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# English and American Studies

## Vorbereitungsliteratur für das Aufnahmeverfahren

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# Linguistics

## 1 The nature of language

Linguistics is the name given to the discipline which studies human language. Two questions come immediately to mind. Firstly, what is human language? How, in general terms, can it be characterized? Secondly, what does its study involve? What is it that defines linguistics as a discipline?

Clearly, the two questions cannot be kept completely separate. Whenever you decide to study anything, you have already to some degree defined it for your own intents and purposes. Nevertheless, there are a number of very general observations about the nature of language that can be made, and which will be the concern of this first chapter. These will then lead us into more specific issues in linguistics which will be taken up in subsequent chapters.

### In the beginning ...

According to the Bible: 'In the beginning was the Word'. According to the Talmud: 'God created the world by a Word, instantaneously, without toil or pains'. Whatever more mystical meaning these pieces of scripture might have, they both point to the primacy of language in the way human beings conceive of the world.

Language certainly figures centrally in our lives. We discover our identity as individuals and social beings when we acquire it during childhood. It serves as a means of cognition and communication: it enables us to think for ourselves and to cooperate with other people in our community. It provides for present needs and future plans, and at the same time carries with it the impression of things past.

Language seems to be a feature of our essential humanity which enables us to rise above the condition of mere brutish beings, real or imagined. Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest* 'gabbles like a thing most brutish' until Prospero teaches him language. In the play he is referred to as a monster, but that is better than being an ogre, who, according to W. H. Auden, is quite incapable of speech:

The Ogre does what ogres can,  
Deeds quite impossible for Man,  
But one prize is beyond his reach,

The Ogre cannot master speech.  
About a subjugated plain,  
Among its desperate and slain,  
The Ogre stalks with hands on hips,  
And drivel gushes from his lips.

We might note in passing, incidentally, that it is *speech* that the ogre cannot master. Whether this necessarily implies that *language* is also beyond his reach is another matter, for language does not depend on speech as the only physical medium for its expression. Auden may not imply such a distinction in these lines, but it is one which, as we shall see presently, it is important to recognize.

It has been suggested that language is so uniquely human, distinguishes us so clearly from ogres and other animals, that our species might be more appropriately named *homo loquens* than *homo sapiens*. But although language is clearly essential to humankind and has served to extend control over other parts of creation, it is not easy to specify what exactly makes it distinctive. If, indeed, it *is* distinctive. After all, other species communicate after a fashion, for they could not otherwise mate, propagate, and cooperate in their colonies.

### The design of language

Other species communicate after a fashion. The question is after what fashion? Birds signal to each other by singing, bees by dancing, and these song and dance routines can be very elaborate. Are they language? One can argue that they are not in that they *are* indeed routines, restricted repertoires which are produced as a more or less automatic response, and so *reactive* to particular states of affairs. In this respect they lack the essential flexibility of human language which enables us to be *proactive*, to create new meanings and shape our own reality unconstrained by the immediate context. As Bertrand Russell once observed: 'No matter how eloquently a dog may bark, he cannot tell you that his parents were poor but honest'. What are the features then (the so-called **design features**) which provide for such flexibility, and which therefore might be said to be distinctive of human language?

One of them is **arbitrariness**: the forms of linguistic signs bear no natural resemblance to their meaning. The link between them is a matter of convention, and conventions differ radically across languages. Thus, the English word 'dog' happens to denote a particular four-footed domesticated creature, the same creature which is denoted in French by the completely different form *chien*. Neither form looks like a dog, or sounds like one. If it did, then dogs in France would be unrecognizable to English speakers, and vice versa. It is true that some linguistic forms do seem to have a natural basis, that is to say, they are in some degree onomatopoeic (they sound like the thing they describe). The word form 'bark' for

instance, does seem, to English speakers at least, to sound like a dog. But it remains a conventionalized link all the same. The corresponding form in French (*aboyer*) is quite different. In German, the word is *bellen*: different again. And it is anyway hard to see what natural connection there might be between the English word for the noise a dog makes (no matter how eloquently) and the outer casing of the trunk of a tree.

We should notice, however, that although the link between form and meaning is arbitrary in this respect, that is not to say that there is no relationship between them at all. Words are arbitrary in form, but they are not random in their use. On the contrary, it is precisely because linguistic forms do not resemble what they signify that they can be used to encode what is significant by convention in different communities. So the fact that there is no natural connection between the form of words and what they mean makes it possible for different communities to use language to divide up reality in ways that suit them. An example which is often cited is that of Bedouin Arabic, which has a number of terms for the animal which, in English, is usually encoded simply as 'camel'. These terms are convenient labels for differences important to the Arabs, but none of them actually *resembles* a camel. Similarly, in English there is a whole host of terms for different kinds of dog: 'hound', 'mastiff', 'spaniel', 'terrier', 'poodle', and each will call up different images. But there is nothing in common in the different words themselves to indicate that they are all dogs. A 'spaniel' could just as well be a tool (cf. 'spanner') or a 'poodle' an item of oriental cuisine (cf. 'noodle'). And it is of course this very arbitrary, but conventional, connection between form and meaning which enables us to produce puns ('What's a Greek urn/earn?', 'My husband is a naval/navel surgeon', etc.). It is this too which can give rise to such amusement, or embarrassment, when we encounter words in another language which call up incongruous - often indelicate - associations because they resemble words in our own which have a very different meaning.

To say that linguistic signs are arbitrary in this sense is not to deny that they can be used in combination to onomatopoeic effect, that is to say where, to use Alexander Pope's words, 'the sound must seem an echo to the sense'. This is done most obviously, but by no means exclusively, in poetry, as in the line from Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale':

The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Clearly, the language here is not arbitrarily chosen: it in some way *represents* the sound. But the effect can only be recognized if you know what the words mean: it does not arise simply from what they sound like. This is even true of the apparently onomatopoeic 'murmurous'. For if this word expresses a natural connection, with the sound alone evoking what it denotes, then why does the similar-sounding word

'murderous' not do so as well? It would seem to be the case in fact that it is only when you know the meaning that you infer that the form is appropriate.

A second design feature, one closely related to the first, is known as **duality**. Human language operates on two levels of structure. At one level are elements which have no meaning in themselves but which combine to form units at another level which do have meaning. In the line from Keats, for example, there is a repetition of sounds which are associated with the letter 's'. One of these sounds is voiced (the vocal cords vibrate) in the words 'flies' and 'eves', and the other unvoiced as in 'summer'. The same distinction corresponds to spelling differences in the case of 'v' (voiced, as in 'eves') and 'f' (unvoiced as in 'flies'). These distinctions are part of the sound system of English. But the sounds do not themselves have meaning. What they do is to combine in all manner of ways to form words which *are* meaningful. So although we can attribute no meaning to the sounds /s/ and /z/ or /f/ and /v/ as such, they serve to make up words which *are* different in meaning, as for example:

face /feis/	safe /seif/
phase /feiz/	save /seiv/

Obviously this duality provides language with enormous productive power: a relatively small number of elements at one level can enter into thousands of different combinations to form units of meaning at the other level.

So far we have considered duality in reference to spoken language but the same principle applies to written language as well. Here, letters enter into various combinations to form words whose different spelling signifies difference in meaning. As the examples given above indicate, sometimes there is a coincidence between sound elements and letter elements: the sound contrast in /seif/ and /seiv/, for example, is marked by a corresponding spelling difference 'safe' and 'save'. But there are innumerable instances, and English is notorious in this respect, where the sound/spelling relationship is not at all straightforward (how do you pronounce the written word 'sow', how do you write the spoken word /sait/ - 'cite', 'sight', 'site'?) Languages differ widely in the degree and kind of correspondence between their sound and spelling systems.

The very fact that duality can operate with both spoken sounds and written letters in human language is itself a feature of its flexibility. No animal communication appears to have exploited other media to develop alternative delivery systems in this way.

It can be argued, and it usually is argued, that human language is primarily spoken, on the grounds that it is *originally* spoken, both in the individual's acquisition of a language and in the history of language

itself. The written language is in both cases based on the spoken, and can be taken as a derived version. But we should note that each **medium** allows for a difference in **mode** of communication. When we talk of 'slurred speech' we refer to the medium; when we talk of 'a stirring Speech', we refer to a mode, a way of using the medium to communicate in a certain way. Similarly, 'script' (as in 'roman script') applies to the medium of writing, and 'scripture' (as in the Koran) to a written mode.

Once an alternative medium is exploited, different modes of communication emerge. Writing is delayed reaction communication. It does not depend on, and cannot exploit, a shared context of time and place: the first person addresser is at a remove from the second person addressee. In these circumstances, writing clearly allows for ways of talking about the world, and of communicating with other people, which are different from those which are characteristic of the face to face interaction of speech. In this respect, the development of writing from speech and its exploitation in various modes may be seen as further illustration of the inherent flexibility and creative potential of human language.

### Animal communication

We may allow, then, that language is an impressive human achievement. But is it specifically and uniquely human? Is it **species-specific**?

One way of addressing this question is to compare the communication of other animals with human language to see whether it has the design features which we have been discussing. There is a difficulty here of knowing how to interpret the data as evidence. How many features, and in what measure of sophistication, does a particular type of communication have to have to qualify as humanlike in kind, even if not in degree? Animal communication may appear to us to be rudimentary, but we do not know how much of its potential is actually realized. It may be that birds and bees and dolphins could reveal more complex combinations of design features if the occasion were to arise. They may have more capability than their actual behaviour might suggest.

And anyway, it might be objected, how can we actually *know* the significance of the signs of other species since we can only interpret them with reference to our own? For all we know, the dog may be able to tell *other* dogs that his parents were poor but honest, in a kind of canine idiom we cannot understand. Our judgements are bound to be anthropocentric. We can imagine the possibility of linguistic sophistication among animals, of course. Children's fiction is full of talking animals. They figure in adult fiction too, often to satirical effect, as in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Orwell's *Animal Farm*. But they are all anthropomorphic creatures, cast in our image; and using our language, not their own. The pigs in *Animal Farm*, for example, talk like human politicians. What their own distinctive animal idiom might have been, we have no way of knowing.

Another way of enquiring into whether language is species-specific or not is to try and get another species to learn it. The assumption here is that there might be some linguistic capability within animals which has simply not been activated by natural requirement. Perhaps the ogre only lacks appropriate instruction; perhaps his drivel is like Caliban's gabbling - evidence only of ignorance, not incapacity. Instead of just *observing* behaviour, therefore, what we need to do is *elicit* it, and actually try to get certain animals to learn aspects of human language. The argument is that if such animals can be induced to acquire language, it cannot in essence be specific to the human species. Since the non-human primates, especially the chimpanzees, are our closest evolutionary kin, they have been taken as the most suitable subjects for treatment.

It was recognized that these primates are not physiologically equipped with the kind of vocal organs suited to human speech, so that if they were to learn language it would have to be in dissociation from speech, through a different medium. Otherwise all you would get would be ogre-like drivel. One chimpanzee, Washoe, was brought up and instructed in the use of the American Sign Language (ASL). After four years she appeared to have a repertoire of some 80 signs or so, some of which she could use in combination. With another chimpanzee, Sarah, a quite different medium was used, namely a collection of plastic chips of different shape and colour, each of which was the token of a distinct meaning. To simulate human language, the relationship between the chips and their meaning was entirely arbitrary (a red square, for example, meant 'banana'). A more sophisticated version of the same sort of system was used with another chimpanzee, Lana, who was taught to press buttons on a computer installed in her room, each button having a different symbol inscribed upon it, again arbitrarily related to its meaning. Both Sarah and Lana learned a considerable repertoire of signs and were able to respond to, and manipulate a range of combinations suggesting that they might have acquired in rudimentary fashion some features of the flexibility so characteristic of human language.

The results of all these efforts with chimpanzees, however, have been unconvincing. Part of the reason for this is the disparity between the very efforts themselves and the relatively modest returns by way of learning. Human children appear to acquire language with impressive ease, and without the intensive and directed regime of instruction which the chimpanzees were subjected to. The fact that so much effort was needed to induce even rudimentary linguistic behaviour might itself be taken as indicative that the subjects lacked the capacity to learn. Certainly the chimps seemed somewhat lacking in natural language aptitude.

A related point is that whenever special conditions are set up as they were in these cases, with the use of chips and computer buttons, contrived contexts and constant monitoring, it is always possible that these conditions may have a distorting effect on the animals' behaviour. The chimpanzees may have



been exhibiting an elaborate conditioned reflex rather than evidence of any more general capability. Human language provides abundant evidence that it is natural for humans to infer abstract categories from actual occurrences, to go beyond the immediate context, and indeed, as duality shows, to create a level of structure which is exclusively concerned with forms without meaning. It seems, judging from the evidence of these studies, that other primates do not have the same inclination to abstraction.

One reason for the human quest for abstraction of course, is that we are thereby enabled to categorize reality, and so in some degree at least to control it. As indicated earlier, language enables us to be proactive as well as reactive, and so, in some respects, to make the world conform to our will. It is interesting in this regard that the chimpanzees in question did not seek to use their newly acquired linguistic accomplishment with others of the species.

They appeared not to be aware of the advantage that language might bestow upon them. And this, of course, raises a very general (and obvious) question: if these animals, or any others, do indeed have a similar capacity for language as human beings, why have they never bothered to exploit it?

But this in turn raises another (equally obvious) question - and one which was touched on earlier. The researchers with Sarah and Lana recognized that the chimpanzees were physiologically unsuited to speech, so that if they were to learn language it would have to be through some other medium. But then not only are the conditions for learning unnatural, but what they are learning ceases to be natural language. This experimentation might well reveal interesting insights about the nature of chimpanzee intelligence, and this in turn might tell us something about what would for them constitute natural language. For all we know (at present at least) they might have a highly complex and subtle signalling system, a language comparable to ours, but exploiting visual and aural elements which do not count as significant to us. It would be interesting to know whether a latter day Tarzan would do any better among the apes than Washoe and Sarah among the humans. The attempt to teach apes human language reveals as much as anything else how incapable we are of conceiving of language in any except human terms.

### **Human language: endowment or accomplishment?**

To return, then, to the question we started with: is language species-specific, unique to humans? The answer is that if 'language' is defined as '*human* language' and significance assigned to particular design features accordingly, then it is bound to be species-specific, by definition. But now another and more difficult issue arises. If language is uniquely human, does it mean that it is something we are born with, part of our genetic make-up, an innate endowment?

For it is of course quite possible to argue that something is peculiar to humankind and so is *generically* unique, without accepting that it is part of our biological make-up, that is to say, *genetically* unique. Thus, we might note that we seem to be the only creatures that take it into their heads to wear clothes or cook food, but no one, I imagine, is likely to argue that we are genetically predisposed to clothes or cooked food. It might be just as difficult to induce intelligent apes to adopt these human peculiarities on their own initiative as to get them to learn language. So it is hardly valid to use the linguistic shortcomings of Washoe and Sarah as evidence for the genetic uniqueness of human language. One might argue that their 'linguistic' behaviour is no more significant as evidence than the antics of chimpanzees at a circus dressed up for a tea-party. They can indeed ape human behaviour, but it is a travesty of the real thing.

So it is one thing to say that language is, as a matter of observable fact, a universal feature of the species not attested in other animals, and therefore a generic *accomplishment*; but it is quite a different thing to say that it is a genetic *endowment*. This is obviously a much stronger and more controversial claim. And it is one which informs the approach that the linguist Noam Chomsky takes to the study of language.

The argument for the genetic uniqueness of language is that it provides an explanation for a number of facts which would otherwise be inexplicable. One of these is the ease with which children learn their own language. They rapidly acquire a complex grammar which goes well beyond imitation of any utterances they might hear. They do not simply 'pick up' language, parrot-like, but use the language around them to develop rules which cannot possibly have been induced directly from the relatively meagre data they are exposed to. Acquisition is not, or at least not only, a matter of accumulation but also of *regulation*. So where does this capability for regulation come from? The argument is that it must have been there to begin with; that there must exist some kind of innate, genetically programmed **Language Acquisition Device (LAD)** which directs the process whereby children infer rules from the language data they are exposed to.

So the idea is that as human beings we are 'wired up' for language: that is to say for language in general, of course, not for any *particular* language. What (it is claimed) the LAD provides is a closed set of common principles of grammatical organization, or **Universal Grammar (UG)**, which is then variously realized in different languages, depending on which one the child is actually exposed to in its environment. According to Chomsky, these principles define a number of general **parameters** of language which are given different **settings** by particular languages. The parameters are innate, predetermined, part of the genetic make-up of human beings. The settings are the result of varying environmental conditions. This being so, in respect to parameters, all languages are alike; in respect to settings, they are all different. In acquisition, children do not need to induce the particular rules of their

own language from scratch, and only on the basis of the language data they hear. What they do is to use the data to set the parameters which they are already innately provided with. It is as if they came equipped for reception with all the wavelengths in place and all they need to do is tune in.

It should be noted that there is nothing especially novel about the idea that human beings are born with a cognitive learning capability which is wired genetically into the brain. What is different, and controversial, about this theory of innate universals is Chomsky's claim that we are equipped with a specifically linguistic programme which is unique to the species, and different in kind from any other capability. It follows from this view that language learning is not explicable as one among many aspects of general intellectual development, but only as the activation of a distinct language acquisition device and the growth of a kind of separate mental organ.

### **Language, mind, and social life**

From the UG perspective, the essential nature of language is cognitive. It is seen as a psychological phenomenon: what is of primary interest is what the form of language reveals about the human mind. But this is not the only perspective, and not the only aspect of language, that warrants attention as being pre-eminently human. For although language may indeed be, in one sense, a kind of cognitive construct, it is not only that. It also, just as crucially one might claim, functions as a means of communication and social control. True, it is internalized in the mind as abstract knowledge, but in order for this to happen it must also be experienced in the external world as actual behaviour.

Another way of looking at language, therefore, would see it in terms of the social functions it serves. What is particularly striking about language from this point of view is the way it is fashioned as systems of signs to meet the elaborate cultural and communal needs of human societies. The focus of attention in this case is on what Michael Halliday calls 'language as social semiotic', that is to say, on language as a system of signs which are socially motivated or informed in that they have been developed to express social meanings.

The emphasis here is on language not as genetic endowment, but as generic accomplishment. There is little concern with the question as to whether human beings are absolutely unique in their use of systems of signs to express social meanings. It can be conceded that other animals use signs of various kinds to communicate with each other and to establish their communities. But the structure of these communities is simple in comparison with human ones and their signs are hardly comparable to the subtleties of the semiotic systems that have been developed in language to service the complex social organization and communicative requirements of human communal life.

With this social view of language, as with the cognitive one outlined earlier, there is a concern for explanation. Why is human language as it is? The answer this time, however, is that it has evolved not with the biological evolution of the species but with the socio-cultural evolution of human communities. Thus, one requirement of language is that it should provide the means for people to act upon their environment, for the first person (ego) to cope with the third person reality of events and entities 'out there', to classify and organize it and so bring it under control by a process of what we might call conceptual projection. In other words (Halliday's words) language has to have an **ideational function**. Another necessity is for language to provide a means for people to interact with each other, for the first person to cope with the second person, to establish a basis for cooperative action and social relations: so language needs to discharge an **interpersonal function** as well. And both of these functions, and perhaps others, will be reflected within the abstract systems of the linguistic code itself.

To the extent that these functions can be associated with systems of language in general, we may suggest that they too might be regarded as features of universal grammar (though not in the Chomsky sense). They will be realized differently in particular languages of course, but all languages can be said to plot their differences on the same set of general parameters. But in this case, these parameters are of a socio-cultural and not of a cognitive kind.

So language can be seen as distinctive because of its intricate association with the human mind and with human society. It is related to both cognition and communication, it is both abstract knowledge and actual behaviour. We can attempt to define its essential character by specifying a whole range of design features: its arbitrariness and duality, the fact that it is context-independent, operates across different media (speech and writing) and at different levels of organization (sounds, words, sentences), and so on. The phenomenon as a whole is both pervasive and elusive. How then can it be pinned down and systematically studied?

This question moves us from the properties of language to the principles of the discipline which studies them, from the design features of language to the design features of linguistics.

## 2 The scope of linguistics

### Experience and explanation

Language is so intricately and intimately bound up with human life, and is so familiar an experience, that its essential nature is not easy to discern. If you are in the middle of the wood all you can see is the trees: if you want to see the wood, you have to get out of it. The purpose of linguistics is to explain language, and explanation depends on some dissociation from the immediacy of experience. There is

nothing unusual about this of course. As we have seen, it is one of the critical design features of language itself that it is at a remove from the actual reality of things. Its signs are arbitrary, and can therefore provide for abstraction: they enable us to set up conceptual categories to define our own world. It is this which enables human beings to be proactive rather than reactive: language does not just reflect or record reality, but creates it. In this sense, it provides us with an explanation of experience. Of course, the languages of different communities will represent different variants of reality, so the explanation of experience is a matter of cultural custom and linguistic convention.

But this very ability to abstract from the actual - in other words, this process of thinking which seems to distinguish humans and their language from the communication of other animals - naturally sets limits on our apprehension of the external world. Our categories inevitably confine our understanding by defining it, and no matter how subtle they may be, they cannot capture everything. And they remain necessarily unstable. The abstracting, thinking process does not stop; we are forever calling our categories into question, adapting them to changing circumstances. We subject our reality to a continual process of conceptual realignment and look for alternative explanations. It is intrinsic to the nature of language that it allows for this endless adjustable abstraction, and the emergence of different ways of accounting for things. It contains within itself the dynamic potential for change.

The abstracting potential of language provides the means for intellectual enquiry, for the development of more formal explanation such as is practised in academic disciplines. We can think of such disciplines as cultures, ways of thinking and talking about things which are accepted as conventional within particular communities of scholars. As such, and as with any other culture, they draw abstractions from the actuality of experience. Linguistics is a discipline like any other. What is distinctive about it is that it uses the abstracting potential of language to categorize and explain language itself.

## Models and maps

The experience of language, as cognition and communication, is, as we have seen, inordinately complex. The purpose of linguistics is to provide some explanation of this complexity by abstracting from it what seems to be of essential significance. Abstraction involves the idealization of actual data, as part of the process of constructing **models** of linguistic description. These models are necessarily at a remove from familiar reality and may indeed bear little resemblance to it. There is, again, nothing peculiar about linguistics in this regard. Other disciplines devise models of a similar sort. The way in which the discipline of physics models the physical world in terms of waves and particles bears no relationship to the way we experience it. This does not invalidate the model. On the contrary, its very validity lies precisely in the fact that it reveals what is *not* apparent.

The purpose of linguistics, then, is to provide models of language which reveal features which are not immediately apparent. That being so, they are necessarily an abstraction, at a remove from familiar experience. A model is an idealized version of reality: those features which are considered incidental are stripped away in order to give prominence to those features which are considered essential. In this respect, models can be likened to maps.

A map does not show things as they really are. No matter what its scale, a vast amount of detail is inevitably left out because there is no room for it. And even when there is room, details will be excluded to avoid clutter which might distract attention from what is considered essential. Consider, for example, the map of the London Underground:

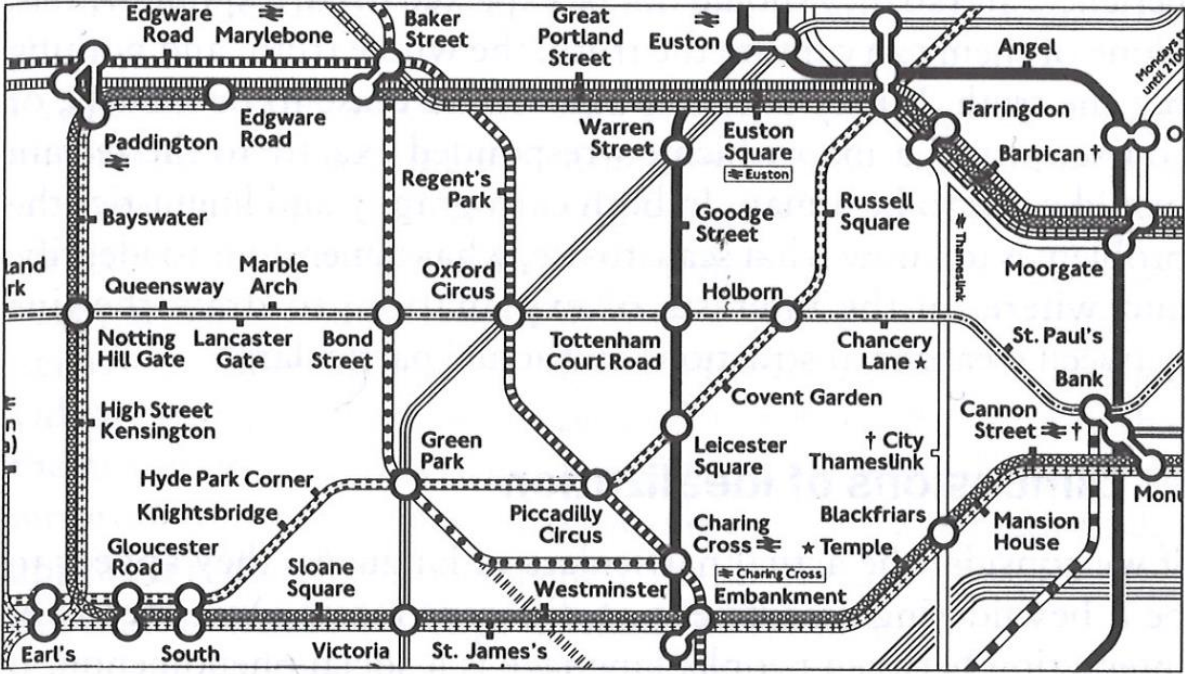


FIGURE 2.1 London Underground map

This bears very little resemblance to the actual layout of the track the trains run on, the twists and turns it takes as it threads its way underground. It gives no indication either about the distances between stations. It is even more remote from the reality of London above ground with its parks and public buildings and intricate network of streets. Such a map would be quite useless for finding your way on foot. It is in effect a model of the underground transport system designed as a guide to the traveller using it, and it leaves out everything which is not relevant to that purpose. It would be perverse to complain that it does not capture the full reality of the railway in all its complexity, misrepresents actual distances, and reveals nothing of what London is like at street level.

And so it is with models of the complex landscape of language. They will identify certain features as being of particular significance and give them prominence by avoiding the distraction of detail. Other features will be disregarded. And, naturally, different models will work to different scales and give preference to different features. Like maps, all models are simplified and selective. They are idealized versions of reality, designed to reveal certain things by concealing others. There can be no all-purpose model, any more than there can be an all-purpose map. Their validity is always relative, never absolute. They are designed to explain experience, and so they should not be expected to correspond with it. None of them can capture the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. If they did that, they would cease to be models, of course, just as a map which corresponded exactly to the terrain would cease to be a map. In both cartography and linguistics the problem is to know what scale to use, what dimensions to identify, and where, in the interests of explanation, to draw the line between idealized abstractions and actual particulars.

### **Dimensions of idealization**

If we consider the actual particulars of language, they appear to be a bewildering assortment of different facets. As a means of interaction between people, language is a social phenomenon. It enables us to give public expression to private experience and so to communicate and commune with others, to arrive at agreed meanings and to regulate relationships. For this purpose to be served, different languages have to be relatively stable codes which people contract into as a condition of membership of the communities that use them, and there have to be generally agreed ways of using the language in different kinds of social context. In this sense, to learn a language is an act of social conformity.

At the same time, language provides the means for non-conformist self-expression as well. There is always some room for individual manoeuvre. For example, an individual speaking French, or Swahili, or Chinese in the natural course of events will on the one hand produce instances of that language, combinations of words, in accordance with the underlying systems of rules and established meanings which constitute the linguistic codes in each case. But on the other hand, they will be producing unique expressions in the language by exploiting the potential of the code. Although individuals are constrained by conventions of the code and its use, they exploit the potential differently on different occasions and for different purposes. But this conscious exploitation is not the only source of variation. The patterning of a person's use of language is as naturally distinctive as a fingerprint. And even spoken utterances repeated by the same person, though they may sound identical, are never acoustically alike in every particular. It is obviously socially necessary to assume that certain things are the same, even if, on closer scrutiny, they turn out to be different.

The point then is that, from one perspective, language is a very general and abstract phenomenon. It is a shared and stable body of knowledge of linguistic forms and their function which is established by convention in a community. At the same time, it is very particular and variable if we look at the actuality of linguistic behaviour. Since social control is necessarily a condition on individual creativity, there is no contradiction here. It is simply that the nearer you get to actuality along the scale of idealization, the more differences you discern as the more general abstractions disappear. It is therefore convenient to mark off limiting points along this scale to define the scope of linguistic enquiry.

### *Langue and parole*

One such mark was made by Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss scholar usually credited with establishing the principles of modern linguistics. In a celebrated series of lectures in the early part of the century, he proposed that linguistics should concern itself with the shared social code, the abstract system, which he called *langue*, leaving aside the particular actualities of individual utterance, which he called *parole*. *Langue* was, on his account, a collective body of knowledge, a kind of common reference manual, copies of which were acquired by all members of a community of speakers. This distinction between language as abstract system and actual speech can be justified on two grounds (and it is not always entirely clear which one Saussure is arguing for). Firstly, it is convenient in that it delimits an area of enquiry which is manageable: it is possible in principle to conceive of a linguistics of *parole*, but the individual particularities of actual acts of speech are so varied and heterogeneous as to be elusive of description. Secondly, the concept of *langue* can be said to capture the central and determining aspect of language itself. On this account, *parole* is the contingent executive side of things, the relatively superficial behavioural reflexes of knowledge. So *langue* can either be seen as a convenient principle of linguistics, or as an essential principle of language itself, or both.

There are a number of issues arising from Saussure's distinction. To begin with, one should note that the concept of *langue* eliminates from language its intrinsic instability. Language is necessarily, and essentially, dynamic. It is a process, not a state, and changes over time to accommodate the needs of its users. In fact Saussure was well aware of this. He was himself schooled in the tradition of historical linguistics which sought to account for changes in language over time, its **diachronic** dimension. But he conceives of *langue* as a cross-section of this process at a particular time, a **synchronic** state, which might be represented in the following diagram:



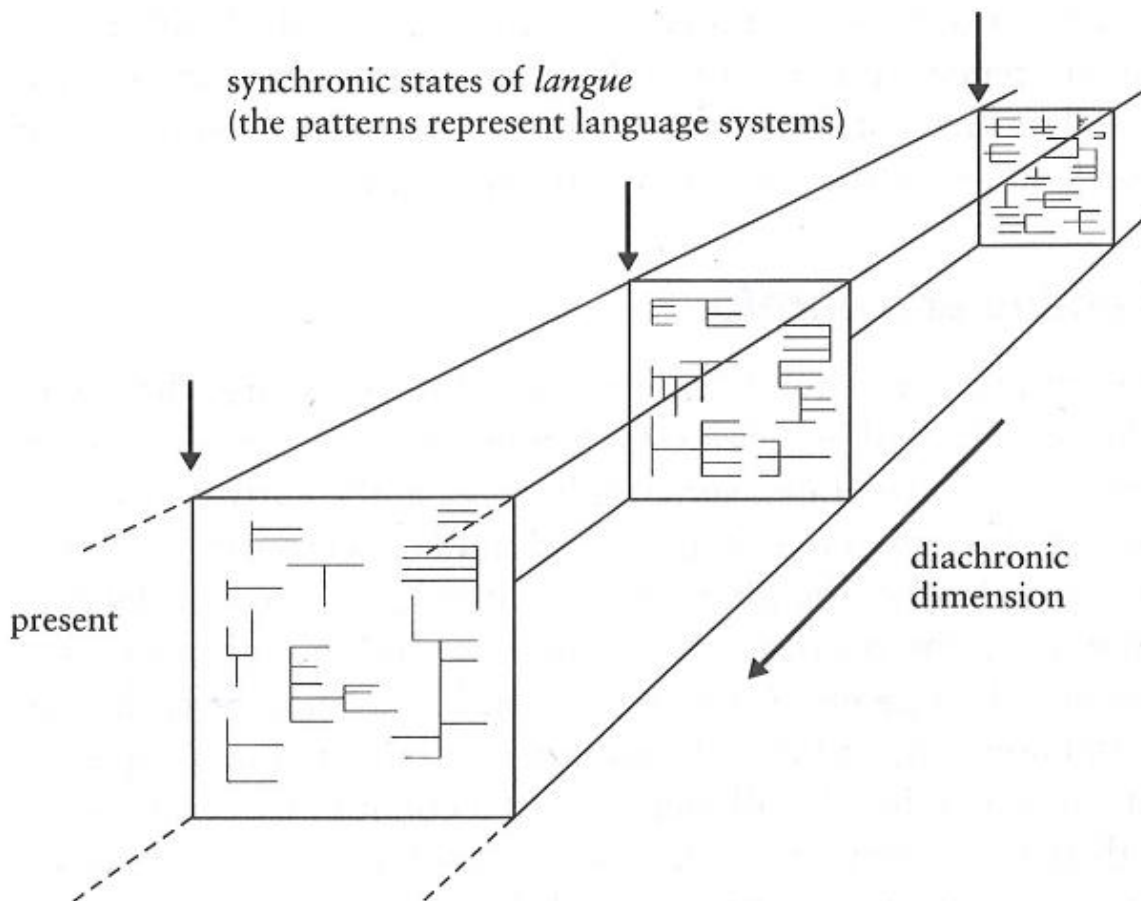


FIGURE 2.2 *The relationship between synchronic and diachronic aspects of language*

One difficulty about this conception, however, is that there is a confusion between synchrony and stability. Wherever you take a synchronic slice through language you will find not fixity, but flux. This is because language does not just change *over time* but varies *at any one time*, and indeed this cannot be otherwise because the members of a community which 'shares' a language will themselves be of different ages, will use language differently, and will have different communicative and communal uses for it. Different generations generate differences. No matter how small the period of time, or limited the variety of language, there will be variations within it as it is fine-tuned by the community of its users. And as some of these variable uses become conventionalized, so they become established as changed forms. In other words, diachronic change over time is simply, and inevitably, a result of synchronic variation at any one time.

To illustrate his synchrony-diachrony distinction, Saussure drew an analogy with the game of chess. The synchronic cross-section of language (the state of *langue*) is, he argued, like the state of play at one time. We can study the disposition of the pieces on the board without considering the diachronic dimension of the game, that is to say, the moves that were made beforehand, or those that might be planned in the future. We can, in other words, see the pattern of pieces as a state of play and disregard it as a stage in

the game. The analogy breaks down, however, because of course the game of chess is of its nature a sequence of separate stages and the game itself stops as each player takes a turn. But language is a continuity with no divisions of this kind. It is linguistics which makes it stop.

To say that diachrony and synchrony are not in reality distinct dimensions is not to invalidate the idealization that makes them distinct, but only to set limits on its claims to absolute validity. And this, as has been pointed out, is true of *all* models of language. If we wished to account for variation and change, we would draw the lines of idealization differently, but there would still be idealization. And the resulting model would necessarily be less revealing of the relative stability of language which serves as the necessary frame of reference in accounting for variation. You have to assume fixed points somewhere as bearings on description.

And as bearings on behaviour. It is important to note too that this assumption of stability can have a reality of its own. It is not only Saussure who conceives of language as a stable state. Although a close scrutiny of an actually occurring language will reveal all manner of variation, people in the communities who speak it might well nevertheless *think* of their language as being settled and established, and accept the validity of grammars and dictionaries which record it as such. Members of a linguistic community may not have identical copies of *langue* in their heads, but they may nevertheless *believe* they do, and may consider whatever differences they do discern as matters of no real significance.

### Competence and performance

A comparable distinction to that of Saussure, designed to idealize language data, and to define the scope of linguistic enquiry, is made by Noam Chomsky. He distinguishes **competence**, the knowledge that native speakers have of their language as a system of abstract formal relations, and **performance**, their actual behaviour. Although performance must clearly be projected from competence, and therefore be referable to it, it does not *correspond* to it in any direct way. As with other aspects of human life, we do not necessarily act upon what we know, quite simply because actions are inevitably caught up in particular circumstances which set constraints and conditions on what we do. So it is that actual linguistic behaviour is conditioned by all manner of factors other than a knowledge of language as such, and these factors are, according to Chomsky, incidental, and irrelevant to linguistic description. Performance is particular, variable, dependent on circumstances. It may offer evidence of competence, but it is *circumstantial* evidence and not to be relied on. Abstract concepts of competence and actual acts of performance are quite different phenomena and you cannot directly infer one from the other. What we know cannot be equated with what we do.

Chomsky's distinction obviously corresponds in some degree to that of Saussure. It represents a similar dichotomy of knowledge and behaviour and a similar demarcation of the scope of linguistic enquiry. There are, however, differences. To begin with, there is no ambivalence in Chomsky as to the status of the distinction. It is not that competence is presented as a *convenient* construct and therefore a useful principle for language study: it is presented as a *valid* construct, as the central principle of language itself. To focus on competence is to focus on what is essential and primary. Performance is the residual category of secondary phenomena, incidental, and peripheral.

A second point to be made is that though *langue* and competence can both be glossed in terms of abstract knowledge, the nature of knowledge is conceived of in very different ways. Saussure thinks of it as socially shared, common knowledge: his image is of *langue* as a book, printed in multiple copies and distributed throughout a community. It constitutes, therefore, a generality of highest common factors. But for Chomsky competence is not a social but a psychological phenomenon, not so much printed as *imprinted*, not a shared generality but a genetic endowment in each individual. Of course, individuals are not innately programmed to acquire competence in any particular language, but competence in any one language can nevertheless be taken as a variant in respect to universal features of language.

*Langue*, then, is conceived of as knowledge which is determined by membership of a social community, and so it follows that the focus of attention will naturally be on what makes each *langue* different. In this definition of linguistic knowledge, the main question of interest is: what is distinctive about particular *languages* as social phenomena? Competence, on the other hand, is conceived of as knowledge which is determined by membership of the human species and it follows that the interest here will naturally be not on what makes individual competences different but what makes them alike. In this definition of knowledge the main question of interest is: what is distinctive about *langue* in general, and as specific to the human species?

Chomsky's distinction, then, leads to a definition of linguistics as principally concerned with the universals of the human mind. Indeed, he has defined linguistics as a branch of cognitive psychology. His idealization is a strictly **formalist** one in that it fixes on the forms of languages as evidence of these universals without regard to how these forms function in the business of communication and the conduct of social life in different communities. In this respect, Chomsky's definition of competence as the proper concern of linguistics is much further along the continuum of abstraction than is Saussure's definition of *langue*, in that it leaves social considerations out of account entirely.

Two further issues are perhaps worth noting in respect to this formalist definition of language. First, as was indicated earlier, it is obvious that the further one proceeds in abstraction, the greater the risk of losing contact with the actuality of language in use. If competence is knowledge of the abstract principles of linguistic organization, which may not be evident in actual behaviour, nor even accessible to consciousness, then what, one might reasonably ask, counts as empirical evidence for its existence? The answer to this question has generally been that linguists themselves, as representative native speakers of a language, can draw evidence from their own intuitions. But there seems no reason why one should suppose it as self-evident that linguists are reliable informants: on the contrary, one might more reasonably suppose that as interested parties with an analytic bent they would on the face of it be very untypical, and so be disqualified as representative speakers. There are ways of countering this argument, but problems about the link between abstraction and actuality remain, and the further language is removed from its natural surroundings, the greater the problem becomes. On the other hand, the more you locate it in its natural surroundings, the less you see in the way of significant generalization. The dilemma of idealization we discussed earlier will always be with us.

Whereas this first issue has to do with the methodology of linguistic enquiry, with how to give support to the statements you make, the second has to do with the scope of linguistic enquiry, with what your statements should actually be *about*.

And here we find something of an apparent paradox in Chomsky's position. What he represents as central in language is an abstract set of organizing principles which both define an area of human cognition, a specific language faculty, and determine the parameters of Universal Grammar. The various forms of different languages are of interest to the extent that they can be seen as alternative settings for these general parameters. The communicative functions such forms take on in actual contexts of use are of no interest at all. They furnish no reliable evidence of underlying cognitive principles: there are too many distractions in the data by way of performance variables. So the most important thing about language from this point of view is that it is evidence for something else, namely a faculty in the human mind, uniquely and innately specific to the species. In a sense, therefore, it would appear that what is central in language is that it is not of itself central. Paradoxically, for Chomsky, the study of language depends on disregarding most of it as irrelevant. Indeed, in this view, what linguistics is about is not really language but grammar, and more particularly that area of grammar which is concerned with the structural relations of sentence constituents, that is to say, with **syntax**.

Chomsky's specification of the scope of linguistics is extremely broad and far-reaching in respect to its implications, encompassing as it does nothing less than the universals of the human mind. But it is, of course, correspondingly extremely narrow and inward-looking in respect to the familiar phenomenon

of language itself. What Chomsky presents is an abstract explanation of language which is a long way from actual experience. Not surprisingly, it has been challenged.

### Knowledge and ability

One objection to Chomsky's model is that it defines the nature of linguistic knowledge too narrowly to mean a knowledge of grammatical form, and more specifically of syntax. Knowing a language, it is objected, involves more than knowing what form it takes: it involves knowing how it functions too. And this in turn implies knowing about words, not just as formal items, constituents of sentences, but as units of meaning which interact with syntax in complex ways. The formal systems of a language, after all, have evolved in association with words as the internal semantic encoding of some external social reality. So an account of grammatical knowledge, the argument runs, cannot ignore the fact that linguistic form is functionally motivated, so that to abstract form so completely from function is to misrepresent the nature of language. In this view, linguistics is essentially the study of how languages *mean*, how they are functionally informed: it is **semantics** which is primary.

Chomsky's *formal grammar* seeks to identify particular features of syntax with reference to universal and innate principles of human cognition. An alternative is to think in terms of a *functional grammar*, to consider how language is differentially influenced by the environment, how it is shaped by social use, and reflects the functions it has evolved to serve.

But it is also argued that knowing a language also includes knowing how to access grammar, and other formal features of language, to express meanings appropriate to the different contexts in which communication takes place. This too is a matter of function, but in a different sense. Here, we are concerned not with what the language means, that is to say, the *internal* function of forms in the language code, but with what people mean *by* the language, that is to say, what *external* function forms are used for in communication. Knowledge in the abstract has to be made actual and this is normally done by putting it to communicative use, not citing random sentences. People do not simply display what they know. They act upon it, and their actions are regulated by conventions of different kinds. So, according to this point of view, competence is not only knowledge in the abstract, but also ability to put knowledge to use according to convention.

There are then two ways of revising Chomsky's conception of competence, of redrawing the lines of idealization in devising a model of language. Firstly, we can redefine what constitutes the code or internal language by including aspects which reflect the nature of language as a communicative

resource. This results in a functional grammar and, we may say, broadens the concept of linguistic *knowledge*.

Secondly, we might extend the notion of competence itself to include both *knowledge* and the *ability* to act upon it. Performance, then, becomes particular instances of behaviour which result from the exercise of ability and are not simply the reflexes of knowledge. Ability is the executive branch of competence, so to speak, and enables us to achieve meaning by putting our knowledge to work. If we did not have this accessing ability, it can be argued, the abstract structures of knowledge - this purely *linguistic* competence - would remain internalized in the mind and never see the light of day. We would spend all our lives buried in thought in a paralysis of cognition. Since this ability is only activated by some communicative purpose or other, we can reasonably call this more comprehensive concept **communicative competence**.

## Glossary of technical terms

**arbitrariness** The absence of similarity between the form of a linguistic sign and what it relates to in reality, e.g. the word 'dog' does not look like a dog. *See also* **design features**.

**communicative competence** As defined by Hymes, the knowledge and ability involved in putting language to communicative use. *See also* **competence**.

**competence** As defined by Chomsky, knowledge of the grammar of a language as a formal abstraction and distinct from the behaviour of actual use, i.e. **performance**: cf. *langue*.

**design features** Those features of human language, like **arbitrariness** and **duality**, which are thought to distinguish it from other kinds of animal communication.

**diachronic** Concerned with the process of language development over time: cf. **synchronic**.

**duality** The way meaningless elements of language at one level (sounds and letters) combine to form meaningful units (words) at another level. *See also* **design features**.

**formalist** Concerned with linguistic forms in dissociation from their communicative function: cf. **functionalist**.

**functionalist** Concerned with the communicative functioning of linguistic forms: cf. **formalist**.

**ideational function** As defined by Halliday, the use of language as a means of giving structure to our experience of the third person world: cf. **interpersonal function**.

**interpersonal function** As defined by Halliday, the use of language for maintaining social roles and interacting with second-person others: cf. **ideational function**.

**Language Acquisition Device (LAD)** According to Chomsky, the innate mental mechanism designed uniquely for the acquisition of language.

**langue** Saussure's term (*see* Text 9) for the abstract linguistic system which is common social knowledge and which underlies individual uses of language, or *parole*: cf. **competence**.

**medium** The means whereby language is given physical expression in sounds and letters: cf. **mode**.

**mode** The exploitation of a **medium** to achieve different kinds of communication, e.g. a speech is a mode of using the medium of speech.

**model** An idealized abstraction of reality which represents its relevant features.

**parameter** A general variable of **Universal Grammar** which is given particular values or 'settings' in different languages.

**parole** Saussure's term (see Text 9) for the actual behaviour of individual language users, as distinct from the abstract language system, or *langue*: cf. **performance**.

**performance** Chomsky's term for actual language behaviour as distinct from the knowledge that underlies it, or **competence**: cf. *parole*.

**pragmatics** The study of what people mean by language when they use it in the normal **context** of social life: cf. **semantics**.

**semantics** The study of meaning as encoded in language. cf. **pragmatics**

**setting** The particular fixing in a language of a **universal parameter** of language in general.

**species-specific** A term used by Chomsky to refer to language as a genetic endowment unique to the human species.

**synchronic** Concerned with the state of a language at any one time: cf. **diachronic**.

**syntax** The **constituent** structure of sentences.

**Universal Grammar (UG)/Universal Parameters** General abstract properties, or **parameters** of language as a whole which are claimed to be universal and innate.