

# 1 What is linguistics?

## Fields of study, academic disciplines, and their foundations

**M**ANY STUDENTS ARRIVE IN THEIR FINAL YEAR OF STUDY WITH NO CLEAR IDEA of how their fields of study are defined, or how these fields relate to other fields. Nor do they know how the variety of academic fields of study that they have encountered in their studies relates to the world outside of the university. Yet it is for this world, or for the study of an aspect or dimension of it that the university is supposed to prepare them. If it wishes to serve well the academic and professional needs of its students, a university and the opportunities for study that it affords cannot leave them with a sense that all that they have learned are bits and pieces. Such scatterings of insight and analysis, unrelated not only to the future needs of students, but often unrelated to other academic fields, or, in the worst case, unrelated even to components within a single field, are neither what students need nor what they rightfully deserve.

The argument of this course is that students are being done a disservice if their encounter with a field of study is offered in piecemeal fashion, and incoherently. This course will therefore set out as clearly as it can a framework for linguistic study. This framework will serve as the foundation from which we can survey all of linguistics. It will allow us to make sense of its many sub-disciplines, and enable us to see how linguistics relates to other fields, as well as beyond the academy to our professional lives after graduation.

A field of study in the academic side of our world is called a discipline. We speak of the discipline of mathematics, the discipline of physics, the discipline of

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sociology, the discipline of economics, or, in our case, the discipline of linguistics. By calling these fields disciplines, we emphasise in the notion of “field” not only that it has limits, boundaries, and demarcation, but also add to it an idea that different fields will have diverse content, and potential variation in what is considered an acceptable way of analysing things in a certain domain. We can only make sense of disciplines if we have a way of demarcating them as such, and as different from others in various respects. This is another way of saying that to know what a discipline is and what it involves, we need to define it. Added to this, such a definition must define our field, linguistics, in such a way that it is clearly different from other fields.

These kinds of issues are philosophical ones. So when the term “framework” or “foundation” is used in this course, it means that we are addressing questions related to the philosophical groundwork or basis of our field, linguistics. It is important to note that these foundational questions and their answers are not linguistics. They cannot be answered merely by reference to linguistic distinctions, our analytical methods, or components of the field. They are philosophical or foundational in nature.

If we do not answer them, however, our linguistic work itself will lack coherence and meaning, and will become a piecemeal exercise. Of course, if we are certain that what we wish to do is linguistics, we may be tempted to rush in headlong, considering how to learn to *do* linguistics a much greater priority than standing back and first answering some philosophical questions. It is this urgency that may understandably have created an unwillingness or inability among those who teach and do linguistics to answer first some critically important questions. The point is: if we do not take the time to clarify the framework issues first, they may come back to haunt us later. Worse, the lack of answers to foundational questions at the outset may make us uncritical victims of the latest academic fashions in our disciplines, with no theoretical equipment at our disposal with which to evaluate the merits or weaknesses of a new approach. The only antidote to becoming a victim of what is currently academically fashionable is to take the philosophical foundations of linguistics seriously. What is currently the most prominent approach may have fallen – indeed will fall, for it is certain to happen – into disfavour in the future, just when we may be in need of linguistic insight and distinctions. To hear that an approach is out of date just when you need it most, and to have no tools for assessing what it has been replaced with, is an unenviable position for any language professional to be in. For our future professional needs, we want to have a framework that will enable us to assess the merits and demerits of each new approach that appears on the horizon of linguistic distinction-making.

There are three related philosophical questions that we must answer before embarking on doing linguistics. The answers to these questions will serve as our guides when we enter the field. The first question is: How do we define linguistics? The second one is: How does linguistics relate to other disciplines? And the final question is: How does linguistic work relate to our professional lives?

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In what follows below, I shall make use freely of the distinctions and insights in my study of the foundations of linguistics (Weideman, 2009).

## **The definition of a discipline**

Academic disciplines are defined by their study of a unique dimension of our experience. Dimensions or facets of experience are not concrete things, but aspects of things. As we shall see below, if we try to define disciplines in terms of concrete phenomena, we run into a multitude of theoretical controversies and contradictions. The aspects of concrete things, such as a house, a tree, a dog, or a statue, a book, a painting, or a coin, are theoretically distinguishable dimensions of those things. Each concrete thing, including language, when we view it as an object, features a number of unique aspects. For example, a tree has a numerical dimension (it is a single tree), a spatial facet (it occupies a piece of land), an organic aspect (it is a growing and living thing), and a social dimension (it stands in a park, where people may use its shade for recreation), to name but a few. It may even have an historical side (a tree planted in commemoration of an important event), or an aesthetic one (it may be pleasing to the eye, or might function as a symbol in a work of art), or a juridical dimension (for example when it becomes the centre of a dispute between neighbours), or have economic value (it can be cut down and sold). Though this is unlikely to be factually true, an apple tree reputedly helped Newton think through his theory of gravity, so trees may, in their interaction with humans, exhibit a logical side. Of course, they also possess a physical one, which is evident when we chop them down to use for fuel.

All of the distinguishable dimensions of our experience yield the unique aspects that help us to define theoretical disciplines. These aspects are the following (with their unique or defining kernel in brackets): the numerical (discreteness), spatial (extension), kinematic (regular movement), physical (energy-effect), biotic (organic life), psychical (feeling), logical (analysis), historical (formative power), lingual (expression by means of signs), social (interaction), economic (frugality), aesthetic (harmony), juridical (retribution), ethical (love) and faith (belief).

It is easy to see how these provide the defining moments that enable us to distinguish between, respectively, mathematics (defined by the study of the numerical and spatial aspects), physics (kinematic dimension), chemistry (the study of energy-effect), biology (biotic dimension), psychology (feelings and emotion), and then logic, history, linguistics, sociology, economics, aesthetics, jurisprudence, ethics, and theology.

It is also apparent that some of these disciplines belong to what we may call the natural sciences, and others to the so-called human or cultural sciences. The natural sciences study the natural dimensions of our world, such as the numerical, the spatial, the kinematic, the physical, the organic and the psychical. The cultural

disciplines focus on the dimensions that are characteristically human: the logical, the historical, the lingual, the social, the juridical, and so on.

Each aspect therefore provides a guarantee of the uniqueness of the discipline involved. It provides us with an angle from which we can proceed to form concepts of phenomena within a certain domain. If the dimensions of our experience were themselves not unique, each with an irreducible, defining nuclear moment, they would not have been theoretically distinguishable, and if they were not distinguishable, we would have lacked a theoretical and philosophical basis for distinguishing between various disciplines.

If these aspects of our experience allow us to distinguish and demarcate disciplinary boundaries, they may also show us how linguistics as a discipline is related to other fields. Let's consider this below, by first looking at answers to the second and third questions posed above, before returning subsequently to more detailed answer to the first ("What is linguistics?").

## The relationship between linguistics and other disciplines

Not only are the aspects that define the fields of study of the various disciplines unique, each with their own irreducible kernel or defining moment, but they are at the same time inextricably related and intertwined. Each unique aspect analogically reflects others. This analogical reflection is a reference, taken from the vantage point of one aspect, to another aspect of experience.

Take as an example the lingual dimension of experience, which shall be occupying us if we are doing linguistics, and consider how it reflects or refers to other dimensions of experience. When, from a uniquely lingual point of view, we look at the numerical dimension of our world, we see a *unity within a multiplicity of lingual rules and lingual facts*, which is called a lingual system. The analogy or reference should be clear: the concept of "unity within multiplicity" is an originally numerical concept. When we refer to it from a lingual point of view, we are able to conceptualise "lingual unity within multiplicity", or what in linguistics is called *lingual systems*.

It is one of the tasks of linguistic enquiry to show how a variety of lingual systems interact, and at different levels (of sound, form, meaning, and so forth). For example, in the sound system of English, there are three ways of regularly forming the plural: with the sounds /z/, /s/ and /iz/. The sound system of the language therefore allows three different sounds when regular English plurals are formed. From the vantage point of the level where they are formed, we speak not of phonemes, which are units of sound, but of morphemes, small lingual units or forms that are lingually significant. At this level, the sound system combines with the morpheme system to allow us to form plurals such as *bars*, *facts*, and *voices* from the singulars *bar*, *fact* and *voice*, by adding the morpheme |s| to each. A single meaningful lingual form or morpheme (|s|) allows us to form the three regular

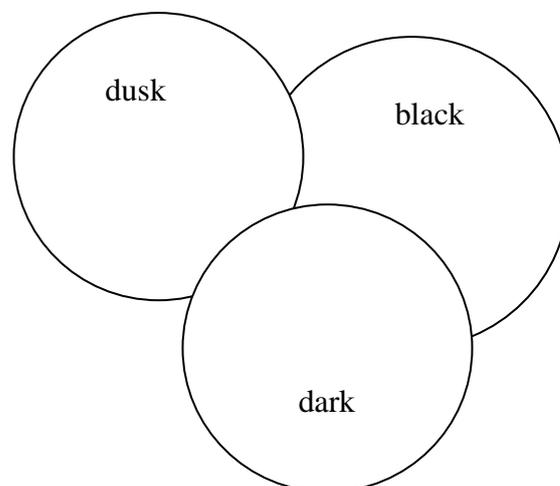
plurals, and we articulate this in sound by means of adding the sounds /-z/, /-s/ and /-iz/ to the three root morphemes (*bar*, *fact* and *voice*). The lingual sound system and lingual form system interact, or become a unity within a multiplicity of (in this case: two) interacting systems. The regularly available sounds (/z/, /s/ and /iz/) interact with the forms to create additional lingually meaningful units. We observe here not only a multiplicity of rule systems at various levels, but also a multiplicity of factual lingual units that are governed by these systems.

Moreover, the multiplicity of the interacting systems is illustrated further when we note that in each case we have a distinguishable new word, with a regularly distinguishable relation (plural : singular) to the original root form. Thus, in addition to sound system and form system, there is a system operating at the level of meaning: a *bar*, a *fact* and a *voice* are words in the singular that are systematically different in meaning from their plurals *bars*, *facts*, and *voices*.

The example is designed to show that there are often multiple interacting lingual systems. In this case we have chosen to look at the interaction between only three lingual systems: a sound system, a morphemic system (operating at the level of form) and a semantic one (operating at the level of meaning).

Of course, language operates at many more levels and states than the ones we have theoretically isolated for scrutiny here. In fact, one of the most exciting new developments for linguistics and language related disciplines, complex systems theory (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), stresses in particular the interaction not only of lingual systems and subsystems, but also how these in turn interact with developmental, cognitive, social, and other systems.

As a second example, consider how the lingual dimension of experience analogically reflects the spatial aspect, which is characterised by extension or continuity. When we speak of the lingual range of meaning of a word, we can express that range in terms of a field, as has been done in semantic field theory (cf. Van Heerden, 1965: 70ff.). So, for example, the meaning of the word *dark* can overlap in part with that of *dusk* and *black*, and can be graphically represented thus:

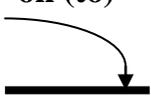
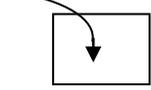


**Figure 1:** Overlapping lingual ranges of meaning

Overlapping and non-overlapping meanings on these lingual fields or ranges of meaning can be illustrated in the following examples:

- (a) It was already dark / dusk [but not *black*] when he got home.  
 (b) When he got home he was in a dark / black [but not *dusk*] mood.

This expression of the field of meaning of a word can be used, for instance, to plot the ranges of meaning of synonyms or near synonyms, like those derived from the three main sources of the English lexicon, such as *rise* (from Old English), *mount* (from French) and *ascend* (from Latin), or, again from the same three major sources, *ask*, *question* and *interrogate* (for these and other examples, cf. Crystal, 2003: 124). If we plot the near-synonymous meanings of these as semantic fields, we are likely to see more overlapping than non-overlapping lingual ranges. Or consider, also adapted from Crystal (2003: 213), how one can spatially plot the semantic or lingual ranges of prepositions in terms of five parameters: destination or position indicated; or reference to a point, surface or volume:

	<i>movement</i>	<i>position</i>
<i>point</i> (one dimension, combining with...)	<b>to</b> 	<b>at</b> 
<i>surface</i> (two dimensions, combining with...)	<b>on (to)</b> 	<b>on</b> 
<i>volume</i> (three dimensions, combining with...)	<b>in (to)</b> 	<b>in</b> 

**Figure 2:** The lingual ranges of some prepositions

As a third example of analogies in the lingual aspect, consider how in English morphology we have more than one system of lingual means (rules) by which that language has created and can continue to create new forms. By adding one particular kind of morpheme, a suffix, we can extend the meaning of a noun in forming its plural, in the regular case, by adding *-s*, as in *dogs*, *plates*, *drinks*. This is a lingual extension of the meaning of the word, from singular to plural. Or, again

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in the regular case, by adding the morpheme *-ed* to a verb, we can extend its meaning to indicate the past tense, as in *walked*, *talked*, *kicked*. The concept of lingual extension is clearly an analogical spatial linguistic concept.

The spatial analogy within the lingual dimension of reality that we are focussing on here is evident not only in the notion of lingual extension, but also in those of lingual position and sequence. In these examples, it is clear that, in order to create a regular plural as in the examples above, the root (*dog*, *plate*, *drink*) in each case has to occur first in sequence, and the suffix in the final position. There is a prescribed sequence (root + suffix), as in the formation of regular past tense.

This sequencing or ordering of discrete elements, which in this case is a sequence of morphemes, is of course the life-blood of mathematics (cf. how the natural numbers are ordered in the sequence of 1 before 2, 2 before 3, 3 before 4, and so on). Yet, in considering in all of these examples the concepts of discreteness, position, sequence and extension, we have been pursuing linguistic, not mathematical, matters. We have been looking at numerical and spatial concepts from a lingual angle.

There are many more examples of a similar nature that one might give. So, for example, in the concept of *lingual regularity* (in the formation of plurals and the past tense in English, but also in the consistent relationships between singular and plural, or present tense and past tense) we encounter, within the lingual dimension of experience that we have taken as a vantage point, an echo of the kinematic aspect of our world. Similarly, we may discover in concepts like *lingual power*, *lingual development*, *lingual cognition*, *lingual identity* or *meaning*, *lingual form*, and so on, echoes within the lingual dimension of, respectively, the spheres of energy-effect, organic growth, the psychical aspect, the logical, the formative, etc.

All of these echoes mean that the lingual aspect of our experience is related analogically to all other dimensions of reality. By extension, it means that the field of investigation of linguistics is linked in principle to the fields of investigation of all other disciplines. This ties in strongly with the notion not only that our experience is one, but also that our entire scientific endeavour is related and potentially coherent. Academic activity, in whatever field, is in principle integral and whole. It is clear that linguistics is therefore related to other disciplines, but is also unique, and that this uniqueness is guaranteed by the fact that the view it takes of things is a lingual view (as distinct from a kinematic, or physical, or psychological, or historical, or even social one). We return to this point below in the form of a number of arguments when we specifically set out to define linguistics.

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## The relationship of linguistics to our future professional needs

The third question that needs to be answered before we embark on linguistic study is how it relates to our future professional needs.

The answer that will be given here is preliminary, since the professional needs of students are likely to vary substantially. Moreover, in order to have a clear grasp of how linguistics can assist one professionally, one of course needs to know more about linguistics than one does at the outset. A proper answer can only be given if one is much more familiar with the content and methodologies of linguistic distinction-making.

Most students who take up the study of linguistics will, however, have an interest in language that will endure into their professional lives. And the professions are probably what we may call the language professions, or the work of language practitioners. Our students of linguistics are likely to end up as language teachers, translators, interpreters, editors, journalists, lexicographers, speech pathologists and therapists, curriculum or test designers, and the like.

For each of these professions their initial linguistics training matters, for in each of these fields linguistic distinctions often lie at the basis of work that is done there. For example, a lexicographer will depend on some definition of what a word or a lexeme is, and this definition is likely to be derived from some linguistic insight or distinction, that in its turn derives from a particular philosophical approach to linguistics. Defining a word is not at all straightforward, and isolating it from a stream of sound, even when recorded, can be extremely difficult. We may all know how to isolate perceptually, and hear or read English words, but think for a moment how difficult it is to hear words in a strange language. What we may hear as words, may be merely “chunks” of language that consist either of one or of several words. So someone learning English, for example, who knows very little of the language, encountering both the questions “What’s the use of complaining?” and “What’s the use of worrying?” may be forgiven for thinking that *What’s the use of* may be a single word. Indeed, Reichling (cf. Reichling, 1947) is generally credited for giving the first theoretically valid definition of a word in his doctoral thesis, written a mere 80 years ago. This does not mean that words were indistinguishable before, but simply that their theoretical delimitation before then left much to be desired.

In similar fashion, language teachers will, consciously or unconsciously, use materials that are based on linguistic distinctions or linguistic theory. In one recent development in Australian schools, language course designers explicitly made use of Halliday’s systemic functional grammar (cf. Halliday, 1978, 1985; Berry, 1975; Butler, 1985) in their curriculum design of language courses for the newly literate.

Other applications include the study of stylistic and discourse similarity and variation that will facilitate the identification of evidence within the study of

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forensic linguistics, an important and growing sub-field. Or take the use of theories of language competence that are employed by those who develop language tests. In fact, much of the validity of a language test depends on the theoretical defensibility of the construct or model of language ability on which it is based.

Speech therapists and pathologists are further users of linguistic distinctions and theories, as are corpus linguists who collect large samples of the language, often for computer analysis. Such analysis is preceded by the development of a sound theoretical linguistic basis. There are already corpora consisting of more than 450 million English words (Crystal, 2003: 448), and there are indications that these large collections of data may be the stimulus for new analyses and insights into the workings of the English language in the present century. It is an exciting time to become involved in linguistics.

Despite these examples of how theoretical linguistic distinctions are used, however, linguistic insight cannot merely be applied wholesale to any language problem. Indeed, though there is a separate discipline of “applied linguistics”, it is wrong to think that it is similar to or merely an extension of linguistics, or that it simply takes a linguistic insight that can in some fashion be related to any and all language problems and issues. The relationship between linguistics and applied linguistics is much more complex, and merits separate discussion, for two good reasons.

The first is that linguistic insight has not only been beneficial, but in some cases has been disadvantageous to the solution of language problems. The second is that thinking of linguistics as something that can be “applied” brings us back to the now discredited intellectual arrogance associated with trends in scientific thinking that pretend that “scientific” solutions are necessarily the best, and always the most authoritative. In the postmodern times that we live, such modernist pretence has not only come under intense scrutiny, but its validity as scientific “truth” has been thoroughly discredited. Indeed, since the time of the Enlightenment there has been in Western scientific thought a tendency to ascribe to scientific analysis and investigation the ultimate power, that will lead us through progressive discovery to the truth. As I remark elsewhere (Weideman, 2009: 1), this belief in an all-powerful “science” is an enduring myth of modernism:

One of the die-hard myths of modern thought is the so-called neutrality or objectivity of our subjective theorizing. It is a dogma of scientific endeavor that has survived almost every major shake-up in the history of Western thinking. But it is nonetheless recognized today more than ever before that the dogma of objectivity is exactly that: an unverified and indeed unverifiable dogma. It has remained as much an illusion as the intellectual mirage of the attendant belief in the progressive discovery of truth.

Of course, as Robins (1967: 3) remarks:

It is tempting, and flattering to one's contemporaries, to see the history of a science as the progressive discovery of truth and the attainment of the right methods. But this is a fallacy. The aims of a science vary in the course of its history, and the search for objective standards by which to judge the purposes of different periods is apt to be an elusive one. 'The facts' and 'the truth' are not laid down in advance, like the solution to a crossword puzzle, awaiting the completion of discovery. Scientists themselves do much to determine the range of facts, phenomena, and operations that fall within their purview, and they themselves set up and modify the conceptual framework within which they make what they regard as significant statements about them.

Much the same point is made by Palmer (1976: 16) when he says that "in linguistics ... the facts are so intangible ... Indeed what we consider as facts will to a large extent depend on the framework, i.e. the model within which we describe them."

So linguistics has limits, and therefore probably possesses only a limited and humble role in all of our future professional lives. That does not mean that its role is unimportant, nor that we should not take its insights very seriously. But linguists and applied linguists, the latter group being those who focus on designing solutions for language problems, will do well to stay abreast of trends and approaches in linguistics lest they fall victim to those trends instead of being able to use them with deliberation and sophistication.

Having considered how linguistics relates to other disciplines and given a preliminary indication of how it may impact on our professional lives, we return now to a more detailed discussion of the first question: what is linguistics?

## **The definition of linguistics**

It is not difficult or uncommon to find in an introductory book on linguistics a definition of the field such as

(1) Linguistics is the study of language (Berry, 1975: 1).

Clearly, such a definition is not only vague (and therefore immediately needs a number of qualifications), but it is also highly problematic in the context of what is actually done by scholars working in the field today. As a definition, it does not distinguish, for example, between, on the one hand, those who study a language or languages other than their own for the sake of becoming fluent in them (the earlier meaning of "linguist"), and, on the other, someone who views the study of

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language not as a practical skill that must be acquired, but as a theoretical study in its own right.

All right then, we may say, there are linguists and linguists. If the conventional dictionary definition does not make this distinction, indiscriminately calling both of these “linguists” rather than reserving the term for those persons who study a (foreign) language or languages for the sake of acquiring them, and coining a second term, say “linguistician”, for the ones who go about their business in a theoretically disciplined way, then surely the only alteration to make to our definition (1) would be to insert some reference to the theoretical interests of the second group. So, not surprisingly, another common definition of linguistics that we find is the following:

(2) Linguistics may be defined as the scientific study of language

(as, e.g., in Lyons, 1969: 1). But does this solve our problem?

As anyone who works as a “theoretical linguist” knows, it is not infrequent that one is assailed with questions by friends and acquaintances on language problems that may only be remotely connected with current theoretical interests in the field. Nonetheless, to the layman, someone who does “linguistics” is a professional, an expert who should be able to confirm that children are better than adults at learning a second language,<sup>1</sup> or who should know why it is that a three year old son of a neighbour does not yet speak, or a ten year old daughter of an acquaintance has begun to stutter. If one is also teaching linguistics within a language department at university, one is, moreover, inundated with enquiries as to what would be “correct” forms of that language, what the spelling of certain words might be, and so forth, since it is clearly assumed that a linguist is an authoritative source on these matters. Again, though, we might argue, all these popular conceptions of what linguistics is - some of which are in fact nothing but misconceptions - are not adequate objections to our definition (2), specifically because many of these questions are indeed studied in some linguistic sub-field, and thus (2) should be allowed to stand, be it then with some qualifications.

This would have been a perfectly valid conclusion if linguistics had been the only academic discipline with an interest in language. But this is demonstrably not the case. To someone who studies acoustic physics, for example, human language sounds may be of particular interest; the technical applications of such knowledge in the fields of architecture and electronic engineering alone make scientific study

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1. Contrary to popular belief (“folk linguistics”), it is by no means certain that this is true. There is some hard evidence in studies that have been conducted to point to the exact reverse, viz. that adults are in fact better than children. There might be a “crucial age” before which one must try to learn a second or foreign language, but this may, according to some earlier studies, be closer to 30 (when we are certainly no longer children) than 7, 10, 14 or any of the other magical dates that are often mentioned (cf. Cook, 1978: 80ff., van Els et al., 1984: 108f.). Moreover, the acceptance nowadays of a number of different accents and a variety of “Englishes” instead of one pure standard for all has made the “problem” of the retention of an accent into adulthood less prominent.

of the acoustic properties of human speech a worthwhile undertaking. Likewise theologians are for their part often concerned with the scientific study of human language, specifically the study of what we might call certitudinal discourse, i.e. the language of “ultimates”, be it in the Bible, the revered books of other faiths, or in confessional texts generally. Similarly, too, jurisprudence has always been centrally interested in the interpretation of stretches of language in legal texts in order to interpret them properly; psychology in the scientific analysis of the patient’s talk in psychotherapy; mathematics in the theoretical interpretation of the language of algebraic formulae, etc. Yet none of these disciplines in any but the widest sense has the same focus as linguistics, and, as scientific disciplines, seem to be quite distinct from it. The problem, therefore, as one linguist has put it, is that

the phenomena of language can be studied from different points of view. Dozens of sciences can study linguistic phenomena ... from as many points of view – each one putting these phenomena into relation with phenomena of some other sort. What aspect of the phenomena, if any, is left to linguistics as its exclusive property? (Wells, 1966: 15)

In desperation, one might very well ask if there is then any valid reason for attempting to define linguistics, if even an apparently sound definition such as (2) obviously needs to be modified and qualified before one can arrive at a rational conclusion, i.e. find the “aspect of the phenomena” which is the exclusive concern of linguistics. If, however, linguistics should indeed, as another famous structuralist linguist (Hjelmslev, 1963: 5f.) put it

attempt to grasp language, not as a conglomerate of non-linguistic (e.g., physical, physiological, psychological, logical, sociological) phenomena, but as a self-sufficient totality, a structure *sui generis*

then its definition, in terms of a unique, characterizing aspect of language, remains crucially important. So the perplexing question of whether we should perhaps abandon any attempt at defining linguistics - in favour of simply getting on with doing linguistics - remains. As the history of the discipline of linguistics has shown time and again, however, too much depends on one’s (explicit or implicit) view of what linguistics is for this question to be left in abeyance. The answer to this question has a direct bearing on what aspect of language one wishes to focus linguistic enquiry.

In the foregoing, I have been hinting that linguistic study may perhaps be defined by what the language theorist wishes to focus on, i.e. by that aspect of the phenomena of language on which linguistic theory is apt to concentrate. An eventual modification of definition (2) might then be

(3) Linguistics is the theoretical study of an aspect X of language (where X has not yet been defined).

A sure way of finding out what “X” in (3) is, according to some, would be to look at what the data of linguistic enquiry is, for it should be obvious from the data

of the theoretical enquiry what the as yet mysterious “aspect X” of language is. So, if we can find a generally accepted view of what the data of linguistic enquiry might be, then, with “X” in (3) having been identified, the riddle of the definition of linguistics would be solved.

## The data of linguistic enquiry

In the prelude to modern linguistics in the 19th century<sup>2</sup> linguistic thinking was centred on the historical lineage of particular languages or groups of languages. Some explanation had to be offered for the fact that many European languages seemed to be related, and also that in the development of a particular language there were successive historical stages: modern English, for example, had developed from Middle English, which in turn had grown out of Anglo-Saxon. Of prime concern here were the sounds or the phonic stratum of language, and laws were formulated to account for sound shifts occurring between different stages of a language, or even between the oldest known form of a language and a hypothesized proto-form, such as Proto-Indo-European (cf. Sampson, 1980: ch. 1). If any answer had to be given in this period to the question of what “X” is in our definition (3) above, it would surely have been: the historical aspects of language change, especially as these manifest themselves in successive sound-changes.

That this view did not go unchallenged is evident from the sharp distinction that the founder of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, drew between historical linguistics and synchronic linguistics. In the latter kind of linguistics one viewed language as a cross-section of the ongoing process: language was, as it were, frozen to the gaze of the theoretical observer, and in this observed entity the theorist discovered the system of language (or *langue*, in De Saussure's terms). De Saussure's answer as to what constituted “X” would then have to be: the system(s) through which the signs of language are related. This answer formed the basis of the school of linguistic thinking that came to be known as structuralism or structural(ist) linguistics.

On the surface, the two answers as to what the true data of linguistic enquiry might be seem to be quite dissimilar, and indeed they are (even though, for De Saussure, “system” would also include the - now “frozen” - sound system of a language). Nor is De Saussure's answer the only possible one. Early transformational grammar held that the data of linguistic enquiry were to be found in the speech (and intuition) of the native speaker of a language. This view, in turn,

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2. This does not imply that linguistics proper did not exist before this time, but simply that before the 20th century linguistic concept-formation was markedly different. Students who embark upon linguistic study will do well to read an account of pre-modern linguistics (as in Robins, 1967, who devotes more than half of his book to pre-Saussurean linguistics) to acquaint themselves with the history of the discipline. There are numerous reasons for being informed about the history of linguistic thought, not the least being that one very influential recent linguistic theory, transformational-generative grammar, explicitly tries to find its roots in the linguistic thought of the Enlightenment, and that, especially in the case of English, the historical influence of the prescriptive grammarians is by no means a spent force.

is being vigorously opposed in current thinking on complex systems theory and language (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), which sees the data of enquiry as many interacting lingual and non-lingual systems that combine to become, in an individual, a set of “language resources”. Thus, a preliminary look at the history of linguistic theory gives us little hope of finding any firm agreement on the data of linguistics, and of consequently resolving the mystery of what “X” is in our definition of linguistics.

If we look closely, however, we can see that De Saussure’s view of language as a system of signs does give us a more abstract way of characterizing linguistic enquiry. With historical hindsight, we can today see the force of this abstraction operative in linguistics as we came to know it in the 20th century, and how it has continued to influence current work in the field. By isolating or abstracting the “signalling” aspect of language as its unique characterizing feature, De Saussure has allowed us to see that this is what distinguishes linguistic interest in language from theological, psychological, historical, mathematical or other kinds of interest in language.

Above, I have called this abstract aspect of language the lingual mode of experience. De Saussure would probably have preferred the term “semiotic”, whereas a later structuralist, Greimas, uses the term *modus significandus*. We can then try out this formulation as a means of distinguishing between various ways of experiencing and legitimately analysing language: linguistically, confessionally, psychologically, historically, juridically, and so forth. Then we can make the final alteration to our definition, and say that

(4) Linguistics is the theoretical study of the lingual aspect of language,

where “lingual” refers to the fact that language is *expression that is related to the understanding of signs*. This definition is by no means perfect, not the least because it is still very general (and hence vague), but at least it is a working hypothesis, and its very generality allows it to capture theoretical linguistic concerns that are quite divergent, as we shall see in the next section.

## **An encyclopaedic view of the field**

One of the strongest points in favour of the very general formulation of the field of linguistic enquiry in (4) above is that it allows us to account for a wide spectrum of differentiated linguistic sub-disciplines.

The linguistic sub-discipline which reaped what were probably the first fruits of the more abstract modern formulation of the field of linguistics was the study of language sounds. Phonetics, as this study was called, had been studied since the time of the Renaissance and had, by the end of the 19th century, become increasingly sophisticated: the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) had been formulated, and various applications had been made possible in the technical and

educational fields (cf. Robins, 1967: 202ff.). Through the development of the more abstract concept of the phoneme, the foundation was laid for the linguistic sub-discipline known as phonology to grow out of phonetic concerns with the sounds of language.

To see how the theoretical concept of the phoneme differs from that of the more ambiguous term “speech sound”, we need to look at the definitions of each. A speech sound is any phonetically distinct unit of sound; thus the English “clear” (l) as in *long* and *leg* and the so-called dark (l) as in *build* and *veld* are distinct phonetic units. However, since a phoneme can roughly be defined as a unit of sound that serves to distinguish different words, it seems that we need to distinguish only one phoneme /l/ in English, i.e. an abstract sound unit that has the effect, for example, of distinguishing *land* from *band*, or *bit* from *lit*, through its opposition to another phoneme of English, viz. /b/ (Lyons, 1969: 99ff.).<sup>3</sup> Clearly, this is a much more economical way of studying the phonic stratum of language, and facilitates the formulation of generalizations at this level. But the crucial point is that the Saussurean distinction, which differentiates between the abstract sign system of language (i.e. *langue*, to which the phoneme belongs) and the concrete facts of speech (*parole*, to which the speech sounds belong), had paved the way for the establishment of the linguistic sub-discipline of phonology (Robins, 1967: 204).

This has been one example of the benefits derived from the rather abstract formulation of the field of enquiry of modern linguistics. Without going into any further historical details, let us now take a look at the fields of other linguistic sub-disciplines. Since there has always been a recognition of the hierarchical or “levelled” character of language, it has been generally accepted in linguistics that sounds combine to form words, words combine to form phrases and clauses, and clauses combine to form sentences.<sup>4</sup> So we find in linguistics, alongside of phonology, various other sub-disciplines. Morphology concentrates on the aspect of word-formation (e.g. how we get the past tense form of a regular verb by adding, in the case of English, an *-ed* morpheme), while syntax investigates the organization of words, phrases and clauses in sentences. In the chapter below that deals with this, you will be taking a hard look at syntactic theory, and during this time one of the possible defects of definition (4) above will become clear: the formulation of the field of linguistic enquiry is so general and vague that not every grammarian would agree as to what the data of syntactic enquiry might be. In fact, there are numerous competing approaches not only to English syntax but in each of the previously mentioned linguistic sub-disciplines, and no definition of a field can (or, for that matter, should) rule out internal differences of opinion or theoretical starting points.

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3. “Clear” and “dark” (l) are therefore, on the more abstract phonological level, merely two positional variations of the same phoneme in English (Lyons, 1969: 112). Such positional variants of the same phoneme are called allophones.

4. This is a very crude and simplified formulation, but will have to suffice for the present. One point, especially, that could easily be missed here is that the units mentioned are quite abstract - something that a person who is familiar only with their non-technical uses might fail to grasp.

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Apart from such conflicting analyses within a linguistic sub-discipline, there have moreover developed a number of other fields within linguistics that claim to be complementary to the study of phonology and syntax. Halliday, for example, claims that the linguistic system operates on at least three levels: apart from the phonological level and the lexicogrammatical stratum (which includes syntax, morphology and lexis), there is also a semantic level (Halliday, 1978: 128), which obviously necessitates the study of meaning in the linguistic sub-discipline known as semantics. If we also accept that meaning is not purely sentence-meaning, i.e. meaning in isolation from a social context in which a sentence is uttered, then the way is clear for the development of yet another linguistic sub-discipline, viz. pragmatics.

It is clear that the theoretical knowledge of language gained by phonological and syntactic analyses ought to be complemented by semantic and pragmatic information, though linguists are by no means agreed on the exact nature of this complementarity, or whether it is at all possible to construct such an overall view of language. The philosophical framework that is being used in this course, however, gives a positive answer to this. It claims, in fact, that we need an overall view of how the lingual mode of experience functions in our lives and in our world if we are to make theoretical sense of it.

Together with text linguistics, discourse analysis and conversation analysis, pragmatics forms part of the analyses of language made within the larger sub-discipline of sociolinguistics. These developments have been recent,<sup>5</sup> and attempts to define especially pragmatics have been difficult and even controversial (cf. Levinson, 1983: 1-35), which preclude a definite and precise statement in this regard. Difficult though it may be to define these, what is centrally important in each is the language of conversation, which is regarded as a prototypical manifestation of language (Levinson, 1983: 284f.), as well as the social context in which language is used. On the whole, the growth of the discipline of sociolinguistics has been characterized by the recognition that we do not only speak, but that we speak to each other.

If we could return for a moment to the second definition of linguistics given above, it will now become clear why this definition is only half true: it makes no mention of the speakers and producers of language (lingual subjects) and moreover seems to suggest, erroneously, that linguistics is concerned solely with the objective phenomenon of language. If linguistics considered only the lingual object (that which is produced) and wished to exclude from its view lingual subjects (the producers/receivers), then there also would have been no room for psycholinguistics, the linguistic sub-discipline that investigates, amongst other things, the acquisition of language by the human lingual subject, as well as the

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5. An indication of this is the fact that the first textbook on pragmatics (Levinson, 1983) was published a mere twenty-odd years ago.

maturation and possible loss of language (as in aphasic conditions)<sup>6</sup> in the individual. Moreover, if we consider language loss not only from an individual point of view, but from that of a society or whole community whose language is threatened by extinction, it also becomes clear that not only objective lingual facts are within the purview of linguistic thought, but also subjective lingual issues that have social and political dimensions. The theoretical study of the lingual mode of experience can thus be tackled from the angle of either the lingual object or that of the lingual subject, and the generality and abstract character of our definition (4) allows for this possibility.

There is one more issue to be discussed here that will again come into focus during the latter part of the course, and this is the question of whether, in the concepts “lingual” and “language”, linguistics is restricted to the study of speech, or only to speech and writing, i.e. to verbal language. Most of the recent developments in linguistics, especially in the field of sociolinguistics, have given increasing attention to the lingual, i.e. semiotic or expressive, qualities of gestures that either accompany speech, or, in certain instances, may replace it.

One of the clearest examples of this comes from the field of discourse analysis. One of the fundamental units of analysis here is the concept of lingual “move” (Coulthard, 1985: 8). What this means, briefly, is that within the space of a single utterance like B’s second turn at talk in the following exchange, there may be not only one, but at least two lingual moves by B:

- A: May I read your message?  
 B: Yes.  
 A: Why ... what’s it say ... oh that’s a ... very sensible thing to say ...  
 \*B: Yes ... Well I’ll leave you here for a little longer ...  
 A: Yes, Brenda ...

(adapted from Svartvik & Quirk, 1980: S.1.8, 376-381, p. 206).

Now, if lingual moves are units of linguistic analysis at the level of discourse, how are we to characterize the moves in an example exchange such as the following:

- A: What’s the time?  
 B: ...(pause)... It’s five o’clock  
 (fabricated)

(cf. Goffman, 1981: 41). It can be argued that B’s turn at talk, his utterance, again consists of two moves: the first, transcribed here as “... (pause) ...”, being his glance at his watch, the second his reply to A’s question. We cannot deny that the pause - or specifically the glancing at one’s watch - is normally required before giving an

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6. In respect of this latter concern, the theoretical burden of psycholinguistics may be shared by neurolinguistics and speech pathology.

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answer in cases such as this if we do not wish to express callousness or impoliteness. Here, the gesture or its absence is therefore meaningful or expressive. While some linguists may perhaps still wish to argue whether this gesture is a lingual or a non-lingual move (and for those who restrict “lingual” to “verbal” it will certainly be non-lingual), there is no denying in the end that it is indeed expressive, and hence should be part of linguistic investigation according to our definition (4). Even though not enough is known about the gestures that accompany speech, linguistics should not be tied down to a consideration only of verbal phenomena. The lingual dimension of experience that it investigates accommodates all meaningful expression by means of signs, be they in nature verbal (based in sound or print) or non-verbal (based in the bodily musculature).

In conclusion, we might also ask what, in linguistic theory, the status of our present discussion is. Having characterized linguistics and its various sub-disciplines: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, where does this discussion itself belong? The answer is: we have been discussing the basis of linguistics, its foundations. We may call this kind of undertaking foundational or philosophical linguistics. To use an image that might make the picture somewhat clearer: if our theoretical endeavours can be likened to a house, then linguistics would be one of the rooms, and the study and consideration of what linguistics itself is, i.e. philosophical linguistics, would be the foundations of the room. At the level of philosophical linguistics, one is concerned not so much with the shape or arrangement of the furniture in the room (which would be the tasks of the sub-disciplines of phonology, morphology and syntax) as with the structure of the walls that separate and simultaneously link the room (“linguistic studies”) with other rooms (sociology, psychology, hermeneutics, literary theory, history, aesthetics, economics, jurisprudence, etc.).

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