

Chapter 1: Introduction

Our everyday environment contains a barrage of language phenomena that seems to require explanation. Consider the following examples:

1. You walk into a restaurant and see a sign saying “Thank you for not smoking.” Somehow the *thank you* seems insincere.
2. You’re watching a courtroom drama on TV, and the prosecutor asks the defendant, “Mr. Jones, have you stopped cheating on your wife?” Somehow the prosecutor’s question seems “loaded.”
3. In the same show, the judge turns to the jury for a verdict and asks, “What say you?” Somehow, the judge isn’t using “normal” English.
4. You’re listening to a biology lecture, and the professor says, “Most AIDS are caused by...” Somehow this sounds “funny.” You would have said, “AIDS is...”
5. As you enter a store, you notice a volunteer soliciting donations for abused children. She’s wearing a placard that says *HELP ABUSE CHILDREN*. You wonder how someone could make such a mistake.

Now, each one of these little scenarios has a straightforward explanation. It might be tempting to try to explain them using “common sense”; after all, each of us does speak the language. The catch, however, is that you need to know a little linguistics to be able to explain them accurately. Thus, our goal in this book is to teach you enough about linguistics so that you can make informed comments about language.

There are two questions worth asking about linguistics.

First, *what do linguists study?* The answer is, the *mind*. In particular, they study the unconscious knowledge that speakers have about their language. For example, you may occasionally see the phrase *an historical novel*, but you never see **an history book* (linguists use an asterisk to indicate a non-occurring form). Why is this? Well, it turns out that what everyone learns in elementary school about *a* and *an* is true: *a* occurs before words beginning with a vowel sound, and *an* occurs before those beginning with a consonant sound. However, this is only half the story. It’s also true that *h* can be unpronounced when it begins an unstressed syllable. Note that the *h* begins a stressed syllable in *history* but an unstressed syllable in *historical*. Thus, the *h* in *historical* can be unpronounced, and when it is, the word begins with a vowel sound. When it does, we get *an* instead of *a*. In short, what the linguist is interested in figuring out is these unconscious “rules” that people know about their language (e.g. that *h* can be unpronounced when it begins an unstressed syllable).

Second, *how do linguists study it?* The answer is, *indirectly*. Here’s the problem. These rules that speakers know unconsciously are not directly accessible. Linguists can’t ask speakers about the rules, because speakers aren’t aware they have them. Therefore, linguists have to study concrete that is *associated* with these mental rules. For example, historical linguists study language change (i.e. they look at samples of a language at two different points in time). Neurolinguists study language pathology (i.e. they look at the behavior of people who have damage to the language centers of the brain).

Dialectologists study regional and social variations within a single language. Experimental phoneticians study the sound waves created by people speaking and the musculature used in speech. And so on. The thing they all have in common is that they study something concrete in the hope that it will give them some idea of the ways that language is organized in speakers' minds.

One common method that theoretical linguists use to infer properties of language is to investigate speakers' judgements about sentences. Under this method, the linguist asks informants (native speakers of the language under investigation) questions such as the following: Is utterance X an acceptable sentence in the language? Does utterance X have the same meaning as utterance Y? In utterance X, can word A refer to word B? And so on and so forth. Consider the following sentences.

(6) John thinks that Bill hates him.

(7) John thinks that Bill hates himself.

The linguist might present (6) and (7) to some informants and ask them to judge the two sentences for acceptability. In response, the informants would undoubtedly say that both (6) and (7) are perfectly acceptable. That is, both are completely unremarkable; people say such things day in and day out, and they go completely unnoticed. (In contrast, sentences such as **Him thinks that Bill hates John* and **John thinks that himself hates Bill* are remarkable: that is, speakers of English do not typically produce such sentences.) After having determined that both (6) and (7) are acceptable, the linguist might ask the informants the following questions. (The expected answers appear in parentheses.)

- In (6), can *him* refer to *John*? (Yes.) Can *him* refer to *Bill*? (No.)
- In (7), can *himself* refer to *John*? (No.) Can *himself* refer to *Bill*? (Yes.)
- Do sentences (6) and (7) have the same meaning? (No.)

Having gathered these data, the linguist would then try to infer the properties of the internal linguistic system of the informants that would account for these judgments. For example, the linguist might hypothesize that English contains at least two kinds of pronouns: **personal pronouns** (e.g. *him*) and **reflexive pronouns** (e.g. *himself*). Moreover, the linguist might hypothesize that a pronoun must have an **antecedent** (i.e. preceding word or phrase to which the pronoun refers). Finally, the linguist might infer that the antecedents of these two types of pronouns behave differently; that is, they antecedent for a personal pronoun and the antecedent for a reflexive pronoun cannot occupy the same position within a sentence. And so on. This process would continue until the linguist had formed a picture of what the psychological system of the informants looks like, at least with respect to where the antecedents for personal and reflexive pronouns can appear.

This procedure can be schematized as follows.

Observable Data →

Speakers' judgements of acceptability, sameness of meaning, reference, and so forth.

Linguist →

Makes hypotheses about internal structure of speakers' psychological linguistic system.

Theory

English has two kinds of pronouns, whose antecedents appear in different positions.

This idea of trying to model what we cannot directly observe by drawing inferences from what we can observe is not restricted to linguistic theory. In 1938, the physicists Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld wrote a book entitled *The Evolution of Physics*. In it they had this to say:

In our endeavor to understand reality we are somewhat like a man trying to understand the mechanism of a closed watch. He sees the face and the moving hands, even hears its ticking, but he has no way of opening the case. If he is ingenious he may form some picture of a mechanism which could be responsible for all the things he observes, but he may never be quite sure his picture is the only one which could explain his observations. He will never be able to compare his picture with the real mechanism and he cannot even imagine the possibility of the meaning of such a comparison. (p. 31)

These physicists are essentially describing the same position that theoretical linguists are in: They are trying to formulate hypotheses about the structure of what they cannot observe, based on what they can observe. In studying language, linguists cannot observe a speaker's mind. They can, however, observe the speaker's judgments about sentences. On the basis of these observable judgments, linguists can construct a theory of the unobservable psychological system that underlies these judgments. Moreover, they will never know for sure if their theory is correct; all they can do is continue to test it against an ever-expanding range of data and revise it as necessary.

To summarize, professionals who comment on others' language must know basic linguistic theory in order to do so intelligently and accurately. Linguistic theory is essentially a model of what speakers know about language. Linguists build their models based on indirect evidence, such as speakers' behavior and judgments about language.