

Chapter 1

Introduction

The learning objectives of this chapter are:

1. to master the definition and scope of linguistics;
2. to distinguish some concepts in linguistics;
3. to understand the design features of language;
4. to identify the functions of language.

引言

语言学是系统研究人类语言的学科，或关于语言的科学研究。它探索语言的起源、定义、功能、发展和运用等，以及其他与语言相关的问题。语言学分为微观语言学和宏观语言学两大类。微观语言学只研究语言现象本身，包括语音学、音系学、形态学、句法学、语义学和语用学；宏观语言学注重研究语言与其他领域之间的关系，如心理语言学、社会语言学、认知语言学、神经语言学、应用语言学等。语言学几个容易混淆的概念包括语言和言语、语言能力和言语行为、规定性与描述性、现时语言学与历时语言学、横组合关系与纵聚合关系。语言是人类特有的、任意的、有声的符号系统。语言本身独有的特征，包括任意性、二重性、创造性、文化传承性等。语言在人类交流中有寒暄功能、指令功能、信息功能、表达功能、情感功能、疑问功能和施为功能等。语言的起源有各种假说，包括拟声说、达达说和劳动喊声说等。

Every aspect of language—sound, structure, meanings of words and more complex expressions—is narrowly restricted by the properties of the initial state; these same restrictions underlie and account for the extraordinary richness and flexibility of the systems that emerge.

—Avram Noam Chomsky¹

1.1 What Is Linguistics?

Linguistics is generally defined as the scientific study of language. There is zero article preceding the word “language” implying that linguistics studies not only any particular language (e.g., English, Arabic, Chinese), but language in general. The word “study” does not mean “learning”, but “investigation” or “examination”. “Scientific” refers to the way in which language is studied. A scientific study of language is based on the systematic investigation of data, conducted with reference to some general theories of language structure. In order to discover the nature of the underlying language system, i.e., to see how language is actually used, linguists formulate some hypotheses about the language structure. However, the hypotheses thus formed have to be checked repeatedly against the observed facts. In linguistics, as in any other

1 Avram Noam Chomsky (1928–) is an American linguist, philosopher, cognitive scientist, logician, political commentator and activist. He has authored over 100 books and is described as the “father of modern linguistics”.

disciplines, data and theory stand in a dialectal complement; that is, a theory without the support of data can hardly claim validity, and data without being explained by some theories remain a muddle mass of things. Therefore, the process of linguistic study is as follows:

- Linguistic facts observed;
- Generalization made about the linguistic facts;
- Hypotheses formulated to account for the linguistic facts;
- The hypotheses tested by further observations;
- Linguistic theories of language constructed.

1.2 Scopes of Linguistics

Linguistics can be divided into microlinguistics and macrolinguistics. The former is the core branch of linguistics which includes phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Microlinguistics studies the language itself.

Phonetics is the scientific study of speech sounds. It studies how speech sounds are produced, transmitted and perceived.

Phonology focuses on the study of how speech sounds function in a language. It studies the way of how speech sounds are put together and used to convey meaning in communication.

Morphology is the study of formation of words. It can be considered as the grammar of words, as syntax the grammar of sentences.

Syntax deals with the combination of words into phrases, clauses and sentences which are governed by rules.

Semantics is concerned with the study of meaning in all of its formal aspects. What one is really trying to do in semantics, is to explicate, or to make explicit, the ways in which words and sentences of various grammatical constructions are used and understood by native or fluent speakers of a language.

Pragmatics can be defined as the study of meaning in the context of use. It deals with how speakers use language which cannot be predicted from the linguistic knowledge alone.

Macrolinguistics studies the relationship between language and other fields. The major subbranches of macrolinguistics are as follows.

Sociolinguistics studies the relationship between language and society. It mainly studies how social factors influence the structure and use of language.

Psycholinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and psychology. It focuses on the mental structure and processes which are involved in the acquisition, comprehension and production of language.

Neurolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and brain. It typically studies the disturbances of language comprehension and production caused by the damage of the certain areas of the brain.

Stylistics is the study of language style. It is concerned with the linguistic choices that are available to a writer and the reasons why particular forms and expressions are used rather than others.

Discourse analysis is the study of the relationship between discourse and its contexts. It deals with how sentences in spoken or written language form larger meaningful units such as paragraphs, conversations and interviews, and the various devices used by speakers or writers when they connect single sentences together into a coherent whole.

Cognitive linguistics is the study of the organizing, processing and cognition of language. It mainly studies categories and categorization, conceptual metaphor and metonymy, iconicity and grammaticalization, etc.

Applied linguistics is primarily concerned with the application of linguistic principles and theories to the solution of practical problems, especially methods and findings to the language problems which have been arising in other areas of experience. Narrowly speaking, it refers to the application of linguistic principles and theories to language teaching and learning.

Ecolinguistics, linking language with ecology, is a field which explores the role of language in the life-sustaining interactions of humans, other species and the physical environment. It addresses language loss and language maintenance in the age of globalization and the question of how language construes our view of nature and environment.

Computational linguistics is the study of the applications of computers in processing and analyzing language, as in automatic machine translation and text analysis. Much of this exploits the capacity of computers to accept, retain, and process vast amounts of information, thus freeing human research workers for the more vital interpretation of the results of the computer's calculations, sortings, and listings.

Legal linguistics is the application of linguistic research and methods to the law. It studies law with linguistic methods and the outcome of the studies can help legal scientists and legal practitioners do and understand their work better through an increased understanding of how language works in general and in legal domains in particular.

1.3 Some Distinctions in Linguistics

1.3.1 Langue and Parole

These two terminologies were proposed by the famous linguist F. de Saussure in the early 20th century. Langue and parole are French words. Langue refers to the abstract linguistic system shared by all the members of a speech community. Parole is the realization of langue in actual use. Specifically, langue is the set of conventions and rules which language users all have to abide by. Parole is the concrete use of the conventions and the application of the rules. Langue is abstract; it is not the language people actually use. Parole is concrete; it refers to the naturally occurring language events. Langue is relatively stable; it does not change frequently. Parole varies from person to person, from time to time, and from situation to situation. Saussure makes this distinction in order to single out one aspect of language for a series of studies. According to Saussure, parole is simply a mass of linguistic facts, too varied and confusing for systematic investigation, and what linguists should do is to abstract langue from parole, that is, to discover and study the regularities governing the actual use of language.

1.3.2 Competence and Performance

The distinction between competence and performance was proposed by an American linguist N. Chomsky in the late 1950s. Chomsky was the founder of traditional grammar (TG), which is most influential in modern linguistics. Competence is an ideal user's internalized knowledge of a language. Performance is the actual use or realization of the knowledge by individuals in linguistic communication. According to Chomsky, speakers have internalized a set of rules about their language. This rule system enables them to produce and understand an infinitely large number of sentences and recognize sentences that are ungrammatical and ambiguous. Despite the

perfect knowledge of one's own language, a speaker can still make mistakes in actual use, e.g., a slip of tongue, and unnecessary pauses. These imperfect performances are usually caused by social and psychological factors, such as stress, anxiety, and embarrassment. Similar to Saussure, Chomsky thinks that what linguists should study is the ideal speaker's competence because the speaker's performance is too haphazard to be studied. The task of the linguists is to discover and specify the speaker's internalized rules.

While there is similarity between Saussure and Chomsky's notions. Saussure's distinction takes a sociological view of language. His notion of *langue* is a matter of social conventions. Chomsky looks at language from the psychological point of view and considers linguistic competence as the property of the mind of the speaker.

1.3.3 Prescriptive and Descriptive

Modern linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive. It aims to describe and analyze the language people actually use. It tries to eliminate a series of grammatical rules which are forced on the language users. Most modern linguists regard linguistic study as a scientific and objective undertaking, and their major task is to describe the language that people actually use, be it "correct" or not. In other words, what actually occurred in the language use should be described and analyzed in linguistic investigation.

Traditional grammar is prescriptive in the sense that it tries to lay down a series of grammatical rules which are forced on the language users, that is, to tell people what they should say and what they should not say. For example:

It is not right to say sentences like "I runs away". (prescriptive)

People do not say sentences like "I runs away". (descriptive)

1.3.4 Synchronic and Diachronic

Language exists in time and changes through time. The description of a language at some point in time is the synchronic study. The description of a language as it changes through time is the diachronic study. A diachronic study of language is a historical study; it studies the historical development of language over a period of time. For example, a study of the features of the English used in Shakespeare's time would be a synchronic study, and a study of the changes English has undergone since then

would be a diachronic study. In modern linguistics, synchronic study seems to enjoy priority over diachronic study. The reason is that unless the various states of language are successfully studied, it would be difficult to describe the changes that have taken place in its historical development. Synchronic descriptions are often regarded as the descriptions of a language as it exists at the present day and most linguistic studies are of this type.

1.3.5 Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Relations

Saussure has put forward another pair of concepts: syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. The former refers to the horizontal relationship between linguistic elements, which form linear sequences. The latter refers to the vertical relationship between forms, which might occupy the same particular place in a structure. Paradigmatic relationships between linguistic elements can be established by the use of the substitution test at the vertical level. Thus, the initial consonants in “beer” “deer” and “peer” form a paradigmatic relation as well as the words “today” and “tomorrow” in the sentence “She will arrive today/tomorrow.” Syntagmatic relationships are defined by the ability of elements to be combined horizontally (linearly). For example, the relationship between “She will arrive” and “today”.

1.4 What Is Language?

Language comes differently. If we say “Chinese is a language”, it refers to language in particular. If we say “Linguistics is the systematic study of language”, it refers to language in general. If we say Shakespeare’s language, it refers to a typical style of using a particular language. If we say C language in computer science, it refers to an artificial language. If we say the language of bees, it refers to a system of communication.

Till now, there is no standardized definition of language. Most definitions suggested by modern linguists share some important characteristics of human language that are included in the following statement about language:

Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication.

Language is a system of rules and it is constructed according to certain rules. Language is arbitrary. There is no intrinsic connection between the word and its

meaning. Words are just symbols associated with objects, actions, ideas, etc., by convention. Language is vocal, for the primary medium of language is sound for all languages. Language is used for human communication in the sense that language is human-specific.

1.4.1 Design Features of Language

Design features refer to the defining properties of human language that distinguish it from any animal system of communication. The following six design features are specified by the American linguist Charles Francis Hockett.

1. Arbitrariness

Language is said to be arbitrary because there is no natural relationship between the words and the concepts that they represent. It is the matter of convention. For example, there is no intrinsic connection between the word “desk” and the object it refers to. In Chinese the word “桌子” is used for the same concept, and so on with other languages.

2. Duality

Human language has two levels of structure. The alphabet for writing and the phonemes for speech are at the lower level, which have no meaning on their own. At the higher level, the meaning emerges as a result of the combination of the units from the lower level.

3. Creativity (Productivity)

By creativity we mean language is resourceful and productive in that it makes possible the construction and interpretation of new signals by its users. That is, language has the potential to create endless sentences, including the sentences people have never heard before.

4. Displacement

Displacement means human language enables its users to refer to things that are not present in time or space at the moment of communication.

5. Cultural Transmission

Language is culturally transmitted, not genetically transmitted. It is passed down from generation to generation through teaching and learning, rather than by instinct.

6. Interchangeability

Interchangeability means any human being could be both a producer and a receiver of a message. The role of a speaker and a hearer is changeable at any moment.

1.4.2 Functions of Language

We use language for almost infinite numbers of purposes, from writing letters to gossiping with our friends, making speeches and talking to ourselves in the mirror. The primary function of language is to transmit information and convey commands, feelings and emotions. That is, language is a tool of communication. Linguists talk about the functions of language in an abstract sense, not in terms of using language to chat, to think, to buy and sell, to read and write, to greet, praise and condemn people, etc. They summarize these practical functions and attempt some broad classifications of the basic functions of language. The following are the major functions of language.

1. Phatic Function

Language is used to establish an atmosphere or maintain social contact between the speaker and the hearer. Greetings, farewells and comments on the weather serve this function. For example:

How are you?

How do you do?

It's a nice day, isn't it?

They are used to establish a common sentiment between the speaker and the hearer.

2. Directive Function

Language is used to get the hearer to do something. Most imperative sentences are of this function. For example:

Close the book and listen to me carefully.

3. Interrogative Function

Language is used to ask for information from others. All questions expecting answers serve this function. For example:

What's your idea?

What time is it now?

4. Informative Function

Language is used to tell something, to give information, or to reason things out. Declarative sentences serve this function. The following public sign serves this function.



5. Expressive Function

Language is used to reveal the speaker's attitude and feelings. Interjections serve this function. For example:

My God!

Good Heavens!

6. Evocative Function

Language is used to create certain feelings in the hearer. Jokes, advertising and propaganda serve this function.

7. Performative Function

Language is used to do things or to perform acts. The judge's imprisonment sentences, the president's declaration of war or the Queen's naming of a ship, etc., serve this function.

8. Metalingual Function

Language can be used to talk about itself. For example:

"Man" is a noun.

"Man" is composed of three phonemes.

1.4.3 The Origin of Language

There are some famous theories about the origin of language, but many of them have been discredited. The following are three well-known theories.

1. The Bow-Wow Theory

The basic idea of this theory is that primary words could have been imitations of the natural sounds which early men and women heard around them. Onomatopoeic words seem to be convincing evidence for this theory. However, we find they are very different in the degree of resemblance they express with the natural sounds. This theory lacks supportive evidence.