

# ENGLISH LINGUISTICS

# 英语语言学

王东波 主编

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# 英 语 语 言 学

## English Linguistics

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## 前 言

语言学是一门包含多学科的学问。虽然它的历史不算太长，但在最近几十年中，对这一学科的研究取得了异乎寻常的发展，它所涵盖的范围也越来越广。对它的研究不乏详尽权威的成果，但对于将其作为必修课的初学者来说，由于其复杂性，过于详尽的叙述往往使他们产生一种一头雾水、不得要领的感觉。出于这种考虑，我们编写了这部《英语语言学》。

该书的编者都有多年英语语言学教学和研究经验。在编写过程中，我们力求做到深入浅出，既讲解英语语言的基础知识，同时，融进最新的研究成果；既让学习者掌握英语语言学的发展脉络，又让他们了解到本学科最新的发展。

本书适用于英语专业本、专科生，致力于考研的自学者和教师进修人员。

本书共分为 15 个单元，编写分工如下：

王东波：第一章；

陈艳：第二章；

仇伟：第三章；

陈朝霞：第四章；

祝英玉：第五、八、九章；

韩明现：第六、七、十一、十四章；

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刘爱华：第十、十二章；

梁承铎：第十三章；

徐庆利：第十五章。

由于作者水平所限，不当之处在所难免，诚望读者指正。

编 者

2003 年 8 月

# Contents

## Unit 1 The Origin of and Design Features of Language

..... (1)

1.1 The Origin of Language ..... (1)

1.2 The Design Features of Language ..... (5)

## Unit 2 The Nature of Linguistics ..... (11)

2.1 Definition of Linguistics ..... (11)

2.2 Some Basic Distinctions in Linguistics ..... (12)

2.3 Major Branches of General Linguistics ..... (22)

2.4 Application of Linguistics ..... (26)

2.5 The Data of Linguistics ..... (38)

## Unit 3 Major Modern Schools of Linguistics ..... (43)

3.1 Introduction ..... (43)

3.2 The Prague School ..... (46)

3.3 Structuralism and American Structuralism ..... (50)

3.4 Transformational-Generative Linguistics ..... (55)

3.5 Other Current Theories ..... (63)

3.6 Earlier Post-structuralist Theories ..... (71)

<b>Unit 4 The History of English .....</b>	<b>(76)</b>
4.1 Introduction .....	(76)
4.2 Ancestry of English .....	(78)
4.3 Old English .....	(79)
4.4 Middle English .....	(84)
4.5 Early Modern English (1500~1650) .....	(90)
4.6 Late Modern English (1650~1800) .....	(94)
4.7 Present-day English (1800~) .....	(96)
<b>Unit 5 Phonetics .....</b>	<b>(101)</b>
5.1 The Phonic Medium of Language .....	(101)
5.2 What Is Phonetics? .....	(102)
5.3 The Speech Organs .....	(103)
5.4 Consonants .....	(106)
5.5 Vowels .....	(111)
5.6 Transcription of Speech Sounds .....	(114)
<b>Unit 6 Phonology .....</b>	<b>(117)</b>
6.1 Definition .....	(117)
6.2 Phonemes and Allophones .....	(118)
6.3 Recognition of a Phoneme .....	(119)
6.4 Sounds Distribution .....	(119)
6.5 Phonological Rules .....	(121)
6.6 Suprasegmental Phonemes .....	(124)
<b>Unit 7 Morphology .....</b>	<b>(129)</b>
7.1 Definition .....	(129)



---

7.2	Internal Structure of Words .....	(129)
7.3	Word Formation Rules .....	(135)
<b>Unit 8</b>	<b>Syntax .....</b>	<b>(141)</b>
8.1	Definition .....	(141)
8.2	The Traditional Approach .....	(142)
8.3	The Structural Approach .....	(148)
8.4	The Transformational-Generative Approach .....	(158)
<b>Unit 9</b>	<b>Introduction to Three Major Schools of Grammar</b> <b>(Traditional, Structural, TG ) .....</b>	<b>(165)</b>
9.1	Traditional Grammar .....	(165)
9.2	American Structuralism .....	(170)
9.3	Transformational-Generative Grammar .....	(175)
<b>Unit 10</b>	<b>Semantics .....</b>	<b>(189)</b>
10.1	Definition .....	(189)
10.2	Some Views on "Meaning" .....	(190)
10.3	Types of Meaning .....	(198)
10.4	Word Meaning .....	(199)
10.5	Sense Relations between Sentences .....	(210)
<b>Unit 11</b>	<b>Pragmatics .....</b>	<b>(218)</b>
11.1	Definition .....	(218)
11.2	Deictics .....	(219)
11.3	Speech Act Theory .....	(220)



11.4	The Cooperative Principle .....	(225)
11.5	The Politeness Principle .....	(228)
<b>Unit 12</b>	<b>Stylistics</b> .....	<b>(232)</b>
12.1	Introduction .....	(232)
12.2	The Concept of "Style" .....	(236)
12.3	Levels of Style .....	(241)
12.4	Phonological Features and Style .....	(242)
12.5	Graphological Features and Style .....	(248)
12.6	Syntactic Features and Style .....	(251)
12.7	Lexical Features and Style .....	(256)
<b>Unit 13</b>	<b>Second Language Acquisition</b> .....	<b>(261)</b>
13.1	Definition .....	(261)
13.2	Schools of Thought Concerning First Language Acquisition .....	(261)
13.3	Stages in Child Language Acquisition .....	(264)
13.4	More about Stages in Child Language Acquisition .....	(266)
13.5	Interlanguage .....	(268)
13.6	Error Analysis .....	(269)
13.7	Learning Strategies .....	(271)
<b>Unit 14</b>	<b>Linguistics and Foreign Language Teaching</b> .....	<b>(275)</b>
14.1	Traditional Grammar and Its Influence on Foreign Language Teaching .....	(275)
14.2	Modern Linguistic Theories and Their Influence on Language Teaching .....	(276)

---

14.3	Communicative Competence .....	(279)
14.4	Syllabus .....	(280)
14.5	Testing .....	(285)
<b>Unit 15</b>	<b>Language as Communication .....</b>	<b>(288)</b>
15.1	Introduction .....	(288)
15.2	Function of Language .....	(289)
15.3	Language as a Human Communication System .....	(292)
15.4	Other Communication Systems .....	(311)
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>(313)</b>

## **Unit 1 The Origin and Design Features of Language**

For long, the origin of language has held the fascination of linguists. It has always been an intriguing task to trace it as some scientists say that language is the very thing that makes us human. Nevertheless, people have always speculated upon where language came from; consequently, we have with us today various theories and speculations, some rather ridiculous, others with more than a trace of credibility to them.

Just as it is difficult to trace the origin of language, it is hard to give a comprehensive description of the natures of it. When asked the question “what is language?”, we might think it a piece of cake to give an answer. On the contrary, it is almost impossible to give a complete definition of language without further inquiry, for it can be defined in various ways depending on the features one wishes to emphasize.

### **1. 1 The Origin of Language**

According to the Bible: “In the beginning was the Word”.

According to the Talmud: "God created the world by a Word, instantaneously, without toil or pains". God created Adam and speech simultaneously, for God spoke with Adam and Adam answered him. The language they were said to have spoken was Hebrew.

The Egyptians considered themselves to have the oldest civilization and asserted that the original human language was Egyptian. This assumption was checked out at least once, according to the historian Herodotus. A 17<sup>th</sup> B. C. Egyptian ruler named Psammetichus believed that babies, if left alone, would grow up speaking "the" original language. Curiosity stimulated the king to try an experiment. He had two babies taken from an ordinary family and given them to a shepherd to raise. He ordered that not a word be spoken to the babies and the shepherd tend only to their needs. When they were two years old, the little ones one day abruptly said to the shepherd "Becos", which meant "bread" in Phrygian. Phrygian was thus announced to be the original language.

The Greeks claimed that at some ancient time there was a "legislator" who gave the correct, natural name to everything. Evidence can be found in Socrates' dialogue with Plato:

not every man is able to give a name, but only a maker of names; and this is the legislator, who of all skilled artisan in the world is the rarest ...

Numerous other theories have been advanced and many of them have been given picturesque names. They are:

The *bow-wow* theory: primitive words were imitative of sounds: for example, man copied the barking of dogs and ob-

tained a word which meant "dog" or "bark".

The *pooh-pooh* theory: language is derived from instinctive cries called forth by intense emotion.

The *ding-dong* theory: every substance has a natural resonance when struck; when man is struck by an impression (for instance, the sight of a sheep), he will emit the appropriate vocal resonance, that is, the word "sheep".

The *yo-he-ho* theory: under strong physical effort, man will emit noises from his vocal tract; these became language, so the first words will mean "heave" or "haul".

The *ta-ta* theory: man makes gestures appropriate to certain situations, for example, waving when taking leave; the tongue may duplicate the manual gesture, and striking the roof of the mouth, will utter the sound ta-ta.

The *ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay* theory: language arose from ritual dance and incantation.

Vivid as these speculations are, it is impossible to see how they could be proved or disproved. However, one person is worth mentioning. It is Johann Gottfried von Herder, a German philosopher, critic and clergyman. With the publication of his *On the Origin of Language* in 1772, speculation on the origin of language moved from the realm of fancy and entered what is called the "organic phase" in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Herder denied that language is the direct gift of God, thinking it too imperfect to be so. God, to be sure, gave man the impulse to speak, but man used this impulse in his own way. He observed recurring phenomena and named them; the sense of hearing was the first to be used; then followed names for things



recognized by other senses. Thus a simple vocabulary arose, confined to observable things. In time, as man's ability to think developed, more and more diversified words and complex grammatical categories appeared. This is an advance on, at least the divine origin theory, since Herder postulates a parallel development of the powers to speak and to think, so in a sense he envisages a changing, evolving mankind.

William C. Stokoe proposes a new kind of interpretation of language origin; language may have begun with gestural expression. Instrumental manual actions may have been transformed into symbolic gestures, and vision would have been the key of language evolution; man could have begun to represent the world they saw (namely, things and actions) by their own means. Vision would have been the key for syntax to slowly come up because of its great capability of parallel processing.

From the above brief introduction, we can see that the origin of language is a rather controversial topic, and the proposed theories are quite untestable. As is a fact, when the Linguistic Society of Paris was founded in 1866, its rules forbade the discussion of the origin of language, although this did not discourage speculation. Recently, more and more light has been cast on the problem by the consideration of the anatomical and psychological attributes necessary for the production of human language and of the differences between animal communication and human language. These differences seem to constitute a developmental chasm as great as that which separates animals from plants. At present, the safest thing that can be said is that it is impossible to conceive of mankind existing without language, that is, lan-

guage developed when man himself developed

## **1. 2 The Design Features of Language**

Everyone might think he has a fairly clear idea of what language is. He might say language is a means of communication. However, other species outside human being also communicate, for example, dogs by barking, birds by singing. Are the barks of dogs and singings of birds languages?

As Bertrand Russell once observed: "No matter how eloquently a dog may bark, he cannot tell you that his parents were poor but honest". This is to say, as is generally agreed, that language is an intrinsic aspect of human inheritance. But what makes human language so advantageous over animal "languages", so complicated and flexible, so unrestrained by the immediate context and so capable of creating new meanings, in a word, so distinctive from "languages" used by other species? The features that define our human language, the design features, are what we are to discuss.

### **1. 2. 1 A System of Communication**

By system, we mean the preconceived meaningful order and arrangement that we have to adhere to when communicate. Otherwise, our utterances could not achieve the purpose of communication at all. All languages have systems. This system has a framework of ideas built up within it, so that every utterance we make communicates these ideas to the listener, who in turn responds by framing the same ideas as the speaker has framed.

It goes without saying that the communicative function of language deserves prime emphases. It is true that humans use language for other purposes. The stock greetings and small talk exchanges by acquaintances serve to reinforce social ties rather than communicate vital information. Songs and rhymes are a pleasant form of motor activity, enjoyable apart from any potential communicative function. But these are certainly peripheral uses of language. The central purpose of language is communication.

### 1. 2. 2 Arbitrariness

Why do we call a “table” a “table” instead of a “horse”? Why do we call a “房子” a “房子” instead of a “马”? The widely accepted meaning of this feature discussed by Saussure first refers to the fact that the forms of linguistic signs bear no natural resemblance to their meaning. Saussure’s initial definition of the principle of arbitrariness and its relationship to the sign goes as follows:

The link unifying signifier and signified is arbitrary or, even more, since we understand by the sign the total result of the association of a signifier with the signified, we can say more simply: the linguistic sign is arbitrary.

Saussure’s definition simply means that the linguistic signs used in language are employed as arbitrary symbols. That is, the meaningful values assumed by linguistic signs in language are arbitrarily fixed.

Arbitrariness does not exist at lexical level alone, it also exists at syntactic level, though to a lesser degree. For example:

I usually get up at six. \* I at six usually get up.

我通常在六点起床。\* 我六点起床通常。

However, to say that linguistic signs are arbitrary in this sense is not to deny that they can be used in combination to onomatopoeic effect, that is to say where, to use Alexander Pope's words, "the sound must seem an echo to the sense". To illustrate this, Widdowson cites a line from Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*:

The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Let's see another example in Chinese, lines from Mao Zedong's poem:

小小寰球，有几个苍蝇碰壁。嗡嗡叫，几声凄厉，几声抽泣。

Clearly, the language here is not arbitrarily chosen; it in some way represents the sound. But the effect can only be recognized if we know what the words mean; it does not arise simply from what they sound like. This is even true of the apparently onomatopoeic "murmurous" and "嗡嗡". For if the word/characters express a natural connection, with the sounds alone evoking what they denote, then why do the similar-sounding word/characters "murderous"/"轰轰" not do so as well? It would seem to be the case in fact that it is only when we know the meaning that we infer that the form is appropriate.

### 1. 2. 3 Duality

A third design feature, one closely related to the second, arbitrariness, is known as duality. By duality, we mean the two levels of structure on which human language operates. At one level are elements which have no meaning in themselves but