



# An Introduction to Language

Kirk Hazen

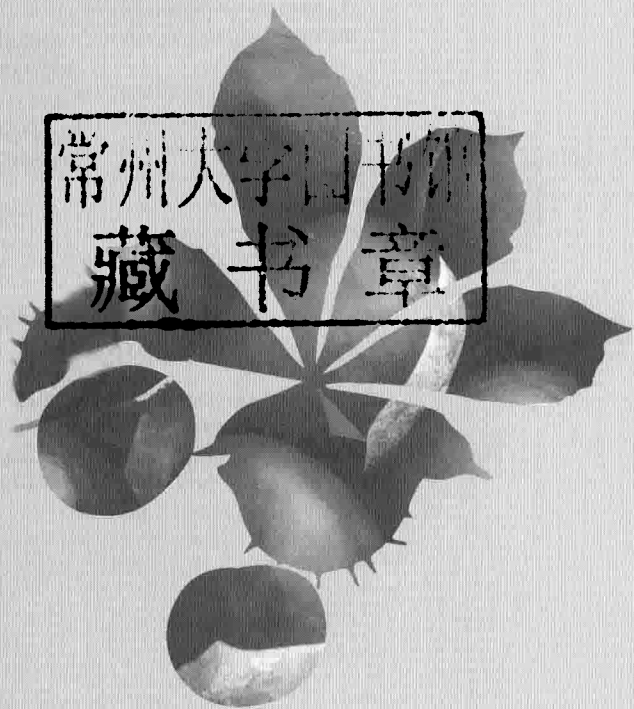


WILEY Blackwell



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# An Introduction to Language

## Linguistics in the World

*Linguistics in the World* is a textbook series focusing on the study of language in the real world, enriching students' understanding of how language works through a balance of theoretical insights and empirical findings. Presupposing no or only minimal background knowledge, each of these titles is intended to lay the foundation for students' future work, whether in language science, applied linguistics, language teaching, or speech sciences.

*What Is Sociolinguistics?*, by Gerard van Herk

*The Sounds of Language*, by Elizabeth Zsiga

*Introducing Second Language Acquisition: Perspectives and Practices*,  
by Kirsten M. Hummel

*An Introduction to Language*, by Kirk Hazen

For their willingness to tune me out, for their five-second attention spans, for their exasperation at my efforts to teach them all the same, and for their continued love no matter how aggravating I am, I dedicate this book to the three people who most challenged me to become a better teacher.

*For Keegan, Coleman, and Madara*

# Companion Website

This text has a comprehensive companion website which features a number of useful resources for instructors and students alike.

## **For Instructors**

Instructor's manual

Answer keys for the end of chapter exercises

## **For Students**

Interactive sample quizzes

Flashcards of key concepts

Annotated web links and video clips



Visit [http://quizlet.com/\\_puhix](http://quizlet.com/_puhix) to access the flashcards, and [www.wiley.com/go/hazen/introlanguage](http://www.wiley.com/go/hazen/introlanguage) for all other materials

# Acknowledgments

Writing a book is something like walking down a crowded city street. You might be doing the walking by yourself, but you are not alone. Your effort might be in your walking, but you did not build the sidewalk or the city around you. You might be walking to a certain spot, but there are lots of diversions that alter your path. As walks go, writing this book has been a good one.

My two Wiley Blackwell editors deserve many thanks. The person who started me off on this trip was Danielle Descoteaux, and I want to thank her for her persistence with me (she first asked in 2006, but I did not sign up until 2010): Her vision, voluminous knowledge of publishing, avalanche-like emails, and support throughout made this project possible. Julia Kirk, my other primary editor at Wiley Blackwell, was able to carry me through with patience and sage advice.

Locally at West Virginia University, I would like to thank the students I have taught in an introduction-to-language course, vaguely enough titled *The English Language*. I have had the good fortune to teach this course 30 times since 1998, and it is my experience from that class and those students that forms the foundation for this book. I still enjoy teaching this class, and it is the students who make it valuable and enjoyable.

The students who have helped me the most are those who have worked with the West Virginia Dialect Project. From the lab managers to the teaching assistants, we have had amazing folk, and I am immensely grateful to have worked with them. For assistance with this book, I would like to specifically thank the WVDP technical writers/copy editors/indexers: Isabelle Shepherd, Jaclyn Daugherty, Lily Holz; team MCQ: Margery Webb, Kiersten Woods, Emily Vandevender; and the teaching assistants who contributed to quizzes, glossary terms, and homework answers: Allison Eckman, Jordan Lovejoy, Emily Greene, Emily Justiss, Shannon Goudy, Caleb Stacey, Khali Blankenship, and M'lyn Gibson.

I would like to thank my mentor, Walt Wolfram, for marking so many trails for me to follow. I want to thank Patrick Conner for hiring me at WVU and working with me on the Old English examples at WVU. I thank Julia Davydova



for helping me with Russian examples and discussions of language variation, and Jim Harms and Mary Ann Samyn for their assistance with poetry and genre. Janet Holmes taught me a great deal about producing a book while we edited *Research Methods in Sociolinguistics*, and this book benefited from that experience. I want to thank the Department of English and the Eberly College at WVU for providing me with so many opportunities and so much freedom to work.

The reviewers for this book were invaluable for its development. Their advice was clear and direct, and I incorporated it in every section. I thank them for their astute reading and precise comments.

I especially want to thank my family for their love and support. My parents, Barbara and Al Hazen, provided me with a wonderful childhood and set me on firm educational ground, entrenching in me the idea that parents are the first teachers. My mother-in-law, Janet Coleman, and my entire extended family have kindly brought me into their lives. Above all, I want to thank Kate Hazen for working with me for the last 24 years to build the beautiful life we have and loving me all the way through.

# Note to Instructors

Early introductions to language have included Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1916), Bloomfield's *Language* (1933), and Hockett's *A Course in Modern Linguistics* (1958). In these works, the authors aimed at slightly different audiences and wrote from different sociocultural contexts. Saussure lectured in an age of European language scholarship where linguistic study was the study of historical linguistics, and his lectures turned generations of students away from the concrete and historical and towards abstract systems. Bloomfield wrote as an American scholar surrounded by exciting work in dialectology, anthropological linguistics, and the study of mental systems created by students of Saussure. Both of those scholars developed material aimed at a small percentage of the population. Both of their books are works of scholarship. The difference between Saussure's work and Bloomfield's is that Saussure's was his collected lectures about how the study of language should play out. Bloomfield wrote a tremendous scholarly work about language which elucidated the state of knowledge at the time. Additionally, Bloomfield's book was a greatly expanded revision of his *Introduction to the Study of Language* (1914), incorporating the previous decades of work in linguistics.

For the editions I own, Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale* is 317 pages with 30 chapters (in five parts), Bloomfield's *Language* is 564 pages with 28 chapters, and Hockett's *A Course in Modern Linguistics* is 621 pages with 64 chapters. A few modern textbooks have the same length, but these earlier works are vastly more dense. In terms of writing style, both Bloomfield's and Hockett's works are very readable for modern scholars and impressively expansive. Yet for most teachers of students who are not majoring in linguistics, the approach they take is daunting.

Hockett (1958:vii) clearly designates his book for "those college students who take an introductory course in linguistics," but he did not write a "popularization" and warns the potential readers accordingly. As a Professor of Linguistics and Anthropology at Cornell University, Hockett (1958:viii) considered that the university "with a magic seemingly unique, makes itself a congenial home for the scholar in linguistics."

Saussure, Bloomfield, and to a great extent Hockett, directed their work towards audiences prepared for scholarly engagement with detailed language facts. With the opening up of universities in the United States after the advent of the GI Bill, many different kinds of students entered the university, including those from blue-collar and poor families who may never have been exposed to the expectations of twentieth-century scholarship. Both of my parents fit that description, and I have wondered how my parents, from working-class Pittsburgh and poverty-stricken rural Florida, would have dealt with Hockett's morphophonemics or the distinction between internal and external sandhi. I do not imagine that it would have worked well, and I am not sure Hockett wrote for such students – those who were not budding scholars.

Since 1958, most of the textbooks have been openly designed for introductory linguistics courses and have followed Hockett's model, but rarely with the ambition needed to cover all 64 of his chapters. This book crafts a different path. This book is for people who will probably not study linguistics as scholars. It is designed for college students, and specifically for college students of the twenty-first century.

In an introductory biology course for humanities majors (an “intro to life” course), you would deal with evolution and concepts like natural selection. The general public has heard about evolution, but might not know how natural selection actually works. There would be some challenge in getting students to know how these concepts interact, plus time spent disabusing people of misconceptions. In an introductory biology course for majors, you would learn how biologists actually study natural selection and more detailed descriptions of how it works. You would have a clue about how research projects are conducted to test ideas. But natural selection would be part of both courses because it is an important concept for biology.

For this book, one foundational concept is that our species has a specific ability to acquire a highly complex communication system. That concept should be part of both intro to linguistics and intro to language classes. The intro to linguistics course might provide research studies by linguists that investigate that concept; the intro to language course would just fit it into the story about how language works. The key difference between the biology example and the linguistic example is that very few people in the college educated public realize in any explicit way the complexity human language has. When I do public talks, people overwhelmingly believe that language clearly has two forms (good and bad) and that it is a human invention; rarely does anybody start with the distinction between language and writing. I really hope that with this book, some of its basic tenets of linguistics become the norm for college-educated understanding.

The difference between what high school biology now teaches and what my parents' generation knew is dramatic. My father-in-law did not understand what a cell was when he was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer; my wife, with a BS in zoology, had to explain how cells worked. My children's high school biology classes are on the same level (with updated facts and concepts) with my intro to biology college class from 1988. Linguistics has made no such gains with general public knowledge or high school education. I want us to do so.

# Preface: About the Book

## Chapter outline

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## the scope of the book

This book explores the nature of language primarily through an explanation of English, drawing on examples from other languages to illustrate similarity and diversity in human language.

As a result of the expansion of the British Empire, English is now a global language. With all the people who have learned English over the last 200 years, the language is in a different state than it used to be. We might be able to imagine a possible universe where language does not change, but as we will explore in this book, humans have a natural instinct to understand and produce language variation. A product of that daily variation is language change. Over time, our natural ability for variation has created many varieties of English.

At times, I refer to these different varieties as *Englishes*. It is more concise than *dialects of English*. Plus, the term *dialect* carries with it a great deal of social baggage, which will be explained throughout the book. Although speakers of many different Englishes can understand each other, the social differences and language characteristics of these varieties of English are widely recognized. As we talk about the qualities of language throughout this book, the examples will come from Englishes around the world.

## intro classes

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A note is needed on the general approach to teaching about language in this textbook.

The world would be a better place if everyone were required to take (and pass) two linguistics courses. People would be more likely to demand rational arguments and empirical evidence, and we would be better able to provide those things. The field of linguistics, important to both academia and industry, would also benefit from the increased interest. The reality is that a graduate degree in linguistics is not an easy task, and few people become professional linguists. Yet everyone should know about language. It is one of our most important human qualities, and something all of us talk about. If people learned about the basic qualities of human language, we would better understand ourselves.

The training to become a linguist is specialized in the same way that the training to become an ornithologist (bird scientist) is specialized: A lot has to be learned about the material, and the methods for analysis are particular to the kinds of data under study. Yet, for nonspecialists to learn about birds, they do not have to learn genetics. For nonspecialists to learn about how wonderful language is, they do not have to train to be linguists and learn about acoustic phonetics. Most other introduction-to-language books adopt the same model, the same chapter set-up, as do books for linguistic majors. This book does not. With this difference between linguists and normal people in mind, the traditional book divisions, which mirror the traditional subfields in linguistics, were modified in this book. Instead, we move from small parts to larger parts.

In writing this book, I have attempted to maintain the distinction between a textbook working as an introduction to linguistics and this textbook, which is an introduction to language. Although this book will not teach you how to do the science of language, known as *linguistics*, it will use knowledge from linguistics to explain language. For a comparison, *biology* is the study of life, and an introduction to *life* would use knowledge from biology. An introduction to biology itself, as a field of academic study, would be a different book than an introduction-to-life textbook. In many ways, an introduction-to-life textbook would work in a biology class for nonbiology majors. This textbook is an introduction to language for nonlinguistic majors.

Just like human biology or human society, language is more complex than most people realize and more complex than any one book can explain. This

particular book introduces modern ideas about language. I sincerely hope you continue to study language after reading this book, but certainly not all readers will analyze language in scientific ways. With those expectations in mind, this book maintains different goals than books which introduce the academic field of linguistics. It relies on your knowledge as language users to help you discover the wondrous skills you already have. The book does not, however, train you to be a linguist, and it keeps at reasonable levels the linguistic jargon borrowed from that professional training.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout your life as language users, you will have debates about the meaning of words, the history of phrases, and how appropriate certain bits of language might be for certain situations. Eventually, some readers become parents, and they will want to know how their children develop language as babies and why they sound so different as teenagers. Debates about language are regular events in religion, government, and legal systems all over the world. When all these people talk about language, it is extremely helpful for them to understand how language actually works (in contrast to the many myths about language that float through the world). In this book, I attempt to lead you to an understanding of what language is and why it is both beautiful and essential to who we are.

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## this book's structure

This book has numerous, digestible subdivisions for every chapter. Understanding language is not a simple task, and a subdivided structure allows students to focus on the important information bit by bit. All chapters have the following sections plus chapter specific topics:

*Chapter overview:* This section provides a clear and concise description of each topic in the chapter. It is intended to orient the student to the area of language study.

*Textboxes with Words to the Wise and Word Play:* These sidebars provide interesting topics related to the main focus of the chapter. These side topics can provide ideas for undergraduate research studies.

*Chapter summary:* This section reiterates the main topics to offer the student another opportunity to step back and consider the entire area of study.

*Key concepts:* These keywords and concepts, which serve as the foundational vocabulary for each chapter, should be the primary focus for the students.

*Further reading:* Featuring both popular and academic titles, the further reading sections provide suggestions for the most accessible language research. These suggestions are accompanied by summaries of each work.

*Exercises:* These questions, instructions, and sample data will help the student actively engage and work with the concepts in the chapters.

*Study questions:* Although not exhaustive, these questions provide the basics for the concepts in the chapters. If the students can answer these questions fully and provide detailed examples with each one, they should be on their way to performing well in the class.

Most chapters will also address the following themes:

Meaning  
Structure  
English and other languages  
Variation through time  
Variation today

These topics bring together many different areas of research and translate them into larger pools of interest. Throughout the chapters, certain themes are more prominent than others. In some chapters, *meaning* will be a larger theme of focus; in other chapters, *structure* will require more explanation. For example, Chapter 3, on the patterns of sounds, contains more stories about *variation today* than does Chapter 8, which is about building sentences. Since the nature of human language restricts variation for building sentences but allows abundant variation with sounds, there are simply fewer examples of variation for building sentences within English at the present time.

The discussions of language variation bring a grand opportunity to this book. Language is an important part of our personal and social identity, and the construction of these identities is carried out by our innate ability to play with and produce language variation. Since language variation is a natural vehicle for expressing social qualities, discussion of sociolinguistic topics will not be segregated from linguistic topics. Instead, social qualities of language variation are integrated with linguistic qualities. In many books of this type, one chapter would talk about how suffixes are added to words, such as *-ing* added to the verb in *I am walking*, and a different chapter would talk about how people use variation in language to mark social differences: To use *-in'* rather than *-ing* is more informal. This book discusses the social and linguistic qualities of variation together to illustrate the rich texture of language for students.

## exercises

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The exercises in this book are designed to help students engage the concepts presented in each chapter. Some of the main points in this book are abstracted away from many observations of language, and to make those points real, students must play with language to observe its patterns. The exercises help students discover their own language, its basic qualities, its social nuances, and its inherent variation. The exercises are divided into two sets: those for individual work and those for in-class group work. With the individual exercises, students develop analytical skills through the close examination of data sets and their own personal language variation. In these studies, students pursue the ancient goal of knowing oneself. With the group exercises, the collective work of a small group develops a body of shared (socio)linguistic knowledge for group analysis while also building camaraderie within the class.

One of the most important steps students can make to successfully learn about language is to take the time in these exercises to account for the language knowledge and language beliefs in their own heads. When students approach topics such as physics or economics, they may not have many explicit beliefs about how things work in those branches of scholarship. In contrast, all students approach the study of language with long-standing beliefs about their languages, others' languages and dialects, and the judgments made about them. Unfortunately, some of those beliefs are factually wrong. To learn about how language works, most people have to unlearn things they already believe.

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## Englishes and other languages

Discussion of Englishes and other languages will compare what happens in the many varieties of English to the even wider expanse of languages on Earth, over 6,900 of them. The biggest downside to learning about language through just one of them is that the range of language diversity cannot be accurately displayed. For example, English has a fairly rigid order to its sentences, and this order affects meaning: *The coach hit the ball* and *The ball hit the coach* have two different meanings. Yet, many other languages do not work this way, allowing instead a freer word order. Such alternative realities are presented in these sections.

Language variation and varieties of English are part of many different sections of this book. In Chapter 2, for example, the words used to exemplify certain sounds are presented with regular spelling to represent those sounds (as spoken by someone from the state of Michigan). Although some other varieties share the same words to represent those vowels, not all do. Speakers from Alabama and New Zealand might well have different words to best represent those vowels. The course instructor can help negotiate these paths of variation.

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## the limits of this book

Language itself is complex, yet language is not all there is to human communication. For many linguists, body language and clothing choices are not considered language, though they are certainly part of communication. This division between *language* and *communication* will be maintained throughout this book. The study of meaning overall is called *semiotics*, but that includes a really large group of activities, including how you dress, when you cross your arms, and whether you are smiling or frowning. All those clues let people know information about you. They all fall into the category of communication and can all be examined with semiotics. Communication is a broader range of human skills than just language, and an introduction to human communication would be a different kind of book. This book focuses on language.



## analogies for language

In order to explain how language works, linguists have tried to make comparisons between language and many different things. None of them are perfect, but with some of these analogies, decent explanations are provided for parts of what language does. Analogies provide a comparison between two unlike things. Better analogies compare something the audience knows well to something the audience knows less well: “Walking in outer space is like walking on smooth ice without skates.” In that analogy, the qualities of lack of control and very little friction are conveyed. For anyone who has been on smooth ice, it is difficult to get going without a push. As with any analogy, this one fails in several ways. Outer space is frictionless on every dimensional plane, not just where your feet are located; outer space also presents many more dangers, including deathly cold and no atmosphere. So, admittedly, analogies are not perfect, but they remain an effective teaching tool.

This book will use analogies throughout to relate certain qualities of language, although some of the most common analogies are not used. One of the most common comparisons not used in this book is between language and clothing. The analogy works something like the following: Language is like clothing in that it comes in styles, certain parts go in and out of fashion, and you can use clothes for a while and then change them for different occasions. This is a decent analogy in some ways, but it is wrong in many other ways. For example, you can consciously choose to “wear” some words and not others, but patterns of pronunciation and grammar are not fully open to that kind of choice. Words certainly do go in and out of fashion, but dialects are not things which can be put on and taken off like a coat; they cannot be packed up for the winter once the last leaf falls. When providing analogies in this book, I explain in what ways they apply to language, and at times, in what ways they do not apply.

## a prescriptive guide for social trends

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Everyone has vast experience with language. From the day you are born, language is all around you. It is one of the essential things we do every day, and it is difficult to imagine life without at least one language. Unfortunately, most people’s experiences with language in school are unpleasant. When people think about school and language together, they think about teachers who correct their writing or tell them specific words *not* to use. If you were one of the lucky ones who learned the school rules easily, you may have taken it upon yourself to correct your classmates. If you were one of the many who did not conform so easily to the school rules, you may have wondered why you were being picked on for your language. This book will not judge you by those kinds of rules. We will make distinctions between the kinds of rules used in writing and the other types of rules people use in every human language. This book