

社科文献论丛第8辑 / 曹剑南主编

英语 语言学概论

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戴瑞亮 张建科 安昌光 褚世峰◎编著

线装书局

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前 言

现代语言学是一门只有一百多年历史的学科。虽然它的历史不算太长，但研究成果却十分丰富。由于语言学学派众多，理论繁杂，新概念、新术语丛出不穷，且所述内容比较抽象，所以许多初涉此领域的学习者都感到难以对其理出头绪，从而对语言学习 and 研究有畏难情绪。出于帮助语言学习者的目的，我们编写了这本《英语语言学概论》。我们的宗旨是尽量用通俗易懂的语言去介绍深奥的概念和理论，让学习者在轻松之中去领略语言学王国的各种奥秘。

本书内容充实，既包括了语言学基础知识，又反映了语言学理论的新发展。全书共分十一章。第一章：语言与语言学；第二章：语音学与音系学；第三章：形态学；第四章：句法学；第五章：语义学；第六章：语用学；第七章：语言变化；第八章：语言和社会；第九章：语言与心理；第十章：第二语言习得；第十一章：语言、思维与文化。第一、二、五、六、七、十章由戴瑞亮执笔，三、四章由张建科执笔，八、九章由安昌光执笔，十一章由褚世峰执笔，最后由戴瑞亮审订定稿。

在本书编写过程中，我们参考了大量的语言学文献资料，对引用的地方书末都一一注明了出处。引用材料较多的著作有：Frank Parker & Kathryn Riley (1994), Leroto Todd (1994), George Yule (1996), Adrian Akmajian et al (1993), Jean Aitchison (1992), 胡壮麟 (2001), 戴炜栋 (2002), 刘润清 (2003)。

在此，编者对有关作者一并表示感谢。

由于编者水平有限，学识浅薄，虽几经努力，书中错误仍在所难免，诚望读者批评指正。

编著者

2008 年 5 月

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Chapter 1 Language and Linguistics

1. 1 What is language?

1. 1. 1 Definitions of language

What is language? This may at first sound like a naive and simple question. Yet to this extremely familiar, everyday phenomenon, it is difficult to give a satisfactory definition. Some people probably will say “language is a tool for human communication”. Far from a definition, this only tells us what language does, or what it is used for, i. e. its function. Alternatively, one might say “language is a set of rules.” Then this tells nothing about its functions, and there are actually other systems that are also rule-governed.

Modern linguists have proposed various definitions of language, some of them are quoted below:

“Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.” (Sapir, 1921)

Language is “the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols.” (Hall, 1968)

“From now on I will consider language to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.” (Chomsky, 1957)

Each of these definitions has its own special emphasis, and is not totally free from limitations. However, there are some important characteristics of human language linguists have agreed on; these are embraced in the following generally accepted definition:

Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication.

Short as it is, this definition has captured the main features of language. First of all, language is a system, i. e. , elements of language are combined according to rules. This explains why “iblk” is not a possible sound combination in English, and also why “Been he wounded has” is not a grammatically acceptable sentence in English.

Second, language is arbitrary in the sense that there is no intrinsic connection between a linguistic symbol and what the symbol stands for, for instance, between the word “pen” and the thing we write with. The fact that different languages have different words for the same object is a good illustration of the arbitrary nature of language. This also explains the symbolic nature of language: words are just symbols; they are associated with objects, actions, ideas, etc. by convention. This conventional nature of language is well illustrated by a famous quotation from Shakespeare’s play “Romeo and Juliet”: “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

Third, language is vocal because the primary medium for all languages is sound. All evidence points to the fact that writing

systems came into being much later than the spoken forms and that they are only attempts to capture sounds and meaning on paper. The fact that children acquire spoken language before they can read or write also indicates that language is primarily vocal.

The term “human” in the definition is meant to specify that language is human-specific, i. e. , it is very different from the communication systems other forms of life possess, such as bird songs and bee dances.

1. 1. 2 The design features of human language

Philosophers, psychologists and linguists commonly make the point that it is the possession of language which most clearly distinguishes man from other animals. But how can language, or more exactly, human language, be distinguished from other systems of animal communication? A useful approach was pioneered by the American linguist Charles Hockett, who has pointed out that human language has certain design features that no system of animal communication possesses. He specified twelve design features, six of which will be discussed here.

1. 1. 2. 1 Displacement

Most animals can communicate about things in the immediate environment only. For example, when your pet cat comes home after spending a night in the back alleys and stands at your feet calling meow, you are likely to understand this message as relating to that immediate time and place. If you ask the cat where it was the night before and what it was up to, you may get the same meow response. Animal calls are mainly uttered in response to immediate changes of situation. Calls or cries are produced, say,

in contact of food, in presence of danger or in pain. Once the danger or pain is over, calls are stopped. It seems that animal communication is almost exclusively designed for this moment, here and now. It cannot effectively be used to relate events which are far removed in time and place.

Human language-users, by contrast, are perfectly capable of communicating about things that are absent as easily as about things that are present. For instance, if someone says *I was a-fraid*, it is not necessary that the speaker still be afraid. In other words, language can be used to refer to things which are not present; real or imagined matters in the past, present, or future or in far-away places. This property of human language is called **displacement**. It provides speakers with an opportunity to talk about a wide range of things, free from the barriers caused by remoteness in time and place.

However, it has been proposed that bee communication does have the property of displacement. For example, when a worker bee finds a source of nectar and returns to the hive, it can perform a complex dance routine to communicate to the other bees the location of this nectar. Depending on the type of dance, round dance for nearby and tail-wagging dance for farther away, and how far, the other bees can work out where this newly discovered feast can be found. This ability of the bee to indicate a location some distance away must mean that bee communication has, at least, some degree of displacement as a feature. However, bee communication has displacement in an extremely limited form; for the bees must communicate about the food immediately on returning to the hive. They do not dance about the food they disco-

vered last month nor do they speculate about future discoveries.

The factors involved in the property of displacement, as it is manifested in human language, are much more comprehensive than the communication of a single location. It enables us to talk about things and places whose existence we cannot even be sure of. We can refer to mythical creatures, fairies, angels, and recently invented characters such as Superman. It is the property of displacement which allows the human, unlike any other creature, to create fiction and to describe possible future worlds.

1. 1. 2. 2 Arbitrariness

By “language is arbitrary”, we mean that there is no logical or intrinsic connection between a particular sound and the meaning it is associated with. For example, there is no reason why English should use the sounds /kæt/ to refer to the animal *cat*, and Chinese should use the sounds *mao* to refer to the same animal. The relationship between the sounds and their meaning is quite “accidental” or “conventional”. The fact that the two languages use different sequences of sound to describe the same animal shows that there is no reason why a certain object or action must be associated with a certain sound.

However, this relationship does not give the speaker of a language the freedom to choose any sounds he likes to refer to things, for the relationship must be conventional. People speaking the same language must use the same sets of sounds to refer to the same thing. Otherwise there would be little communication if each speaker chose his own sounds to express anything he could think of.

There are, of course, some words in language which have