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## The scope of linguistics

### Experience and explanation

Language is so intricately and intimately bound up with human life, and is so familiar an experience, that its essential nature is not easy to discern. If you are in the middle of the wood all you can see is the trees: if you want to see the wood, you have to get out of it. The purpose of linguistics is to explain language, and explanation depends on some dissociation from the immediacy of experience.

There is nothing unusual about this of course. As we have seen, it is one of the critical design features of language itself that it is at a remove from the actual reality of things. Its signs are arbitrary, and can therefore provide for abstraction: they enable us to set up conceptual categories to define our own world. It is this which enables human beings to be proactive rather than reactive: language does not just reflect or record reality, but creates it. In this sense, it provides us with an explanation of experience. Of course, 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.

But this very ability to abstract from the actual—in other words, this process of thinking which seems to distinguish humans and their language from the communication of other animals—naturally sets limits on our apprehension of the external world. Our categories inevitably confine our understanding by defining it, and no matter how subtle they may be, they cannot capture everything. And they remain necessarily unstable. The abstracting, thinking process does not stop; we are forever calling our categories into question, adapting them to changing circumstances. We subject our reality to a continual process of

conceptual realignment and look for alternative explanations. It is intrinsic to the nature of language that it allows for this endless adjustable abstraction, and the emergence of different ways of accounting for things. It contains within itself the dynamic potential for change.

The abstracting potential of language provides the means for intellectual enquiry, for the development of more formal explanation such as is practised in academic disciplines. We can think of such disciplines as cultures, ways of thinking and talking about things which are accepted as conventional within particular communities of scholars. As such, and as with any other culture, they draw abstractions from the actuality of experience. Linguistics is a discipline like any other. What is distinctive about it is that it uses the abstracting potential of language to categorize and explain language itself.

### Models and maps

The experience of language, as cognition and communication, is, as we have seen, inordinately complex. The purpose of linguistics is to provide some explanation of this complexity by abstracting from it what seems to be of essential significance. Abstraction involves the idealization of actual data, as part of the process of constructing **models** of linguistic description. These models are necessarily at a remove from familiar reality and may indeed bear little resemblance to it. There is, again, nothing peculiar about linguistics in this regard. Other disciplines devise models of a similar sort. The way in which the discipline of physics models the physical world in terms of waves and particles bears no relationship to the way we experience it. This does not invalidate the model. On the contrary, its very validity lies precisely in the fact that it reveals what is *not* apparent.

The purpose of linguistics, then, is to provide models of language which reveal features which are not immediately apparent. That being so, they are necessarily an abstraction, at a remove from familiar experience. A model is an idealized version of reality: those features which are considered incidental are stripped away in order to give prominence to those features which are considered essential. In this respect, models can be likened to maps.

A map does not show things as they really are. No matter what its scale, a vast amount of detail is inevitably left out because there is no room for it. And even when there is room, details will be excluded to avoid clutter which might distract attention from what is considered essential. Consider, for example, the map of the London Underground:

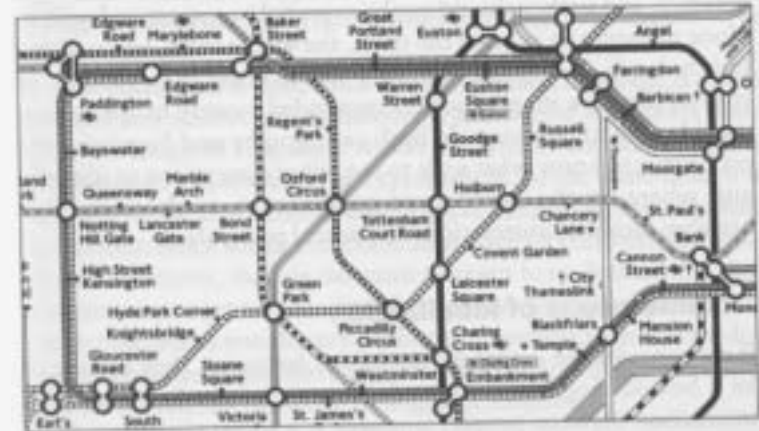


FIGURE 2.1 *London Underground map*

This bears very little resemblance to the actual layout of the track the trains run on, the twists and turns it takes as it threads its way underground. It gives no indication either about the distances between stations. It is even more remote from the reality of London above ground with its parks and public buildings and intricate network of streets. Such a map would be quite useless for finding your way on foot. It is in effect a model of the underground transport system designed as a guide to the traveller using it, and it leaves out everything which is not relevant to that purpose. It would be perverse to complain that it does not capture the full reality of the railway in all its complexity, misrepresents actual distances, and reveals nothing of what London is like at street level.

And so it is with models of the complex landscape of language. They will identify certain features as being of particular significance and give them prominence by avoiding the distraction of detail. Other features will be disregarded. And, naturally, different

models will work to different scales and give preference to different features. Like maps, all models are simplified and selective. They are idealized versions of reality, designed to reveal certain things by concealing others. There can be no all-purpose model, any more than there can be an all-purpose map. Their validity is always relative, never absolute. They are designed to explain experience, and so they should not be expected to correspond with it. None of them can capture the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. If they did that, they would cease to be models, of course, just as a map which corresponded exactly to the terrain would cease to be a map. In both cartography and linguistics the problem is to know what scale to use, what dimensions to identify, and where, in the interests of explanation, to draw the line between idealized abstractions and actual particulars.

### Dimensions of idealization

If we consider the actual particulars of language, they appear to be a bewildering assortment of different facets. As a means of interaction between people, language is a social phenomenon. It enables us to give public expression to private experience and so to communicate and commune with others, to arrive at agreed meanings and to regulate relationships. For this purpose to be served, different languages have to be relatively stable codes which people contract into as a condition of membership of the communities that use them, and there have to be generally agreed ways of using the language in different kinds of social context. In this sense, to learn a language is an act of social conformity.

At the same time, language provides the means for non-conformist self-expression as well. There is always some room for individual manoeuvre. For example, an individual speaking French, or Swahili, or Chinese in the natural course of events will on the one hand produce instances of that language, combinations of words, in accordance with the underlying systems of rules and established meanings which constitute the linguistic codes in each case. But on the other hand, they will be producing unique expressions in the language by exploiting the potential of the code. Although individuals are constrained by conventions of the code and its use, they exploit the potential differently on different

occasions and for different purposes. But this conscious exploitation is not the only source of variation. The patterning of a person's use of language is as naturally distinctive as a fingerprint. And even spoken utterances repeated by the same person, though they may sound identical, are never acoustically alike in every particular. It is obviously socially necessary to assume that certain things are the same, even if, on closer scrutiny, they turn out to be different.

The point then is that, from one perspective, language is a very general and abstract phenomenon. It is a shared and stable body of knowledge of linguistic forms and their function which is established by convention in a community. At the same time, it is very particular and variable if we look at the actuality of linguistic behaviour. Since social control is necessarily a condition on individual creativity, there is no contradiction here. It is simply that the nearer you get to actuality along the scale of idealization, the more differences you discern as the more general abstractions disappear. It is therefore convenient to mark off limiting points along this scale to define the scope of linguistic enquiry.

### *Langue and parole*

One such mark was made by Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss scholar usually credited with establishing the principles of modern linguistics. In a celebrated series of lectures in the early part of the century, he proposed that linguistics should concern itself with the shared social code, the abstract system, which he called *langue*, leaving aside the particular actualities of individual utterance, which he called *parole*. *Langue* was, on his account, a collective body of knowledge, a kind of common reference manual, copies of which were acquired by all members of a community of speakers. This distinction between language as abstract system and actual speech can be justified on two grounds (and it is not always entirely clear which one Saussure is arguing for). Firstly, it is convenient in that it delimits an area of enquiry which is manageable: it is possible in principle to conceive of a linguistics of *parole*, but the individual particularities of actual acts of speech are so varied and heterogeneous as to be elusive of description. Secondly, the concept of *langue* can be said to capture the central and determining aspect of

language itself. On this account, *parole* is the contingent executive side of things, the relatively superficial behavioural reflexes of knowledge. So *langue* can either be seen as a convenient principle of linguistics, or as an essential principle of language itself, or both.

There are a number of issues arising from Saussure's distinction. To begin with, one should note that the concept of *langue* eliminates from language its intrinsic instability. Language is necessarily, and essentially, dynamic. It is a process, not a state, and changes over time to accommodate the needs of its users. In fact Saussure was well aware of this. He was himself schooled in the tradition of historical linguistics which sought to account for changes in language over time, its **diachronic** dimension. But he conceives of *langue* as a cross-section of this process at a particular time, a **synchronic** state, which might be represented in the following diagram:

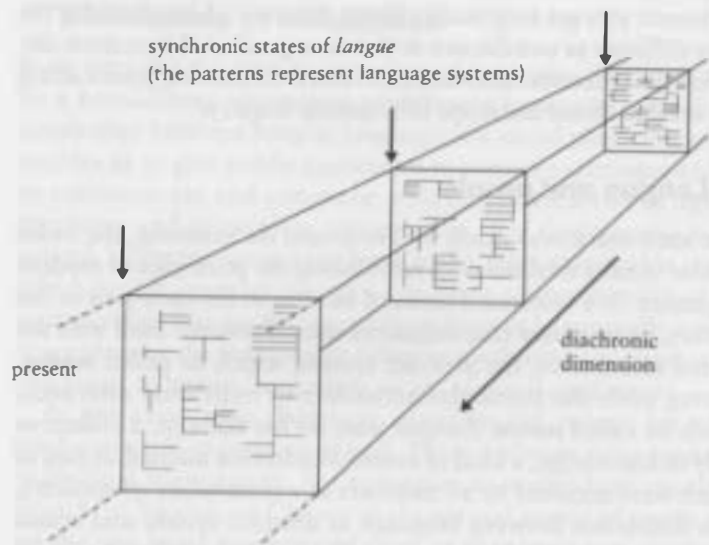


FIGURE 2.2 *The relationship between synchronic and diachronic aspects of language*

One difficulty about this conception, however, is that there is a confusion between synchrony and stability. Wherever you take a synchronic slice through language you will find not fixity, but

flux. This is because language does not just change *over time* but varies *at any one time*, and indeed this cannot be otherwise because the members of a community which 'shares' a language will themselves be of different ages, will use language differently, and will have different communicative and communal uses for it. Different generations generate differences. No matter how small the period of time, or limited the variety of language, there will be variations within it as it is fine-tuned by the community of its users. And as some of these variable uses become conventionalized, so they become established as changed forms. In other words, diachronic change over time is simply, and inevitably, a result of synchronic variation at any one time.

To illustrate his synchrony–diachrony distinction, Saussure drew an analogy with the game of chess. The synchronic cross-section of language (the state of *langue*) is, he argued, like the state of play at one time. We can study the disposition of the pieces on the board without considering the diachronic dimension of the game, that is to say, the moves that were made beforehand, or those that might be planned in the future. We can, in other words, see the pattern of pieces as a state of play and disregard it as a stage in the game. The analogy breaks down, however, because of course the game of chess is of its nature a sequence of separate stages and the game itself stops as each player takes a turn. But language is a continuity with no divisions of this kind. It is linguistics which makes it stop.

To say that diachrony and synchrony are not in reality distinct dimensions is not to invalidate the idealization that makes them distinct, but only to set limits on its claims to absolute validity. And this, as has been pointed out, is true of *all* models of language. If we wished to account for variation and change, we would draw the lines of idealization differently, but there would still be idealization. And the resulting model would necessarily be less revealing of the relative stability of language which serves as the necessary frame of reference in accounting for variation. You have to assume fixed points somewhere as bearings on description.

And as bearings on behaviour. It is important to note too that this assumption of stability can have a reality of its own. It is not only Saussure who conceives of language as a stable state. Although a close scrutiny of an actually occurring language will

reveal all manner of variation, people in the communities who speak it might well nevertheless *think* of their language as being settled and established, and accept the validity of grammars and dictionaries which record it as such. Members of a linguistic community may not have identical copies of *langue* in their heads, but they may nevertheless *believe* they do, and may consider whatever differences they do discern as matters of no real significance.

### Competence and performance

A comparable distinction to that of Saussure, designed to idealize language data, and to define the scope of linguistic enquiry, is made by Noam Chomsky. He distinguishes **competence**, the knowledge that native speakers have of their language as a system of abstract formal relations, and **performance**, their actual behaviour. Although performance must clearly be projected from competence, and therefore be referable to it, it does not *correspond* to it in any direct way. As with other aspects of human life, we do not necessarily act upon what we know, quite simply because actions are inevitably caught up in particular circumstances which set constraints and conditions on what we do. So it is that actual linguistic behaviour is conditioned by all manner of factors other than a knowledge of language as such, and these factors are, according to Chomsky, incidental, and irrelevant to linguistic description. Performance is particular, variable, dependent on circumstances. It may offer evidence of competence, but it is *circumstantial* evidence and not to be relied on. Abstract concepts of competence and actual acts of performance are quite different phenomena and you cannot directly infer one from the other. What we know cannot be equated with what we do.

Chomsky's distinction obviously corresponds in some degree to that of Saussure. It represents a similar dichotomy of knowledge and behaviour and a similar demarcation of the scope of linguistic enquiry. There are, however, differences. To begin with, there is no ambivalence in Chomsky as to the status of the distinction. It is not that competence is presented as a *convenient* construct and therefore a useful principle for language study: it is presented as a *valid* construct, as the central principle of language itself. To focus on competence is to focus on what is essential and

primary. Performance is the residual category of secondary phenomena, incidental, and peripheral.

A second point to be made is that though *langue* and competence can both be glossed in terms of abstract knowledge, the nature of knowledge is conceived of in very different ways. Saussure thinks of it as socially shared, common knowledge: his image is of *langue* as a book, printed in multiple copies and distributed throughout a community. It constitutes, therefore, a generality of highest common factors. But for Chomsky competence is not a social but a psychological phenomenon, not so much printed as *imprinted*, not a shared generality but a genetic endowment in each individual. Of course, individuals are not innately programmed to acquire competence in any particular language, but competence in any one language can nevertheless be taken as a variant in respect to universal features of language.

*Langue*, then, is conceived of as knowledge which is determined by membership of a social community, and so it follows that the focus of attention will naturally be on what makes each *langue* different. In this definition of linguistic knowledge, the main question of interest is: what is distinctive about particular *languages* as social phenomena? Competence, on the other hand, is conceived of as knowledge which is determined by membership of the human species and it follows that the interest here will naturally be not on what makes individual competences different but what makes them alike. In this definition of knowledge the main question of interest is: what is distinctive about *language* in general, and as specific to the human species?

Chomsky's distinction, then, leads to a definition of linguistics as principally concerned with the universals of the human mind. Indeed, he has defined linguistics as a branch of cognitive psychology. His idealization is a strictly **formalist** one in that it fixes on the forms of languages as evidence of these universals without regard to how these forms function in the business of communication and the conduct of social life in different communities. In this respect, Chomsky's definition of competence as the proper concern of linguistics is much further along the continuum of abstraction than is Saussure's definition of *langue*, in that it leaves social considerations out of account entirely.

Two further issues are perhaps worth noting in respect to this

formalist definition of language. First, as was indicated earlier, it is obvious that the further one proceeds in abstraction, the greater the risk of losing contact with the actuality of language in use. If competence is knowledge of the abstract principles of linguistic organization, which may not be evident in actual behaviour, nor even accessible to consciousness, then what, one might reasonably ask, counts as empirical evidence for its existence? The answer to this question has generally been that linguists themselves, as representative native speakers of a language, can draw evidence from their own intuitions. But there seems no reason why one should suppose it as self-evident that linguists are reliable informants: on the contrary, one might more reasonably suppose that as interested parties with an analytic bent they would on the face of it be very untypical, and so be disqualified as representative speakers. There are ways of countering this argument, but problems about the link between abstraction and actuality remain, and the further language is removed from its natural surroundings, the greater the problem becomes. On the other hand, the more you locate it in its natural surroundings, the less you see in the way of significant generalization. The dilemma of idealization we discussed earlier will always be with us.

Whereas this first issue has to do with the methodology of linguistic enquiry, with how to give support to the statements you make, the second has to do with the scope of linguistic enquiry, with what your statements should actually be *about*.

And here we find something of an apparent paradox in Chomsky's position. What he represents as central in language is an abstract set of organizing principles which both define an area of human cognition, a specific language faculty, and determine the parameters of Universal Grammar. The various forms of different languages are of interest to the extent that they can be seen as alternative settings for these general parameters. The communicative functions such forms take on in actual contexts of use are of no interest at all. They furnish no reliable evidence of underlying cognitive principles: there are too many distractions in the data by way of performance variables. So the most important thing about language from this point of view is that it is evidence for something else, namely a faculty in the human mind, uniquely and innately specific to the species. In a sense, therefore, it would appear that what is

central in language is that it is not of itself central. Paradoxically, for Chomsky, the study of language depends on disregarding most of it as irrelevant. Indeed, in this view, what linguistics is about is not really language but grammar, and more particularly that area of grammar which is concerned with the structural relations of sentence constituents, that is to say, with **syntax**.

Chomsky's specification of the scope of linguistics is extremely broad and far-reaching in respect to its implications, encompassing as it does nothing less than the universals of the human mind. But it is, of course, correspondingly extremely narrow and inward-looking in respect to the familiar phenomenon of language itself. What Chomsky presents is an abstract explanation of language which is a long way from actual experience. Not surprisingly, it has been challenged.

### Knowledge and ability

One objection to Chomsky's model is that it defines the nature of linguistic knowledge too narrowly to mean a knowledge of grammatical form, and more specifically of syntax. Knowing a language, it is objected, involves more than knowing what form it takes: it involves knowing how it functions too. And this in turn implies knowing about words, not just as formal items, constituents of sentences, but as units of meaning which interact with syntax in complex ways. The formal systems of a language, after all, have evolved in association with words as the internal semantic encoding of some external social reality. So an account of grammatical knowledge, the argument runs, cannot ignore the fact that linguistic form is functionally motivated, so that to abstract form so completely from function is to misrepresent the nature of language. In this view, linguistics is essentially the study of how languages *mean*, how they are functionally informed: it is **semantics** which is primary.

Chomsky's *formal grammar* seeks to identify particular features of syntax with reference to universal and innate principles of human cognition. An alternative is to think in terms of a *functional grammar*, to consider how language is differentially influenced by the environment, how it is shaped by social use, and reflects the functions it has evolved to serve.



But it is also argued that knowing a language also includes knowing how to access grammar, and other formal features of language, to express meanings appropriate to the different contexts in which communication takes place. This too is a matter of function, but in a different sense. Here, we are concerned not with what the language means, that is to say, the *internal* function of forms in the language code, but with what people mean *by* the language, that is to say, what *external* function forms are used for in communication. Knowledge in the abstract has to be made actual and this is normally done by putting it to communicative use, not citing random sentences. People do not simply display what they know. They act upon it, and their actions are regulated by conventions of different kinds. So, according to this point of view, competence is not only knowledge in the abstract, but also ability to put knowledge to use according to convention.

There are then two ways of revising Chomsky's conception of competence, of redrawing the lines of idealization in devising a model of language. Firstly, we can redefine what constitutes the code or internal language by including aspects which reflect the nature of language as a communicative resource. This results in a functional grammar and, we may say, broadens the concept of linguistic *knowledge*.

Secondly, we might extend the notion of competence itself to include both *knowledge* and the *ability* to act upon it. Performance, then, becomes particular instances of behaviour which result from the exercise of ability and are not simply the reflexes of knowledge. Ability is the executive branch of competence, so to speak, and enables us to achieve meaning by putting our knowledge to work. If we did not have this accessing ability, it can be argued, the abstract structures of knowledge—this purely *linguistic* competence—would remain internalized in the mind and never see the light of day. We would spend all our lives buried in thought in a paralysis of cognition. Since this ability is only activated by some communicative purpose or other, we can reasonably call this more comprehensive concept **communicative competence**.

## 3

### Principles and levels of analysis

However linguistic knowledge is defined, it involves an abstraction from actuality, some kind of classification of experience. To say that you know a language implies that you have *inferred* certain generalities from particulars. That is what we do in language learning. To say you know how to act upon your knowledge implies that you can reverse the process and identify instances, that is to say, *refer* particulars to generalities. That is what we do in language use.

#### Type and token

It follows that linguistic description deals in generalities, in abstract **types** of language element of which particular instances are actual **tokens**. Consider, for example, the following line from Shakespeare's *Richard II*:

I wasted time and now doth time waste me.

On one count, there are nine word elements here, and thirty-two letter elements. This is a count of token occurrences. But the word 'time' occurs twice, so if we count word types, there are eight words here. Similarly, if we count letter types, there are ten, since the letters 'i' and 'w' occur three times, 't' five times, and so on. But if we define elements differently, we would, of course, get other counts. Thus, we might count 'wasted' and 'waste' as tokens of the same type (the verb 'waste') or as different types if we are thinking in terms of **lexical items**, since the verb is used in two different meanings, 'to use extravagantly' and 'to make weaker and thinner'. Or we could adjust our focus again and consider vowels and