英语语言学

English Linguistics

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Chapter 1

Language and linguistics

Talking, shouting, whispering, lying, swearing, telling jokes or tales, in short: communication of all sorts by means of articulate sound is something we are so familiar with that we hardly ever come to think about it as something unique. However, no other creature on this planet shows the ability to communicate verbally in the way we do. Take a minute to think about the immense impact spoken and written language has on your everyday life! You could not possibly do without it in situations where you meet other people, like in school, at university, or at the breakfast table. The examples are innumerable. In this course, we will take a look at the unique features of human language. As you will see when we proceed, the human curiosity concerning language is no modern phenomenon. Language has been examined by linguists and philosophers for several millennia. Therefore, we can look back on a respectable stock of literature on the topic originating from the times of ancient Greece until the present day. The result is a compendium of linguistic disciplines that are interwoven with the domains of, among others, philosophy, psychology, neurology, and even computer science: a vast and fascinating network of knowledge. To keep you fascinated (which I hope

you are) and to keep you from becoming intimidated (which I hope you are not), we will start right away with the very principles that make human language so special.

1 What is human language

Language is many things—a system of communication, a medium for thought, a vehicle for literary expression, a factor in nation building. All normal human beings speak at least one language, and it is hard to imagine significant social or intellectual activity taking place without language.

We use language every day. We live in a world of words. We are surrounded by words. Whatever we do, whether we play, talk, or sit in the classroom, we use language. Hardly a moment of our waking lives is free from words, and even in our dreams we talk and are talked to. We talk to our pets and sometimes to ourselves, and we are the only animals that talk.

Then what is language? It sounds like a silly question. Yet, many linguists have given different definitions and you will find out different explanations from dictionaries. As beginners of linguistics, you just remember Wardhaugh's definition: Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication. Let's look at it in more detail.

1.1 System

1) tdnot, plattol, bicycle

Which one is English? Which one could be? How do we

know? —rules

2) With playing is ball that he

Is the sentence correct ? How do you know? —rules

3) This he just just bought book

How about this sentence? Is it correct? No. Then how about in Chinese? Yes.

So language must be a system; the elements in it have to be arranged according to limited, consistent rules. They cannot be combined at will; otherwise, it cannot be learned or used. It does not matter which rules are involved, all members in the speech community have to agree.

1. 2   Arbitrary

1) in English: chair   table   window

2) in French: chaise   table   fenêtre

3) in pingyin: yizi   zhuozi   chuanghu

4) in German: stuhl   tisch   fensker

5) in Japanese: いす   つくえ   まで

From the examples above we can see different languages have different words for the same things in reality. So language is arbitrary, there is no direct, intrinsic relationship between the language(form, sound image, or sign) and the objects of the outside world (concept, meaning). Everything is an agreement among the speakers in the speech community, or we can say language is a convention or language is arbitrary. But there are some cases where there seems to be some association between the sound and the meaning, such as the onomatopoeic words: bang, cuckoo, clink, crash, sniff, and snore. That is to say

some words are motivated.

1.3   Symbolic and vocal

Language is symbolic, which means words represent/symbolize something such as objects, actions, and ideas whether they are abstract or concrete.

When did you learn to speak (write) Chinese?

The fact that children acquire spoken language first before they can read or write indicates that language is primarily vocal. All languages are spoken; not all are written. All evidence shows that writing systems came much later than the spoken forms. Writing just records the spoken ideas.

"Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication." The term "human" in the definition is meant to specify that language is human-specific; that is it is very different from communication systems other forms of life possess. This brings us to a question: In what ways are human languages different from systems of nonhuman communication? The next section explores the difference—designing features which refers to the defining properties of human language that distinguish it from any animal system of communication.

1.4   Design features of language

A principle feature of human language is the duality of patterning. It enables us to use our language in a very economic way for a virtually infinite production of linguistic units. How does this principle work? Language is a system, which consists of two sets of structures, or two levels, these two structures are sounds and

meanings. There are limited numbers of sounds, but unlimited combinations to make meaningful words. No animal communication has this. Taking birds (parrot) do not "dissect" the sounds of their imitations into discrete units. A parrot says what it is taught, or what it hears, and no more.

All human languages have a small, limited set of speech sounds. The limitation derives from the restricted capacity of our vocal apparatus. The speech sounds are referred to as consonants and vowels. Linguistically speaking, the distinctive speech sounds are called phonemes, which are explained in more detail in the chapter on phonology. You cannot use isolated phonemes for communication, because phonemes are by themselves meaningless. But we can assemble and reassemble phonemes into larger linguistic units. These are commonly called "words". Although our capacity to produce new phonemes is limited, we frequently coin new words. Hence, our capacity to produce vocabulary is unlimited.

Discreteness: The human speech apparatus is specialized; speech sounds are only for language. Speech sound production is intentional; we use it to convey meaning. Although the physical form of the message is continuous, the meaning conveyed is discrete. For thousands of years, the scholars and philosophers interested in the nature of language have believed that language and speech are composed of discrete units of sound and meaning. Although the sounds are represented by the letters, for instance, dog may be continuous on a physical level, the word can be considered to be composed of separate sounds. Child's linguistic development, just take it as another example, often

comes about with the child's discovery of the independence of the sign from the thing it stands for; at a still later stage, the child makes another important discovery, namely, that the sounds he or she utters to form the signs are also relatively independent. In other words, a universal trend in the acquisition of one's native language is discernible, which consists in breaking down diffuse, unanalyzable entities into compounds of discrete ones, in developing independent subsystems from certain global forms.

Displacement: In contrast to other animals, humans have a sense of the past and the future. A gorilla, for example, cannot tell his fellows about his parents, his adventures in the jungle, or his experiences of the past. The use of language to talk about things other than "the here and now", is a characteristic of humans. Displacement is thus our ability to convey a meaning that transcends the immediately perceptible sphere of space and time. Although some animals seem to possess abilities appropriating those of displacement, they lack the freedom to apply this to new contexts. The dance of the honey-bee, for instance, indicates the locations of rich deposits of food to other bees. This ability of the bee corresponds to displacement in human language, except for a lack of variation. The bee frequently repeats the same patterns in its dance, whereas humans are able to invent ever new contexts.

Open-endedness: The ability to say things that have never been said before, including the possibility to express invented things or lies, is also a peculiar feature of human language.

Stimulus-freedom is another aspect that distinguishes human language from animal communication. The honey-bee must per-

form its dance, the woodchuck must cry out in order to warn his fellows when it beholds an eagle. Humans have the ability to say anything they like in any context. This ability is only restricted in certain ceremonial contexts such as church services, etc. , where a fixed form is expected to be followed. The possibility to violate this fixed linguistic behavior is then the source of jokes, such as a bride's "No".

Arbitrariness: Why is a table called "table"? Obviously, the thing never told us its name. And tables do not make a noise similar to the word. The same applies to most of the words of our language. Hence, words and their meaning have no a prior connection. We cannot tell from the sound structure which meaning is behind it. Language is not motivated, as we can also put it. There are, however, exceptions to this rule: language can be iconic, which means that there is a direct correlation between form and meaning. The length of a phrase, for example, could represent a length of time the phrase refers to, like in "a long, long time ago". Here, the extension serves to visually represent the semantic emphasis. Iconicity in language can be found frequently. We will see this in more detail in the chapter on semiotics. Another example for nonarbitrariness are onomatopoeia. These are words that seem to resemble sounds. There are many examples for onomatopoetic words, like splash or bang. Some names for animals are also onomatopoetic, for example, "cuckoo". Still, since animals such as the bird are named differently in different languages, there can be no ultimate motivation for the name.

The human vocal tract: An elaborated language requires a

highly sophisticated speech organ that will enable the speaker to produce the many differentiated sounds. Only humans are endowed with a speech organ of this complexity.

2   What is linguistics

Linguistics is the scientific inquiry into the human language with all its aspects. All its aspects: these are many. There is a specialized branch for each approach to the examination of language.

Until the beginning of the 20th century, scholars were occupied with research on the history of languages and the roots of words in ancient tongues. The famous linguist Ferdinand de Saussure coined this approach the diachronic analysis and moved to the analysis of the system of language, which he assumed to be of greater importance. Saussure stated this in the first decades of this century and thus formed the fundamentals of modern linguistics.

2.1   Diachronic versus synchronic view

• Diachrony

Diachronic linguistics views the historical development of a language. Thus, on the diachronic axis we can go back and forth in time, watching the language with all its features change.

• Synchrony

Synchronic linguistics views a particular state of a language at some given point in time. This could mean Modern English of the

present day, or the systematic analysis of the system of Shakespeare's English. However, no comparisons are made to other states of language or other times.

today
    synchronic axis

1500

1066

449
    diachronic axis
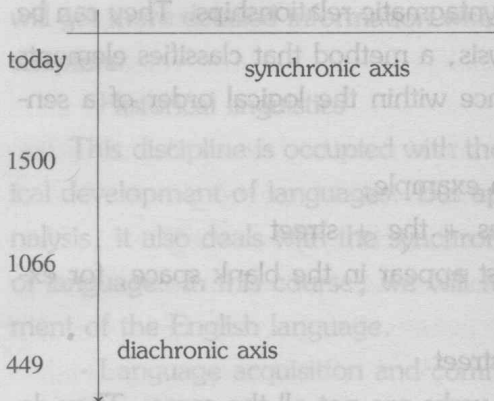
Modern linguistics, following Ferdinand de Saussure, is primarily interested in the synchronic point of view. Saussure postulated the priority of synchrony: no knowledge of the historical development of a language is necessary to examine its present system. He arrived at this radical viewpoint due to his conviction that linguistic research must concentrate on the structure of language. Later, the whole paradigm was hence called structuralism.

2.2   The two axes of the synchronic view

When we look at the structure of language, we find sentences and words. This is, however, a very rough view. A grammar of a language must be more precise.

One axis of the synchronic view is syntagmatic analysis.

Here we examine the relationships of all elements of a sentence to one another. We ask ourselves exactly what element appears where and under which condition in a sentence. For example, where do nouns appear? Where are auxiliary verbs applied? All word classes show certain syntagmatic relationships. They can be defined by distribution analysis, a method that classifies elements according to their appearance within the logical order of a sentence.

Let's have a look at an example:

A + _____ + crosses + the + street

Obviously, a noun must appear in the blank space, for example:

A woman crosses the street.

Of course, nouns and verbs are not all the same. They do not fit into contexts freely. Hence we apply paradigmatic analysis. In our example, the idea of a sandwich crossing the street is impossible.

As you can see, the elements of language obviously evince paradigmatic relationships. Elements can be substituted by others of the same paradigmatic class, such as street, lane, road, etc. Articles can also be exchanged. Words that belong to the same paradigmatic class thus belong to the same grammatical class. They also belong to the same lexical field. The following diagram shows the two axes of synchronic analysis:

a	woman	crosses	the	street
the	lady		a	lane
	female			road
	· sandwich			