

21 世纪英语专业系列教程

# 现代语言学基础教程

**An Introduction to Modern Linguistics**

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## 内 容 提 要

本书主要介绍语言学研究各领域的基础理论知识,重点阐述语言研究的三个层面——音系、句法、语义,并论及语言与文化、社会、语境、心理等因素的关系和母语习得及第二语言习得等,包括课文、练习(附有答案),并附有英汉术语对照及其索引。本书可供60课时的英语专业语言学课程使用。

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# 编者说明

我们编写《现代语言学基础教程》一书的指导原则是：(1) 既传授语言学的基础知识，又反映语言学的最新理论与研究成果；(2) 尽可能使用浅显的英语，并配以少量例句，以阐明语言学的相关理论；(3) 尽可能包容语言学各流派的观点。

全书共分十一章。一至六章主要介绍语言的性质、语言学研究各领域的基础理论知识，并对音系、句法、语义——即语言研究的三个层面作重点阐述，七至十一章主要探讨语言与文化、社会、语境、心理等因素的关系，以及母语习得和第二语言习得等。各章之间既存在有机联系，又具有相对的独立性。总之，本教程在传授“基础”理论的同时，重点反映近年来国内外学者在语言学研究各领域内的最新研究成果。“基础”与“新颖”是本教程的两大鲜明的特征。

《现代语言学基础教程》用英语编写，每章包括正文和练习。为了有助于读者理解，正文中的术语均在括号中提供相应的中文译名。提供的练习和思考题用以复习、巩固所学之内容，书后附有部分练习答案，供读者参考。此外，本教程附有英汉术语对照及其索引，以便于读者检索。

编者

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# 1 The Nature of Language

We live in a world of language. All human beings normally speak at least one language and it is hard to imagine much significant social, intellectual, cognitive or artistic activity taking place in its absence. One can scarcely imagine what life might be like without language. We cannot extend our capabilities, our thoughts, our complex social structure, and our ability to conceptualize the world around us. Without language it is, indeed, difficult to refer to anything that is far from us in space and time. Even some simple tasks like learning, planning or problem solving would be impossible. Human progress is greatly hastened by the use of language. Language allows human beings to learn, to perceive and to adapt to changing circumstances far more quickly and efficiently. Hardly a moment of our lives goes without listening, speaking, reading, or writing. The use of language is so natural and so extensive to all people that we rarely consider language as an interesting subject worthy of study. Language seems to be a simple phenomenon, yet most of us have only a vague idea of what it is about.

The study of language is in large part the study of man. As such it has rightly aroused the interest and attention of specialists from biology, communication, education, psychology, sociology, rhetoric, and various other fields. They deal with language from various different perspectives and have contributed enormously to the insight into language. The scientific study of language is a growing and exciting subject, which will play a leading role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the “human essence”, the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man (Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind*). When we acquire language, we can know our identity as individuals and social beings. Language serves as a means of cognition and communication. It enables us to understand ourselves and to cooperate with other people. Language has such a great impact on our lives that the study of it is an access to such fields as education, anthropology, sociology, language teaching, cognitive psychology, philosophy, computer science and artificial intelligence.

The power that language gives us is, indeed, so great that the great progresses human beings have made owe a great debt (due in very large part) to the fact that human beings can speak. Given the great variety of forms of communication, it is important that before we start our study of language, we have a clear understanding of what is meant by the term language. We should try to understand its nature, features and functions.

## 1.1 Definition of Language

Language is so familiar an experience, and is so intricately and intimately bound up with human life, that its essential nature is not easy to discern. We don't share one medium of communication. Russians and Chinese speak different languages. The value of different languages is universal and their central position in human behavior is clear. A language, then, is a medium of communication specific to a society; it constitutes part of that culture. A language is also a cognitive system, which is a part of human being's mental or psychological structure. We are all intimately familiar with at least one language, our own, yet few of us ever stop to consider such questions as: What is language? What do we know about it? What does it mean to be a language user? How does a child acquire language? How can we deceive ourselves through language? How language may influence our perceptions, our thoughts, and our behaviors? and so on.

One constructive approach to an understanding of the discipline is to give an adequate definition of language. Linguists have come up with different definitions. One attempt to define human language was made in 1921 by an early American linguist, Edward Sapir. His definition is as follows: "Language is a purely human and non — instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols". Another definition was given by a modern British linguist, David Crystal in 1989. He defined "Language as human vocal noise (or the graphic representation of this noise in writing) used systematically and conventionally by a community for the purpose of communication."

Despite the differences in their definitions, they are in broad agreement about the following definition: **Language** is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication. These definitions can throw light on the nature of human language and the following important attributes pertaining to all languages.

### 1.1.1 A communication system unique to human beings

Whether language is the exclusive property of human beings is an interesting subject. The idea of talking animals is probably as old as widespread among human societies as language itself. No culture lacks a legend in which some animal plays a speaking role. There is hardly an animal who does not figure in Aesop's famous fables. Hugh Lofting's fictional Doctor Doolittle's major accomplishment was his ability to communicate with animals.

The human race dominates life on earth. Why can't chimpanzees? A major reason is that they lack a larynx and a mouth that allow the articulation of a wide range of distinguishable sounds. Language is an impressive human achievement.

But is it specifically and uniquely human? Is it species — specific? If language is viewed only as a system of communication, then many species communicate, too. Human beings also use other means than language to relate each other and to send messages, such as by means of signaling like sight, smell or sound. Animals have developed ways of letting others know that they have found a supply of food, of warning others of danger, of attracting mate, and so on. The range and complexity of animal communication system are very limited and the information imparted is severely limited and stimulus — bound, confined to a small set of messages. No matter how eloquently a dog may bark, he cannot tell you that his parents were poor but honest (Bertrand Russell). Human beings have developed one type of communication which far surpasses all others — namely, language. The system of language represented by intricate mental instinct, which generates infinite messages, is unique to human beings.

There is every reason to believe that human beings have a special capacity for language that is not shared by other animals because every child is equipped with **Language Acquisition Device** (语言习得机制). Children have the ability to acquire any natural language, given appropriate experience of the language.

### 1.1.2 A system of vocal symbols

Language makes use of concrete sounds and signs to represent a certain meaning. For example, the word *desk* consists of a sequence of sounds /desk/ (the concrete sign) and refers to a piece of furniture with a surface to write on, and often with drawers (the meaning). Therefore, the word *desk* is a symbol. Only certain sounds are used by speakers of any language and only certain combinations are possible. The sound system of a language allows a small number of sounds to be used over and over again in various combinations to form units of meaning. The meaning system allows these units of meaning to be arranged in an infinite number of ways to express both simple and complicated ideas.

Language is a system of vocal symbols produced by various movements of speech organs. However, there are other media used to communicate. Traffic lights, railroad signals, barber poles, smoke signals, signal flags and the like are common visual symbols. Drum beats, burgle calls and whistles are auditory symbols. Human beings communicate constantly and in a vast variety of ways.

### 1.1.3 An arbitrary system

The relationship between meaning and the symbols employed to convey meaning is an arbitrary one. As mentioned in the definition of language, by “language is a set of arbitrary symbols”, we mean that there is no “natural” or “logical” connection between linguistic forms and their meanings the sounds convey. For example, there is no reason why the four-legged barking object should

be called *dog* in English, *chien* in French, *gou* in Chinese, *hund* in Germany, *sobaka* in Russia. The linguistic forms have no natural relationship with the objects they are used to indicate. As a result, we cannot infer the meaning of a word from its form (sound) because the same form may have a different meaning, as in *here* and *hear*. Similarly, we cannot predict the sound from the meaning of a word because the same meaning may use a different sound to indicate it, as in *fall* and *autumn*. 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 that form.

There are, of course, some words which have sounds which seem to “echo” the sounds of the objects or activities, such as *cuckoo*, *crash*, *splash*, *bow-wow* in English, and *kacha*, *potong*, *dingdong* in Chinese. These **onomatopoeic** (拟声词) or sound symbolic words do imitate the meanings to a certain degree. The creative use of sound in literary works and in real-life contexts such as in advertising can create sound – symbolic effect. For example, words ending in /ntʃ/ share the ‘tightly together meaning’. This symbolism can be suggested in the following sentence containing this sound: *Over lunch she clenched her teeth thinking she would never forget the stench of that day...* However, these onomatopoeic words are relatively rare in number and it is only when you understand the meaning that you can infer the form is appropriate or not. Consequently, we cannot say “Onomatopoeic words are not arbitrary”, because different sounds are used to refer to the same sound of nature. For example, in Chinese, we imitate the barking of a dog with *wan-wan*, English speakers, with *woof-woof*, and French speakers, with *gnaf-gnaf*.

### 1.1.4 A social tool used for communication

Language is a shared code(共享的代码) that enables users to transmit ideas and desires to one another. Language must be flexible enough to accommodate the communication needs of a variety of social organizations. Communication is certainly an essential and defining element of language. No one would devise or learn such a complex system without some purpose in mind. In short, language has but one purpose: to serve as the code communications between people.

As such, language is influenced by its environment and in turn, influences that environment. Overall, language reflects the collective thinking of its society and culture, and influences that thinking. The languages of different communities will represent different variants of reality, so the explanation of experience is a matter of cultural custom and linguistic convention. In the United States, for example, certain words like *democracy* reflect meanings and emotions and influence their concepts of other forms of government. Our notion of democracy is somewhat different and influences our thinking similarly.

Likewise, at any given moment, language in use is influenced by what precedes

it and influences what follows. The utterance should fit certain situations that define the appropriate language use. Imagine that you are walking across campus and run into a teacher who gave you a failure mark last term. Perhaps you will unwillingly say *Hi* and hurry off. The reason is that you do not want the communication, but rather cause it to break down.

Language is used as a social tool even if those you are engaging are not present with you. When you are writing an essay or reading a book, you are involved in the communication between the reader and the writer. To consider language without communication is to assume that language occurs in a vacuum.

### 1.1.5 A rule-governed system

Language is a system governed by rules. The relationship between meanings and the symbols employed is an arbitrary one, but the arrangement of symbols in relation to one another is non-arbitrary. This non-arbitrary organizational feature of language demonstrates the presence of underlying rules or patterns that occur repeatedly. These systems of rules are called **grammar**. Linguists use the term grammar in a rather special and technical way, which is a set of underlying operational principles or rules that describe the relationships between symbols that form the structure of a language. As such, grammar describes the relationships between sounds, between words and smaller units such as plural *s*, between words and meanings, and between words and communicative intent or purpose. These shared rule system allows users of a language to comprehend and to create messages. Evidently there is a difference between having the knowledge necessary to produce sentences of a language and applying this knowledge. A language user's underlying knowledge about the system of rules is called his **linguistic competence** (语言能力). Linguistic knowledge in actual speech production and comprehension is called **linguistic performance** (语言行为). Linguistic knowledge, for most part, is not conscious knowledge. The linguistic system — the sounds, structures, meanings, words, and rules for putting them all together — is learned subconsciously, with no awareness that rules are being learned. Knowledge of these rules represents a complex cognitive system.

When a user of a language knows a language, he knows the sounds, the words, and the rules of their combination.

### 1.1.6 A creative system

Knowledge of a language enables the user to combine words to form phrases, and then to form sentences. Knowing a language means being able to produce new sentences never spoken before and to understand sentences never heard before. The linguist Noam Chomsky refers to this ability as part of the “creative aspect” of language use. Not every user of a language can create great literature, but all

persons who know a language can and do “create” and understand new sentences . Because communication is not restricted to a fixed set of topics, language users must speak and understand new sentences in response to new thoughts, experiences, and situations. In conversations, lectures, broadcasts, and textbooks you are regularly exposed to novel combinations of words for the expression of unfamiliar ideas, and the presentation of new information.

Knowledge of a language ensures you to produce and understand unfamiliar utterances that you have not seen or heard before. All human languages permit their users to form indefinite number of sentences; “creativity” is a universal property of human language.

Underlying the creative aspect of language represents a complex mental system that defines the boundaries within which innovation can take place. This creativity shows that language use is not limited to a stimulus – response behavior. For instance, if someone steps on your toe, you will “automatically” respond with a scream or gasp, or grunt, but these sounds are really not part of language, they are involuntary reactions to stimuli. After you automatically cry out, you can say *That was some clumsy act, you big oaf !* or *Thank you very much for stepping on my toe ; I was a afraid I had elephantiasis and now that I can feel it hurt I know it isn’ t so*, or any one of an infinite number of sentences, because the particular sentence you produce is not controlled by any stimulus. Knowing a language includes knowing what sentences are appropriate in various situations.

The important nature of language thus can suggest many issues and concerns within linguistics, all of which relate directly to the central goal of linguistic study.

## 1.2 Popular Ideas about Language

### 1.2.1 Speech and writing

Languages are spoken. In most parts of the world, verbal communication can be found in various forms. Of course, the medium of language is the most powerful communication. Speech and writing are the most common. We should be clear that spoken language is primary and the others are derived from it, some of them indirectly. There are several reasons for saying this. First of all, all normal children learn to speak before they learn to read or write. Secondly, children between the ages of about eighteen months and twelve years automatically learn a language to which they are given sufficient exposure. A third reason is that the earliest written records are very recent in comparison to the time man has been on earth. In fact, there are still a great many languages in the world which do not have written representations. Every language which has a written form also has a spoken form; the reverse is not true. Fourth, writing is based on speech, not the other

way round. Writing systems represent some level of the spoken language, such as the entire words, syllables, or sounds. And the changes in the written form usually occur as reflections of earlier changes in the spoken form.

However, linguists' claim that the primary medium of language is speech does not in any sense mean it is "better" than writing. Everyone agrees that the English written by Shakespeare is more aesthetic and worthy of preservation than is a verbal chat in a pub. Writing, a delayed reaction, is a different mode from face to face interaction. It does not depend on a shared context of time and place. Most written language is more polished than speech. In this respect, the development of writing from speech and its exploitation in various modes may be seen as further illustration of the inherent flexibility and the creative potential of human language.

### 1.2.2 Equality of all languages

All languages are equally complex and equally capable of expressing any idea in the universe. All human beings normally speak at least one language and it seems obvious that all languages have developed to express the needs of their users, and that in a sense all languages are equal. From this point of view of modern linguistics, it makes no sense to say that one variety of English is better than another, nor does it make any sense to say that the grammar of English is better than the grammar of Japanese.

All languages and varieties of a particular language have grammars that enable their speakers to express any idea that human mind can produce. All varieties of language are absolutely equal as instruments of communication and thought. The goal of modern linguistics is not to rank languages on some imaginary scale of superiority. Instead, they seek to understand the nature of the grammatical systems that allow people to speak and understand a language.

The idea that one's language is superior to others is widespread, but the reasons given for superiority vary greatly. Latin and Greek were for centuries regarded as models of excellence in Western Europe because of the literature and thought which these languages expressed. A language might be viewed as the oldest, or the most logical, or the language of Gods, or simply the easiest to pronounce or the best for singing. Arabic speakers, for example, feel that their classical language is the most beautiful and logical, with an incomparable grammatical symmetry and lexical richness. Nowadays, students prefer to speak American English just because America is a powerful country.

### 1.2.3 Descriptive not prescriptive

**Prescriptivism** (规定性) is the view that one variety of language has a higher value than others, and this ought to be imposed on the whole speech community. As a result, the aim of the early grammarians is to prescribe some usage and avoid

others. However, there is an alternative point of view that the task of the grammarian is to describe, not to prescribe. This means that linguistics seek to describe human linguistic ability and knowledge, not to prescribe one system in preference of another. And this view has become the principle of the modern linguistic approach to grammatical analysis. The first concern of all scientists is to describe and explain the facts they observe, not to change them.

Even though modern linguistic analysis rejects prescriptivism, it does not deny the importance of clear expression in writing and speech. Such skills are quite rightly an object of concern among language educators. Certain patterns may have negative social consequences: it may be harder to win a scholarship, to get a job, to be accepted in a certain circle, and so on. From a purely linguistic point of view, however, there is absolutely nothing wrong with the grammar that permits such patterns.

### 1.2.4 Changeability of language

Language is vigorous and dynamic, and constantly changing. It is a well-established fact that the grammar of every language is constantly changing. Some of these changes are relatively minor and occur very quickly. For example, the addition of new words such as *ethnic cleansing*, *spin doctor*, *yuppie*, *internet*, *telecommuter*, *acid house*, *vegeburger* to the English vocabulary. Other changes have a more dramatic effect on the overall form of the language and typically take place over a long period of time. English has undergone continuous and dramatic changes throughout its three periods Old English (roughly from 450 to 1100), Middle English (from 1100 to 1500), and Modern English (from 1500 to the present). Old English differed significantly from modern English in many respects like pronunciation, morphology, word order, meaning, etc. Some Old English words have disappeared from use, others have been maintained, but with a change in meaning.

## 1.3 The Properties of Language

The possession of language allows human beings to develop in a completely different way from other animals. We think other creatures lack the psychological properties of the human species required for the production of language. The fact that physical aspects of human teeth, larynx and so on are not shared by other creatures may explain why only the human creature has the power for speech. Yet we do not mean that human is the only creature which is capable of communicating. Other creatures, from apes, bees, dolphins through to zebras, are capable of communicating with other members of their species by other means like sight, smell or sound, but the range and complexity of animal communication systems are very

limited. Human language possesses some defining properties which far surpass all other means of communication. The following six features are unique to human language and unlikely to be found in the communication systems of other creatures.

### 1.3.1 Productivity

The scope and diversity of human thoughts and experiences place great demands on language. Because communication is not restricted to a fixed set of topics, language must do something more than provide a package of ready-made messages. It must enable us to produce and understand new words, phrases, and sentences as the need arises. In short, the nature of **productivity** (多产性) allows novelty and innovation in response to the new thoughts, experiences, and situations. Speakers of a language all carry around inside their heads knowledge and information about the intricate system.

The essential function of language is that of taking an idea that exists inside the head of the speaker, shaping it so that it can be transmitted as a message, then actually transmitting the message — and hoping that approximately the same idea will somehow miraculously reappear inside the head of the listener. How are human beings able to use language in this remarkably creative way? And it is this knowledge that enables us to accomplish this remarkable feat. Language is a creative system.

The communication systems of most other forms of life are nonproductive. The bee dance, for example, does have a limited productivity in that it can be used to communicate about nectar sources within a few miles of the hive in any direction. We should notice that messages about such sources are the only message that can be communicated through the bee dance. Bees cannot communicate about people, animals, hopes, desires, failures, and so on.

### 1.3.2 Displacement

When your pet dog comes home with a piece of bone in his mouth and stands by your feet barking, you are likely to understand this message as relating to that immediate time and place. If you ask the dog where and when he got the bone, you may get the same bark. It seems that animal communication is almost exclusively designed for this moment and place. It cannot effectively be used to relate events which are remote in time and place. Animal communication is under immediate stimulus control. Human language, however, can be used to refer to past and future time and to other locations. This property of human language is called **displacement** (不受时空限制性). It allows the users of language to talk about things and events not present; real or imagined things in the past, present, or future or in faraway places. We can talk about things and places whose existence we cannot even be sure of. As a result, we can refer to mythical creatures, fairies,

angels, dragons, and some recently invented characters such as Superman. We can also create fiction and to describe abstract concepts such as truth and beauty. We can send e-mails on the computer screen while projecting the reader's probable reaction to it.

Animal communication is generally considered to lack this property. However, it has been proposed that bee communication has the property of displacement. For example, when a worker bee finds a source of food and returns to the hive, it can perform a complex dance to communicate to the other bees the location of the food. This ability of the bee to indicate a food location far away must mean that bee communication has at least some degree of displacement as a feature. But bee communication has displacement in an extremely limited form, for the bees must communicate about the food immediately on returning to the hive. They cannot dance about the food they discovered last weekend nor can they tell about the future food source.

### 1.3.3 Arbitrariness

As mentioned earlier, by “language is a set of arbitrary symbols”, we mean that there is no “natural” or “logical” connection between linguistic form and its meaning. The linguistic form has no natural or “iconic” relationship with the object they are used to indicate in the world and different languages may use different linguistic signs to indicate the same object. The **arbitrariness** (任意性) of language means 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 that form.

For animal signals, there does appear to be a clear connection between the conveyed meaning and the signal used to convey it. For example, a bee dance is iconic rather than arbitrary; that is, it rather directly represents its subject matter, because a direct connection exists between the dance itself and the source of nectar in the number and direction of the gyrations. Each variety of animal communication consists of a fixed and limited set of signals for establishing territory, for locating food source and for attracting the opposite sex. And all these signals used in animal communication give us the impression of non-arbitrariness.

What then is the link between a linguistic form and its meaning? It is a matter of convention. Once the link between a form and a meaning is established, people cannot change it at will. Arbitrariness of language makes it potentially creative for new words and convention of language makes learning a language a difficult job.

### 1.3.4 Discreteness

The sounds used in language are meaningfully distinct. For example, the difference between a *b* and a *p* is not actually very great. As individual sounds,

these discrete sounds do not have any intrinsic meaning, but when these sounds are part of a language like English, they are used in such a way that they have distinct and identifiable meaning. The fact that the pronunciation of the words *pat* and *bat* makes a distinction in meaning can only be due to the difference between the *p* and *b* sounds in English. This property of language is described as **discreteness** (分离性, 离散性). Each sound in a continuous stream in the language is treated as discrete. We should have a very discrete view of the sounds of our language and wherever a pronunciation falls within the physically possible range of sounds, it will be interpreted as a linguistically specific and meaningfully distinct sound.

### 1.3.5 Duality

Human language operates on two levels of structure. At one level are elements which have no meaning in themselves but which combine to form units at another level which do have meanings. This organization of language into two levels, a lower level of sounds combining into a higher level of larger units, is known as **duality** (二重性) of language. So, at one level, we have distinct sounds, and, at another level, we have distinct meanings. The advantage of duality lies in the great productive power of human language, since with a limited set of distinct sounds we are capable of producing a very large number of sound combinations (e. g. words) which are distinct in meaning. And these huge number of words can form unlimited number of sentences. From duality we can notice that language is highly hierarchical.

Languages differ widely in the degree and the kind of correspondence between their sound and spelling systems. The very fact that duality can operate with both spoken sounds and written letters in human language is itself a feature of its flexibility. No animal communication appears to have exploited other media to develop alternative delivery system in this way. It is obvious that, although many animals may be able to produce special calls like *woof*, *meow* etc. , these units have meanings but cannot be further divided into discrete sounds. If your dog could operate on two levels , then you might expect to hear *oowf* and even *foow*, each with different meanings, consequently the communicative power of animals is very limited.

### 1.3.6 Cultural transmission

Language is unique to human being, but it is not something we are born with, a genetic endowment. While children inherited physical characteristics, such as dark hair and yellow skin from parents, they don't inherit their language. Children acquire a language in a culture with other speakers and not from parental genes. They have the ability to acquire any natural language, given appropriate experience of the language. An infant born of Japanese parents and brought up in an English-