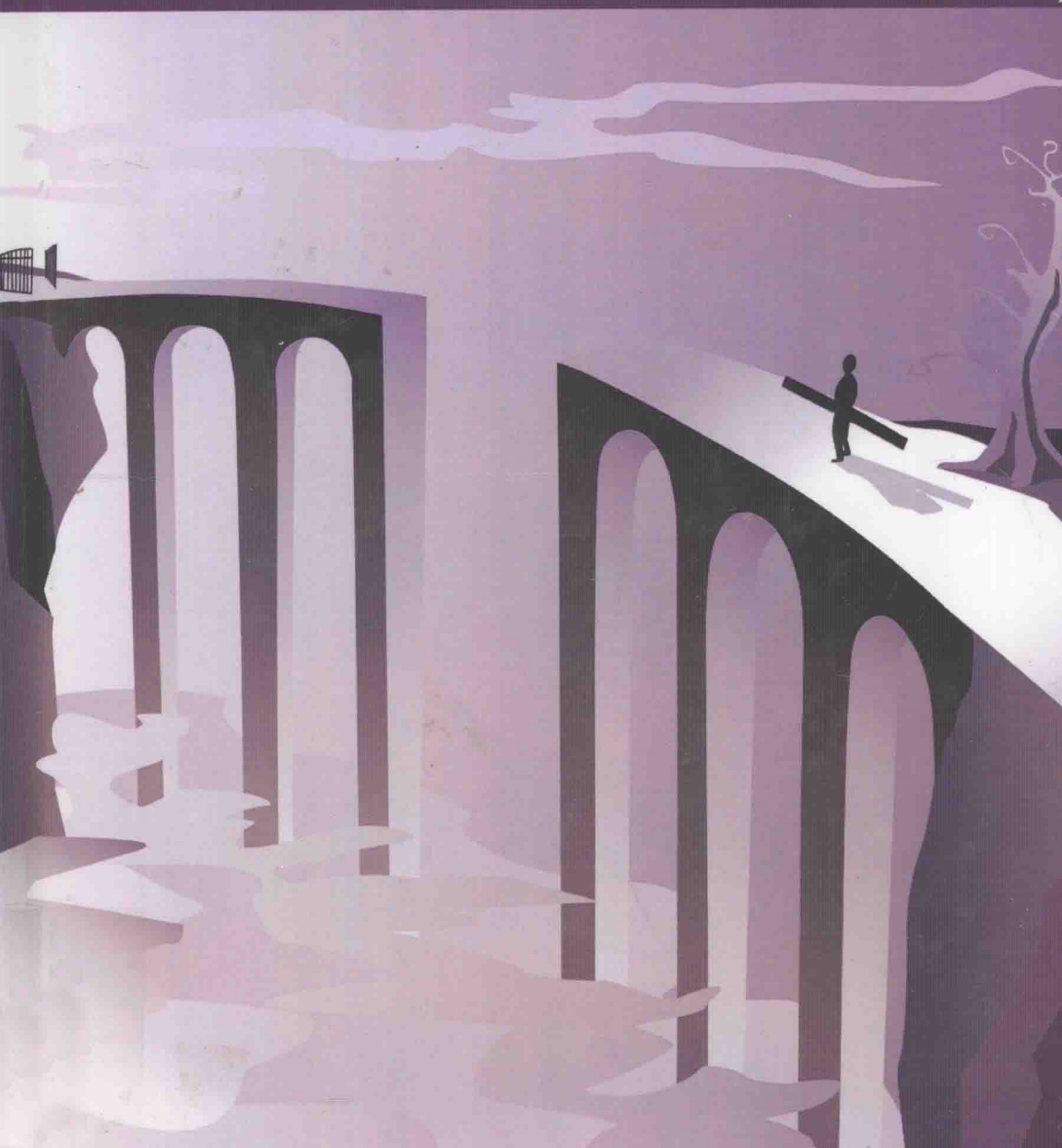
Language Teaching

Linguistic Theory in Practice

MELINDA WHONG



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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

Like many of the most difficult questions, the answer to this question may initially seem obvious because language is such a natural part of our lives. But, what is language? If you find you cannot answer this question very well, or if you find you have lots of possible answers to this question then you are one step closer to appreciating the complexity of language. As a language teacher, it is important to be able to explain what language is. Yet language – that which we are trying to teach – is not easily defined.

The first aim of this book is to discuss some of the many possible answers to the question of what is language. The second is to explore what we know about how knowledge of language develops. These ideas will provide a foundation for the ultimate aim of this book: to illustrate how an understanding of concepts in theoretical linguistics can lead to a better understanding of language teaching in the classroom. In this introductory chapter, we will briefly explore these three aims as a preview to the remainder of the book, beginning with the question of what language is.

The Form/Function Divide

Language can be characterised in terms of oppositions, a helpful exercise for teasing apart its complexity. One common opposition among researchers in linguistics is to see language as form versus language as function. Language as form is concerned with the structure of the language itself, while language as function is more interested in the work that a language does to facilitate interaction among people. The two views do not have to be seen as incompatible. In some ways they are, in fact, complementary.[1]

Language as form is the more contemporary way of referring to a view of language that traces its roots to what was called **Structuralism**.

As indicated by the label, a structuralist view of language is one that is concerned with the shape of language; it is a formalist view which sees language as a system of rules and patterns. This approach is concerned with categorising and labelling different aspects of language as a way of understanding the patterns. This can be done from the very small level of individual sound to the larger level of the sentence. Traditionally, this approach to language tries to break language down to its smallest units. As a result of this reductionist approach, much discussion of language from a formalist view is concerned with detailed and sometimes very subtle properties of language.

For example, a structuralist is interested in the individual sounds that are possible in a language. This interest includes, for example, phonetic descriptions, such as the voice/voiceless distinctions between bilabial /b/ and /p/ or velar /g/ and /k/ in English. From the level of sound a structuralist view moves to the level of morpheme to identify the smallest bundle of sounds that have meaning. So, for example, the word *restatement* has three morphemes:

(1) re-state-ment

The root, *state*, holds the core meaning, while the prefix *re-* is added to give the meaning of 'do again'. Interestingly in English, the addition of suffixes often functions to derive one word form from another; so the verb, *state*, through suffixation becomes a noun, *statement*; prefixes do not have this ability. As noted in our example, the verb itself, *state*, is a morpheme. From a formalist point of view, words themselves are morphemes. The next level up for a formalist is the level of word order, or syntax, which is concerned with how words combine to form different patterns and meanings. This takes us up to the phrase and then sentence level.

A cross-linguistic investigation of languages reveals very clear patterns for word order within and across languages. Joseph Greenberg studied hundreds of languages, looking for cross-linguistic regularities. He established a set of forty-five properties of language that seem to be universal (Greenberg 1963). So, for example, Universal number forty-three says that if the nouns in a language show grammatical gender, then the pronouns will also reflect gender. As an example, Spanish generally uses the suffixes *-o* and *-a* to mark its nouns as masculine or feminine, respectively; it also distinguishes between the feminine pronoun, *ella*, 'she', and the masculine one, *el*, 'he'. Notice that this implication is true in the direction stated. So, for example, a language

could have gender expressed on pronouns, but not on nouns – like in English. Most of Greenberg's Universals are implicational in this way.

This attention to universals paved the way for the development from structuralist linguistics to **Generative Linguistics**. Noam Chomsky took this idea of universals one step further to argue that there is a **Universal Grammar** (UG) that is a property of being human. Developing the ideas of the structuralists, UG is seen as a set of patterns or rules. But for Chomsky these rules are a natural, even biological, property of being human – from this set of rules, a person can generate an infinite set of utterances. In both traditional structuralist linguistics and the more current Generative Linguistics there has not been much interest in language beyond the level of the sentence. This is one criticism of the language as form, or formalist approach.

Adding to this criticism, some linguists argue that breaking language down into bits may be an interesting exercise, but fails to address the essence of what language is: a mode for communicating thoughts. Linguists such as Michael Halliday argue that, in order to study meaning, we need to look at the function of language. **Functionalists**, therefore, are not interested in breaking language down into categories for the sake of identifying patterns, but instead ask what work, what function an instance of language performs. At the sentence level, a functionalist is more interested in looking at the role of parts of a sentence. A functionalist, for example, is interested in the connection between the following two options for expressing the same idea in English in terms of how the speaker is thinking about the scene in question:

(2) a. The clown chased the monkey.
b. The monkey was chased by the clown.

For a functionalist the choice is going to depend on the context because it is the content of the message that is of primary importance, not the form. So a speaker would choose (2a) if wanting to foreground the activity of the clown, but (2b) if the monkey was the main character in the event. Similarly, a functionalist is interested in how words and phrases fit together. Consider the following examples:

(3) And then her mood changed completely – ever since leaving, she's been over the moon.
(4) The colleagues she left behind, by contrast, are all feeling a bit down.

Phrases like *and then* and *by contrast* show the relationship between ideas and help to hold them together. This is called textual coherence.

Functionalists are also interested in how the message conveyed in words extends beyond literal meaning. Expressions like *over the moon* and *feeling down* in (3) and (4) illustrate how spatial notions associate with emotion. In fact, there seems to be a cross-linguistic trend to associate the location of 'up' or 'on top' with good, positive feelings while 'down' or 'low' seems to be linked with negativity. Associations such as these, between language and meaning, are the types of linguistic features that interest functionalists.

While formal and functional approaches to language are clearly quite different, they do not have to be seen in opposition. Instead, they have different interests and perspectives in mind. So, one way to answer the question of what is language is to say that language is both a tool for communicating thoughts and emotions – function, and a systematic set of rules and patterns – form.

Mentalist/Internal and Interactionist/External

Another opposition for viewing language is to think of language as the internal mental process of individuals, as opposed to the external interaction that occurs among people. This does not contradict the above form/function divide, and in fact overlaps in some ways. But it is also useful as another way of thinking about language.

The mentalist approach to language is often framed in terms of the seventeenth-century philosopher, Descartes, who made a distinction between *the mind* as the rational awareness unique to humans and *the body* as the physical collection of cells, organs and tissue that is characteristic of all living creatures. We can use this mind–body dualism to distinguish between the **brain**, which refers to the physical mass of neurons encased in the cranium, and the **mind**, which refers to the more philosophical understanding of how mental processes work. Recent developments in brain science can give us glimpses into the physical workings of language in the brain. Computed axial tomography (CAT) and functional magnetic resonance imagining (fMRI) technology have been used to investigate which areas of the brain respond to different types of stimuli. This has added weight to the older observation by early brain researchers – most notably, Paul Broca and Carl Wernicke – who found physical connections between injuries to specific areas in brain's left hemisphere and language impairment. So-called Broca's area in the frontal lobe is associated with the more structural properties of language while Wernicke's area further back is known to be crucial for linguistic meaning.[2] Current

technological developments may eventually lead to a more sophisticated matching between linguistic behaviour and neural structure, but, as we will discuss later, there are limitations on our understanding of this link in current research.

The much older tradition of understanding language as a property of the mind is a more abstract exercise that has made use of theoretical models to explain relationships between various aspects of language. There are two strands of linguistics that have developed different ways of understanding how language in the mind works. Generative Linguistics views language as a special kind of knowledge, distinct from other kinds of knowledge. Generativists present a model of language which separates language from other mental functions; the separation also occurs within language itself as different aspects of language are modelled as being distinct. This view is in direct opposition to a **Cognitive Linguistics** model, which sees language as the same type of knowledge as other types of knowledge, and mental processing as one process without special distinctions. We will come back to the distinction between these views in Chapter 4. For now, the two views are relevant in terms of how they differ in their psycholinguistic, or mentalist, characterisation of language knowledge. In terms of the brain, a cognitivist understands language processing to occur throughout the brain using the same mechanisms as other cognitive processes, while a generativist sees language processing as connected with specific mechanisms in the brain dedicated exclusively to language. Perhaps in time developments in brain science will determine which view is more accurate. Until then, we are left having to choose between these two opposing positions.

But how can we determine which position is correct? Mentalist investigations explore language through two basic types of methodology, a philosophical method and a psycholinguistic method. The philosophical method depends on logical arguments regarding the nature of language. Language was a concern even for Plato over two thousand years ago in what has come to be known as **Plato's Problem**: how can people come to possess such a large store of knowledge when only exposed to a limited set of examples? In the same spirit, generativists applied this question specifically to language, noting that all people, whether schooled or not, have the ability to create perfectly formed sentences (in their native language), unlike other complex mental tasks such as mathematics, which have to be 'learned'. A cognitivist, on the other hand, will point out that our use of language is dependent upon our understanding of the world around us and will

note that schooling is vital for developing our language skills. This type of argumentation is as old as the field of philosophy itself.

The second methodology, the psycholinguistic method, has developed more recently. On-line processing tasks can give insight into the inner workings of the mind. One example is a task which asks participants to decide whether sentences presented on a computer screen are true or not. While the participant is making their decision based on the truth value of the sentence, the psycholinguist is actually interested in how long it takes the participant to make that decision. Testing has shown, for example, that the response time for grammatical sentences is faster than for ungrammatical sentences. Thus mean response time studies can give a glimpse into the inner workings of the mind.[3] What that glimpse shows, however, is debatable. Generativists have used psycholinguistic methods like this to argue that language knowledge is automatic, operating without our conscious control or awareness. Cognitivists have used it to show that we categorise language based on associations among concepts that come from our personal experience of the world.

Again we return to the question of what language is. For a brain scientist, language equates to electric impulses in the brain. For a psycholinguist it corresponds to behaviour in response to external stimulus. Generative and cognitive psycholinguists interpret the same responses as support for different views on how language is organised in the mind. A different approach altogether is to view language as a product of culture and as a tool for interaction among people. Taking an external or interactionist point of view, language can be seen as an integral part of culture, as a socially constructed set of practices. This sociolinguistic view of language is more interested in how people in society make use of language to signal identity, to negotiate interaction and to exert power, for example. Sociolinguists are more interested in the role of language in human interaction than in the structural properties of language divorced from context.

Other linguists see the properties of language in terms of the way language is used in social contexts. One of the aims of Systemic Functional Linguistics is to view language in terms of how it is used by a group of people in a shared context. For example, a systemic functionalist is interested in how texts can be identified by properties of the text itself; the text of a political speech, for instance, will be different from that of a story told to a group of children, not just in its subject matter, but also in the language used to convey the ideas. For systemic functionalists, the social context of human interaction will critically define the shape that language takes.

Another linguistic approach to language which can also be seen as 'external' is the study of pragmatics. While a sociolinguist's starting point is the level of society or groups, and that of systemic functionalists the level of text, pragmatics takes a particular interaction or utterance as its starting point. Pragmatics is interested in what a speaker/writer means and explores the possible range of meanings an utterance can have depending on the context. A simple *thank you*, for example, will have a completely different meaning and function if uttered in the following situations:

(5) a. on receipt of a gift from a close friend
b. on receiving bad news from someone you do not know very well
c. by an umpire in a tennis match at Wimbledon.

So now we can see that language covers a very broad spectrum indeed: from the physical electric impulses in the brain to the way individuals negotiate meaning in society. Because language spans this internal/external spectrum, the field of linguistics has many subfields that overlap with a number of disciplines, from brain science to sociology, and, of direct relevance to us, to education.

Linguistic vs Metalinguistic

The field of education is important for this last opposition that we will explore: the difference between linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge. **Linguistic knowledge** refers to the knowledge of language that we possess, whether we are explicitly aware of it or not. It is the knowledge that develops without explicit instruction from a very young age to allow us to communicate our intentions and thoughts. **Metalinguistic knowledge**, on the other hand, is knowledge that an individual has about the knowledge of language. In other words, it is explicit awareness of linguistic knowledge. It is also awareness of aspects of language that are part of the culture of a language group.

One type of metalinguistic knowledge closely associated with the language classroom is the set of grammar rules that we can explicitly teach and learn. These can be either descriptive or prescriptive rules. Linguists hold fast to the belief that their task is to describe the grammatical properties of a language in terms of what the speakers of that language actually produce. Their aim is to capture language in terms of the actual habits of its speakers without imposing any

preconceived notions of what the language should be like. This type of metalinguistic knowledge is known as **descriptive grammar** because it captures the patterns and structures of the language that people actually use. From a descriptive grammar point of view, it is better to think in terms of the patterns that language users follow instead of the more value-laden notion of grammar rules, which suggest a list of what one should and should not do.

A descriptive grammar contrasts with a **prescriptive grammar**, which is what is often found in textbooks used to teach a language. A prescriptive grammar dictates what rules of language should be adhered to, regardless of what the speakers of the language may actually do in natural language production, whether part of so-called standard speech or a dialect. The well-known example of prescriptivism is the admonition that no word should intervene between a verb and the particle *to* in the infinitive form in English. It is unacceptable, in other words, to *ever* insert an adverb within the infinitive construct, even though English speakers do this routinely in speech and writing. The reason for this prescriptive rule is historical; hundreds of years ago, notions of 'proper' English were based on the properties of Latin. In Latin it is impossible to interrupt the verb's infinitive form because the infinitive is signalled through a suffix on the verb itself; for example, nothing can intervene between the infinitive suffix *-ire* and the root *aud-* in the Latin infinitive form *audire*, 'to hear'. The power of tradition is so strong that some prescriptive grammarians still impose this Latinate property on English infinitives. While this is an extreme example, language textbooks often include 'unnatural' prescriptive rules, most of which are associated with the most prestigious 'standard' forms of English.

A second type of metalinguistic knowledge is the knowledge required for **literacy**. In most alphabets in the world's languages today, there is an arbitrary relationship between letters and sounds.[4] There is no reason why two lines crossed to form a 't', for example, should correspond to the /t/ sound in English. Yet the association between sound and letters allows us to record language on paper in a visual, two-dimensional format. This association has to be explicitly learned. It is possible for a person to have a fully formed grammar of a language, with a very large vocabulary, without being able to read or write that language. For this reason, reading and writing are not considered 'natural' properties of language in the sense that they are not abilities that normally developing children naturally acquire, whether they try to or not. Instead, literacy-related aspects of language

such as spelling, punctuation, writing and reading must be taught and consciously learned. This is the bulk of the hard work of the first few years of schooling. Because of the integral role of reading and writing in education, the 'unnatural' nature of literacy can be hard to accept. Yet it is considered a feature of metalinguistic knowledge, not linguistic knowledge, because of the level of conscious awareness that it requires.[5]

So where does this leave us? So far we have considered a range of ways to think about what language is. We can think of language as lying on a continuum from form to function, or make a distinction between internal mental processes and external social interaction. In doing so, we include a full range of academic fields of inquiry. The primary perspective taken in this textbook is an internal, mentalist, so therefore psycholinguistic perspective. The reason for this is not because of any belief that the psycholinguistic view is somehow better or more important. Instead, it is because most of the literature on language teaching that currently exists assumes a more external, interactionist view of language.

Also important to language teachers is an understanding of pedagogical issues in general; fortunately, there are many texts on general issues of pedagogy. This book, by contrast, is interested in thinking about language teaching from the point of view of the more formal properties of language itself, in hopes that teachers can be more confident about their subject knowledge and thus make more principled decisions when they teach. An expert teacher has their work cut out for them. In addition to general principles of pedagogy, they need to understand the complexity of language. Additionally, they need to be familiar with the process of language development.

HOW DOES LANGUAGE DEVELOP?

Whether generativist, cognitivist or functionalist, linguists agree that language develops, but are not in agreement on the question of *how* language develops. By using the phrase *language development* I am signalling the approach that I am taking in this discussion. Language teaching and learning implies an interaction between a teacher and students in a classroom. It is an activity that occurs in a particular culture and society, and in a particular institution. Language development, by contrast, is something that happens within an internal mental system. Thus, by using the term *language development* I am taking an internal perspective that emphasises mental processes.

Nature vs Nurture?

The question of language development is often presented as one of nature vs nurture. But this opposition is somewhat of a straw man argument. It is as unreasonable to say that the development of language is completely a matter of internal biological processes (nature), as it is to say that language development only involves external linguistic input (nurture). It is uncontroversial to say that both are necessary. The debate arises when deciding on the balance between the two and how the two interact. This nature/nurture opposition can be seen as similar to the external/internal opposition we discussed above, but for language development instead of language itself. Before thinking about second language development, we will take a quick look at the native first language context to ask how it is that a newborn child comes to possess a fully developed language within a matter of a few years.

This question of language development was one of the central motivators behind the Chomskyan language revolution of the 1950s. The mystery that inspired Chomsky was the problem of how young children can develop a language system that enables them to create an infinite number of sentences when they are only exposed to a limited number of (often fragmentary) examples of language. For Chomsky, the answer is that there must be some innate predisposition for language already in the brain from birth. **Nativism** sees language as an ability given by nature that exists at birth. But of course, whether a child ends up speaking Turkish or Portuguese depends on the language that the child is exposed to in infancy. Thus, even in the Chomskyan nativist model, nurture in the form of language input plays a key role. Thus it is more reasonable to talk about the nature AND nurture debate than the nature vs nurture debate.

Most people, however, will agree that native first language development and adult second language development seem to be very different. So is there any use in discussing native first language development in a book about second or foreign language teaching? The answer is more obviously yes if you are a language teacher in a primary school working with young children. So what if your teaching exclusively involves adults? Even so, a general understanding of native acquisition is still relevant. Despite the intuition that the two are different, the distinction between native language development and second language development (child or adult) has not been proven to be entirely clear despite decades of research. Indeed, it may be that you know someone (or may yourself be someone) whose second language

proficiency is seemingly native-like, yet with first exposure to the language as an adult or late teenager. Arguably, if, as a teacher, you want to make the best decisions about how (and what) to teach, knowledge of all types of language development is important.

Native First Language Development and Adult Second Language Development

Perhaps the most striking thing about native language development is that all children manage to develop a complete grammatical system so that they can speak the language that they are exposed to fluently – that is, of course, unless there is some pathological reason for interference in the development process. Immediately you might find yourself contrasting this with many of your own experiences within the second language context. This intuitive difference is at the heart of what Bley-Vroman (1990) calls the **Fundamental Difference Hypothesis**: in first language development native fluency is always achieved, while in second language development native-like fluency seems exceptional. But the fact that native-like fluency can and does happen makes for an interesting problem.

A second important point about native language acquisition is that regardless of the type and amount of language that a child is exposed to (unless entirely deprived of input), the child will develop language, and will go through the same general set of stages that all children go through. That children have a one-word stage that precedes a two-word stage may not seem remarkable. Children will also develop a large set of meaningful content words like *dog* and *want* before they begin to use grammatical words like *the* or *of*. But less obvious is why children will acquire certain grammatical words before others. As shown in his now famous morpheme order study, Roger Brown found that English-speaking children acquire grammatical morphemes in a specific order. For example, they acquire the present progressive *-ing* before they acquire the plural *-s*, both of which are acquired before the regular past tense *-ed* and the 3rd person singular *-s*.[6] Regular development of this type is now widely accepted as characteristic of native language development.

Also interesting is the regularity of errors that children make – as well as the fact that certain types of error are never made. If you spend time with young English-speaking children, you will notice that they use words like *breaked*, *falled* and *runned*. These 'errors' suggest that the child has acquired the regular rule for making the past tense in