A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO ENGLISH

BY
THURSTON WOMACK

AND
SHIN-ICHI MIURA

A LINGUISTIC APPROACH
TO ENGLISH

BY

THURSTON WOMACK

Associate Professor of Language Arts
San Francisco State College

AND

SHIN-ICHI MIURA

Lecturer in English
Keio University

INTRODUCTION

A Linguistic Approach to English is an attempt to present in concise form the grammar of English as it has been studied and described in recent years by scientific linguists. The present book is directed to Japanese learners of English who already have some knowledge of English, but who wish, with or without the aid of a teacher, to gain greater proficiency in spoken and written English. The present book is deliberately concise and does not pretend to furnish all the necessary exercise and practice materials that the student will need. It is therefore suggested that the student extend the exercises on his own initiative, and alert himself to the patterns of English which he hears spoken and sees in print and writing. The value of such extensions of the exercises cannot be overemphasized. The end product of all language learning and teaching is the **automatic** production of the characteristic patterns of the language being learned.

The English grammar that most Japanese (and American) students have learned is the traditional grammar formulated in the eighteenth century. It is a grammar largely arrived at by drawing analogies with Latin, which furnished the model. The eighteenth century grammarians did not know, evidently, that English grammar was only partially like Latin grammar. Inflection, the use of affixes of various kinds to indicate grammatical relationships, was the chief grammatical device of Latin. On the other hand, inflection in English was **relatively** unimportant, occurring in the formation of the plural in nouns, the possessive,

and the past tense of the verb. Other important grammatical devices in English were and are word order and the use of structure words: prepositions, determiners, etc.

Modern grammatical studies of English proceed much differently from the earlier studies. Modern studies are scientific, that is, they are descriptive, inductive. In other words, modern grammatical study does not merely transfer the grammar of one language to another. An important fact in modern language study is that each language has its own characteristic grammar. Consequently, linguists in arriving at the grammar of a language, go directly to the language itself, observing it with carefully worked out techniques, and arriving at generalizations about how the language works based upon their observations. These generalizations about the forms and patterns and arrangements of forms and patterns constitute the grammar of the language.

English has been quite well studied by this method, and it is upon such knowledge that the present book is based. Modern linguistic studies recognize two kinds of meaning in language: lexical or semantic, the vocabulary meaning that we find in dictionaries; and structural or grammatical, the meanings that signal relationships between words and groups of words. The present book makes these distinctions clear. Traditional grammar does not. Linguistic science is primarily interested in structural meaning and it attempts to arrive at statements about language without recourse to lexical meaning. Traditional grammar does not do this and offers a confusion of definitions, sometimes based on meaning (a noun is the name of a person, place, or thing) and sometimes on function (an adjective modifies a noun).

It is not, however, the purpose of the present book to discount traditional grammar, for traditional grammar is not all wrong. It has much that is useful. It is, however, in the light of

contemporary language study, falsely based, tending more toward philosophy than science. It is often inconsistent and inapplicable, and lacking the well-defined framework of modern linguistic science.

The present book uses much of the terminology of traditional grammar, but uses it in a somewhat different way. This should not cause the student undue difficulty. The writers' experience in several years of teaching this material to both native students and students learning English as a foreign language indicates that it does not. There will be some new terminology, although this has been minimized. Again, experience has shown that the concepts behind the new terms are clear and comprehensible. The terminology of traditional grammar varies widely and offers much greater difficulty than anything in the present book.

The use of the linguistic approach in teaching and learning English as a foreign language has been dramatically successful. Because linguistics begins with a study of the sound system of a language, it is possible to isolate, for example, those areas of pronunciation and intonation that constitute particular difficulties for foreign students. We know clearly what sounds in English are difficult for Japanese speakers. The student will notice in the present book considerable attention given to phonemes, the basic sound units of language, the way phonemes combine into morphemes, the way morphemes combine to form still larger units of language, and to intonation, the matters of pitch, stress, and juncture—all matters of structural importance in English. Sound is important not only in learning to sound like a native speaker, but also in understanding the very nature of language.

The present book bears the unmistakable influence of the work of many teachers and scholars, most notably that of Professors C. C. Fries, Paul Roberts, Henry Lee Smith, Jr., W. Nelson

Francis, Donald J. Lloyd, and Harry R. Warfel. The responsibility for any misinterpretations, oversimplifications, or inadequacies, however, rests with the authors.

San Francisco, California
February, 1959

Thurston Womack
Shin-ichi Miura

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

Ants, apes, and most other creatures communicate, but they do not have language. Parrots and other birds "talk," but they are entirely imitative and have no idea of what they are saying. When a dog scratches at the door and barks his demand to be let in, he is communicating. But he is not using language. Dogs and other animals do communicate, but their communication is very far from the complicated machinery of human speech. We humans communicate in a complex variety of ways, by speech, gesture, tone and inflection of voice, writing, or a combination of these. Of all the creatures on earth, however, man alone uses articulate speech for communication, and this is his most important form of communication. Speech is man's basic medium of communication, and when modern linguists study language, they study it as it is spoken by all kinds of people. We can define language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which human beings in a given speech community communicate.

It would be well to make clear what is meant by **system, vocal, symbols,** and **arbitrary.**

(1) **System.** Language is not random behavior; it is a system. A system is an organization of units into general classes of similar items. Each language has its own unique system of patterns.

(2) **Vocal** and **symbol.** A symbol is something that stands for something else. In language, the symbols are speech sounds, that is, vocal symbols. They **stand for** objects and ideas directly. Writing stands for, or symbolizes, these speech sounds. Thus speech (language) is a primary symbolization of reality, while writing is a secondary symbolization—a symbol of a symbol.

(3) **Arbitrary.** "Arbitrary" here means only that there is no inherent relationship between the symbol and the concept, thing, or idea that the symbol stands for. We cannot say that **pferd** is a better symbol than **cheval** or **horse** for the animal these symbols stand for.

Scientific language study seeks to understand the internal structure of a language. It is therefore inductive, objective, and systematic, and like other sciences, its generalizations are tentative, subject to revision when more data are at hand. In this book we analyze American English into significant sounds, the patterns of sounds and the patterns of clusters, and sentences. Modern linguists focus on structural or grammatical meaning rather than lexical meaning. A student who does not know the meaning of words in a given sentence may understand the grammatical signals. Let us cite the **Jabberwocky** poem of Lewis Carroll:

> 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
>   Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
> All mimsy were the borogoves,
>   And the mome raths outgrabe.

In this poem the words, such as **brillig, slithy, toves, gyre, gimble, wabe, mimsy, borogoves, mome, raths,** and **outgrabe,** have no dictionary meaning in English, but the sentences of the poem comply with English grammar. That is to say, we can hear the grammatical signals such as **was, the, -y,**

-s, **did, in, were,** and **and.** These elements carry structural or grammatical meaning. Structural meaning plus lexical meaning constitutes total linguistic meaning.

Applications

1. Which kind of meaning is the linguist primarily interested in, lexical or structural meaning?

2. Why is a sentence such as " The uggles wuggled the diggles " used by modern linguists?

3. What is the aim of scientific language study?

4. What is the most important means of human communication?

5. Select the true statement: Language, defined by modern linguists, is (a) guttural noise (b) all of the words that make up a vocabulary (c) an arbitrary system of vocal symbols by means of which people communicate (d) any sign or symbol which conveys meaning from one mind to another.

6. Select the true statement: In the sentence " When it rains it pours " the " s " ending on **rain** and on **pour** is (a) a structural device signalling plurality (b) a meaningless element which appears only in the writing (c) a device that makes the meaning of the word more concrete (d) none of these.

SOUNDS: THE BASIC BUILDING BLOCKS

Phonology includes both phonetics and phonemics. In **phonetics** we are concerned with those matters which are necessary for the study of American English. Phonetics studies speech sounds in terms of the mechanism of their production by the human vocal apparatus. In **phonemics** we discover which phonetic features are distinctive, that is, which sounds contrast or signal meaning. It is the business of phonemics to find out what elements in the stream of speech carry the meaning.
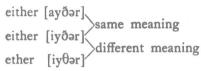
Phonetics is the study of all **distinguishable** speech sounds. For example, phonetics is interested in the difference between the two pronunciations of **either** which occur in dialects of American English or in the difference between British English **path** and American English **path**. Both [ayðər*] and [iyðər] are current pronunciations in educated American English. British English chooses [paθ] and American English [pæθ]. These are phonetic differences. They do not affect the meanings of the words.

Phonemics is based upon phonetics. Where phonetics is based

---

* A phonetic alphabet represents distinguishable speech sounds. The alphabet we use here includes only those symbols which are necessary for describing General American English. The system used is based on the International Phonetic Alphabet.

upon distinguishable speech sounds, phonemics is based upon speech sounds which signal or contrast meaning. [paθ] and [pæθ] offer a phonetic contrast but not a meaning contrast. But consider

> path [paθ]
> path [pæθ] ⟩same meaning
> pith [piθ] ⟩different meaning

Thus [piθ] not only contrasts in sound, it contrasts in meaning with [paθ] and [pæθ]. It is the sound contrast that signals meaning that phonemics is concerned with. Observe

> either [ayðər]
> either [iyðər] ⟩same meaning
> ether [iyθər] ⟩different meaning

In the first example, the contrast is a vowel. In the second a consonant. Remember, it is with **sounds** that we are dealing, not **writing,** the written **representation** of sounds. English writing only partially reflects English speech.

The distinguishable number of speech sounds in a particular language is extremely large, in the thousands, perhaps more. But the sound units which contrast meaning—the phonemes—in any language are relatively few. All languages are made up of phonemes, which may or may not occur in other languages. Some languages have more than English; some have fewer.

American English has forty-five basic speech signals. These are divided into segmental phonemes (twenty-four consonants and nine vowels), and suprasegmental phonemes (four stresses four pitches, and four junctures). In this chapter we shall see how these basic linguistic building blocks function.

Segmental Phonemes. The consonant and vowel phonemes are called " segmental " phonemes because each represents a little segment or piece utterance. A **phoneme** is defined as a sound

signal unit consisting of one or more sound members which are phonetically similar and in complementary distribution. The different sound members which make up a phoneme are called **allophones**. The sound signal /t/, for instance, may be noted in the following series: gate, little, biggest, butter, sentence, light. Each of these /t/'s is made in a somewhat different way, but each is recognizable as a /t/ and so belongs to the /t/-phoneme. These /t/'s are in complementary distribution.

We write symbols for phonemes between slanted lines as we use square brackets in phonetic transcription. In order to become aware of the nature of speech, we record the actual phonemes of speech. Practice with phonemic notation is helpful to us in catching exactly the sound signals actually employed in speech. The more we practice phonemic transcription, the sharper our ears become.

A phoneme never occurs alone; it is always preceded or followed by another. It is influenced by others and has a sound peculiar to its surroundings. Thus /l/ and /k/ in **like** and **look** do not sound the same; they range over quite a stretch of the palate. All phonemes adjust to their neighbors.

Different languages have different numbers of phonemes. As far as we know, the Japanese language* has twenty-three segmental phonemes (eighteen consonants and five vowels). Some phonemes

---

* Bernard Bloch in an article, " Studies in Colloquial Japanese IV: Phonemics," in *Readings in Linguistics*, 2nd Edition, edited by Martin Joos, New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1958 says " The conservative dialect of standard Japanese has twenty-nine phonemes in addition to four pitch phonemes. . . : five vowels, one long nasal, ten voiceless consonants, ten voiced consonants, two semi-vowels, and pause." He also says that the " innovating dialect " of standard colloquial Japanese has thirty-one phonemes in addition to the phonemes of pitch. He shows also that /ž/ is a phoneme in Japanese as follows:

> [onaži] : [naši]
> [onaži] : [6okinadžišìn]
> [sẽn·žoo] : [sẽn·zo]

of Japanese are approximately equivalent to those of American English and some are not. Japanese students very often have extreme difficulty with American English phonemes, such as /f/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /l/, /ž/, because they are not phonemes in Japanese.

The twenty-four **consonant phonemes** of American English are made up of six stops (/p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/), two affricates (/č/, /ǰ/), nine fricatives (/f/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /s/, /z/, /š/, /ž/, /h/), one lateral (/l/), three nasals (/m/, /n/, /ŋ/), and three semi-vowels (/w/, /r/, /y/).

The consonant sounds of General American English are classified below according to types of sound and points of articulation.

		Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Alveopalatal	Velar	Glottal
Stops	vl.	p			t		k	
	vd.	b			d		g	
Affricates	vl.					č		
	vd.					ǰ		
Fricatives								
slit	vl.		f	θ				h
	vd.		v	ð				
groove	vl.				s	š		
	vd.				z	ž		
Lateral	vd.				l			
Nasals	vd.	m			n			
Semivowels	vd.	w			r	y		

(vl. = voiceless   vd. = voiced)

To produce /p/ and /b/ we close both lips and then release them with a puff of air. With the back of the tongue pressing up against the soft palate we make /g/ and /k/. To form /i/ we rest the tip and the blade of the tongue against the hard palate. Letting some air escape along both sides of the tongue tip as it rests against the back of the upper teeth or the gum-ridge, we produce /t/ and /d/. To form /š/ we put the blade of the tongue against the palate and let the air whish through noiselessly. To produce /ž/ we put the tongue in the same position, but vibrate the air going through the vocal cords. With the tongue tip resting just back of the teeth, we produce /s/ and /z/; the air passes between teeth and tongue in a narrow slit. To make /θ/ and /ð/ we thrust the tongue tip forward between upper and lower teeth. To form /č/ we start with the tongue in position for /t/ and ease into the position for /š/. To make /j/ we start with the tongue in position for /d/ and ease into the position for /ž/. With the blade or back of the tongue against the palate, the nasal passages open and resonating, we produce /ŋ/. With the tongue tip against the hard palate and gum-ridge, the nasal passages resonating, we make /n/. To produce /f/ and /v/ we press the lower lip against the upper teeth. With both lips tightly closed but the nasal passages open, we make /m/. To make /r/ we lift and curl the tongue tip back a little in a position near but not touching the roof of the mouth, or we lift the blade of the tongue up near but not touching the palate. To produce /y/ we put the tongue in position for /i/ with tip touching lightly the back of the lower front teeth and sides touching the upper bicuspids. Then voicing begins as the tongue moves immediately to the next vowel in the word. To make /h/ no particular position of the tongue and lips is required. With the speech organs in the position of the sound which is to follow /h/, the breath is forced through the partially closed vocal cords and out of the mouth with sufficient strength to make a rushing