
英语 语言学 导论

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An Introduction to
English Linguistics

文秋芳 著
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Preface

An Introduction to English Linguistics is designed for university undergraduates who are majoring in English. It can also be used by postgraduate students as a textbook for an introductory linguistic course.

To help you comprehend the contents of the book, the whole book is presented in a very simple and clear style and also includes several kinds of aids:

(1) **Summary.** Each chapter contains a summary that highlights the main points discussed in the chapter and can be used as an outline for what is to be reviewed.

(2) **Suggestions for study.** Each chapter includes suggestions for reading the chapter. They are concerned with difficulties you might come across, ways you can overcome them and requirements you are expected to meet after studying the chapter concerned. You can also read this section before you proceed with the chapter. Thus this section can be regarded as an advance organizer for what is to be learned.

(3) **Exercises.** At the end of each chapter, a series of exercises are provided. Generally speaking, there are two kinds of exercises. The first kind is theory-oriented. It helps you review theoretical concepts, principles, etc. The second kind is practical work which includes various types of problems for you to solve for the purpose of developing your basic skills of linguistic analysis.

(4) **Key to exercises.** Finally, Key to Exercises is provided at the end of the book. The suggested answers are for your reference.

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Chapter One Introduction

I. Linguistics and English linguistics

Linguistics, as a cover term, concerns itself with both language and languages. When it deals with language, it aims at developing a theory that describes the rules of human language in general. When it studies one particular language, it attempts to establish a model that describes the rules of this particular language, such as Chinese, English and French. In John Lyons' term, the former is called **general linguistics** and the latter, **descriptive linguistics**. Although general linguistics and descriptive linguistics have different goals, they explicitly or implicitly depend on each other. General linguistics provides descriptive linguistics with a general framework in which a particular language can be analyzed and described. Very often, it may supply several different frameworks for descriptive linguists to choose from. Depending on their different views on language, they may follow one model exclusively or combine two or more models. Their resulting descriptions of particular languages, in turn, supply empirical evidence which may confirm or refute the model(s) put forward by general linguists. Suppose that the general linguist formulates a hypothesis that all languages have nouns and verbs. The descriptive linguist might refute this with the data collected from a particular language in which verbs are not available. Thus, general linguistics and descriptive linguistics are complementary to each other.

English linguistics is a kind of descriptive linguistics. It deals with a particular language--English, for the purpose of constructing a model to represent unconscious linguistic knowledge possessed by a fluent English speaker. In order to fulfill this purpose, the English linguist cannot avoid using the principles, concepts and methods introduced in general linguistics. In fact, his description of English is an instance of applying a general theory. Thus, this book has a double purpose. The first is to make clear to you some fundamental linguistic principles, concepts and methods. In this sense, you may consider this book as a preliminary

study of general linguistics. The second purpose is to enable you to have a better understanding of the structure of English. In this sense, you may regard this book as an advanced study of English.

2. The nature of language(s)

In the previous section, I mentioned that the subject matter of linguistics may be language in general or particular languages depending on different purposes. In this section, we shall discuss the nature of human language(s). By reading this section, you will know what important features human language possesses and what views a linguist has on language.

To begin with, **language is a system**. It consists of a set of rules which underlie people's actual speech or writing. In de Saussure's term, the system of language is called **langue** and the speakers' speech, **parole**. In a similar fashion, Chomsky advanced another pair of terms: **competence** and **performance**. Competence is "the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language", while performance is "the actual use of language in concrete situations". (Chomsky, 1965, p. 4). With careful examination, we may find that there are differences between these two pairs of terms. **Langue** refers to the system of rules, while **competence**, to the knowledge of **langue** but not **langue** itself. **Parole** is the result of applying the system of rules but **performance** is the result of applying the knowledge of the rules. However, in our introductory course, we may ignore such differences. **Langue** or **competence** is abstract and not directly observed, while **parole** or **performance** is concrete and directly observable. It has to take place in a definite time and place, and in a particular situation.

Let us look at an analogous example. In order to play the game of basketball, the players must agree on a set of rules, which should specify the number of players in a team, the function of each player, what is counted as a goal, what is counted as a foul and so on. These rules of the game can be compared to **langue** or **competence**. They are not observable but they are necessary to play a concrete game. Any game

that takes place in a definite time and place is an instance of applying those abstract rules. Therefore, any individual game of basketball can be compared to parole or performance.

Linguists claim that they are only interested in langue or competence, but not parole or performance. However, they cannot avoid using the data from people's actual speech or writing in their study of langue or competence.

① **Language is symbolic.** Now, what is a symbol? Let us look at some non-linguistic situations. A symbol is essentially made up of (i) a concrete object or form, and (ii) the meaning or the idea that it conveys. Consider the following examples:

Concrete sign (or form)	Idea (or meaning)
Red color	danger
Cross	Christianity
Doves	stands for peace
White clothes(in China)	mourning
Black clothes (in the west)	

Language makes use of words and words are symbols, because they have concrete signs--sounds, and the sounds can represent a certain meaning. For example, the word *book* consists of a sequence of sounds /buk/ (the concrete sign) and refers to sheets of paper bound together with something printed (its meaning). Therefore, the word *book* is a symbol. Of course, there are a few words which cannot be classified as symbols such as the English words *the*, *a*, *an*, etc. This, however, is not discussed in our introductory course.

③ **Language is a system of vocal symbols.** Gestures, signal flags, and traffic lights are common visual symbols. Drum beats, bugle calls and whistles are auditory but not vocal symbols because they are not produced by speech organs. Linguistic-symbols are various movements of speech organs. However, not all sounds produced by human speech

organs are linguistic symbols. For example, sneezes, coughs, grunts, and cries usually do not have symbolic value.

Therefore, linguists maintain that language is primarily speech, and not the written form. This view may be justified by the following reasons. Biologically speaking, children begin to learn to speak much earlier than to learn to read and write. Functionally speaking, the spoken form is used more frequently than the written form in our daily life. Historically speaking, all human languages were spoken before they were written and there are still many languages in the world today which have not been written down. The emphasis on the spoken form indicates that linguistic study is primarily based on the data collected from living speech.

④ **Language is arbitrary.** As indicated earlier, a linguistic symbol is composed of two things: speech sounds (form) and the idea (meaning) the sounds convey. The relationship between the sounds and their meaning is arbitrary. For example, there is no reason why sheets of paper bound together with something printed on them should be called *book* in English, *hon* in Japanese and *shu* in Chinese. It is clear that we cannot infer the meaning of a word from its pronunciation because the same pronunciation may have a radically different meaning, such as *four* and *for*. Similarly, we cannot predict the pronunciation from the meaning of a word because the same meaning may be represented by radically different sound sequences, such as *flaw* and *defect*. By saying language is arbitrary, we mean that we cannot give a sound reason why such a form is pronounced in this way rather than in that way, and why a particular meaning should be indicated by this form rather than by that form.

However, in most languages, there are some onomatopoeic words which imitate the sounds of nature. Their pronunciation may suggest the meaning to a certain degree. Therefore, we may say that onomatopoeic words are less arbitrary than the other words. But we should notice that the above statement is not the same as saying that "Onomatopoeic words

are not arbitrary", because it can be easily refuted by a simple argument. If we believed that onomatopoeic words were not arbitrary, then the same sound of nature should be imitated with the same sound sequence throughout the world. Unfortunately, this is not the fact. For example, in Chinese, we imitate the barking of a dog with *wan-wan*, English speakers, with *bow-wow*, and French speakers, with *gnaf-gnaf*.

Before we move further, we have to make it clear that the technical sense of the term arbitrary in linguistics is different from its common sense. It does not imply that any individual speaker has the freedom to determine the pronunciation of a word. Once the pronunciation of a word has been established in a speech community, people cannot change it at will.

③ **Language is creative.** It means that every language contains an infinite number of sentences, which, however, are generated by a small set of rules and a finite set of words. We can illustrate this by a well-known example given by Fromkin and Rodman (1983, p. 8). A native speaker can say:

This is the house.

or

This is the house that Jack built.

or

This the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

or

This is the dog that chased the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

The above sentence can continue to be lengthened by adding another attributive clause because there is no limit on the number of attributive clauses imposed by the system of a language. Therefore, the length of a sentence has no limit and consequently, the number of sentences in a language is infinite. Of course, in our actual communication, there are always limits on the number of sentences and on the length of sentences

we can produce. But we have to remember that these limits are not imposed by the system of a language itself, but by non-linguistic factors such as time, energy, memory span, attention span, tiredness, etc. While the number of sentences is indefinitely large, the rules by which the sentences are generated only form a small set. That is why linguists describe the rules rather than individual sentences.

It is important not to confuse the technical sense of "creative" in linguistics with its general use as in arts and poetry. As a linguistic term, it has nothing to do with imagination and originality. It simply refers to the fact that all normal speakers—imaginative or not—can produce and understand new sentences which they have never heard before.

① **Language is double-structured.** Let us first look at an example. The sentence "Birds sing", at one level, can be divided into three meaningful units (more precisely "morphemes"): *bird*, *-s*, and *sing*. Each of them has a certain meaning in itself. At another level, the same sentence can be analyzed into a sequence of sounds (more precisely "phonemes"): /b, ə:, d, z, s, i, ŋ/. Each of them has no meaning in itself. In simple words, there are two levels: grammatically-meaningful and sound-meaningless. The interesting point is that these meaningful units are just made up of meaningless sounds. Furthermore, these two levels are independent. That is to say, the rules that govern the combination of sounds have no relation to the rules that govern the combination of those meaningful units. Thus, the rule that rules out the sound sequence like /dz ə:d/ has no connection with the rule that excludes the sentence "Bird sing".

A language is structurally organized in terms of two levels. At the first, higher level, language is analyzed in terms of combinations of meaningful units; at another, lower level, it is seen as a sequence of meaningless sound segments which combine to form units of meaning. These two levels are governed by two different kinds of rules. The advantage of being double-structured is that every language has an