicated. However, we would never expect to find a sentence such as *The boy ran* negated by a sentence such as **The boy ran the boy ran* or **The boy ran ran boy the*, or **The boy ran boy the*, that is, through some system of total sentence repetition or total or partial inversion. Language is unpredictable only in the sense that the variations of the processes that are employed are unpredictable. Apparently certain very simple logical processes are never employed, as in the above ungrammatical examples of negation, but certain seemingly illogical and obviously complicated processes are preferred, as in English negation. Of interest to us is what determines the processes that do occur and what exactly is predictable in languages.

The things which are predictable about all languages are called **linguistic universals**. For example, all languages seem to be characterizable as systems of rules of certain kinds. All have nouns and verbs. All have devices which allow speakers to make statements, ask questions, and give commands or make requests. All have consonants and vowels. All have means for referring to “real world” objects and relationships. And all allow their speakers the freedom to create original sentences. The specifics for each language are, however, largely unpredictable and, therefore, arbitrary: what German nouns are like; how questions are formed in Eskimo; what the vowels of Tagalog are; and what speakers of Basque call the various body parts.

Language as Vocal

The term **vocal** in the definition refers to the fact that the primary medium of language is sound, and it is sound for all languages, no matter how well developed

are their writing systems. We are *Homo loquens* as much as we are *Homo sapiens*. All the evidence we have, from the continued existence of preliterate societies, through the knowledge we have of language acquisition by children, to the existence of historical records, confirms the fact that writing is based on speaking. Writing systems are attempts to capture sounds and meanings on paper. Even though certain characteristics of writing systems came into being to inform people how to recite correctly, particularly to recite certain religious texts (as, for example, the Vedas, the religious texts of the Sanskrit language), the primary purpose of writing is to lend some kind of permanence to the spoken language and not to prescribe that spoken language in any way. In our attempts to describe a language, we must keep this fact in mind; therefore, we are not free to ignore the sounds a speaker makes in favor of studying the writing system.

We must acknowledge the centrality of speech to any study of language and therefore we must take an interest in phonetics and phonology (Chapters 3 and 4). Very few linguists have ventured to claim that language can manifest itself in either speech or writing and that the two manifestations are somehow "equal." These comments should not be taken as a denial of the importance of writing and writing systems and of the possible effects of mass literacy on language systems and linguistic usage. Writing undeniably influences speaking. An insistence on the vocal basis of language is an insistence on the importance of the historical and developmental primacy of speech over writing and therefore a denial of the common misunderstanding that speech is a spoken, and generally somewhat debased, form of writing.

Language as Symbol

The term **symbol** in the definition refers to the fact that there is no connection, or at least in a few cases only a minimal connection, between the sounds that people use and the objects to which these sounds refer. Language is a symbolic system, a system in which words are associated with objects, ideas, and actions by convention so that "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." In only a few cases is there some direct representational connection between a word and some phenomenon in the "real" world. Onomatopoeic words like *bang*, *crash*, and *roar* are examples from English, although the meanings of these words would not be at all obvious to speakers of either Chinese or Eskimo. More marginal are words like *soft* and *harsh* or *slither* and *slimy*, in which any connection between sound and sense may well be disputed by native speakers. More than one writer has claimed that English words beginning with *sl*, and *sn*, as in *slime*, *slut*, *snarl*, and *snob*, are used to denote a variety of unpleasant things. In much the same way the vowel sound in *twig* and *bit* is said to be associated with small things and the vowel sounds in *huge* and *moose* with large things. However, once again we are in an area of subjectivity, as counterexamples are not difficult to find; for example, *sleep*, *snug*, *hill*, and *spoon*. No more than a slight statistical trend can be established, one on which it would be unwise to base conclusions. In the circumstances, then, little evidence exists to refute the claim that languages are systems of arbitrary symbols. In learning a new language, you cannot escape learning the new vocabulary almost item-by-item, adequate testimony to this arbitrary symbolic characteristic of all languages.

Language as Human

The term **human** in the definition refers to the fact that the kind of system that interests us is possessed only by human beings and is very different from the communication systems that other forms of life possess. Just how different, of course, is a question of some interest, for it can shed light on language to know in what ways human languages are different from systems of nonhuman communication. The differences may be ascribed to the process of evolution that the human species has gone through and result from the genetic characteristics that distinguish it from other species. No system of animal communication makes use of the design feature of duality, that is, of concurrent systems of sound and meaning, and few systems of animal communication employ discrete arbitrary signals. Moreover, none allows its users to do all that language allows human beings to do: reminisce over the past, speculate about the future, tell lies at will, and devise theories and even a **metalanguage** about the system itself. Bees do not discuss last year's supply of food, dolphins are not next-year oriented, jackdaws do not deceive each other with their calls, and dogs do not bark about barking. Further discussion of some of the fundamental differences between human language and animal communication is contained in Chapter 2.

Language is uniquely human in another respect. People can perform acts with language just as they can with objects of different kinds. As we shall see in Chapter 9, sentences like *I pronounce you husband and wife*, *I'm sorry*, and *I bet you a dollar* can all be acts (**performatives**) because saying something in the right circumstances is also doing something beyond making noises.

Language as Communication

The final term in the definition is **communication**: language is used for communication. Language allows people to say things to each other and express their communicative needs. These needs are strong, whether they are the needs of a Robinson Crusoe for something or someone to address his remarks to, or of Trappist monks who devise sophisticated signal systems to avoid breaking their vows of perpetual silence. Language is the cement of society, allowing people to live, work, and play together, to tell *the* truth but also to tell a lie, or *lies*. Sometimes it is used merely to keep communication channels open so that if any need arises to say something of importance a suitable channel is available. This last function is met through the conventions of greeting and leave-taking, by small talk at parties, and in the chatter of secretaries in a large office. It is most conspicuous in its absence, as witnessed by the image of the tall "silent" stranger in the movies or by such a statement as *She didn't even speak to me when we passed in the street*. Other manifestations of this keeping open of channels are the ubiquitous portable transistor radios of teen-agers and the *Good morning-Nice day* greetings of casual acquaintances. Language also functions to communicate general attitudes toward life and others, creating what the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski called "a phatic communion [among speakers] . . . a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words." We need only notice how absurd it would be to take each of the following expressions literally: *How do you do!* *Where have you been all my life?*, and *How's everybody?*

The communication of most interest to us is, of course, the communication of meaning. A language allows its speakers to talk about anything within their realm of knowledge. According to one hypothesis associated with the linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf, languages may make some things easier for their speakers to say than other things. That is, different languages impose different perceptions of the world on their speakers or predispose them to look at the world in certain ways. If such a hypothesis were true, it would imply either that meanings would not be freely translatable across languages or that they would be translatable only with certain difficulties. However, this hypothesis has never had any strong appeal to linguists, who have felt that the linguistic evidence cited in its support has been slight and that not enough is known about how languages convey meaning to justify such a strong claim.

Linguists must be prepared to take an interest in how meaningfulness is achieved in language, even though at times precise questions about meaning cannot easily be formulated or answered even when formulated. The sentences *John opened the door* and *The key opened the door* communicate meaning; however, no general agreement exists as to how that meaning is achieved in each case. A sentence such as *John and the key opened the door*, made by conjoining the subjects of the two sentences, is bizarre; and both **John opened* and **The key opened* are unacceptable. The sentences fail to communicate meaning. We are faced with the problem of explaining such failure; Chapter 9 offers certain tentative explanations.

THE SCOPE OF LINGUISTIC THEORIZING

The above definition of language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication still allows for a wide range of scientific inquiries into language and its functions. It allows for a wide variety of questions to be posed and for very different bodies of evidence to be examined for answers to those questions. At this point, therefore, we should return to a discussion of what it is that we claim to be describing. Should we merely describe what we happen to observe, or should we attempt to make observations of certain kinds and also to filter out some important principles from these observations? We can, for example, report that so many people of such and such a background use sentences like *He be wise* and *He asked did John go*, and make no attempt to relate these sentences to other sentences from the same speakers, such as *He wise*, and to the almost certain nonappearance of a sentence such as *He asked if John went*. A decision as to what constitutes the data which must be described and accounted for will therefore control what we have to say. The decision effectively controls the actual selection of those data. If we feel we must describe certain kinds of relationships, we will look for examples of such relationships and for additional evidence; however, if we are not aware of these same relationships, we will not even notice certain phenomena. Such a situation is not uncommon in the natural or "hard" sciences. No scientist ever approaches a problem without some idea of how the problem should be stated and without some notion of what evidence might or might not be relevant in finding a solution.

Some kind of system is necessary for collecting and organizing data, because

science is concerned with the development of systems for handling data and with theory building. One very simple system would involve no more than making a rudimentary catalog of observations according to an elementary scheme of classification, as in the construction of a simple dictionary. Such a system would have what has been called "observational adequacy." It would simply cover the data but would not attempt to get at any very profound relationships that might exist beneath the "surface" of those data.

Some attempt can be made to get beneath the surface to explain relationships. The resulting system would attempt "descriptive adequacy." For example, various kinds of relationships can be shown to hold among apparently unrelated phenomena. Sentences like *John kissed Mary* and *The boy chased the dog* can be related to each other as exhibiting the same "pattern"; words like *Mary* and *dog* can be considered to be "nouns"; *Mary was kissed by John* and *The dog was chased by the boy* can be regarded as "transformations" of the first two sentences; and both **John Mary kissed* and **The boy dog chased* can be regarded as "ungrammatical," and therefore starred, because either they do not apparently occur in real life or they violate certain "rules" which speakers of the language apparently follow. Not all the preceding statements are equally "adequate." The best kind of descriptive adequacy in a grammar would result from that grammar showing not only how the data in the language are arranged but doing so in a way which accords with the linguistic intuitions of the speakers of that language.

But since all languages are somehow alike, a further level of "explanatory adequacy" may be attempted. All language descriptions would draw on the same system of organization, and the same terms and processes would be used in describing them because of the general likeness. For this reason attempts have sometimes been made to describe all language within a particular terminology. For example, attempts have sometimes been made to describe English as though every word must belong to one of eight parts of speech or in terms of phonemes or morphemes which can be discovered by following a prescribed set of procedures, or through possibilities and impossibilities of occurrence, for example the possibility of *Be quiet!* but the apparent impossibility of **Be tall!* Achieving explanatory adequacy is one of the most important goals of modern linguistics.

Each set of terms arises from a theory of some kind, and the theory and terminology together predispose an investigator to look at a language in a certain way. Investigators do not merely fit data into a theoretical framework using the available terminology to do so; rather, that framework helps them to delineate just what are the data and questions with which they must be concerned. Consequently, at various times certain questions about language have been held to be answerable but at other times not. A good theory should lead to the formulation of interesting questions so that gaps in a conceptual framework may be explored and new linguistic evidence used to confirm or deny basic hypotheses.

The "best" theory for a language, that is, the best grammar, will have all the characteristics of any good scientific theory. It will be an abstraction in that it will make reference to idealized units and processes. It will also, of course, acknowledge that these idealizations are realized in various ways in the world in which we live, just as the physicist's gravitational system and the economist's monetary system are abstractions realized respectively in falling bodies and price fluctuations. The grammar will attempt to relate apparently diverse phenomena within a

single framework, will provide a terminology for making observations about such phenomena, and will stimulate interesting investigations. A grammar must do all these things if it is to be of scientific value, and its usefulness must be judged by how well it does all three.

The points made in the previous paragraphs are extremely important. Linguistics is a science only insofar as linguists adopt scientific attitudes toward language. Scientific attitudes require objectivity: investigators must not deliberately distort or ignore data but must try to see things clearly and see them whole, all the while admitting that their theoretical inclinations influence their view of the data. However, these theoretical inclinations should be quite uninfluenced by emotions so as to avoid subjectivity. A scientific statement should also be testable, and the techniques and experiments on which it is based should be replicable, since explicitness is an essential requirement of the scientific method. A statement which is not testable is not vulnerable and an invulnerable statement is not a scientific one, for all scientific statements must be subject to disproof. Scientists must also be thorough in their treatment of problems and reject arbitrary solutions. However, different competing theories exist at any one time, each claiming adequacy in covering what purport to be the same data. The result may be vigorous conflict among supporters of the various theories, and developments in a discipline may appear to be revolutionary rather than evolutionary. Such has been the case in linguistics in recent years.

Since there is more than one way to “do” science—that is, since several different methods may properly be labeled “scientific”—we need not be surprised to find that linguists have continually discussed “how to do linguistics.” The methodology of linguistics is a serious continuing concern. In later chapters we will see that concern for methodology surfaces on many occasions, particularly as this book to some extent recapitulates in its treatment of topics some of the history of modern linguistics.

SOME BASIC DISTINCTIONS

Before investigating language phenomena in any detail, we should be familiar with a set of distinctions widely recognized in linguistics. These distinctions are between pairs of related terms: *description* and *prescription*; *synchrony* and *diachrony*; *form* and *substance*; and *competence* and *performance*.

Description and Prescription

The distinction between description and prescription relates to the fact that we must try not to make prejudicial judgments about data. Linguists are concerned with how languages work, not with how they can be improved (if indeed they can be). A sentence such as *He ain't got none* is to be explained, not criticized or corrected. Such sentences occur, and must be accounted for. They may produce undesirable consequences when uttered in certain circumstances, but this observation is a social rather than a linguistic observation. *He ain't got none* may result in the speaker's being left out of certain social events and being deprived of certain opportunities. To say that *He ain't got none* is a “bad” sentence is to make some kind of prescriptive statement about behavior, not some kind of descriptive

statement about a linguistic phenomenon. We would not want to call it an ungrammatical sentence. For example, we should compare it with a collection of words such as **Got he ain't none*, a collection which is definitely ungrammatical for any speaker of English. *He ain't got none* is quite normal, and therefore perfectly grammatical, for people who use this kind of construction, but no speaker of English uses **Got he ain't none*. It is our task to describe the occurrence of the former and, if we can, to account for it in some way within a general theory. In addition, we may consider that we should also account for the nonoccurrence of the other group of words. On no account, though, can we dismiss *He ain't got none* as either "incorrect" or of no interest, merely because such an expression is in low repute in certain social circles.

Much language study in the last century or more has been prescriptive in nature. This prescriptive influence is particularly apparent in some of the language instruction which is given in the schools. The rules taught are often prescriptive, of the form *Do this* or *Don't do that*. On the other hand, the rules of a generative grammar, as we shall see, are entirely descriptive, of the form *X becomes Y (in situation Z)*.

Synchrony and Diachrony

The distinction between synchrony and diachrony refers to the fact that languages exist in time and that we can study a language as it exists at any one time or over a period of time. A **synchronic** statement is a statement about a language at one period in time, whereas a **diachronic** statement is a statement about a change or changes that took place over a period of time. Synchronic statements should make no reference to previous stages in the language. For example, *meet* and *meat* are pronounced the same, that is, they are **homophones** in current English. It is irrelevant in a synchronic statement about Modern English that they were once differently pronounced, a fact to which their spelling attests. The historical facts indeed show different sources for the *ee* and the *ea* in the words. However, such a similarity between the synchronic statement for current English and the diachronic evidence, that is, the historical facts, must be regarded as fortuitous and should never influence decisions as to what are the synchronic facts. A synchronic statement may reflect certain historical developments: for example, in one treatment of the sounds of current English the vowels of *reel* and *real* are described as being basically different rather than alike because the second word has a derived form *reality* which contains a two-vowel pronunciation of *ea*. But such a decision is made for synchronic reasons alone.

Valid diachronic, or historical, work must be based on good synchronic, or descriptive, work, because no valid statements about linguistic change can be made unless good descriptions exist of a language for at least two discrete stages of development. In addition, a theory of linguistic change is required in order to relate the two descriptions. Any account of changes in the pronunciation of words such as *mouse*, *night*, and *name* over the last thousand years in English must be based on a thorough knowledge of English pronunciation today, English pronunciation a millennium ago, and a theory of sound change, a theory which, to be maximally useful, should also find itself in harmony with the theory from which the synchronic statements are derived. These and related problems will be discussed in some of the later chapters. In those chapters we will also see that the distinc-