

# INVITATION TO LINGUISTICS

Richard Hudson

# Invitation to LINGUISTICS

Richard Hudson

MARTIN ROBERTSON

© R.A. Hudson, 1984

First published in 1984 by  
Martin Robertson & Company Ltd,  
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder.

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Hudson, Richard, 19—

Invitation to linguistics. — (Invitation Series)

1. Linguistics

I. Title II. Series

410 P121

ISBN 0-85520-665-9

ISBN 0-85520-666-7 Pbk

Typeset by Katerprint Co Ltd, Oxford  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
T. J. Press Ltd., Padstow

Invitation to  
LINGUISTICS

## INVITATION SERIES

Invitation to Economics	David Whynes
Invitation to Linguistics	Richard Hudson
Invitation to Politics	Michael Laver
Invitation to Social Work	Bill Jordan
Invitation to Statistics	Gavin Kennedy

### *Other titles in preparation*

Invitation to Archaeology	Philip Rahtz
Invitation to Engineering	Eric Laithwaite
Invitation to Law	William Twining
Invitation to Nursing	June Clark
Invitation to Philosophy	Martin Hollis
Invitation to the Sciences	Barry Barnes

To Gay, Lucy and Alice

# Preface

## FOR NOVICES

This book is intended for readers who don't know what linguistics is, but would like to find out more. In writing it, I have tried to give a clear idea of what it is like to study linguistics – what kinds of activities you engage in, and what their respective attractions are; so you should end up, all being well, with a better idea of whether it would be a good subject for you. I have tried throughout to write in a simple way, with examples that are as straightforward as I could make them. I hope you won't jump to the conclusion that linguistics is all like this book: most of the things you do on a linguistics course are quite a bit harder, and some are very hard indeed, so your capacity for thinking would be stretched as much by a linguistics course as by any other subject in the curriculum. But I hope too that you'll have an idea from this book of the fun and excitement that students can experience in doing linguistics.

## FOR ADVANCED STUDENTS

You may pick this book up in an idle moment, out of curiosity, to see how I describe linguistics. No doubt you will have your own views on the pros and cons of the subject after however many years' study you have put into it. You'll probably find that the course you followed emphasized some

## *Preface*

of the activities that I describe here at the expense of others, and you've probably already worked out for yourself how the biases of your course relate to the personalities of the teaching staff. All I can say is that's life, and since you have a personality too, it could well be that the biases of your course worked in your favour. If they didn't, bad luck – but at least this book may help you to sort out better whether to blame the subject or the teaching staff.

You may also find the book helpful if you're at the point in a course where you want to see how all those loose ends tie up with one another; a quick read through this book may help to make a few connections.

### FOR INSTRUCTORS

You may know enough of my previous published work to know that I hold unorthodox views on a number of subjects. If you're worried that I may be using this book to propagate my pet hobby-horses and presenting them as the orthodoxy, let me reassure you. I have made a special point of trying not to offend my colleagues, in the belief that linguists who are at loggerheads on particular issues nevertheless have a vast amount in common. It is this common ground that I have tried to emphasize, though I have also explained that controversy exists and have even stated my own position on certain issues.

On the other hand, it is inevitable that you will say to yourself that this isn't the book you would have written if you'd been asked to do it. My choice of examples, and also my choice of topics in which to express interest, are a reflection of my personality and may not fit yours. The aim of the book is to encourage students to opt for linguistics, so if it works, you'll have a chance to teach students influenced by the book, and you can set things straight then. Then I shall just owe you a little apology for the mismatch between my book and your personality. If the book doesn't work, though, I shall owe all of my colleagues a very big apology indeed. . . .



## Acknowledgements

I received extremely helpful comments from three of our students, all of whom read the complete first draft of this book near the end of their first year, when they were still able to put themselves back into that blissful state of ignorance that they enjoyed before they joined us. They were David Appleton, Charmaine Faulkner and Gary Holden. I also received expert advice from the editor of the series, Kim Pickin, and from an anonymous linguist whom she persuaded to read the manuscript. I should like to thank them all, and assure them that every one of their comments has led to some kind of change in the book.

The first puzzle in chapter 6, on Latin, is based on an exercise from R. W. Langacker's *Fundamentals of Linguistic Analysis* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972); and the second one, on Zulu, is based on an exercise from H. A. Gleason's *Workbook in Descriptive Linguistics* (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955). These are both excellent books, and if you enjoy chapter 6, you'll find plenty more puzzles in them, though some will be beyond the novice. The dialogue on page 36 is based on one in T. Winograd's *Understanding Natural Language* (New York, Academic Press, 1972).

# Contents

Preface	viii
Acknowledgements	x
1 Introducing Linguistics	1
2 The Pleasures of Linguistics	18
3 Ordinary Language is Good	38
4 Things You (sort of) Know Already	57
5 Strange Goings-On in Language	78
6 Puzzles	96
7 Theories: Boon or Bore?	117
8 The Great Issues (Grey Tissues?)	131
9 Some Applications	152
Further Reading	167
Glossary	170
Index	179

# 1

## Introducing Linguistics

### (MODERN) LINGUISTICS

My aim in this book is to help you, the reader, to decide whether linguistics holds anything of interest to you, so we start with a rough definition of linguistics: it is the study of language. I shall use the term 'linguist' to refer to people who engage in linguistics in this sense and not in the other, more popular, sense of a person who is good at learning and speaking foreign languages. A useful name for this kind of person is 'polyglot'. Many linguists are also polyglots, but we shall see that there are many activities within the field of linguistics for which it isn't particularly important to be a polyglot. If you are yourself a polyglot, or would like to be one, then it is almost certain that you will find a lot of linguistics fascinating, but please don't give up if you aren't. If you can read this book, you must know at least one language, English, and I shall be able to illustrate most of the points I have to make in this book by taking examples from English. (I shall follow the general practice among linguists of reserving *italics* for linguistic forms quoted as examples.)

Linguistics is generally classified as one of the social sciences, along with sociology (the 'study of society'), demography (the study of populations), the more socially oriented branches of anthropology, geography and psychology, and so on. Like many of these disciplines, it is mostly taught at 'tertiary' level, so if you wanted to study linguistics in Britain, for example, you would have to go to a university.

polytechnic or college of education to do so. (Broadly speaking, the same seems to be true of most other countries too, and there are some countries where adequate linguistics courses are hard to find even at this level.) However, as recently as 1970 there were hardly any universities in Britain where you could take a degree in linguistics, in contrast with the situation in the early 1980s, so it may be only a matter of time before linguistics becomes quite common as a school subject. Already there are a number of schools and colleges where linguistics is taught at sixth-form level (or even below), and the experience of teachers is that there is nothing about linguistics which makes it any more unteachable below tertiary level than a subject like mathematics. I shall assume in this book, however, that the linguistics to which I am inviting you is the kind of linguistics that you would be likely to find in a tertiary-level course, or in a book aimed at that level, rather than the carefully selected parts of the subject that might be taught at school.

What we can call 'modern linguistics' – the kind I shall describe below – stands at the end of a long tradition of the study of language, going back to the Classical Greeks of about 500 BC. For various reasons the Greeks were very interested in their language and developed a sophisticated analysis of it which later acted as the model for analyses of Latin and then of all the languages known to the Europeans influenced by Greco-Roman culture. This book is not the right place to look for a description of this long tradition of study, so I shall recognize its existence, express profound respect for the achievements of bygone generations – and then ignore it all. I shall also ignore the particularly impressive version of linguistics which flourished in the last century (though I shall mention its present-day manifestation in the historical study of language); and I shall ignore all the long grammatical traditions found outside Western Europe, notably those of the Arabs, the Indians, the Chinese and the Japanese. All these traditions are strictly irrelevant, however valuable they may be in themselves, since I am assuming that you want to know what linguistics is like now, as practised in a typical department of linguistics (or 'linguistic science', or

## Introducing Linguistics

'phonetics and linguistics', or 'general linguistics', or 'language', or ...). This is what I shall call modern linguistics, or just linguistics for short.

This social and historical sketch may have started to help you to locate modern linguistics as a discipline, so we can now turn to its content. First I shall list some of the phenomena that linguists study, and then I shall say something about the ways in which we study them.

The best way to tell you what kinds of phenomena linguists study is to give you a list of the main branches of linguistics, with the names that are widely used for them. A three-year undergraduate course in linguistics is likely to cover most of these branches and may well be divided into parts so that each part deals with one branch. The list doesn't cover everything you might do in such a course – there are other branches of linguistics which deal with relations to other disciplines, such as the study of literature, which I shall mention briefly in chapter 9.

PHONETICS and PHONOLOGY deal with pronunciation. Phonetics studies sounds from the point of view of the physiologist (how we make them), the physicist (how the sound waves we produce differ from one another) and the psychologist (how we perceive them) but in each case, in principle, without much emphasis on the ways in which particular languages use the sounds. (For example, we might study the differences between vowels and consonants in these ways.) Phonology, by contrast, stresses this latter aspect and works out how sounds are used by languages (e.g. how different languages allow vowels and consonants to be combined with one another in different ways). Many practitioners feel that the boundary between phonetics and phonology is unclear and unimportant.

MORPHOLOGY and SYNTAX deal with words. Morphology concentrates on the internal structures of words – how they are made up from smaller parts, as *dogs* consists of *dog* plus *-s* – whereas syntax concentrates on the relations between words in a sentence (which are often called CONSTRUCTIONS). For example, in *Boys like girls*, it is morphology that discusses the fact that *-s* is added to *boy* and *girl* to make each of them

## Invitation to Linguistics

plural, but it is syntax that allows us to analyse the sentence as consisting of a subject (*boys*), a verb (*like*) and an object (*girls*). (By the way, if any of this terminology worries you, and you find it hard to remember, you can always check the glossary at the end of this book, where I have tried to explain any remotely technical terms that I use.) Morphology and syntax make up a good deal of what you may think of as GRAMMAR, though this often includes parts of the study of meaning as well.

SEMANTICS and PRAGMATICS deal with meaning (though there's also a broader definition of pragmatics which makes it responsible for the whole of language use, including some parts of meaning). The parts of meaning that come directly from the meanings of the words and constructions themselves are the province of semantics, whereas the parts which come from the context in which the sentence is uttered are handled by pragmatics. For example, if you hear someone say *He likes her*, you immediately know that the 'liker' is a male who is neither the speaker nor the person spoken to and likewise that the 'likee' is a female other than the speaker and the person spoken to, and all this information is of the kind which semantics studies; but when it comes to identifying the particular male and female in question, you have to make use of knowledge that comes from outside the sentence itself, such as who has just been discussed in the conversation concerned. At this point the semanticist in principle hands over to the pragmaticist, but, as with the phonetics/phonology boundary, some people feel that this distinction is neither clear nor important.

PSYCHOLINGUISTICS deals with the mind and behaviour of the speaking, listening and learning individual. For example, when we are speaking, how do we plan what we are going to say? How come we sometimes end up saying the opposite of what we mean (e.g. *too big* instead of *too small*, or *open* instead of *closed*)? Why do we have to work so much harder to remember some words (e.g. *nasturtium*, for me at least) than others (e.g. *daisy*)?

SOCIOLINGUISTICS deals with individual speakers as members of social groups and asks questions such as why there is

## Introducing Linguistics

so much variation within and between groups, and what kinds of variation there are.

HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS is about changes through time; we shall have more to say about it later in this chapter.

TYPOLOGY studies the ways in which languages differ from one another, partly with a view to discovering limits to this variation. For instance, some languages are like English in having 'pre-positions', so named because they precede their 'object' (to use the traditional word for the word which belongs to the preposition; take *in London* as an example – here *in* is the preposition, and *London* is its object). Other languages have 'post-positions', which are like our prepositions except that they follow their objects. An example of such a language is Japanese, in which the translation of *in London* would be *London ni*. Most languages can be classified as either 'prepositional' or 'postpositional', since they contain prepositions but hardly any postpositions, or vice versa. The interesting question for a typologist is whether this distinction is related to any other distinction that can be made on the basis of word order (or anything else, for that matter); some recent studies have shown that there is indeed a strong tendency for a postpositional language to have its verb at the end of the sentence and its adjectives before its nouns (as in English but not in French).

This list of branches of linguistics should have done at least one thing: to dispel the idea that linguistics is only about grammar. It is true that grammar is an important part of linguistics, but we touch on many other things too, and I shall try to emphasize the breadth of coverage in the rest of this book by selecting examples from different branches. Now we can turn to the other matter, which is how linguists study these various things.

### TIME: SYNCHRONIC AND DIACHRONIC

Linguistics is time-sensitive, in the sense that it makes a clear distinction (in principle, at least) between 'historical' and 'non-historical' questions. I have chosen to start with this

### Invitation to Linguistics

point because I find that most candidates who apply to study linguistics in our department find it quite hard to imagine questions other than historical ones. Typically, when I ask why they are interested in linguistics they say that it is because they want to know about the origins of things – whether particular words, or whole languages, or even the phenomenon of language as a whole. Now, there is nothing at all shameful about such questions (called **DIACHRONIC** – in Greek ‘dia’ means ‘through’ and ‘chronos’ means ‘time’), and there are a large number of highly respected linguists who devote their lives to trying to answer them. But there are a lot of other, ‘synchronic’, questions (**SYNCHRONIC** – less obviously, ‘syn’ is Greek for ‘with’) which make no reference to history and which are equally interesting (even, we find, to those of our students whose first motivation for studying linguistics was historical). Moreover, as linguistics is currently practised most attention is given to the non-historical type of question, so it is important for prospective students to know about these questions.

To illustrate the kind of non-historical question that can be asked, let us take a particular example from English: the ‘apostrophe *s*’, as in *John’s book*. Non-historical questions about apostrophe *s* involve its relations with other things which ‘exist’ at the same time. The following are examples:

- (1) When do we write apostrophe followed by *s*, and when just apostrophe?
- (2) Which of the ‘*s*-type’ sounds does the *s* represent? (Notice that in *John’s s* is pronounced as though it were *z*).
- (3) What is apostrophe *s* added to? (Notice that it is not added directly to the noun in *the man over there’s name*; if it could be, the form would be *the man’s over there name*, which isn’t allowed.)
- (4) Does apostrophe *s* have a meaning of its own? (You may think it means something like ‘possessor’, but it is hard to see any kind of possession in expressions like *John’s arrival*.)
- (5) In what stylistic or other circumstances is apostrophe *s*



## Introducing Linguistics

used before a verb with *ing* as suffix? (Compare *John's coming late was a nuisance* with *John coming late was a nuisance*; you may feel that one of these alternatives is more suitable for casual speech and the other for fairly formal writing.)

If we restricted ourselves to historical matters, we could not ask any of these questions, so one of the benefits of separating historical from non-historical is that it allows both types of question to be taken seriously. However, another reason is that it avoids confusion. The fact is that languages change (which is precisely why the historical approach is interesting), so if we want to know about modern English, it is pointless to ask how things were in Old English. For example, in Old English the ancestor of our apostrophe *s* was added directly to the noun, just like our present-day plural *s*, but we have just seen that our apostrophe *s* is very different from the plural *s*, in that it follows not only the noun but also any of the noun's modifiers. So if you start with a phrase like *the biggest boy in my class* and make it plural, you do so by adding *s* to *boy*: *the biggest boys in my class*; but if you add an apostrophe *s* to it, to make it possessive (for instance), then you add the apostrophe *s* after *class*: *the biggest boy in my class's name is John*. (You may have been told at school not to use such expressions, but you probably do use them.) If we mixed up the facts about modern English and those about earlier stages of the language, we should be in danger of total confusion – the apostrophe *s* must be a suffix like the plural *s*, but at the same time it must be quite different. It is because modern linguistics tries to avoid confusion like this that we say that it is 'time-sensitive'.

### CORRECTNESS: DESCRIPTION AND PRESCRIPTION

The second quality of linguistics is that it is **DESCRIPTIVE**, in that it describes what is rather than saying what ought to be. With most things that linguists want to talk about, there is no problem. For example, in spite of the history of our apostrophe *s*, nobody writing about modern English would