

On the Necessity of Linguistic Inquiry: Disentangling Structure, Meaning, and the Human Faculty

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Abstract

This paper examines the fundamental role of linguistics in analyzing the uniquely human capacity for language, moving beyond mere grammatical prescription to explore the intersection of syntax, semantics, and cognition. It argues that the discipline provides the essential framework for distinguishing between structural form and logical meaning, a delineation crucial for understanding language acquisition, philosophical expression, and even non-lingual communicative systems. Through a discursive exploration of language's defining characteristics, its historical scholarly treatment, and its philosophical quandaries, this paper highlights linguistics as the central discipline for interrogating the nature of human expression and thought.

Keywords: Linguistics; Syntax and Semantics; Language and Cognition; Human Language Capacity; Philosophical Linguistics

Introduction: The Facade of Syntax

A syntactically well formed sentence can be semantically void. Consider the proposition: *"Anhydrous soiled waters of crystalline purity caused a drought."* Grammatically, it is impeccable, a noun phrase, a verb, a complement. Yet, it is a logical absurdity, a cascade of contradictory adjectives ("anhydrous" vs. "waters," "soiled" vs. "crystalline purity") that collapses under any scrutiny aimed at meaning. This exposes a core axiom of linguistic study: grammaticality and meaningfulness are distinct, though often overlapping, realms. Linguistics matters precisely because it provides the apparatus to dissect this divergence, to formalize how we convey not just form, but coherent sense. The field systematizes the investigation of how abstract thought is materialized through a finite set of rules to produce infinite, and infinitely meaningful, expressions.

Defining the Faculty: Human Language vs. Communicative Signals

While communication is ubiquitous in the biological world, the human linguistic faculty is *sui generis*. Animal communication systems are largely stimulus-bound, context-dependent, and confined to the immediate spatiotemporal moment. A vervet monkey's alarm call denotes present, imminent danger; it cannot recount a predator's approach from the previous day or speculate about future threats. Anecdotes, such as the case of a harbor seal at the Boston Aquarium vocally producing strings like "Hey, get outa there!" (Deacon, as cited in Yule 28), illustrate mimicry and associative learning, but not the displacement—the ability to refer to the non-present—that is foundational to human language.

Human language, in contrast, is characterized by its displacement, its arbitrariness (the lack of intrinsic connection between a sound and its meaning), and its productivity (the ability to generate novel, unprecedented utterances). These properties enable discourse on the hypothetical, the past, the fictional, and the abstract. They underpin myth, law, and speculation. As Chomsky suggests, the study of this faculty approximates the study of the human mind itself, revealing cognitive structures that appear to be species-specific (Chomsky 100). This capacity transcends

mere survival oriented signaling, it is the infrastructure for culture, complex cooperation, and the shared fabrication of social reality.

Historical Trajectory: From Pāṇini to Universal Grammar

The systematic study of language has deep historical roots. The Sanskrit grammarian Pāṇini (c. 4th century BCE), in his *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, produced a meticulous, rule-based generative description of his language's morphology and phonology. His work was not merely prescriptive but analytic, employing meta rules and a formalism that remarkably prefigures modern computational and grammatical theory (Staal 3-5).

The modern discipline crystallized in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Scholars like Franz Bopp engaged in comparative historical linguistics, while Ferdinand de Saussure established critical structuralist distinctions most famously between *langue* (the underlying system) and *parole* (individual speech acts), and between the signifier and the signified (Saussure 65-70). This structuralist foundation was pivotal. However, it was the mid 20th century “cognitive turn” instigated by Noam Chomsky that fundamentally reoriented the field. Chomsky’s theory of a biologically constrained Universal Grammar posited an innate linguistic competence, a set of principles and parameters that both enables and limits the possible forms of human language, thereby offering a powerful hypothesis for the rapid and uniform acquisition of language by children (Chomsky 7-12). This shifted the focus from external linguistic behavior to the internal cognitive mechanisms that make it possible.

Philosophical Predicaments: The Limits of Meaning

Linguistics inevitably grapples with profound philosophical questions concerning meaning, reference, and truth. The work of Ludwig Wittgenstein demarcates this frontier with particular clarity. His early *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* envisioned language as a logical picture of the world, where the structure of propositions mirrored the structure of facts (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 4.01). His later *Philosophical Investigations*, however, repudiated this view, proposing instead that meaning is not a static reference but a function of use within a particular “language-game” and “form of life” (Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 43). For linguistics, this presents a central, ongoing tension: to what extent can meaning be formally modeled by a semantic theory, and to what extent is it inherently pragmatic, contextual, and indeterminate? The field operates at this nexus, analyzing the rules of

the system while acknowledging the nebulous, negotiated nature of their application in practice.

Beyond the Verbal: Semiotics and Cinematic Language

The principles of linguistic analysis extend profitably to other symbolic systems. Semiotics, the general study of signs, applies structuralist and post-structuralist methods to visual, auditory, and cultural codes. A salient example is cinematic language. Film constructs meaning through a syntagmatic chain of shots (its syntax) and paradigmatic choices of angle, lighting, and composition (its morphology). A sequence employs narrative structures analogous to linguistic ones: establishing shots function as topics, cuts as conjunctions, and visual motifs as recurring semantic units. Analyzing film through a linguistic semiotic lens demonstrates that the human proclivity for structured, rule governed meaning making is not confined to the auditory vocal channel but is a broader cognitive trait manifest across modalities (Metz 30-45).

Conclusion

Linguistics matters because it is the preeminent discipline for deconstructing the most defining, yet most taken for granted, human capability. It provides the theoretical scaffolding to differentiate grammatical form from semantic content, to explain the astonishing acquisition and creativity of language, and to trace the boundaries between human language and other communicative systems. By engaging with its historical traditions, its philosophical aporias, and its applicability to nonverbal domains, linguistics offers an indispensable key to understanding how we encode experience, share knowledge, and collectively construct the worlds we inhabit. The “anhydrous soiled waters” of meaningless form are, ultimately, clarified by the rigorous application of its tools.

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