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SEVEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT LANGUAGE

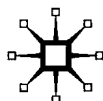
RONALD K.S. MACAULA

Seven Ways of Looking at Language

Ronald K.S. Macaulay



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Introduction

There are fashions in all forms of science. Even the successors to today's physicists will be working on different problems from those presented by string theory. Linguistics is the discipline that studies language systematically, though the extent to which it can be called the science of language may be disputed since the notion of science itself is tricky. Whatever the answer may be, linguistics has seen many fashions over the past hundred years. The aim of the present work is not to provide a detailed historical account of these fashions but rather to attempt to give those who have not been studying the subject professionally some idea of the kind of ideas and discoveries that have occupied the attention of linguists in recent decades. In the past fifty years, it has been an exciting and lively field.

In my earlier book, *The Social Art*, I wanted to provide readers who are not familiar with the field of linguistics a broad sweep of the kinds of knowledge about language that linguists have uncovered. I tried to avoid getting involved in the controversies that inevitably arise from different perspectives in any scholarly field, not least because the disagreements often focus on technical details that are difficult to present to readers who have not been trained in the subject or kept up with the ongoing debate.

The present work focuses on the kinds of issues and topics that have been explored and debated (sometimes quite heatedly) by linguists over the past fifty years. Little of this has reached the general reading public, and that little is likely to have been misleading, with tentative hypotheses often presented as established facts. The present book is designed to give such a reader a clearer idea of some of the different approaches that linguists have taken. I also hope to convey some sense of the excitement that many of these ideas have generated.

For the most part, I will use only examples from English to illustrate the claims. This means that a lot of interesting work on other languages will not be covered. There are several reasons for this. One is that, fortunately, a great deal of the focus in American and British linguistics has been on English, so that there are usually suitable examples to cite. Another reason is that some aspects require sophisticated understanding of the language, and it is not easy to make them clear to those unfamiliar with the language. So there are many interesting issues that will not be discussed here, though some of the suggestions on further reading may point the reader in the right direction. I will also often use examples from my own research as I know the context from which they come. As will become obvious, I have done most of my work in Scotland, but the few features that differ from other varieties of English should not present great difficulties.

The first chapter deals with **Language as Meaning** for the obvious reason that language would be nothing without meaning. This is a very complex subject and only a selection of topics can be covered, but I have tried to outline some of the more interesting work that has been done recently.

Universally, language communication takes place by speaking. Chapter 2 looks at **Language as Sound**. New methods of investigating speech have revealed more details about how the human vocal apparatus operates in ways that permit fast and efficient communication.

The third chapter examines **Language as Form**. One of the fundamental aspects of human language is that it is structured. For a variety of reasons, I will concentrate on syntax and not examine morphology and phonology. As might be expected, much of this chapter deals with the impact of Noam Chomsky's ideas on the study of syntactic structure, and I have tried to show how his ideas have developed over time. Some other alternative approaches to syntax are also examined.

Chapter 4, **Language as Communication**, examines how language is actually used to communicate in ordinary situations. Like other aspects of the use of language, conversation is structured and has its own "rules."

In every stratified society (i.e., most societies) there are differences in the ways in which people speak, according to their

membership in such social categories as gender, social class, age, ethnicity, and region. Chapter 5, **Language as Identity**, looks at the ways in which language reflects (or causes) differences in social status or role. Such differences have historical origins, as does language in general.

Chapter 6, **Language as History**, looks at how language has changed over a long period of history and how it is possible to form hypotheses about earlier forms of language before there are written records.

Chapter 7, **Language as Symbol**, examines the impact of writing systems on the use of language. Speech is fundamental to human language. Language developed from human beings communicating by vocal means, and speech remains the essential and universal characteristic of language. For the past few thousand years, however, there has been a very effective way of presenting language in a visual form.

The chapters are designed to be read as independent accounts. In some ways, each deals with a separate subfield of the discipline, (linguists tend to concentrate their scholarly efforts on at most two or three of these fields). Consequently, it is not essential to begin with Chapter 1 that deals with technical accounts of meaning, or Chapter 2 that provides a technical account of speech sounds, or Chapter 3 that is in many ways the most difficult for the lay reader to comprehend since it deals with abstract concepts that are likely to be unfamiliar to most readers. Yet there is a reason for placing these three chapters first in the book. They deal with fundamental aspects of language that are taken for granted in the later chapters. On the other hand, it is not necessary to have read the earlier chapters to follow the accounts in the later chapters, so the reader may skip back and forward.

Seven short chapters are obviously inadequate to do justice to all the ideas that have emerged in the study of language, even if one were to restrict the survey to the past fifty years. Every year hundreds if not thousands of books are published on linguistic topics. For anyone with the interest and energy there is enough material in print to occupy at least one adult lifetime. This little book is simply a narrative kind of internet search engine pointing in the direction of interesting topics. Like most search engines, it may provide more frustration than satisfaction, but with a little luck it will point you in the direction of some rewarding sites.

At the end of each chapter, I have provided suggestions for further reading. These are works that I consider to provide useful information but a number of them will not be easy reading. It is, however, not necessary to read the whole book to get some benefit, so you should not be put off by their intimidating appearance. Most academics are expert at giving a rapid assessment of how much of an article or book they want to read. Often the introduction and the conclusion will tell you all you need to know. Cultivate the gentle art of skimming and you will be surprised at how much you can learn in a relatively painless way.

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I

Language as Meaning

The meaning of words

The most important fact about language is that it is a way of communicating meaning. If it did not do that, it would be as irrelevant to most of what human beings do as bird song or the sound of the waves. The latter forms of sound are often pleasing to human ears, but they do not help us to conduct our everyday business. Language does exactly that, and more. But from the fact that language communicates meaning it does not follow that it is easy to say what meaning is. There was a famous book by C.K.Ogden and I.A. Richards entitled *The Meaning of Meaning*, which listed over twenty definitions of the word, but in the end it did not succeed in resolving the problems of how to deal with the question of meaning.

Dictionaries are in the business of providing meanings for words but they struggle to provide a definition of meaning itself. *The American Heritage Dictionary* includes even a quotation from the philosopher Willard van Quine: "Pending a satisfactory explanation of the notion of meaning, linguists in the semantic field are in the situation of not knowing what they are talking about." Despite the absence of "a satisfactory explanation of the notion of meaning," the editors go ahead and provide meanings for almost 100,000 words.

The basic notion of a word was given by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. He proposed the model of a sign as linking two parts, the concept and what he called the

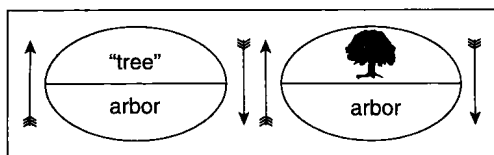


Figure 1.1 Saussure's sound-image diagram

sound-image. He provided the diagram shown in (Figure 1.1) to illustrate this notion.

The concept "tree" is linked to the appropriate "sound-image" in a language: in Latin *arbor*, in English *tree*, in French *arbre*, in German *Baum*, and so on. He labeled the sound-image the **signifier** and the concept the **signified**, two expressions that came to be used in a wide range of discourses. The notion seems relatively easy to demonstrate with respect to nouns representing physical objects but it becomes more problematic with abstract concepts, and even more so with adjectives, verbs, and such grammatical words as prepositions. For example, what is the meaning of *of* in such expressions as *the head of the table*, *a cup of coffee*, *freedom of expression*?

Even with physical objects, cross-linguistic comparisons show that the notion of "concept" is not a simple one. For example, the English word *river* corresponds to two separate words in French: *fleuve* referring to a river that flows into the sea, and *rivière* for one that flows into another river. On the other hand, the German word *Stuhl* covers both *chair* and *stool* in English. A more complex case can be seen in the range of color adjectives. The color spectrum is a continuum that is divided into different color words in different languages. Some languages make only two or three basic distinctions, whereas others, such as English, may have as many as eleven. Kinship terms also vary greatly from language to language. Danish speakers distinguish grandparents as *farfar* "father's father," *morfar* "mother's father," and so on. Where English speakers make do with a single expression *brother-in-law*, many societies make a number of distinctions in this category of relationship. The entries in a dictionary generally give only the minimum information necessary to distinguish one word from another.

“Dictionaries are like watches; the worst is better than none and the best cannot be expected to go quite true. (Samuel Johnson)

In practice, we seldom bother to consult the dictionary about the meaning of most of the words that we use in speaking. We consult the dictionary only about technical or unfamiliar words when we are unsure of their meaning or in a legal dispute. The original dictionaries were simply lists of “hard words” and designed mainly to help readers spell them correctly. Contemporary dictionaries mostly serve the same function, except for a few readers who are interested in the historical development of the language.

The dictionary maker’s challenge is to provide just enough information to enable the reader to make sense of a text in which the word occurs. The dictionary cannot come close to providing all the meaning that the speaker has. (The Spanish Academy reportedly included in its definition of the word for a *dog* that it is the animal that raises one leg to urinate.) For example, the definitions of the word *house* do not include the information that it usually has four walls, at least one door and normally some windows, or that it may be divided into several rooms with different functions, for example, kitchen, bathroom, bedroom. Nor does the definition include the information that for most young people to live in a house it is necessary to obtain a mortgage or pay rent to the owner. Yet these kinds of details are part of our everyday knowledge about houses. When we hear someone say *John and Mary are having difficulty finding a house*, we can immediately envisage a number of scenarios that would fit this statement, but we would not find this information through consulting a dictionary.

The shortcomings of any dictionary are not important for our understanding of human language. The example of the word *house* simply illustrates that we know much more than can be summarized briefly in a dictionary entry. This should be obvious to everyone, but formal linguists (see Chapter 3) often employ lexical items in their models as if their meanings were equivalent to dictionary definitions. They have been able to do so because meaning plays a relatively minor (if any) role in their model. If, however, we are interested in how human beings communicate through language, the wider knowledge that speakers possess about the world is clearly relevant.

There are also what are known as **lexical gaps**, that is, where there is a concept for which we have no single word. For example, the word *bitch* (in its basic meaning) refers to a female dog, but there is no single word for 'male dog,' so speakers often resort to circumlocutions, such as, 'Is that a boy dog?' I used to ask my students to come up with new words for notions that have no single entry in the dictionary. They were often very ingenious in their suggestions.

Some useful words that cannot be found in the dictionary

Brashlets (noun) Those annoying pieces of paper that fall out by the dozens from magazines upon any human contact.

Misticulate (verb) To turn a wave into something different upon finding that you don't know that person over there, after all.

Prantle (verb) The windmilling of one's arms in a vain attempt to avoid falling or losing one's balance.

Strett (verb) To push a crosswalk button repeatedly in hopes that doing so will cause the light to change more quickly.

Scrimp (verb) To clean one's room by shoving everything underneath.

Meanderthal (noun) An annoying individual moving slowly and aimlessly in front of another individual who is in a hurry.

Alas, I no longer have the names of the students to acknowledge them, but they have my thanks if they ever read this.

Meaning in context

Some linguists would argue that the kind of commonsense knowledge that we bring to the example *John and Mary are having difficulty finding a house* is not part of language, but any speaker of contemporary British or American English would bring such awareness to the understanding of the utterance. It is not necessary to know who John and Mary are or where it is that they cannot find a house. It is, however, often the case that we cannot fully