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Issues in  
**Linguistics,  
Sociolinguistics**

**D** AND  
**Discourse  
Analysis**

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Part

**I**

**Linguistics**

*Chapter One*

**The Nature of Language**

## Introduction

What is language? How can we characterize the knowledge that humans have of language?

All normal humans acquire a language in the first few years of life. The knowledge acquired is largely of an unconscious sort. That is, very young children learn how to form particular grammatical structures, such as relative clauses. They also learn that relative clauses often have a modifying function, but in a conscious sense they do not know that it is a relative clause and could presumably not state what relative clauses are used for.

There are a number of aspects of language that can be described systematically: phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics, and pragmatics of language.

### *Sound systems*

Knowledge of the sound system (phonology) of our native language is complex. Minimally, it entails knowing what sounds are possible and what sounds are not possible in the language. Phonological knowledge also involves knowing what happens to words in fast speech as opposed to more carefully articulated speech.

### *Syntax*

Syntax is what is frequently known as grammar, referring primarily to the knowledge we have of the order of elements in a sentence. We point out briefly that there are two kinds of grammar that are generally referred to: (a) *prescriptive* grammar and (b) *descriptive* grammar. By prescriptive grammar, we mean such rules as are generally taught in school, often without regard to the way native speakers of a language actually *use* language. We have in mind such rules as “Don’t end a sentence with a preposition” “Don’t split infinitives”.

On the other hand, linguists who are concerned with descriptive grammars attempt to describe languages as they are actually used. Thus, when talking about knowledge of syntax, we are referring to descriptive grammars. The rules just stated are not true of descriptive grammars because native speakers of English frequently violate the prescriptive rules.

Not only do we know which sentences are acceptable in our language, we also know which sentences are grossly equivalent in terms of meaning.

Another aspect of language that we know is how meaning is affected by moving elements within a sentence. For example, adverbs can be moved in a sentence without affecting the meaning, whereas nouns cannot.

Thus, knowing a language entails knowing a set of rules with which we can produce an infinite set of sentences. In order to see that language is rule-governed and that we can comprehend novel sentences. But it is important to note that syntax is complex, often abstract and in many instances difficult to describe.

### *Morphology and the lexicon*

The study of morphology is the study of word formation. In many cases, words are made up of more than one part. For example, the word *unforeseen* is made up of three parts: *un*, which has a negative function; *fore*, which means earlier in time; and *seen*, which means visualized. Each part is referred to as a morpheme, which can be defined as the minimal unit of meaning. Not only do we know how to form words using affixes (prefixes, suffixes, infixes), but we also know what words can go with other words.

### *Semantics*

The study of semantics refers to the study of meaning. This, of course, does not necessarily correspond to grammaticality because many ungrammatical sentences are meaningful, or at least interpretable, as can be seen in the following sentences.

*\*That woman beautiful is my mother.*

*\*I'll happy if I can get your paper.*

These and many other sentences that are uttered by nonnative speakers of a language are perfectly comprehensible, despite the fact that they do not follow the “rules” of English. The reverse side of the picture is the sentence that is grammatically formed but that, because of the content, is meaningless. (at least without additional contextualization)

Knowledge of the semantics of a language entails knowledge of the reference of words. For example, in English we know that a *table* refers to an object with a flat top and either three or four legs and that a *leaf* most often refers to part of a tree. But as native speakers we also have to be able to distinguish between the meaning of the *leaf* of a tree and the *leaf* of a table. When we hear an advertisement on television for a table with extra *leafs*, it is

this knowledge of homonyms that comes into play to help us interpret the advertisement in the manner intended. For a learner, of course, it is not so easy, as he or she might struggle to imagine a table with tree leaves.

Additionally, it is important to note that the limits of a word are not always clear. What is the difference between a *cup* and a *glass*? For many objects it is obvious; for others it is less so. Referential meanings are clearly not the only way of expressing meaning.

As native speakers of a language, we know that the way we combine elements in sentences affects their meaning.

### ***Pragmatics***

Yet another area of language that we consider is pragmatics, or the way in which we use language in context. For example, when we answer the telephone and someone says *Is John there?*, we understand that this is a request to speak with John. It would be strange to respond *yes* with the caller saying *thank you* and then hanging up unless the caller did not want to carry on the conversation with John present or only wanted to know whether or not John was present. Clearly, the phrase '*Is X there?*' in the context of telephone usage is a request to speak with someone and not an information question.

### **Properties of Language**

The six unique properties of language are *displacement, arbitrariness, productivity, discreteness, duality and cultural transmission*. Displacement: allows language users to communicate about events or things that are absent from the current environment (what you did last week, your friend who is not with you, what you will do on vacation, etc.). This allows humans to make up stories and to think about the future. Arbitrariness: the words and symbols used to denote objects are not inherently related to the objects they symbolize. Productivity: the potential unique sentences/word combinations/sounds is infinite. Discreteness: the sounds within the language are considered their own, discrete sounds with their own distinct meanings. Duality: at one level of language there are discrete sounds, and at another, there are discrete meanings. You can combine the letters g, o and d in two different ways: god and dog, and those two words mean different things/sound differently even though they are comprised of the same three sounds. Cultural Transmission: language is acquired through culture.

*Chapter Four*

**Word Meaning**

## Semantics

Term coined by Bréal (1897) for the subdiscipline of linguistics concerned with the analysis and description of the so-called 'literal' meaning of linguistic expressions.

Depending on the focus, various aspects of meaning may be prominent: (a) the internal semantic structure of individual linguistic expressions, as described by componential analysis, meaning postulates, or stereotypes; (b) the semantic relations between linguistic expressions as in synonymy, antonymy; (c) the whole meaning of sentences ( sentence meaning, principle of compositionality) as the sum of the meaning of the individual lexemes as well as the grammatical relations between them; (d) the relation of linguistic expressions—or their meaning—to extralinguistic reality ( referential semantics). All questions under (a)–(d) can be examined both diachronically and synchronically.

### Semantic Feature

In structural semantics a class of theoretical constructs developed in analogy to the distinctive features of phonology which are considered to be the smallest semantic units for the description of linguistic expressions and their semantic relations, e.g. *walk* [+motion,+on ground,+upright] as opposed to *stroll*, which is further characterized by [+slowly,+portly]. Semantic features are generally expressions found in ordinary spoken language but treated as metalinguistic terms and are (as a rule) placed in brackets (componential analysis for the derivation of semantic features).

We have to resort to less direct methods for probing the semantic aspect of the lexicon and of lexical entries:

### Entailment

It refers to a relationship between two or more sentences (strictly speaking proposition). If knowing that one sentence is true gives us certain knowledge of the truth of the second sentence, then the first sentence entails the second. Entailment is concerned with the meaning of the sentence itself. It does not depend on the context in which a sentence is used.



## ***Implication***

In everyday communication, a great deal of information is implied by the speaker rather than asserted. For example, if somebody said:

*Rita was on time this morning.*

It could imply that Rita was usually late.

Often the hearer would understand the implication of the utterance in the way that the speaker intends and give a suitable response but, of course, there may be misunderstandings and misinterpretations:

*A: I'm rather short of cash at the moment.*

(meaning: I'd like you to pay for the lunch)

*B: Oh, I'm sure they accept credit cards here.*

## ***Presupposition***

What a speaker or writer assumes that the receiver of the message already knows. For example:

Speaker A: *What about inviting Simon tonight?*

Speaker B: *What a good idea; then he can give Monica a lift.*

Here, the presuppositions are, among others, that speakers A and B know who Simon and Monica are, that Simon has a vehicle, most probably a car, and that Monica has no vehicle at the moment. Children often presuppose too much. They may say:

*... and he said "let's go" and we went there.*

even if their hearers do not know who *he is* and where *there is*.

## ***Antonymy***

*Antonymy* is a word which is opposite in meaning to another word. For example, in English *dead* and *alive*, and *big* and *small* are antonyms. A distinction is sometimes made between pairs like *dead* and *alive*, and pairs like *big* and *small*, according to whether or not the words are gradable. A person

who is not *dead* must be *alive*, but something which is not *big* is not necessarily *small*, it may be somewhere between the two sizes. *Dead* and *alive* are called *complementaries* (or ungradable antonyms); *big* and *small* are called gradable antonyms or a *gradable pair*.

### ***Incompatibility***

It is the most common semantic relation of lexical opposition. Two expressions are incompatible if they are semantically similar yet differ in a single semantic feature. To this extent, cohyponyms (hyponymy) are incompatible: for example, *burgundy* and *chablis* are both hyponyms of *wine*, but differ according to the single semantic feature of 'color.' With incompatibility, it is particularly essential to relativize the terms against a common semantic background: thus, *burgundy* and *chablis*, against the background of 'suitable for drinking,' are not incompatible. Substitution of one expression I1 and I2 in suitable sentences S(...) is a useful heuristic test for incompatibility. In this test, a contradiction arises between S(I1) and S(I2), in that the negation of S(I2) follows from S(I1) while the negation of S(I1) follows from S(I2).

### ***Subordination***

In addition to dependency, interdependence, and co-ordination, it is the most important relationship between syntactic elements. A dependency relationship of subordination exists, for example, between predicate and object/adverbials, between heads and modifiers, between main and dependent clauses, as well as between dependent clauses of various degrees of dependency in complex sentence structures. Grammatical terms which are based on subordination include dependency, hypotaxis, subordinate clause, government.

### ***Diahyponymy***

It is a paradigmatic semantic relation and a special type of hyponymy. Two linguistic expressions are in a relation of diahyponymy if they can be distinguished as hyponyms (hyponymy) from other subordinate terms by a common feature. Thus, in the semantic field of 'kinship relationships' (kinship term) the expressions *mother*, *daughter*, and *sister* are differentiated by the

feature [direct relationship] from the expressions *aunt* and *niece* or by the feature [female] from *father*, *son*, and *brother*.

### ***Hyperonymy (superordination)***

Semantic relation of lexical superordination (i.e. the converse of lexical subordination, hyponymy) which reflects a hierarchy-like distribution of the vocabulary or lexicon: *fruit* is a hyperonym, or superordinate, of *apple*, *pear*, and *plum*, because the transition from *apple* to *fruit*, for example, is accompanied by a generalization in meaning. A superordinate relation has some similarities to various logical and semantic relations: part–whole relations (*nose*, *head*), generals vs. specifics (*living being* vs. *human*), ‘element-of’ relations (*book*: *library*).

### ***Hyponymy (subordination)***

Term suggested by Lyons (1963) (in analogy to synonymy) for the semantic relation of subordination, i.e. the specification of semantic content. For example, *apple* is a hyponym of *fruit*, since *apple* has a more specific meaning than *fruit*. In expressions with extensions, the hyponymy can be viewed as the subset relation: l1 (lexeme1) is subordinate to l2 only if the extension of l1 is contained in the extension of l2. *Apple*, *pear*, *plum* are co-hyponyms relative to each other and hyponyms of the generic term *fruit* (hyperonymy). Every hyponym is distinguished from its hyperonym, or superordinate, by at least one feature that specifies it further.

### ***Homophony***

It happens when two or more different written forms have the same pronunciation. An example is *pale* and *pail*.

### ***Polysemy***

When a word has two or more closely related meanings, e.g. *foot* in:

*He hurt his foot.*

*She stood at the foot of the stairs.*

*Chapter Twenty Five*

**Functions and Good  
Language Learners**

In this section we have addressed the following question:

*How do good language learners develop functional competence (or the ability to use the language they are learning in real communication) and how can teachers facilitate the process?*

There are different approaches to the teaching of language functions:

1. Prague school of linguistics: Following Saussure, they viewed language as a system of units (for instance, sentence, word, morpheme, or phoneme), each serving some purpose or function and functionally related to other units. The functional perspective on language set up by the Prague school is shown in its view of language as consisting of devices fulfilling certain functions and being understood only when the functional relation of each device to others is analysed. The Prague school had an interest in the practical application of its theory to the teaching and learning of functions, centered on the need to understand the relationship of form to meaning and function in the course of learning a new language.

2. The British tradition (Firthian linguistics; the London school) is another school of linguistics whose functional view was central to its conception of language. Firth (1957), the founder of the school, drew heavily on Malinowski's (1935) context of situation to frame his view of language as a system functioning in some environment or context. Firth argued for the centrality of the notion of context, with an emphasis on meaning. Insisting on language as a means primarily used by people to function in society, Firth construed *meaning as function in context*. Each function, in his view, can be split into a series of component functions, defined as the use of a *language form in relation to a context*. As function in context, meaning was not studied only in word-based semantics or in a separate area of linguistics. Rather, The statement of the functions of linguistic elements in their context was looked on as the principle underlying all linguistic description. The influence of the British tradition is evident both in the implications of its functional view of language for the promotion of function acquisition and use by learners, and in the practical involvement of linguists drawing on this tradition to respond to the burgeoning demand for language learning.

3. In Halliday's theory, language function has a dual status: The first refers to the uses or functions that reflect the developmental needs of an

infant, *inter alia* instrumental and regulatory. The second concerns the transition to adult language. While this language, according to Halliday, maintains its originally functional character, the concept of “function” in it undergoes a substantial change in that it is no longer synonymous with “use” but gains a more abstract nature, turning into a kind of metafunction. Through metafunction, the various adult uses of language receive a symbolic expression in a systematic and finite form. For Halliday, uses in the adult language are simply “the selection of options within the linguistic system in the context of actual situation types”; as such, it is not possible to enumerate language uses in a very systematic way.

In Halliday’s view, adult language is made up of a small number of functional components.

Good language learners need greater awareness of the fact that pragmatic competence does not automatically evolve in the process of language learning and that they need a focus on the pragmatic aspect of language. The functional approach arrived on the scene in the 1970s to help language learners acquire communicative competence. It broadened the horizons of learning by contributing to the burgeoning of interest in the concepts of a functional view of language learning, a learner-centered focus, the analysis of learner needs, and learner-centered goals. Functions are one of the units of organization in the hybrid or multidimensional syllabus and functions feature prominently in any method or textbook aimed to satisfy the communicative needs of language learners. This is the result of recognition that pragmatic competence is one of the vital components of language that good language learners need to acquire. Functions are gaining increasing attention with the rise of interlanguage pragmatics and the corresponding research into the learning, use, and instruction of functions/speech acts. However, the question of how good language learners develop functional competence (that is, how they learn to use the language) and how insights into this question might be used to assist less successful learners remains largely unaddressed and presents a fertile ground for further research.