

# LINGUISTIC INTERLUDES

by

Eugene A. Nida, Ph.D.

Summer Institute of Linguistics, Inc.  
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## PREFACE

These Linguistic Interludes represent a rather radical departure from the more conventional methods of presenting linguistics. They are designed to introduce the beginning student or layman to (1) the conflicting attitudes toward linguistics, (2) the fundamental principles of the descriptive linguistic approach, (3) elementary background of historical and comparative methodology, (4) the history of linguistic study, and (5) the relationship of linguistics to human culture in general.

The available books which deal with the study of language are often too technical and too detailed for the beginning student. He cannot see the forest because of the trees. Furthermore, such books usually do not present the various viewpoints, so that the student can see the more recent developments in contrast with what he has learned in the conventional "grammar" education.

The style and method of presentation has been developed so as to present (1) the conflicting ideas about language, (2) the lines of argumentation and steps in the analysis of various problems which the students may be able to follow easily, and (3) a comparatively pleasant means of introduction to the background material of linguistics, a study which one often finds dull and uninteresting. Accordingly, the writer has put all the material into the mouths of interlocutors, who have been chosen as representing the different types of amateur and professional attitudes toward descriptive linguistics, though some characters are admitted drawn out of proportion so as to make any disparagement less bitter by very virtue of the caricature.

This volume is a complete revision of the 1944 edition, with the deletion of one chapter and the addition of another. It is hoped that the present edition will be faster moving in dramatic detail, richer in illustrative material, and more comprehensive in scope.

Illustrative material for these dialogues has been drawn from research work conducted by the writer and various of his colleagues of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, and from the following books and articles:

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- Voegelin, C. F., and M. E. Ellinghausen, "Turkish Structure," Journal of the American Oriental Society, vol. 63, no. 1 (1943), pp. 34-65.

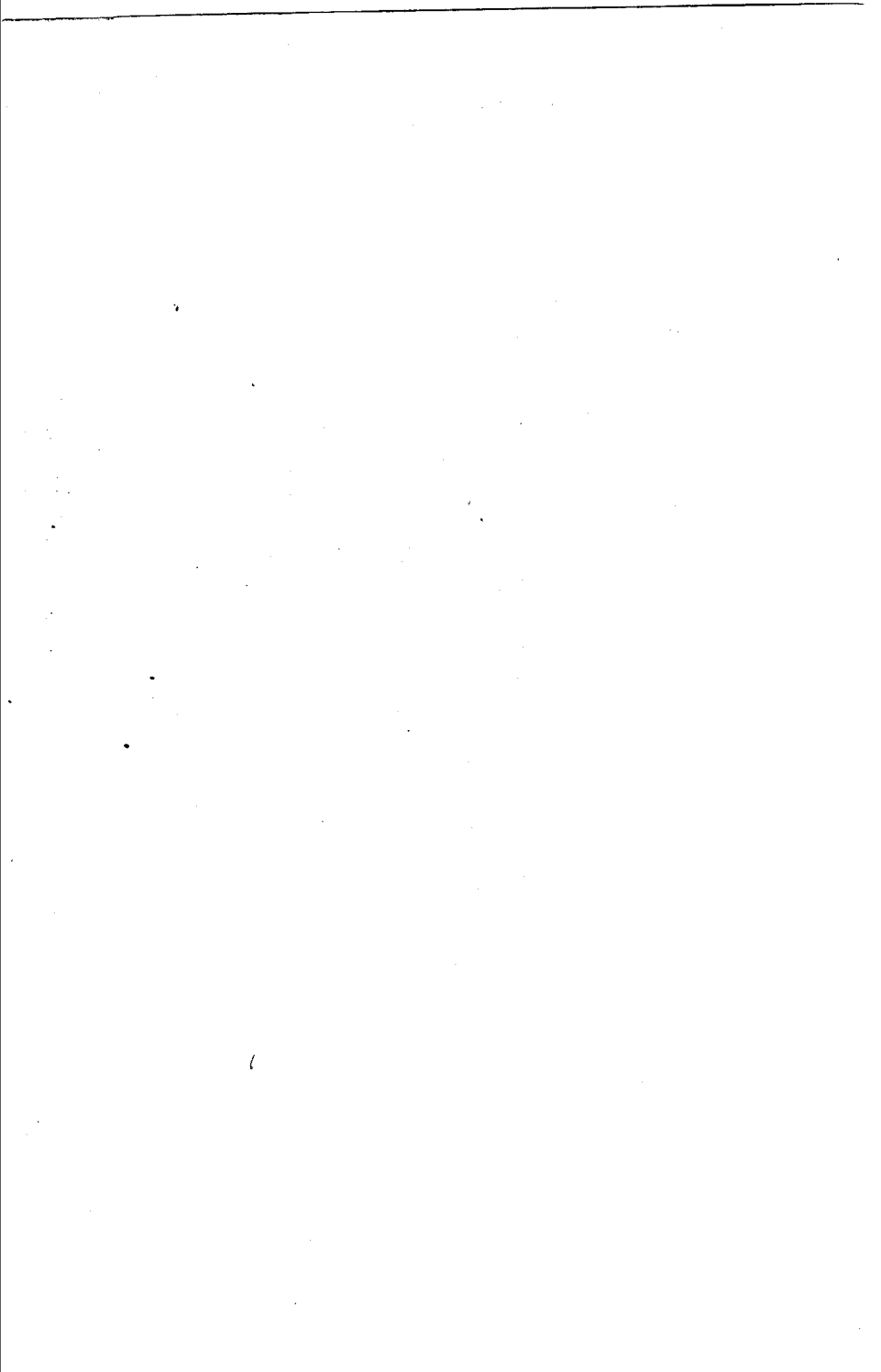
My wife's suggestions have been largely responsible for this "down-to-earth" presentation of linguistics.

New York  
March, 1947

Eugene A. Nida

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Interlude 1

CLASH IN THE CO-OP

Bill Downing: Ann, this is Dr. Thompson, whom I heard last night discussing morphemes and phonemes. Dr. Thompson, this is my friend Ann Ferrell.

Dr. Thompson: How do you do, Miss Ferrell?

Ann Ferrell: I am so glad to meet you, Dr. Thompson. Bill has been raving about linguistics all morning.

Dr. Thompson: I'm glad to hear that the lecture seems to have impressed at least one person.

Ann Ferrell: Indeed it has! Do sit down and join us, Dr. Thompson.

Dr. Thompson: Gladly. Thank you.

Bill Downing: What I like best about this technique you presented last night is that it is so new and different.

Dr. Thompson: Well, in some ways that is the case, but actually it is rather old stuff.

Bill Downing: What do you mean? We've certainly never received it from any of the other profs here at the university.

Dr. Thompson: It may seem strange, but without doubt the finest pieces of descriptive work were done by Sanskrit grammarians before the time of Christ.

Bill Downing: Then why haven't we been hearing about these descriptive methods before now?

Dr. Thompson: Most linguists of the past century were too much taken up by the study of the history of European languages to bother very much with describing languages. Then, too, the rhetoricians, who have had a rather heavy incubus around their necks in the form of the Latin and Greek grammatical apparatus, have been rather slow to introduce new methods into the study of languages.



Ann Ferrell: You are evidently quite opposed to the classical view of grammar. You should have a chance to meet Dr. Horatio Zilch. He is the principal protagonist among the old-school grammarians here.

Dr. Thompson: Yes. Someone mentioned Dr. Zilch to me yesterday.

Bill Downings: I presume that I might as well tell you that in his office this morning he delivered some rather strong bombast, against you and the descriptive linguists. A friend of mine, Charles Morgan, told me last hour about it. I can well believe it, for I used to take rhetoric and grammar from "Old Horatio."

Dr. Thompson: I'm glad to hear he's talking about the course. It doesn't make much difference what is said. If people can be made curious, we'll have a good class of curiosity-seekers. Actually, being curious is the best foundation for scholarship. Eternal curiosity and knowledge of how to satisfy that curiosity make a research person. I do hope that I can meet Dr. Zilch.

Bill Downings: You may be assured that Dr. Zilch is anxious to meet you, for he heard you last night. Dr. Zilch often comes into the co-op here for tea about this time in the afternoon. I'll keep an eye open for him.

Ann Ferrell: Dr. Thompson, Bill told me that in the course you are going to use native speakers of various aboriginal languages. Why do you do that, for goodness sakes?

Dr. Thompson: That is a rather big question. However, have you ever heard that if one wants to study oneself, the best thing is to look at others; and vice versa, when one wants to study others, one must look at oneself. If we look at languages which have utterly different structures, we are likely to get rid of some of the preconceived ideas that we have had about languages because we have known only English or perhaps one or two other more or less related languages.

Ann Ferrell: How different can these aboriginal languages be?

Dr. Thompson: They can be different in almost any and every detail. But here is a specific example. Some languages do not have words which correspond in the function of the grammar to our adjectives.

Ann Ferrell: How would they ever say the good man?

Dr. Thompson: The speakers of such languages would say 'the man goods,' for they express by verbs what we express by adjectives.

Bill Downing: One minute, Dr. Thompson. Dr. Zilch just came in. Would you like to have him join us?

Dr. Thompson: By all means.

Bill Downing: He's a rather opinionated person, as I told you.

Dr. Thompson: That's fine. I'd rather know people who have wrong ideas than those who have no ideas at all. But which one of the men standing by the counter is he? I may perhaps have met him at the faculty meeting, but I do not remember.

Bill Downing: Dr. Zilch is the rather large, heavy-set man, with the black homburg hat, gold-headed cane over his arm, glasses tied to a ribbon, and that big Phi Beta Kappa key that hangs like a medal of the Legion of Honor.

Dr. Thompson: Oh yes. I do recognize him.

Bill Downing: I'll step over and invite him to drink his tea with us.

Dr. Thompson: Good.

[Bill Downing goes to get Dr. Zilch.]

Ann Ferrell: Dr. Zilch is really a very fine old fellow. His ideas are rather conventional and authoritative. That is especially hard for Bill to swallow, but "Old Horatio," as we call him behind his back, is really a pretty good "Joe."

Dr. Thompson: I'm sure I shall like him.

[Bill Downing returns with Dr. Zilch.]

Bill Downing: Dr. Zilch, this is Dr. Thompson, and I'm sure you know Ann Ferrell.

Dr. Zilch: How do you do, Ann? I'm delighted to see you. And Dr. Thompson, this is indeed a pleasure to meet you again. I have been looking forward to having some brief opportunity to chat with you. There are so many items that I want to take up with you, having heard your lecture last night; but first, do explain what you said about bringing in speakers of primitive languages for the study of linguistics. What

can these simple natives contribute to a university?

Dr. Thompson: Perhaps your difficulty lies in the fact that you consider the so-called primitive aboriginals as being essentially simple, naïve, and barren as regards cultural achievements. This may be somewhat the fault of calling them "primitive peoples." It would be better to speak of such people and languages as being non-literate. In terms of cultural achievements and adaptation to human needs, these peoples may have surpassed us.

Dr. Zilch: Pure unadulterated primitivism! That's all! What can they show us?

Dr. Thompson: Your reactions are not strange. Miss Ferrell was asking me about this aspect of the course before you joined us. Perhaps I could say that the main purpose of such work with aboriginal languages is to obtain a fresh approach.

Dr. Zilch: But by aboriginal languages, you mean unwritten ones!

Dr. Thompson: That's right. Ones which are not regularly written by the natives themselves.

Dr. Zilch: That means then that there is no literature, no poetry, drama, stories, not a Shakespeare or a Demosthenes in the crowd. Don't you feel, Dr. Thompson, that you are wasting precious years of students' time, having them study languages that have no recognized literary tradition?

Dr. Thompson: That may very well seem to be the case. But there are two factors involved. First, linguistics is not the study of literature. That is technically philology. Linguistics deals simply with language, any type of language, and anyone's language.

Dr. Zilch: But why not make your study the analysis of noble speech and language, rather than a series of some inarticulate aboriginal grunts?

Dr. Thompson: We'll come to that in a moment. However, first be assured that I agree most heartily in the study of literary productions. They are very worthwhile. But Dr. Zilch, don't you believe that there is value in studying something which society uses as much as language, something without which we could have absolutely no organized society and culture?

- Dr. Zilch: I suppose that one is justified in the study of such matters as the economics of a people, but for me that is far too banal.
- Dr. Thompson: Well, linguistics is in some degree more fundamental than economics. Without language such exchange as we know would not exist. Language is a vital part of all our living. In some ways there is a distinct parallelism between economics and descriptive linguistics. If we are going to describe the economic life of a people, we have to consider Joe Zlaket, who runs the corner fruit-stand, as well as the multimillionaire. Similarly, if we are going to describe the language of a people, we must be concerned with Joe Zlaket's speech, just as well as Shakespeare's. You could not obtain a balanced picture of the economic life of the United States by analyzing only the business dealings of the Rockefeller family, any more than one can obtain an accurate picture of the function of a language in society by limiting research to Shakespeare. I dare say, too, that just as we know better the significance of the Rockefeller dealings after studying the economic life of the little business man, so we can even bring some light to bear on the language of the literary masters by knowing the linguistic usage of the "butchers, the bakers, and the candlestick-makers."
- Dr. Zilch: I admit that you descriptive linguists seem to have some purpose in what you are doing, and if you wish to waste your time studying languages with a few hundred words and trying to describe how the natives make out their meaning with grunts and gesticulation, that is all right with me. I do hope, however, that you do not play the Pied Piper here in the university and lead aside our really serious students.
- Dr. Thompson: You have made out quite a case against me, haven't you, Dr. Zilch? Perhaps descriptive linguists are not as bad as you have depicted them. The impression that people with a primitive material culture...
- Dr. Zilch: There you go again, speaking exactly as an anthropologist would.
- Dr. Thompson: Is speaking like an anthropologist actually as bad as all that? He simply studies all types of people, rather than a select few as in the case of the biographer or the historian. It is true, however, that we descriptive linguists and the anthropologists have much in common.
- Dr. Zilch: That's right--primitivism.

Dr. Thompson: Well, be that as it may, let's get back to our primitives. The impression which you have about their limited vocabulary and almost awkwardly simple grammar is quite a universal conception. Actual investigation soon dispels this idea. Consider this one word in the San Blas language of Panama, ampo'ittimalasarsq'gana. It means 'the two of us just about hit them, but we did not.' What we say in twelve words in English, the San Blas Indians may say in one.

Dr. Zilch: And is that just one word?

Dr. Thompson: In a somewhat similar way as we define predes-  
tination as one word. In English pre-, -de-, -stin-, -g-, -i-, and -ion are all meaningless apart from the combination. It is much the same with this San Blas word. The units have their meaning in combination.

Dr. Zilch: What do these various parts mean?

Dr. Thompson: Well, am- indicates first person. It is usually an- except before certain bilabial stop consonants, where it becomes am-. We speak of this m as being assimilated.

Dr. Zilch: That assimilation, I suppose, is the result of the general slovenliness of the speech and the laziness of the people.

Dr. Thompson: Not any more than in English, where the negative prefix in- becomes im- before a word beginning with a bilabial consonant, such as in the word imperfect.

Dr. Zilch: The situation is rather parallel, I must admit. However, what about the rest of the word?

Dr. Thompson: The second unit is -po- which means 'two.'

Dr. Zilch: But does the language use the same am- or an-, whether a singular or plural, for the first person? Am I right in assuming that a pluralizing ending is added to a singular form? How inadequate to make no distinction as between 'I' and 'we'! It would be the same as saying I-two.

Dr. Thompson: In some ways the San Blas is better than the English, for we say you for singular and plural and make no indication whatsoever of a distinction between plural and singular reference.

Dr. Zilch: I have always decried the loss of thou and thee to contrast with ye and you. It's the modern intellectual

laziness that even creeps into English and corrupts it.

Dr. Thompson: We may have a chance to discuss this matter later, but be that as it may, let's examine the San Blas word further. The third unit is -itti-. This is the third person indicator, and the fourth element -sala- pluralizes the third person indicator.

Dr. Zilch: That is evidently parallel to the first person. I presume one would say annala- for 'we.'

Dr. Thompson: You're absolutely right, Dr. Zilch. It wouldn't be any time at all before you would be having a great time with these aboriginal languages.

Dr. Zilch: Perish the thought! But one cannot refrain from pointing out a few analogies. That is what comes from classical training.

Dr. Thompson: Fine! Then perhaps you'll become a student of descriptive linguistics all the more rapidly. The stem of the San Blas word we mentioned is -sargo- which means 'hit.' The -sa- suffix shows the past tense, and the -ng is a reverse. This particle completely changes the meaning. Instead of the 'two of us hit them,' the resultant word means 'the two of us just about hit them but we did not.' The word ampo'ittimalasargo·sana could hardly be called an example of an "awkwardly simple grammar."

Dr. Zilch: It must be admitted that the San Blas put a good deal of meaning into very small insignificant items. This would seem to be very poor judgment on their part in attaching so much meaning to such a small element as the final suffix -na.

Dr. Thompson: You will admit, however, that English leaves a good deal of meaning to be borne by such small, generally unaccented words as not and if.

Dr. Zilch: I must admit that is true. From the type of illustration in the San Blas I would take it for granted that you could perhaps have a paradigm in some of these aboriginal languages even as extensive as in Greek.

Dr. Thompson: You are a little more than right. Actually, with all the possible combinations of grammatical units, this stem -sargo- in San Blas could probably appear in some 10,000 different combinations.

- Dr. Zilch: My word! Is it possible? Imagine the task of a teacher having to teach natives to recite paradigms of 10,000 forms.
- Dr. Thompson: In the first place, no one is ever called upon to teach the native children the 10,000 forms of the verbs. They learn to form words in the same way as English children learn to form complicated sentences. Children can form sentences because they have learned the patterns into which the words fit. In the same way San Blas children can use rather large words, for they learn the system into which the various elements fit. In exactly the same manner as you discovered the pattern for anmala- 'we,' so San Blas natives form their complex words.
- Dr. Zilch: The factor which makes English so remarkable and so easy for people to understand is the crystal-clear word order. English shows orderliness of thinking. I presume that these aboriginal languages throw their words together in almost any fashion that they like or can devise.
- Dr. Thompson: You are quite wrong. This San Blas language has every bit as fixed a word order as we have in English. The subject expression normally occurs first, preceded and followed by various classes of attributives. The object expression follows the subject expression and this in turn may be preceded and followed by various classes of attributives. Third, the attributives of the verb occur, and finally, the verb expression. Following the verb there may occur certain stylistic words indicating whether the sentence is colloquial, oratorical, or poetical.
- Dr. Zilch: This is almost elaborate enough to be considered an actual language.
- Dr. Thompson: It is most emphatically just that.
- Dr. Zilch: You have chosen a very good example, I must concede. I'll have to do some investigating of this subject myself to see what other features these primitive languages are credited with having.
- Dr. Thompson: Good! If your curiosity is aroused, that is all I could ask for, even though you do accuse me of a little misrepresentation.
- Dr. Zilch: However, in connection with these long words, which you intimate these aboriginal languages have, I would like to suggest that there is nothing particularly good about

long words in themselves. The Indo-European languages have always avoided that tendency.

Dr. Thompson: In the first place, aboriginal languages do not all have long words. Aboriginal languages have all types of words. But as for Indo-European languages always avoiding long words, I'm not so sure. Consider the Gothic word habaldedeins, which is equivalent to Modern English had.

Dr. Zilch: Yes. That is exactly the point I have inferred. Consider that English by short words is getting rid of such excess baggage, and in doing so overcoming some abortive tendencies in the history of the Germanic languages.

Dr. Thompson: This doesn't sound the same as your former argument about the aboriginal language attaching so much meaning to small units. However, even in the case of English, though we do have some short words, we still say unattractive when we could possibly get along with ugly.

Dr. Zilch: Possibly, Dr. Thompson. But tell me, is there any system to the inflection of these languages which is comparable to the excellency of the Greek noun?

Dr. Thompson: That can possibly be indicated best by giving you a paradigm in the Quechua language. A few of the possible forms are:

t'ika	'flower'
t'ikay	'my flower'
t'ikaykuna	'my flowers'
t'ikaykunaman	'to my flowers'
t'ikaykunamanta	'of my flowers'
t'ikaykunamantapacha	'from my flowers'
t'ikaykunamantapachalla	'from my flowers only'
t'ikaykunamantapachallapis	'also from my flowers only'

Dr. Zilch: Indeed, it is a rather interesting type of paradigm. Very typical, indeed, isn't it, of the agglutinative languages, where you keep on adding one element after another? I presume that you teach your students the gradual evolution of languages from the monosyllabic isolating languages such as



Chinese, through the agglutinative stage as in the Polynesian, Quechua, and San Blas, finally to the perfection of the inflected type, such as the Indo-European. I remember that was what we learned concerning your so-called descriptive linguistics when I was a student at Harvard.

- Dr. Thompson: I fear then that you haven't been studying any descriptive linguistics since that time, for such ideas are very much out of vogue today.
- Dr. Zilch: Is it possible? Why, I have been teaching that from my notes for many years.
- Dr. Thompson: It is advisable at times to revise notes, you know. However, such ideas are quite wrong about the evolution of language from the monosyllabic languages through the agglutinative stage and finally to the inflected languages such as Greek and Latin. Moreover, such speculation is decidedly not descriptive. The historical and comparative enthusiasts of the past generation have been responsible for such errors in interpretation of information, not the descriptive linguists.
- Dr. Zilch: The theory seems very plausible and cogent.
- Dr. Thompson: Superficially it does seem so. One of the hits in the entire idea is the fact that Chinese has been found to be the result of considerable change in itself. Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family of languages, and these languages at one time were polysyllabic and inflected, even as the research of Karlgren and others has so admirably demonstrated.
- Dr. Zilch: Is it possible?
- Dr. Thompson: Moreover, it is strange for you to assume that the Chinese should represent the most "primitive" language. Certainly there is no correlation between this and primitivism of culture that you have mentioned before.
- Dr. Zilch: But do you not find in general that the primitives of the world have this second type of language, namely, agglutinative?
- Dr. Thompson: It is true that a great percentage of primitive people of the world have agglutinative languages. It is also true that a similar percentage of all the languages of the world are agglutinative. However, many so-called primitives have inflected languages. There is surely no hard-and-fast correlation in this regard. Moreover, it is unwise to attempt