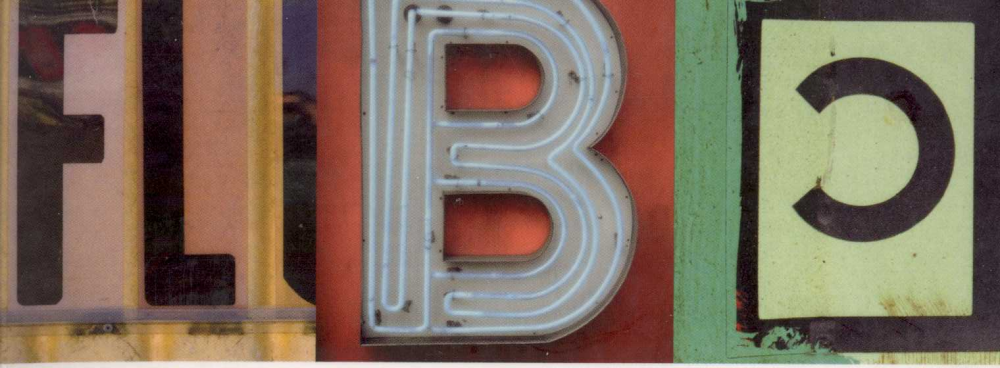

Understanding **Language**

Elizabeth Grace Winkler

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A BASIC COURSE IN LINGUISTICS

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Figure 2.1 Round Dance, Figure 2.2 Wagging Dance, and Figure 2.3 Sickle Dance
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Figure 4.1 Articulators, Figure 4.2 Sagittal Sections: Velum raised and Figure 4.3 Sagittal Sections: Velum lowered
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Preface

Our lives are filled with language. We use it to describe the world around us, to negotiate our way through the complex situations and relationships of our lives, and for the most simple ones as well. In addition, the way we use language defines us to the people around us. Language is not just a tool for communication but an intrinsic aspect of our identity. In fact, Robert LePage and André Tabouret-Keller call every communication event an 'act of identity'. Even though language is so significant in our lives, and we quite easily make use of it hundreds of times every day, most people are not aware of the incredible complexity of all the systems that make up our communication system. The goal of this text is to explore all the fascinating subsystems of language as well as how we make use of them.

Over the past decade, there has been a trend at many universities to offer 'General Education' classes, which are replacing traditional elective classes taken in many departments. These classes are usually multidisciplinary in nature, covering areas of knowledge that universities have identified as critical to the overall education of university students. Because an important function of the university is to prepare students to understand the global society in which we live, many departments of linguistics have been asked to construct courses in the basic understanding of language and its functions across cultures. These classes are often large lecture classes offered to first-year students who are most likely being exposed to the concepts of linguistics for the first time. Students in these classes need materials that provide not only an understanding of the range of linguistic topics, but materials that are preparatory in nature.

Because the needs of students in the general education courses are more interdisciplinary, there is a need for a text that provides a broad-based treatment of both theoretical and applied linguistics. This text, while providing a solid coverage of the theoretical systems of language, provides more coverage than traditional textbooks of language use in our normal lives with many real-life examples to show how theory is played out in real life. Popular culture is also analysed for linguistic content. For example, in any episode of *The Simpsons* television show, there are many examples of language play and manipulation of our language skills which create a great deal of linguistic-based humour. This is not just the simple use of sarcasm or puns to get a laugh, but a profound manipulation of the syntax, morphology and phonetics of the English language.

The text begins with chapters designed to sort out what language is, and just as importantly what it is not, and how it is that all humans acquire their mother tongue so well. Then, I have provided a basic overview of the major structural areas of linguistics including the systems

we use to create sound, grammar and meaning. The final third of the book looks at how individuals and groups make use of language in their daily lives. The chapters explore how gender, race and ethnicity, among other characteristics of human communities, affect not just what we say but how we say it. More importantly, the chapters look at how we use language to negotiate our own identities within different communities or contexts.

The text provides a broad coverage of many complex areas of the field of linguistics. Its goal is to provide students with an awareness of human language through brief and clear explanations accompanied by real-life examples and illustrative exercises to help draw attention to the diverse ways in which language impacts our daily lives and the societies in which we live.

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The reviewers for this text provided me with excellent commentaries, suggestions and criticisms, and each reminded me that their fields had much more to offer than I necessarily covered in this brief treatment of their specialties. They provided more guidance than I could have wished for. That being said, any errors in this text are solely mine.

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Contents

1 What Every Native Speaker of a Language Secretly Understands

Chapter Overview

If you ask any group of people to define the concept *language*, you are going to get countless definitions ranging from simply a system of communication to 'a system of symbols, generally known as lexemes and the rules by which they are manipulated'.[1] The definition really only becomes relevant for normal people (not linguists!) when we start putting boundaries around a language and try to separate out, for example, what is English and what is not, which we'll discuss in detail in the final chapter on language varieties.

When I rephrase the question and ask, 'what makes up a language?' I usually get a good general list including: sounds, words, grammar, meaning and, more rarely, students tell me about the principles that guide us in combining these features. These are all certainly important features of language, but each aspect represents a complex series of features and rules, and, often, social choices, that are all part of an interconnected system of language. In addition, I get responses about what is *right* and *wrong* about language, for example, that you shouldn't end a sentence in a preposition or use double negatives. Everyone who is a native speaker has a considerable amount of knowledge about the language he or she speaks. Nevertheless, most people have probably lived happily all of their lives without ever thinking about the complexity and elegance of the system because most of this knowledge is unconscious. So, what is it that we all know?

1.1 The sound system

All native speakers of a language know what sounds are part, and what sounds are not part, of their language. It is important to note here that I am talking about *sounds* and not *letters*. English, for instance, has 26 letters in its alphabet, but more than 40 distinctive sounds, depending on which variety of English you speak. When we learn a second language, one of the challenges we must meet is learning the sounds, and possible combinations of sounds, that differ in the language we are learning. For example, every English speaker who learns Spanish has to learn the rolled or trilled 'r' sound that appears in words like *carro* (car). Many of us have trouble learning this sound because it is not part of the natural inventory of sounds that English speakers make. On the other hand, Spanish speakers from Latin America learning English frequently have trouble with the 'th' sounds in words like *three* because 'th' is not part of the inventory of sounds of Latin American Spanish, though it is still used in the Spanish of Spain. We are well aware that different languages have these differences because they often appear as stereotypes in television programmes and movies. Many children growing up in the US who have seen the cartoons *Pepe Le Peu* and *Speedy Gonzalez* have heard the stereotypes of second language English from supposedly French and Spanish-speaking cartoon characters. It is clear from the sounds that these characters make that their US creators noted differences in the sounds, stress and accents of certain varieties of these languages and English, and that they expected these would be understood by their audiences.

Native speakers of a language also know where a particular sound can occur in a word. This rule is more unconscious to speakers than knowing which sounds are in their language. Most English speakers are unaware that the last sound in words like *sing*, which linguists represent as [ŋ], can only appear at the end of a syllable or word in the vast majority of English dialects. It is never heard at the beginning of a word or syllable. It does, however, appear at the beginning of many words in sub-Saharan African languages that are not historically related to English. The Liberian language of Kpelle has this sound at the beginning of words: *ŋwana* (wound or hurt, verb).

There are also combinations of sounds in English that can be heard at the beginning of a word or syllable, but may not end them. For example, you can begin a word or syllable with the sound combination [dw] (dwindle, dweeb) but there are no words that end in this combination of sounds. The same is true for the combination [str] as in *street*.

Sometimes there are very subtle differences in sounds depending on where in a word a sound occurs. In most varieties of English, there is a difference in the sound [p] when it is at the front of a syllable from when it is the final sound in a syllable. You can not only hear the difference if you pay close attention, but you can see it as well. If you hold a piece of paper in front of your mouth and say the word *pan*, you will notice that the paper moves a little because you release a small puff of air when you make

the [p]. Try the same thing only this time saying the word *taped*. Note how there is much less air escaping after the [p], and the paper hardly moves at all. Most people live their whole lives without overtly noticing this difference, yet they make the correct choice thousands upon thousands of times without thinking when they speak each and every day. There is a sound rule in English, that foreign learners of English must learn, which states that you add a puff of air (aspirate) the [p] sound when it is at the beginning of a syllable but do not when it is syllable-final. Notice the different aspirations of the two [p] sounds in the following sentence:

*P*ut it down and sto*p* it.

It is important to note that there is no physical reason why your mouth is forced to make these sounds differently. There are languages that make both sounds in the same environments. In these languages, it is as if they are different letters. Thai is one of these languages; the difference in initial aspiration of [p] is the difference between the words *aunt* and *cloth*.

pàa = aunt [p] phàa = cloth [p^h]

In addition, only certain sounds can be combined together in any language. Not all combinations of sounds are possible. Above we said that [dw-] was an acceptable combination at the beginning of English words, but how about [wd-]? We also only allow two consonant sounds in a row in the same syllable except for [str-]. Japanese, as well as many other languages, allows no consonant clusters (two or more consonants in a row in the same syllable). Japanese syllables always follow the same two patterns: CV (consonant/vowel) or CVC (consonant/vowel/consonant). You never have a syllable in which there are two consonants in a row in the same syllable. All you have to do is think of all the Japanese company names to test this out:

Ya·ma·ha Hon·da Su·zu·ki To·yo·ta

This pronunciation rule is so strong for Japanese speakers that it even carries over to words that get borrowed into Japanese from other languages. Japanese has borrowed thousands of words from English that people use every day:

lefuto (left field[2]) homuran (homerun) erebata (elevator)

nekutai (necktie) sarada (salad)

These words give us a good deal of information about acceptable syllable structure in Japanese as well as information about what other sounds are acceptable in Japanese as well. (For instance, what happens to the [l] sound from the middle of an English word when it gets borrowed into Japanese as in *elevator* and *salad*?) Each language has its own particular

set of sounds that are part of the inventory of sounds for that language as well as rules for where those sounds can be found in a word and how they can combine together. There is nothing biological or logical that dictates these rules although they work systematically in every language.

1.2 The lexicon: the human dictionary

The most common response I get when I ask students what we know when we know language is that we know the words. Linguists call the words that speakers know their lexicon. Knowing the words of the language is different from knowing the sounds. All speakers of a language know all the sounds of their language. The only exception would be if a speaker has some sort of pathology and physically cannot make a certain sound. The lexicon is different. Each speaker of a language has a different vocabulary depending on the environment in which a person lives and works, his or her level of education and exposure to different social groups, as well as many other variables. There is a subset of words that everyone seems to know. This list would include all the articles like: *a*, *an* and *the*, and the prepositions: *on*, *under* and *by*, etc. Most people also share the most common lexicon as well: words about core family members and activities, food and other things that are common across the English-speaking world. This does not mean that there is no variation for common words. Depending upon which part of the United States you live in, you put your groceries in a *sack*, a *bag* or a *poke*, and you put water in a *pail* or a *bucket*. If you want to go to an all-you-can-eat restaurant you go to either a *smorgasbord* or a *buffet* depending on where you live. In many parts of the USA, a carbonated beverage is referred to as *pop*, in other parts of the country as *soda*, and in the Deep South, it is becoming more and more common to refer to all these beverages as *coke*. When I lived in Georgia, I actually had someone ask me, 'What kind of coke do you want?' When I responded, 'Just regular', the person said, 'No, which kind? Pepsi, Mountain Dew or 7 Up?' This is not just a southern phenomenon; it is spreading slowly to other parts of the States as well. There are thousands of dialectal variations for words and phrases across any country; for example, in Britain, all of the above drink words translate as a *fizzy drink* or a *soft drink*. There are even more lexical distinctions from one English-speaking country to another. I recently heard this joke that gets the point across quite nicely:

> A businessman from the United States was in London for a meeting. After checking in at the hotel, he asked the desk clerk where the elevator was located. The clerk responded that he did not understand the question and asked, 'What is an elevator?' The American responded, 'It's the machine you go upstairs in.' The British clerk looked indignant and in a lofty tone said, 'Oh, you mean the lift.' The businessman got miffed as well and said, 'Look, we invented it; it's called an elevator' to which the British clerk responded, 'Look, we invented the language; it's a lift!'

When we know the words of our language, we also know the slang expressions of our group and idiomatic expressions like *What's up?* Imagine the confusion of many first-time foreigners visiting the United States trying to figure out why in a greeting a person might ask them what's up on the ceiling or in the sky. I ran into the same problem in Mexico when my friends would greet me with *Qué Honda?* (basically, 'What's up?') When I looked up the words in the dictionary, they translated as 'how deep?'. Native speakers of a language understand when words are to be understood literally and when they are not which means we understand the semantics of our language. We also understand that our utterances are generally not made in a vacuum. If I make the statement 'The lights are on' when we pull up at a friend's house at night uninvited, it is likely that I mean that they are probably still up. If I make the same statement as we are leaving our own house, it is likely that I want to go back inside and turn the lights off. Language is not simply the words, sounds and grammar of a language, but also the understanding of the use of language within a society and its subcultures, which is the study of pragmatics.

As a learner of a second language, it is often a long time before we are able to get jokes because we tend to translate literally, getting word-by-word meaning, and we miss word-play and sarcasm. Much of our humour is based on native-speaker-conscious or unconscious understanding of linguistic processes. You only have to watch an episode of *The Simpsons* to see how language play and manipulation of our language skills in all the subfields of linguistics is the basis for a great deal of humour. This is not just the simple use of sarcasm or puns to get a laugh, but a profound manipulation of the grammar and sound system of the language. There are jokes for every subfield of linguistics, as we'll see throughout this text. Our awareness of language play comes very early in our lives, as we can see from kids' jokes or puns like the following:

Question: Why can't you play cards on a boat?
Answer: Because someone is always sitting on the deck.

Question: What animal could Noah not trust?
Answer: The cheetah (cheater).

In addition to understanding word meanings and knowing when they are to be taken literally or not, we know how to decide which of a word's possible meanings is needed for a particular context. For instance, we know which meaning of the word *bank* in the sentence 'I'm going to the bank' is necessary depending on the context of the event:

1. You are swimming in the river.
2. You need money.

Many words and phrases are lexically ambiguous (having more than one possible meaning) until they are in a context. Native speakers very

naturally access, most of the time, the needed meaning of an ambiguous word or phrase used in a normal conversation without even being aware of the process. This is another source of bad jokes:

Question: What did the Zen master say to the server at the hot dog stand?
Answer: Make me one with everything.

The humour in this joke is derived from the double meaning of the words *one with everything*. In the context of the hot dog stand, the first reading of *one with everything* would normally mean a hot dog with all the condiments; however, when you throw in the Zen master, it refers to making the speaker one with the universe in this bad joke.

Church signs are often excellent sources for linguistic wordplay. In each of the following signs, a point is being artfully made through the double meaning of the words *jams* and *left*.