
Language Description

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Abstract:

The importance of language description in Applied Linguistics has sometimes been criticised (e.g. by Widdowson, 1979, 1980) because of a perception that the theoretical insights of descriptive linguistics were different from the practical insights of language pedagogy. Linguistics has increasingly separated itself from a prescriptive view of language which advocates rules for what should be said or written, in favour of a descriptive view, which seeks to record the language which people actually use. This paper aims to give a brief overview of the main dimensions of linguistic description and the key concepts involved. Descriptions of language are often divided into a number of categories and each of these categories has its own principles, concepts and objects of the study. The paper has separated language description into the study of language (Phonetics and Phonology), language structures (Grammar, Vocabulary, and Lexicography), syntax, discourse and meaning (Semantics).

Keywords: Linguistic Description, Phonetics, Phonology, Lexicography, Syntax, Meaning etcetera

Introduction:

By the laws of approximation, it is meant to look at the texture and structure of language by means of linguistic analysis and its practical application. The efficacy of learning a language chiefly rests on the process of the analysis of methods of teaching to facilitate the acquisition of language with great accuracy and proficiency.

All language teaching methods are necessarily based on some sort of analysis, for the very process of making a method involves the breaking down of the language into the element which is to be taught. Language teaching analysis depends ultimately on the recognition of these elements. The more the particular content of a

language is known, the more teaching of a language can well be analyzed.

Modern methods of language description differ from the traditional ones: they also differ considerably from one another. This is because they are based on different theories of language within the same theoretical framework. These are responsible for the four fundamental differences in the description of language: (1) in the linguistic levels described, (2) in the units used to describe them, (3) in the direction or order in which these units and levels are treated and (4) in the material on which the description is based.

Arguments:

1.1 Levels:

Knowledge of such levels of description as the vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation of the language is obviously important both for its teaching and for the analysis of how it is taught. A method based on a detailed description of the pronunciation of a language will differ from one based mainly on its grammar. Descriptions of a language may, therefore, differ (1) in the number of levels described and (2) in the contents of each level.

1.1 Number of Levels:

The number of levels into which a language description is divided has varied anywhere from the two of Harris (phonology and morphology) to the fourteen of Brondal.

1.1.2 Content of Levels:

Although Pike, Chomsky, and Ullman have three levels, the contents of these are quite different; morphology, for example, which is a separate level in the first case, is combined with phonology in the second and semantics in the third. Some linguists restrict their analysis to one area of language, that of linguistic form, analyzed exclusively from the point of view of expression and treated in detail by division into such levels as phonematic, phonotactics, morphomatis, morphotactics, inflection, and construction.

1.2 UNITS:

Whatever enters into any of the above levels can only be analyzed or described through some sort of unit for the description of vocabulary, a unit like the word is needed; for pronunciation, a unit like the speech sound; for syntax, a sentence unit.

1.3. DIRECTION:

The levels recognized, and the level included may be described in a different

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order. In other words, descriptions may proceed in different directions. This may be (1) Upward- from sound to sentence, (2) Downward- from sentence to sound, (3) Across- from word to word- position to pronunciation.

1.3.1 Upward:

Following this direction, one starts by establishing the relevant sounds of the language (Phonemes); one then proceeds to study how they combine into words, how the words combine into larger units, what the rules are for combining form and words together, and so on, until the main sentence types have been determined. Among those who follow this direction are Hill, Target and Smith, in their descriptions of English.

1.3.2 DOWNWARD:

The method of description using this direction starts with the largest units and works down to the smallest. The description may begin with a series of tests in the language. These are first broken down into sentences and sentence types. With the sentence- types as a framework word -classes (roughly equivalent to nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) and groups of function words (articles, prepositions, etc.) are established. This is the technique Fries used in his description of English structure. Proceeding in this direction, Chomsky establishes the basic sentence- types and then moves gradually through a series of transformations down to the sequences of sounds.

1.3.3 ACROSS-FROM WORD TO WORD-POSITION TO PRONUNCIATION:

Distinct from this is the technique of description, which relates each unit of language to all other units at all other levels, phonological, morphological, and grammatical. A word is described in terms of its pronunciation, its endings, and its place in the different types of sentences. This is the technique advocated by Pike and his school. The theoretical reason for advocating this technique of analysis is the view of language as a system of three hierarchies-lexicon, phonology, and grammar. They are hierarchies because, within each, there are a number of levels, each more inclusive than the other, phonemes are included in syllables, syllables in stress groups stress groups in pause-groups' morphemes are included in morpheme-clusters, morpheme clusters in words, words in phrases.

We may picture the analysis thus:

Lexicon	Phonology	Grammar
Morpheme	Phoneme	Tagmeme
Cluster	Syllable	(Graeme)

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Word	Stress-group	Syntagmeme
Phrase	Pause-group	(Utter-me)

1.4 MATERIAL:

Descriptions of language may differ in the material on which they are based. An analysis based on the spoken language is not likely to be the same as one based only on written materials. Materials of language description may vary in four respects: (1) in dialect, (2) in register, (3) in style, and (4) in media.

1.4 MATERIAL: Language descriptions are shaped by the type of material analyzed, whether spoken or written, and various other factors. The four key areas of variation are:

1.4.1 Dialect:

Language descriptions can differ depending on the dialect being analyzed. For example, European Spanish, Portuguese, or French might differ significantly from Latin American or African varieties. The geographical region from which language material is collected will influence the outcome of the analysis.

1.4.2 Register:

Register refers to the different ways in which language is used depending on the situation or context, such as occupational, emotive, or informative purposes. For instance, scientific texts may avoid personal pronouns, while personal letters may include them frequently. Additionally, occupational vocabulary varies by profession—farmers, fishermen, or factory workers will each have their distinct terminologies.

1.4.3 STYLE:

The style of the language material being analyzed will significantly influence its description, particularly in languages where social distinctions are prominent. For example, the formal, literate speech of a secondary school teacher would differ markedly from the informal language of an unskilled laborer, reflecting differences in education and social background.

1.4.4 MEDIA:

Language descriptions can vary depending on whether they are based on written or spoken material. For instance, in written French, adjectives like *fier* and *premier* might be categorized together, but in spoken French, they would fall into different categories due to pronunciation differences. Older language descriptions, such as those by Jespersen and Poutsma for English, were based on written texts. More modern descriptions, like those by Fries, Tager, and Smith, focus exclusively

on spoken language.

2. WHAT LANGUAGE DESCRIPTIONS CONTAIN:

A language description may contain any or all of the following:

(1) Phonetics, (2) Grammar, (3) Vocabulary, (4) Meaning. Each of these has its own particular problems of content and method.

2.1 PHONETICS (the study of the relevant sounds):

The description may differ in the following respects. (1) In the range of accents described, (2) in the analysis of relevant sounds and how they work together (units of Phonology), and (3) in the symbols used to describe them.

2.1.1 RANGE OF ACCENTS:

For English, there are a number of accents that have been acceptable in their respective regions. These include the speech of the educated speaker of South South England, North England, Scotland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, England, the Atlantic Seaboard, and the American West, South, and Mid-West, all of which have marked differences. In addition to this, there are all the other regional standards in the English-speaking world and a number of nearly "Dependent" accents like Anglo- Indian and educated West African, which are now regional accents in their own right.

Of all English accents, the one that has been most fully described is English Received Pronunciation, also known as R.P. This, however, is not a regional accent but a social one. It is spoken throughout England by certain educated families and is kept alive in such private institutions as public schools. It is only one of several types of so-called "Educated English spoken in England and reflecting the type, not the degree, of education. It is definitely a minority accent".

In contradistinction to this, a majority accent like General American is the native accent of more than a hundred and thirty million people and is spoken over wide areas of the United States and in parts of Canada. The range of these variations must then be known. The vowel of not, for example, may be usually heard as [ɒ] in Southern England, [ɔ] in Scotland, [ɑ] in Canada, (ɑ) in New England, and [ɑ] in the American Mid-West. The two extremes are from [ɒ] to (ɑ), therefore. Not only do speakers of the same dialect have perceptible individual differences, but even the pronunciation of the same person will vary according to sex, age, and state of physical and mental tension. For example, the word extraordinary may be pronounced by the same person in two different ways within the space of a few minutes as /ekstrōu: dinari/with six syllables and /stro:dnri/ with three.

2.1.2 UNITS OF PHONOLOGY:

Phonology is the study of the system behind the speech sounds. Its fundamental problem is to extract from the substance of pronunciation the relevant units of speech. These are the units of (i) Articulation, (ii) Catenation, (iii) Rhythm, and (iv) Intonation.

(I) UNITS OF ARTICULATION:

Although the varieties of articulation are almost unlimited, the number of relevant units of articulation (Phonemis) in any one language is restricted to less than 100. Not all sounds are used in part of the language.

(II) UNITS OF CATENATION:

Includes the features that chain sounds together. It is concerned with (a) the grouping of phonemes into syllables (Syllabification) and the grouping of syllables through (b) Junction, (c) Assimilation, (d) Elision, and (e) Word-Linking.

(a) Syllabification:

Language differs in the way they divide the stream of speech into syllables, in the structure or make-up of their syllables. Some phonemes, like [h], can be used only at the beginning of a syllable; others, like [n] and [ʒ], only at the end and in the middle, but never at the beginning. It's possible, therefore, to reduce the Phonetic structure of the syllable in a given language to a formula that any speaker of the language- even when uttering nonsense syllables or invented words- is forced to follow. Whorf has given such a formula for the single-syllable word in English.

(b) Junction:

This is the feature which links and separates syllables. It prevents the identical pronunciation of such similar sentences as send them aid and send the maid; it is an aim, and it's a name. They may this is done varies from language to language.

(c) Assimilation:

When sounds occur together in a language, they undergo certain changes that are regular and peculiar to that language. For example, opening the door is often heard as/oupmadoa/, where [n] takes on the lip position of the preceding [p]. Some of these changes are so regular that they may be said to form part of the grammar or morphology of the language, yet because they are also part of the phonology, they are called Morophophonological. For example, the addition of - S in the plural comes out

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in speech as an (-s) or (-z) depending on how it assimilates to the preceding sound; we say cats/kats/, but dogs/dogz/.

(d) Elision:

Related to this is the leaving out of a sound when too many come together; in English, for example, [t] is dropped when uttering words like postpone, directly, next station.

(e) Linking:

Languages also differ in the way they divide and link words. German doesn't have glottal stops, English makes use mostly of the glides [w], and methods are [j] when two vowels come together of descriptive, e.g., you [w] always want to [w] eat relevant to she/i/always takes my / J/arm.

(III) UNITS OF RHYTHM:

This strikes the ear as a sequence of changes in loudness and length. Each unit of rhythm is made of a number of syllables; the unit of rhythm has been called the foot. Variations in length and loudness are usually called stress, but there is little agreement on what should be included under this term. Some linguists recognize four levels of stress in English: (1) primary, (2) secondary, (3) tertiary, and (4) weak, as for example, in elevator-operator. They may do so on the basis of phonetics or for reasons of phonological analysis.

(IV) UNITS OF INTONATION:

The intonation of a language is continual raising and lowering of the voice. This change is due not only to what we say, but to the way we say it. English intonation has been analyzed into five moving tones, such as the rising tone, the falling, the falling-rising, etc. These have been subdivided into high and low varieties.

2.1.3 PHONETIC NOTATION:

One of the most confusing things for a beginner in the use of Phonetics is the difference in symbols used to represent sounds, especially when he is forced to switch from one type of phonetic notation to another. Despite the standardizing efforts of the International Phonetic Association since the end of the nineteenth century, there is still a considerable difference in the use of Phonetic symbols for the articulated sounds of speech. The current notations are divided into numerical, Linear, and accentual types. The linear category of notation invites the user to visualize the material as a sequence of dots, dashes, curves, or notes or as a continuous or broken line. The Accentual type is divided into two: the head nucleus type and the tonetic

stress type.

2.2 GRAMMAR:

Grammars differ (1) in their types of purpose and scope, (2) in the categories they use, and (3) in the terms and notation that they employ.

2.2.1 TYPES OF GRAMMAR:

The purpose of grammar may be historical, comparative, or descriptive. Neither historical nor comparative grammars are likely foundations for a modern language method, conceived as they are with forms no longer in use. It is based on contemporary descriptive grammar, which is what such methods are likely to be based on. The sort of descriptive grammar that is the most relevant to modern language teaching is one that aims to describe the contemporary forms of the language. Some of the most complete ones have been written by grammarians such as Poutsma, Jespersen, Kruisinga, and Zandvoort. These grammarians are not chiefly concerned with definitions, analytical techniques, or correct usage; they are mainly reservoirs of information about the language.

2.2.2 GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES:

One of the most significant ways in which one grammar may differ from another is in the categories into which it puts the different forms of a language; by far, the most important are the word classes or parts of speech, as they have been traditionally called. It is true, however, that the parts of Greek speech provided a useful framework for the description of Latin. But they fitted English less well, and it took a few centuries before this was fully realized. English grammarians in the twentieth century made an attempt to break with this tradition when they realized that their parts of speech were those of another language. They tried to re-establish the word classes of English through the analysis of the contemporary forms of language.

2.2.3 GRAMMATICAL TERMINOLOGY AND NOTATION:

Most evident, of course, are the differences in terminology. Even more diverse than differences in terms are the differences in syntactic notation since these include not only different definitions, different categories, and different symbols but also different principles of syntactic analysis.

2.3 VOCABULARY:

Of the systems that make up a language of vocabulary, it is the least stable. It is continuously changing, bringing in new words from other languages, losing words, and adapting others to changing conditions. It is voluminous; no man possesses it all, and no dictionary has ever recorded all the words in any language.

The description of vocabulary includes (1) lexicography, the inventory of the words, and (2) lexicology, the study of the relations between them.

2.2.1 LEXICOGRAPHY:

In the cataloging tradition of language analysis, the most prolific descriptions have been the dictionaries. Perhaps because their problems are less complicated than those of grammar and phonetics. Dictionaries which are compilations of the vocabulary of a language, with explanations of the meaning by paraphrase definition are the sort of description on which language learner have traditionally most depended.

2.3.2 LEXICOLOGY:

It is the study of the relationships in the vocabulary of language. Formally, a word is related to all the other words in which it is part. In this way, man is related to manly, mannish, manlike, unmanly, mankind ...etc.

2.4 MEANING:

Although there are no manuals of meanings, as there are grammars and dictionaries, meaning is one of the most important aspects of language and the most difficult to describe. The notion of meaning, like that of sound, is not limited to language. Smoke means fire; clouds mean rain. Meanings are relationships between certain impressions made on the mind. It may be an imputed and conventional relationship between a referent of content (e.g., an object) and a symbol of expression (e.g., a word), mediated by an act of reference (thought). This is imagined by Ogden and Richards in the form of a triangle.

This complex of relations is what characterizes language as a whole. In a language, everything can be related to everything else. For the most distinctive feature of language is that it is a system of systems.

Conclusion:

This paper provides a brief outline of what is involved in the description of languages. While language description may not be a core concern for applied linguistics, a coherent understanding of the structural features of language is important for applied linguistics, research and practice. So, a certain level of familiarity with the principles of linguistics provides a framework within which the work of applied linguistics can be carried out in an informed and principal way.

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