

Phenomena Found in Human Linguistic Systems

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Commentary

Abstract

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. It encompasses the analysis of every aspect of language, as well as the methods for studying and modelling them. The traditional areas of linguistic analysis include phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Each of these areas roughly corresponds to phenomena found in human linguistic systems: sounds (and gesture, in the case of signed languages), minimal units (words, morphemes), phrases and sentences, and meaning and use. Linguistics studies these phenomena in diverse ways and from various perspectives. Theoretical linguistics (including traditional descriptive linguistics) is concerned with building models of these systems, their parts (ontologies), and their combinatorics. Psycholinguistics builds theories of the processing and production of all these phenomena. These phenomena may be studied synchronically or diachronically (through history), in monolinguals or polyglots, in children or adults, as they are acquired or statically, as abstract objects or as embodied cognitive structures, using texts (corpora) or through experimental elicitation, by gathering data mechanically, through fieldwork, or through introspective judgment tasks. Computational linguistics implements theoretical constructs to parse or produce natural language or homologues. Neurolinguistics investigates linguistic phenomena by experiments on actual brain responses involving linguistic stimuli. Linguistics is related to philosophy of language, stylistics and rhetoric, semiotics, lexicography, and translation. However, there is another aspect of grammar in which languages differ more radically, namely in morphology, the principles governing the structure of words. Languages do not all employ morphology to a similar extent. In fact they differ dramatically in the extent to which they allow words to be built out of other words or smaller elements. The English word undeniability is a complex noun formed from the adjective 'undeniable', which is formed from the adjective 'deniable', which is formed from the verb 'deny'. Some languages (like German, Nootka, and Eskimo) permit much more complex word-building than English; others (like Chinese, Ewe, and Vietnamese) permit considerably less. People often think of grammar as a matter of arbitrary pronouncements (defining 'good' and 'bad' language), usually negative ones like "There is no such word as ain't" or "Never end a sentence with a preposition." Linguists are not very interested in this sort of bossiness (sometimes called prescriptivism). For linguists, grammar is simply the collection of principles defining how to put together a sentence.

Biography

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