Relevant Linguistics
Paul Justice

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Preface

To the Student

As more and more institutions of higher learning realize the importance of linguistics in teacher preparation programs, linguistics courses are becoming a more integral part of their curriculum. You're reading this book because you're in a linguistics class, and you're probably in a linguistics class because your school feels that an understanding of language will help you be a better teacher. Unfortunately, you probably haven't taken a linguistics class before, so you probably have no idea what linguistics is all about or how it will help you be a better teacher. Hopefully, by the end of the term, this will change.

For many first time students of linguistics, the subject is inaccessible, boring, and seemingly irrelevant. The purpose of this textbook is to make linguistics more accessible, more interesting and more obviously relevant to you. It has been written with future teachers in mind. While it's not a teaching handbook, it does highlight areas of linguistics that are most relevant to teachers, occasionally even making specific suggestions for applications of the material to classroom teaching. In most cases, however, the specific applications will be up to you, the creative teacher, to identify.

For those neither in, nor pursuing, a career in education, this book will hopefully provide an accessible introduction to linguistic study, which will give you valuable insight into human language and prepare you for future study in the field.

To the Instructor

This textbook is based on many semesters of tried and true methods and materials. Every semester at San Diego State University there are seven or more sections of an introductory class that is populated largely by current and future elementary and secondary school teachers. Our goal is to teach them about the structure and use of language, with an emphasis on English, the language of instruction in most of their classrooms. The various instructors of this class have tried many different textbooks and have received repeated complaints from students about all of them. Some students say the books are incomprehensible; others say they are filled with an excessive amount of jargon, and others still don't see the connection between the material in the book and their chosen profession. The aim of this book is to eliminate, or at least reduce, these complaints by making linguistics more accessible and relevant. This text does not claim to be better than those currently in use; it merely claims to be more appropriate (and effective) for a particular group of students.

The approach this book takes is, of course, very descriptive in nature. The goal is to impress upon students the systematic nature of language and the scientific nature of linguistic inquiry. The text is data driven, with copious examples provided throughout. The idea is to lead students through descriptive analyses and help them really "see" the concepts as well as to provide them with reference materials that they can refer to when studying for tests or, better yet, preparing their own lessons or deciding how to address a classroom situation.

The data and examples used are mostly from English. When foreign language data is used, it is for the purpose of illustrating the differences between English and other languages. The purpose of these comparisons is to make students aware that there is nothing inherently "normal" about the way English works and that students from non-English speaking backgrounds have difficulty with English for very understandable reasons—the same reasons native English speakers have difficulty with other languages. Also, this focus on English tends to make the material seem more relevant to the students and, therefore, captures their attention better.

One issue to keep in mind when using this textbook is what can be referred to as the struggle between completeness and simplicity. That is, as teachers, we want to present our students with complete information about the structure and use of language, but at the same time, because language is so amazingly complex, we are sometimes forced to simplify it to make it more comprehensible to our students. At times, this text does this. Also at times, the sharper students catch the oversimplifications. Rather than apologize for it, an instructor can explain to them why the material has been simplified and invite them to continue searching for more "complete" answers to their questions.

Many of these oversimplifications appear in Chapter Six. Students tend to get overwhelmed by the sheer volume of material in a study of syntax, the result being that difficult choices must be made regarding how detailed the approach should be. Because of this, the approach to syntax in this chapter is greatly simplified in places. For example, in the presentation of phrase structure, certain kinds of words are not included at all. A quick glance reveals that adverbs, while covered at the beginning of the chapter, do not make an appearance in the phrase structure sections. Also in this section, the approach to constituents is simplified. For example, noun phrases are represented with the simplified structure det+adj+N, rather than a structure that indicates grouping at different hierarchical levels. This is one of several simplifications that have been made with regard to phrase structure. Another feature that has been simplified is the treatment of "that" as a relative pronoun. While this word is generally regarded as a complementizer, not a relative pronoun, among linguists, such a presentation does not work well with the student population this book is written for. The philosophy behind this text is to teach as much about the structure and use of English as possible without going so far that students tune out.

On a related note, while this text walks students through the basics of linguistic analysis in a very thorough way, you will find that it does not always delve as deeply as possible into some issues. That is, many of the gray areas of linguistics are not dealt with. For example, in the chapter on morphology, compounding is dealt with in a brief paragraph, while the topic could easily be discussed over several pages. The intended audience of this book often complains that detailed discussions serve only to confuse them and erect barriers between them and the material. This book *does* cover these gray areas, to a certain extent, because they are an essential part of the discipline, but not completely because some of the details are probably better dealt with in class. In fact, one of the main benefits of this book is, hopefully, that it will free up class time to discuss these complex issues by covering the basics in the text in a comprehensible way.

Also, while the chapters are presented in a particular order, from the smallest units of language to larger ones, there is a certain amount of flexibility in terms of the order in which the chapters can be used. For example, the chapter on morphology could be covered before the chapters on phonetics and phonology. Another possibility that has been effective in the past is to handle phonology and morphophonology together, after both the phonetics and morphology chapters. However, given the way the information on word classes is split between the morphology and syntax chapters, it's probably best to cover syntax later, as the syntax chapter assumes knowledge of the material covered in the morphology chapter. Also, the final chapter on language variation assumes knowledge of all of the material presented earlier. It serves to introduce important new concepts while reviewing familiar ones. Thus, it is most effective when covered at the end of the term.

Finally, understanding the pedagogical plan behind the book can help instructors decide how best to work with it. The philosophy behind this curriculum is that students learn best in class when they have a foundation of knowledge and skills to work with. Thus, it's recommended that students be assigned readings to be completed *before* the class session that will cover that particular area. Also important for establishing this foundation is completion of the quick exercises and data analyses in the text of each chapter. These can be used to lead into class discussions and involve students in those discussions. The other two components of the pedagogical philosophy are a thorough exploration of each area during class and independent practice through the completion of the end of chapter exercises *after* class. No solutions to these exercises are provided in the book, so instructors who want to use them as graded exercises can do so. For those instructors who do not want to use them as graded exercises, solutions are available via the Web and can be distributed to students. Only instructors who adopt the text will have access to these solutions. To obtain access, please contact the publisher by email at pubs@csli.stanford.edu or by FAX at 650-725-2166. Please provide proof of text adoption and make your request on university letterhead.

The graphic below illustrates the pedagogical philosophy.

Step 1		Step 2		Step 3
Students read text and complete in-text exercises and analyses independently	⇒	Class discussion adds to depth of understanding	⇒	Students complete end of chapter exercises independently to solidify understanding

Acknowledgments

1

What is Linguistics?

In this chapter, we'll examine the discipline of linguistics to prepare you for the term. In addition to defining what linguistics *is*, we'll examine what it is *not*. In the process of doing this, we'll identify some of the more common, and important, misconceptions about linguistics.

Some specific goals of this text are the following:
- To encourage you to reevaluate your own beliefs and attitudes about language.
- To make you aware of the complexity of language and able to articulate this awareness.
- To make you aware of some of the similarities and difference among languages.
- To expose you to the "core" sub-fields of linguistics (phonetics, phonology, morphology and syntax).
- To introduce you to linguistic analysis, and to encourage you to think scientifically about language
- To provide you with some tools that you can apply in subsequent study of linguistics or professional settings.

Some important fundamental concepts of linguistics are stated below (adapted from Department of Lingsuistics, pp. 2–3):
- Every language is amazingly complex.
- Despite this complexity, all languages are highly systematic, though their systematicity is not transparent to native speakers of those languages.
- It is not easy for speakers of a language to think about or talk about their language use; although our speech is completely rule governed, we are not consciously aware of these rules.
- Speech is the primary mode of language; writing is only a secondary one. For proof of this, just think about the age at which you started speaking and the age at which you started reading and writing.
- Although most children learn their first language fluently by the age of five, they're not explicitly taught it; instead, they naturally acquire the rules of their language from the language use they hear around them.
- Linguists are interested in describing the similarities and differences among languages; this is especially important when trying to teach someone a second language.

What Do Linguists Do?

When people meet a teacher of linguistics, the first question they generally ask is "how many languages do you speak?" This question perfectly illustrates the fact that most people have very little idea what linguistics is all about. It also illustrates one of the most pervasive misconceptions about the discipline:

Misconception #1: Linguistics is the study of specific languages with the goal of learning to read, write or speak them.

If this were true, every linguist would speak a variety of languages fluently; otherwise, they'd be pretty poor linguists. Imagine the surprise, however, when people meet a linguist who speaks only a single language. This does *not* mean, however, that such individuals are linguistically deficient. While these linguists

don't speak any languages other than English, they know a fair amount *about* many other languages. Put another way, they don't know them (i.e., speak them), but they do know about them. This is an important distinction to make. It also leads us to a working definition of linguistics:

Clarification #1: Linguistics is the scientific study of the phenomenon of human language.

There are some important, yet seemingly subtle, points wrapped up in this definition. First, note the form of the word "language." If it were to read "languages," then the misinformed souls referred to earlier would be correct. Rather than studying specific languages, linguists study the "phenomenon" of language, in terms of its structure and use. We use this word "phenomenon" in our definition not to make it unnecessarily wordy, but to clarify and reconfirm the notion of the larger issue of human language, rather than specific languages, as the primary focus of linguistics. You can think of human language as one big system, with each individual language being a specific part of the system. This concept is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

Human Language

Finnish   Spanish   German

Korean   Russian   French   Thai

Japanese   Tagalog   Farsi   Urdu

Turkish   Swahili   Arabic   Hindi

Armenian   English   Mandarin Fijian

Swedish   Czech   Inuktitut

Navajo   Vietnamese   Greek Dutch

Shona   Italian   Romansch   etc.
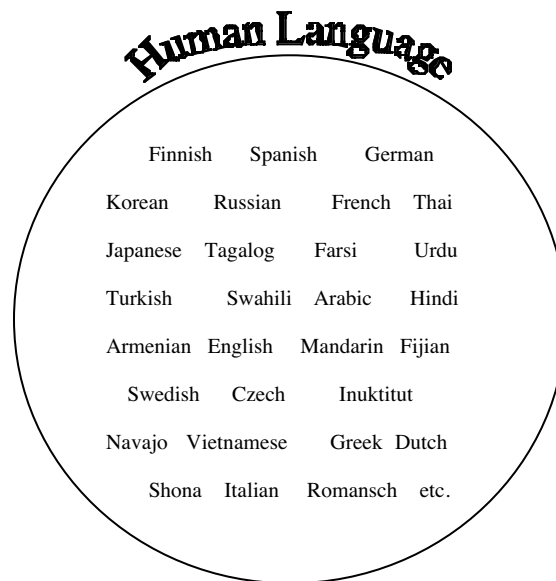
Figure 1.1: Human Language

Also important is the use of the word "scientific" in the definition. Throughout our exploration of the phenomenon of language, we will employ a scientific approach, similar to the "scientific method" you learned in grade school. That is, we will *observe* real language, we will make *hypotheses* about it, and then we will *test* our hypotheses to see if they're accurate. In the end we will describe "laws" of language in much the same way a physicist describes laws of nature. We'll explore the nature of language "laws" (i.e. rules) in more detail shortly.

A final note to make here is the *mode* of language that we will be dealing with primarily. At all times, unless otherwise specified, when we discuss language, it will be *spoken* language that we are referring to. The *written* mode will also be covered, but when this is the case, a special note will be made.

What is the Nature of Language?

Now that we have defined linguistics as the scientific study of language, we need to spend some time discussing what language is. This is not as simple as one might think. Most people, when asked to define language, focus on the concept of communication. They come up with definitions for language such as "a way to communicate thoughts and ideas." It's true that language is a tool for communication, but to offer such a simple definition would be misleading. The fact of the matter is that language is far more complex than most people realize. Consider the following example:

(1)   Jimmy says to Joey: "Hey, what's up?"

What thoughts or ideas have actually been communicated to Joey? Most people agree that the idea communicated by questions is a request for information. For example, if someone asks you "What time is it?" they're communicating to you that they would like some information, namely the time of day. In (1), however, do you think Jimmy really wants information from Joey? How do you think he will react if Joey really starts to tell him what's up (generally understood to mean what's happening in his life)? If Jimmy is like most people, he'll get bored rather quickly. He'll also probably make a mental note never to ask Joey that kind of question again. Instead, he'll probably just say something like (2) and keep on walking.

(2) "Hey, Joey, good to see you."

And why is this statement an easy substitute for the question in (1)? The answer is simple: because (2) conveys essentially the same "information and ideas" as (1), namely a greeting. In some cases, we use language not to express ideas or communicate information, but to perform social functions such as greetings. Expressions like the question in (1) are intended solely to perform social functions and do not really contain any other "meaning." Performing a social function is not the same as "conveying information."

To further dismiss the simplified communication-oriented definition of language, consider example (3):

(3) Man says to woman at a bar: "You look lovely tonight."

Now, presumably it's possible that he merely wants to express an idea in his head, give her that information and be done with the interaction. However, most people would probably suspect that this man has an ulterior motive, and that by telling her she looks lovely, he may be able to influence her actions. In fact, it's entirely possible that he doesn't really believe this "idea" that he's expressed to her, yet he expresses it anyway. Why? Perhaps he believes a compliment is going to help him achieve some other purpose (we'll leave the exact nature of that purpose to your imagination). So, we see that in the case of some compliments, the use of language goes beyond the desire to "convey information."

The important point to get out of the preceding discussion is that language is far more complex than we realize. In fact, it's so complex that it's difficult to provide a nice, neat, concise definition of it. Instead of *defining* language, then, we'll *describe* it. We can describe language as a complex system involving ideas and expressions. Stated another way, when we use language, we put thoughts (ideas) into words (the expressions). Thought this might seem straight-forward at first, upon closer inspection, we'll see that it's actually more complicated.

Let's begin with the link between ideas and expressions. Is it always as tight as we'd like it to be? In other words, do we always say exactly what we mean? Certainly not. Any teenager who has ever planned a telephone call to an admired boy or girl knows this well. No matter how much they rehearse exactly what they want to say, it never seems to come out as they had hoped. This problem connecting ideas and expressions is what leads countless teenagers (and adults) to jot down notes before making important phone calls to line up dates.

To further illustrate the complexity of language, we have to consider the situation in which utter expressions. The fact of the matter is that a single set of expressions can have multiple meanings depending on the situation in which utter them. In other words, the ideas (or meaning) represented by our words is, at least to a certain extent, context specific. Consider (4) and (5):

(4) Teacher asks students in the back of a large lecture hall: "Is Zoe there?"
(5) X says to Y, who has just answered X's telephone call: "Is Zoe there?"

In (4), the teacher is expressing his desire for information, specifically whether a certain person is present in the classroom or not. If the students reply "yes," then the questioner is satisfied and the discussion moves on to other matters. In (5), however, if Y answers "yes" and hangs up, X won't be as satisfied as the teacher. This is because the expressions in (5), though identical to the expressions in (4), are used to express a different meaning (i.e. there is a different idea behind it). In (5), the meaning goes beyond a request for information about the presence of a person and includes a request to actually speak with the person. Thus, we see that, in some cases, the situation in which an expression is uttered can change its meaning. This is, indeed, complicated.

Focus on Expressions: The Nature of Words

An important point to raise when discussing language is the nature of the words we use to express ideas. The words we use are **signs** of our meaning, but what is it about them that makes their meaning clear? Consider the words in 6:

(6) water, agua, su

Even if you don't recognize the third word, you can probably guess what it means based on the other two words. All three of these words are used to represent the meaning of H_2O in different languages —"agua" is the Spanish word for water, and "su" is the Turkish word for water. Notice, however, that while they have the same meaning behind them, the words are completely different on the surface. That is, they don't sound alike at all. If there were some inherent connection between the words we use and their meanings, then every language would use the exact same words. This, however, is certainly not true. There is nothing inherent in the sounds w-a-t-e-r or a-g-u-a that indicates the meaning of these words. Instead, English's use of w-a-t-e-r, Spanish's use of a-g-u-a, and Turkish's use of s-u are completely *arbitrary*. This is illustrated by the fact that these different languages have different words for H_2O, yet all three of the words represent the same meaning to speakers of the languages. Our understanding of "water" as H_2O is based only on our agreement, as English speakers, that we will use the sign "water" to represent this meaning. People who do not speak a word of English, however, are not in on this agreement, and cannot connect the sign word with the meaning H_2O. The point here is that most words are completely arbitrary.

While the overwhelming majority of words in any language are completely arbitrary signs, like the words in (6), there are some words that do, at least in some way, indicate their meaning. The most obvious examples are like those in (7):

(7) meow, moo

The words we use to represent animal noises generally sound somewhat, though not exactly, like the actual noises. Thus, unlike the words in (6), there is some inherent connection between the words in (7) and their meanings. It is not an arbitrary choice to use "meow" for a cat's noise and "moo" for a cow's. Instead, the choice is based on something real in the world. Specifically, the pronunciation of the word is similar to its meaning, the sound it represents. Words like the ones in (7) are examples of **onomatopoeia**. Onomatopoeic words are ones that do, in some way, indicate their meaning. These words, therefore, are *not* completely arbitrary signs.

Further evidence for onomatopoeic words not being completely arbitrary comes from other languages. For example, if you ask people who speak other languages what the word for a cat's noise is in their language, chances are that the word will be similar to the English "meow." This makes sense, because the word is, after all, onomatopoeic. Table 1.1 provides cross-linguistic examples of onomatopoeia.

meaning	English word	Arabic	Chinese	Japanese
cat's sound	meeyow	mowmow	mayow	neeyow
rooster's sound	cockadoodledoo	keekeekees	coocoo	kohkaykoko

Table 1.1: Onomatopoeic Words (adapted from the Department of Linguistics, p. 16)

What you should notice is that the words, while similar across all the languages, are not identical. In fact, it's impossible to find a word that is universal to all languages. If one were to exist, it would be a completely non-arbitrary sign, and such signs simply do not exist in human language. In other words, there are no completely non-arbitrary words in language. For completely non-arbitrary signs, we need to look to nature. For example, the presence of smoke is a completely non-arbitrary sign that there is fire in some form. No language, however, has such signs.

So, you're probably wondering at this point how a system with so much arbitrariness can work. The answer lies in the word "system." Language is not just a bunch of words thrown together; instead, it's very

systematic, and when native speakers of a language speak their own language, they unconsciously follow a set of complicated rules. This set of rules is often referred to as **grammar**, a word that often evokes painful memories for some people. In the next section, we will explore the nature of these grammar rules.

The Nature of Grammar Rules: Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism

Perhaps one of the reasons people have negative feelings toward grammar is the approach to grammar that is generally taken in schools. Specifically, grammar is presented as a set of rigid rules that must be followed by anyone who wants to be considered a "good" or "correct" speaker of a language. Naturally, any approach of this nature sets people up for failure if they do not conform exactly to the standard that's been set. It's no wonder, then, that many people grow up disliking grammar. No doubt, people's early experiences with grammar have contributed significantly to the second misconception:

<u>Misconception #2</u>: Linguistics is concerned with trying to get people to speak "properly".

Linguistics teachers hear this from students all the time. Often students report that by taking a linguistics class they hope to learn to speak "better" English. Their assumption is that this is the purpose of a linguistics course. This is certainly not the case. Rather than *prescribe* to students how they should speak a language, linguistics is mainly concerned with *describing* how people actually speak. This distinction is generally referred to as **prescriptivism** vs. **descriptivism**.

Prescriptivism

As the term suggests, someone who subscribes to a prescriptive approach to grammar, believes that there is a prescribed (written before, or ahead of time) list of rules to which all speakers of a language must conform. Those who do not conform are said to be speaking "incorrectly" and in some cases are labeled "linguistically deficient." It's understandable that many people take this view of grammar. After all, this is the approach taken in most language instruction. A quick glance at any foreign language textbook confirms this. Chapters usually begin with the statement of a rule. This prescribed rule is then modeled using a variety of examples. After that, there are exercises for the students to practice the rule that they've learned. This is clearly a prescriptive approach.

Prescriptivism is not, however, limited to the foreign language classroom. You've probably learned many prescriptive rules of English during the course of your education, most of them in English or composition classes. The "rules" in (8) represent two of the more common prescriptive rules of English.

(8) a. It's ungrammatical to end a sentence with a preposition.
     b. It's ungrammatical to split an infinitive.

If you violate these rules, as we have in the sentences in (9), you have, in the eyes of a prescriptivist, spoken ungrammatical English.

(9) a. Linguistics is what I live for.
     b. Captain Kirk wants to boldly go where no man (or woman) has gone before.

The problem for prescriptivists, however, is that these sentences sound perfectly good to nearly all native English speakers and sentence just like these are spoken regularly by native English speakers. We'll address this "problem" in the next section.

Descriptivism

What you will soon see, hopefully, is that prescriptivism ignores reality. First, while formal foreign language instruction is, as has been noted, generally prescriptive, first language acquisition is clearly not. Every person reading this book learned a language fluently by the age of five, and with very few, if any, exceptions, none of you read or heard any grammar rules during this time. This list of prescribed rules that

the prescriptivist adheres to did not play a role in your acquisition of your first language. In fact, most of you probably never encountered a stated grammar rule until you were at least 12 or 13 years old.

Consider also the fact that nearly every single one of you reading this book violates the rules in (8) on a regular basis. In fact, the examples in (9) that violate these rules probably sound just fine to nearly all of us. If native speakers of English end sentences with prepositions and split infinitives regularly, who are these prescriptivists to claim that such English speakers don't know how to speak the language? This is something that we should all take exception with (note the sentence final preposition).

To further illustrate the absurdity of prescriptivism, consider the origin of prescriptive rules, in particular the prescriptive rule prohibiting the splitting of infinitives. In the eighteenth-century there was a movement among grammarians to standardize English, and when questions arose about which forms should be deemed "correct," they were often answered by using classical languages, Greek and Latin, as models[1]. In Latin, infinitive forms consist of a single word. Examples are the verbs "vocare" (to call) and "vertere" (to turn). Thus, in Latin, it is impossible to split an infinitive. In English, however, infinitives consist of "to" plus the verb (as in "to turn" and "to call"), giving rise to the possibility of splitting an infinitive, such as the infinitive "to go" that's split in (9b). To attempt to make the rules of one language, English, conform to the rules of another, Latin, can only be described as absurd.

<u>Clarification #2:</u> Linguists are concerned with describing how people actually speak.

Rather than trying to prescribe how people *should* speak, linguists are interested in describing how they actually *do* speak. Descriptive grammar does not judge linguistic production as correct or incorrect; instead it observes what people say and describes it. Such an approach also involves surveying native speakers of a language to test their intuitions regarding what "sounds good" or "sounds bad" to them. The approach taken by a descriptivist is that whenever a native speaker of a language speaks, he or she is following a set of grammar rules. In other words, aside from the occasional slip of the tongue, all native speaker linguistic production *is 100% rule governed*. The descriptive linguist is well aware, however, that not all native speakers are following the exact same set of rules. Consider the sentences in (10).

> (10) a. We love linguistics classes.
>   b. *Love we classes linguistics.
>   c. ?If I were you, I would take lots of linguistics classes.
>   d. ?If I was you, I would take lots of linguistics classes.

No doubt you find (10a) perfectly grammatical, but you find (10b) wholly ungrammatical, and would never expect to hear any native speaker of English uttering such a sentence (an asterisk before a sentence, as in (10b), indicates ungrammaticality). It's difficult to imagine any native speaker of English disagreeing with you. What this proves is that we all share some (in fact, many) of the same rules. There is certain to be disagreement, however, among native English speakers regarding the grammaticality of (10c) and (10d) (a question mark before a sentence indicates questionable grammaticality). For some of you, (10c) is grammatical, while (10d) is ungrammatical; for others, the exact opposite is true; for others still, both are grammatical. Does this mean that some of us are right and others are wrong? If so, who's right? To a descriptive linguist, because sentences like both (10c) and (10d) are spoken regularly by native speakers of English, they are both grammatical for the people who speak them. (10c) and (10d) prove that while all native speakers of English share certain rules, we do not share *all* rules. In fact, there is a tremendous amount of linguistic diversity among the speakers of any language. We will revisit this issue in more detail at the end of the book.

What this lack of consensus regarding grammaticality tells us is that to judge certain speakers as incorrect or deficient because they don't conform to a standard laid out by certain individuals, such as the eighteenth-century grammarians described earlier, is misguided. Linguists do not judge; they merely observe and describe. We will see that the *correct vs. incorrect* distinction is more useful than *the appropriate vs. inappropriate* distinction. That is, when speaking with people who prefer (10c) to (10d), it would be more

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[1] See Barry (1998), pp. 4–5, for a more detailed discussion.

appropriate to use (10c), and while speaking with people who prefer (10d) to (10c), it would be more appropriate to use (10d).

Much of what we do in this textbook is describe rules of English. Notice, however, the use of the word "describe." Our rules will be based on observation of real linguistic data, meaning real language. In some cases, we will use data already gathered, and in other cases we will generate our own. The important point, however, is that everything we do will be based on observation of real language, not a rule prescribed by some language "authority." In some cases, we might even feel the need to disagree with a dictionary. This is fine as long as we base our conclusions on real data.

You'll see that the process of linguistic inquiry that we employ is a very scientific one that should remind you of your first junior high school science class. Specifically, we will use a "scientific method" of investigation. Just as in a physical science class we will follow certain steps, as illustrated in (11).

(11) step 1: observe (we will gather real language data and analyze it)
     step 2: hypothesize (based on our observations, we will hypothesize a rule)
     step 3: test (we will gather additional data to test our hypothesis)
     step 4: conclude (we will write a final rule based on our observations and tests)

Notice that it's not until the very end that we will write our rules. This is a true *descriptive*, as opposed to *prescriptive*, process.

Descriptivism and the Language Arts Curriculum

At this point, you may be wondering how descriptivism fits into language arts instruction. If whatever native speakers say regularly is grammatical, what are we supposed to teach? To begin with, many of the students in US classrooms today are not native speakers of English. For these students, even the native speaker consensus that is illustrated in (10a) and (10b) is not necessarily shared. Much of their early English production might not be governed by a set of rules. Instead, it might be constructed partially through guessing; or it might be influenced partially by rules of the students' native languages. Therefore, rules like the ones governing (10a) and (10b) that we discover through a descriptive process sometimes need to be explicitly taught.

Next, for native speakers of English, the concept of appropriateness mentioned earlier is important when determining the relevance of descriptive grammar to classroom instruction. While all varieties of English are inherently equal, some are more appropriate in certain contexts. For people to be successful in our society, knowing how to speak the **standard** variety of English, meaning the one that's accepted in formal contexts, is of tremendous importance. The descriptive linguist realizes this, and, while being careful not to judge **non-standard** production as incorrect, works to teach his or her students the systematic differences between the two and how to produce the standard variety in the appropriate contexts.

To illustrate the concept of standard vs. non-standard, we can return to the questionable examples in (10). For some native speakers of English, (10c) is "correct" while for others (10d) is preferable. Only one of these, however, is considered standard (decide on your own which one you think is standard). In some cases, native speakers need to be taught the standard form if the non-standard one is what they've internalized. This must be done carefully, though. Imagine being told that what sounds right to you, what you've grown up with your whole life, is just plain *wrong*. For many of you, this will be easy, because while many of you prefer (10d), in fact, (10c) is considered standard. If this is hard for you to swallow, you can relate to what many students of non-standard speaking backgrounds go through when learning the standard variety.

Narrowing the Focus: English and other Languages

Up to this point, we have focused on the study of language in general. Now, let's shift our attention to specific languages, English in particular. An important point to keep in mind when studying language is that not all languages are structured the same way; nor are there "better" or "worse" ways for languages to be structured. While it's true that there are certain **universals**, or shared features, across human languages (in fact, language universals are the subject of a great deal of linguistic inquiry currently), there are also many differences among languages. What you, as a native English speaker, consider to be "normal" or

"logical" in language might be completely foreign and unfamiliar to someone whose first language is not English. Conversely, what seems completely "normal" or "logical" to a speaker of another language might be foreign to you. This is part of what makes learning a second language so difficult. It is essential for teachers working with non-native speakers of English to understand this. Throughout this text, we will examine differences between English and other languages to make this point clear and to help you appreciate some of the difficulties your non-native speaking students face.

English: an Ideal Language?[2]

English seems to function just fine as a human language, but is it perfect? Like every natural human language, English is somewhat less than ideal. An ideal language would be one that is 100% clear or 100% efficient. Clearly, English is not 100% clear, as is illustrated by the amount of **lexical ambiguity** in language. Lexical ambiguity describes a situation in which a word could have multiple meanings. A common example used in linguistics classes is the sentence in (12).

  (12) I'll meet you at the bank.

Does "bank" refer to a financial institution or the side of a river? It's not clear from this sentence; we would need more context to determine the answer to this question. Two words, such as "bank" and "bank," that are pronounced the same but have different meanings are called **homonyms**. English has many homonyms. Related to homonyms are **homophones**, words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings *and* different spellings. Examples of homophones are "pray" and "prey." An ideally clear language would have no homonyms or homophones; instead, each word would have exactly one meaning, and for every meaning there would be just a single word.

Just as English is not ideally clear, it is not ideally efficient. If it were, we would have a *single* word, for example, "suff," to express *every* meaning. While this would make learning vocabulary easy, it would not facilitate communication. Unfortunately, communication in an ideally efficient language would require powers of telepathy, which we do not have. How else would we know which of the countless meanings of "suff" a speaker intends? If he says only "suff" when he greets you, "suff" when he wants a drink and "suff" when he tells you happened to him at work yesterday, how will you know which of these three "meanings" he intends?

Though English, like every other natural language, is not ideal, we shouldn't be too quick to condemn it. It is, in fact, a compromise between the two "ideal" extremes described above. Think about the number of words you would have to learn if there were no homonyms in English; one word for every meaning would mean a whole lot of words to know. Instead, the language has sacrificed some clarity for efficiency. Ideal clarity would also take some of the fun out of life. Imagine a world without puns (plays on words) such as the one in (13). Pretty dull, to be sure.

  (13) Q: Why is the baby ant confused?
        A: All his uncles are ants [aunts].

        Q: Why is a moon rock tastier than an earth rock?
        A: It's a little meteor [meatier].

        Q: Did you hear about the butcher who backed into the meat grinder?
        A: He got a little *behind* in his work.

Also, in an ideally clear language, the humorous (but real) newspaper headlines in (14) wouldn't be humorous at all, and wouldn't that be a shame? What makes the examples in (13) and (14) humorous, assuming you find them humorous, is precisely the lack of clarity in English that we've been discussing. Specifically, it's the lexical ambiguity that creates the humor. In each headline, there is a word or words that can have multiple meanings, and one of these meanings is clearly inappropriate for the context. One might say, then, that a lack of linguistic clarity adds a little spice to life.

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[2] Ideas adapted from Finegan (1999), pp. 4–5.

(14) a. Iraqi Head Seeks Arms
b. Is There A Ring Of Debris Around Uranus?
c. Prostitutes Appeal To Pope
d. Safety Experts Say School Bus Passengers Should Be Belted
e Red Tape Holds Up New Bridge
f. Kids Make Nutritious Snacks

And, of course, imagine the confusion that would result from an ideally efficient language (one with just a single word). We would never know what people were trying to say. By having more than just one word, the language sacrifices some efficiency for clarity. English is, then, a compromise between clarity and efficiency.

So, while English might not be ideal, it works; and as future educators who will be using English as the language of instruction, it will important for you to have a conscious awareness of how it works. That is the focus of this book.

Tying It All Together: The Relevance of Linguistics

Before we begin our exploration of English, and language in general, we need to stop and consider the relevance of linguistics to classroom teachers. Frequently, students complain that they don't see the point in studying linguistics. Many of them are already classroom teachers, they argue, and have been for several years, so why do they need to learn something new? This attitude leads us to our final misconception of the chapter:

Misconception #3: Linguistics is not relevant for primary and secondary school teachers.

Nothing could be further from the truth. While the students' complaints are, on one level, legitimate, they are very misguided on another. What this mean is that while it's true that no one *needs* linguistics to be a teacher, we would argue that to be the *best* teachers they can be requires a great deal of knowledge, including linguistic knowledge. To use a confusing, but accurate, saying, "we don't always know what we don't know." One of the goals of this textbook is to help you see what you didn't previously know about language, and to encourage you to use your newly found knowledge in your classrooms.

Clarification #3: Linguistics is highly relevant for primary and secondary school teachers.

Regardless of the subject or subjects you teach, language is involved. While language obviously plays a larger role in language arts than in other areas, it is certainly not limited to language arts. If you're teaching history, language is involved. If you're teaching math, language is involved. Because you will be using and responding to language in your classroom, having a greater awareness of it will make you a more effective teacher. You're probably having a difficult time seeing exactly how right now, but hopefully, by the end of the term, it will be clear to you. Remember, the usefulness of linguistics depends to a great extent on the creativity of the teacher. You need to be active in your application of linguistic knowledge in your classroom.

Summary

In this chapter we previewed the course by learning about what linguistics is and is not, uncovering some of the most common misconceptions about the field. We studied language as a general phenomenon and took a look at English in particular. We also investigated the nature of linguistic rules. Finally, we considered the relevance of linguistics to education professionals, specifically primary and secondary school teachers.

Misconceptions	Clarifications
#1: Linguistics is the study of specific languages with the goal of learning to read, write or speak them.	#1: Linguistics is the scientific study of the phenomenon of human language.
#2: Linguistics is concerned with trying to get people to speak "properly".	#2: Linguists are concerned with describing how people actually speak.
#3: Linguistics is not relevant for primary and secondary school teachers.	#3: Linguistics is highly relevant for primary and secondary school teachers.

Exercises

English   Homophones

As you know, English (along with every other natural human language) is not an ideal language. Part of what makes English less than ideal is the significant amount of **homonymy** in the language. Homonymy refers to the relationship between words that have the same sounds, but different meanings. The term **homophone** is often used to refer to homonyms that have different spellings, as well as different meanings. Homonyms and homophones can be a particularly troublesome area for English Language Learner (ELL) students, for obvious reasons. Below is an exercise that should give you an idea of the extent of homonymy in English.

For each word given below, think of a *homophone*. Whenever possible, try to think of two homophones for each word. The first one has been done for you.

to	too	two
do		
pair		
raise		
air		
there		
right		
sight		
weigh		
need		
praise		