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# M.A. English

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## COURSE II

# INTRODUCTION TO LINGUISTICS

## BLOCK I

### WHAT IS LINGUISTICS?



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# **INTRODUCTION TO LINGUISTICS**

## **BLOCK I**

### **WHAT IS LINGUISTICS?**

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

The course *Introduction to Linguistics* will introduce you to some of the basic concepts in the area of both linguistics and phonetics. We have introduced this course as part of your MA in English programme for two reasons: first of all we believe that the study of any language is incomplete without its *literature* and *language*. Secondly, we firmly believe that the knowledge *about* language will help you understand its literature better.

When we talk about *language* we look at issues such as how a language functions, how it conveys meaning, how it forms words, how it is spoken, how it forms sentences, how subtle nuances of meaning are assigned to words, the role it plays in society, whether it is a dialect or an idiolect, etc.

We have divided the course into two broad areas: linguistics and phonetics. *Linguistics* is universally defined as the science of language. *Phonetics* deals with only one of the aspects of language i.e. the spoken form of the language. It is therefore defined as the science of speech. Since speech is an important aspect of *using* language we feel it should be given special attention. Within *linguistics* we will deal with other aspects of language such as *syntax* which deals with the notion of sentence, phrase, etc., *phonology* which deals with how sounds are combined together to form syllables and words, etc. *morphology* which deals with the notion of word formation, *semantics* which deals with the notion of meaning, *sociolinguistics* which deals with the status a language is given in a society, etc.

In this course, we shall primarily talk about only English and no other language. However, you must know that linguistics as a science deals with *all* languages of the world.

The course is divided into five blocks:

Block I: What is Linguistics?

Block II: Phonetics

Block III: Phonology and Morphology

Block IV: Syntax and Semantics

Block V: Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics

We hope that this brief introduction to different aspects of what constitutes a language will encourage you to learn more about how a particular language functions.

These are the general aims of the course. The specific objectives of each unit will be spelt out at the beginning of each Block and Unit.

Each Block covers one specific area of linguistics. Within each Block, there will be several units discussing issues in a specific area.

You can begin reading this course by choosing any Block. There is no need for you to read the Blocks in the order in which we have presented them,

though the order is reasonably logical, and some of you might be content to start at the beginning and work your way through to the end.

So, quickly skim through the course to see what is dealt with where, before you move on to the next section.

Here's wishing you happy studying!

## INTRODUCTION TO THE BLOCK

The Block on *What is Linguistics?* will introduce you to the scope of the linguistic course, vis-a-vis the other Block on *Phonetics*.

Based on your past knowledge and experience you probably have some understanding and expectations regarding this course. Why don't you try and do the following task.

Tick from the following list the objectives/expectations that you regard as appropriate and add your own (if any) and then contrast them with our claims for this course:

- a. to understand what constitutes language,
- b. to understand how we *acquire* our mother tongue and how we *learn* English or any second/foreign language,
- c. to understand the basic concepts in the area of linguistics.

Well, most of the claims in the above list are valid claims. A course in linguistics will help you to get an insight into how languages are *organized* and how they *function*. This course also aims at developing your intuitions about language and at making you a better researcher/teacher of various aspects of language. You may, then, if you find it interesting, wish to go on to do a research degree in one of the areas which fall under the cover term *linguistics*.

I have devoted this Block to the discussion of different aspects of what goes into *linguistics*. This Block has two units. Unit 1 will focus on the definition of *linguistics*, and in Unit 2, I will tell you little about different *branches* of linguistics and the different *levels* at which a linguistic analysis can be carried out.

There are several activities and review questions given in these units. The main purpose of the activities is to enable you to apply your knowledge to the given problem and to check for yourself whether or not you have understood the issues discussed within a particular section. Review questions on the other hand, help you to recapitulate what you have studied. The review questions are provided with model answers, whereas activities - as they are more open ended in nature - are not provided with model answers.





## **UNIT I**

### **DEFINING LINGUISTICS**

#### **Contents**

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## UNIT 1

### DEFINING LINGUISTICS

#### 1.0 Introduction

Language, as you know, is many things - a system of communication, a medium for thought, a vehicle for literary expression, a matter for political controversy, a factor in nation building, etc. And we find that every man is interested in language to some extent. Each of us therefore has a stake in understanding how language is *organized* and how it is *learned*. In other words, we should find out:

- What is the nature of language?
- What is the function of language?
- How is language related to linguistics?
- Why do we need a discipline called linguistics? and
- Why do linguists spend such a lot of time trying to develop theories which could explain the workings of (human) language?

This unit aims to provide a modern context for asking and answering these questions.

#### 1.1 What is linguistics?

Before we actually begin to define linguistics let us first understand what is NOT linguistics.

You read earlier in the introduction that everybody is interested in language to some extent. Most people are only concerned with language when they have a difficulty with it -- they cannot find the right words for what they want to say or they cannot remember how to spell a word. They often have trouble with punctuation. This, however, does not imply that linguistics is a collection of methods to help people with language problems. *Linguistics is not a way to solve the problems of language users.*

A few people are fascinated by language -- they learn lots of languages, play scrabble, do crosswords, like looking at dictionaries, and admire beautiful and elegant language. This again does not mean that these people are doing linguistics. *Linguistics is not an informal interest in language, however strong that interest may be.*

Some people work with language all the time. Authors and journalists write books and articles, politicians make speeches. Translators take ideas from one language and recreate them in another language. Advertisers choose the best words to sell a product. *But using a language is not linguistics.* Because, using a language is not the same as *studying* a language. Linguistics is the *objective study* of language and not the use of language.

Many people discuss language: literary critics analyse a writer's language, lexicographers look carefully at how words are used. Philologists look at how languages change over time and philosophers have written about language and its relation to thought and knowledge. Logicians, psychologists, sociologists, communications engineers, all these and many other find specific points of interest in the structure and function of natural language. *But linguistics is not an interest in language for some other purpose.* It is an interest in language for studying language itself.

Linguistics differs from all these other disciplines in having no necessary external motivation. The linguistic study of language is unique in approaching these phenomena from within, in order to study language itself rather than studying something else through the medium of language. Most linguists would say that they derive the same pleasure from studying a language that a mathematician derives while struggling with theories or a poet writing poems.

Having seen what linguistics is NOT let us begin to look more positively at linguistics by looking at some questions about language. Two such questions are:

- (a) How many languages are there in the world? and
- (b) What are the main differences and similarities between them?

These are not simple questions. If we want to know how many languages there are in the world, we have to first agree on what counts as language. That is, should we count Danish and Norwegian as two distinct languages where people can *understand* each other or count the three types of English - Northern British English, Broad West Country English and New Zealand English as three varieties of one language even when people *cannot understand* each other?

You will read about this, in detail, in Block V, but let me clarify this point here itself. In linguistics, a distinction is made between a dialect and a language. If there are two varieties and the speakers of one variety do *not understand the other variety* then they are called two different languages, and if the speakers of one variety *understand* the other variety then they are two different dialects of the same language.

Looking at similarities and differences between languages is also not straightforward. People who have learned a foreign language can easily point out one or two *sounds* which are different from English. For example, the sound at the beginning of the German word *Zahn* "tooth". Similarly the *word-order* (that is, in a sentence should the article follow the noun or precede it? Should the verb follow the object or precede it, etc.) of German is different from that of English: for example, *Haute habe das Buck gelesen*, translated word for word comes out as *Today have I the book read*. Thus languages differ from each other at various levels. You will read more about this in Unit 2.

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**Activity A**

List similar differences between English and your mother tongue or between any two languages. You may need 15-20 minutes to do this activity.

Words: \_\_\_\_\_

Word-order: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Discussion**

If at first you find it difficult to do this activity do not lose heart. It is a difficult activity. And one has to think a lot/search a lot in order to find such differences between two languages. If however, you are a translator, you will find it easy to do this. Translators have to grapple with this problem every day. Maybe you could come back to this activity after going through the unit.

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If we want to study these matters in more depth we have to look at four types of differences between languages: ***pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar*** and ***relationships between speakers***. What we, therefore, need to agree on is the basic terminology which we can use to talk about language.

Linguistics, then, is a field which classifies the pronunciation, grammar, meaning and use of language and hence provides *terminology* to talk about these matters. However, this way of thinking makes the field sound as if linguistics merely provides terminology which can be used by lexicographers, translators, speech therapists, language teachers, scrabble enthusiasts, etc.

This makes the field useful, but not very exciting or high-powered from the point of view of theoretical linguists who are interested in finding out *how* we learn languages, what is in the mind of human beings which facilitates language learning, how this knowledge is encoded in the mind/brain or how this knowledge arises in the mind/brain, etc. (You will read more about this in later blocks).

One of the simplest definitions of linguistics is that, it is a scientific study of language. David Crystal (1987:412) in his encyclopedia defines linguistics as the 'science of language'. It has also been defined as 'the scientific inquiry into human language -- into its structures and uses and into the relationship between them' (Finegan & Besnier 1989:8), or as 'a scientific study of the systems/principles underlying human languages' (Verma and Krishnaswamy 1989:26). Notice how almost all definitions of linguistics emphasise three key words: *scientific, study* and *language*.

In the following sections, you will read in detail how these words are crucially related to linguistics. Look at the following questions to test what you have understood so far.

### Review question I

Say which of the following sentences are **True** or **False**.

- i. Linguistics is a collection of methods to help people with language problems.
- ii. Linguistics provides terminology about discussing issues related to language.
- iii. Authors, journalists, advertisers can be called linguists as they deal with language all the time.
- iv. Linguists study language itself rather than studying something else through the medium of language.
- v. Languages may differ from each other in terms of sounds or word-order.

#### 1.1.1 What is 'scientific'?

In this section, we shall concentrate on what is understood by the term *scientific*. Let us first understand what science is. Many people think that the key thing about science is its subject matter, the things that scientists study. For such people, science is the study of the physical world ---- what it is made of (chemistry), the forces and energy that operate in it (physics), living things (biology), stars and planets (astronomy), and so on. For them things that are not physical (the mind, emotions, human behaviour, art and literature, etc.) cannot be part of science.

The other definition of science is that it seeks to explain *why* things are the way they are. It is the search for explanations, an attempt to answer the question *why*, which is the essence of science. Science is about solving puzzles. And to solve a puzzle you have to observe the facts closely, decide which facts are relevant and which are not; make imaginative guesses, and then check your guesses using rigorous logical thinking. A scientist, therefore,

- a. believes that explanation is more important than just describing and classifying a wide range of data,
- b. is willing to narrow the data and even put off for the time being problems which could not be solved at the time,
- c. uses abstraction and idealization, and concepts and principles often remote from everyday experience, and
- d. recognizes that being disproved doesn't devalue his/her contribution.

A linguist, just like a scientist, explains the observed data of natural languages alive or dead by constructing hypotheses, theories and laws. And like scientific theories a linguistic theory has to not only explain the observed data but also predict those data which constitute potential though not actual data. Thus *explanation* of the observed data and *prediction* of the potential data are the two functions of any scientific (linguistic) theory. Explanation and prediction are two sides of the same coin. A general principle explains what has already been observed and it predicts what has not been observed as yet.

Consider, for example, Hindi words such as /ʃʌm/ “shyness” or /gʌm/ “hot”. In Hindi, these words are possible but sequences like /\*ga:rm/ or /\*ʃa:rm/ are not possible. A linguistic analysis of Hindi should be able to *explain* why these words are not possible in Hindi. (The reason is simple. In Hindi long vowels are not followed by *-rm* sequence.)

Not only this, once a theory has an explanation, it should also predict that an English word like *farm* pronounced as /fa:m/ with a long vowel, and without the sound /r/ will pose a problem for native speakers of Hindi, who tend to simplify it as /fa:rʌm/.

And finally, like a true scientist, the linguist is constantly engaged in discovering more about languages, refining his/her methods of investigation and in constructing better theories. Now here’s a question for you to think.

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**Activity B**

*As a child, I'm sure, you must have collected leaves of various shapes, sizes and colours, and you may have even tried to find their names and how they are classified in botany. Would you then consider it to be a scientific activity? If not, why not. You shouldn't take more than 5 - 10 minutes to do this activity.*

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**Discussion**

The question itself gives you a clue, saying it is not a scientific study. I would advise you to go back to the previous section to find out what else is needed in order to make this a scientific study.

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**1.1.2 What is ‘studying a language’?**

Why do we have to *study* language? After all, speaking or writing one's native language is the most natural and effortless task. We do it all the time. Language is in and around us. Therefore, apart from a few rules of grammar

and pronunciation, what else is there to explain about (human) language? But it turns out that there is a great deal to explain if we actually "step outside" language and look at it as an *object* to be *consciously studied* and not merely used.

Is there a difference between *learning* a language and *studying* a language? All of us have learnt to use at least two languages - our mother tongue and English. Learning a language means learning how to use the language. However, when we say a linguist studies a language, we mean he/she studies the mechanism of the language. That is, he/she studies the way a language works.

Linguistics comprises language in all its forms and manifestations. Its aim is to seek a scientific understanding of language and the ways in which it is organized. The study of an individual language is the *grammar* of that language while the study of language in general is linguistics.

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**Activity C**

*What is the difference between "the study of language" and "the study of a language"? Can you think of a similar kind of distinction in any other kind of scientific study? You should not take more than 10-15 minutes in doing this activity.*

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**Discussion**

Since we have established that linguistics is a science, we can think of a similar example from astronomy or physics or biology and extend the notion of "studying" to them as well.

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**Review question II**

*Fill in the blanks with suitable words.*

1. A linguist believes that \_\_\_\_\_ is more important than just describing and classifying data.
2. Explanation of the observed data and \_\_\_\_\_ of the potential data are two important functions of any scientific theory.
3. A linguist believes in refining his/her \_\_\_\_\_ of investigation and in constructing better \_\_\_\_\_
4. Linguists differentiate between learning a language and \_\_\_\_\_ a language.
5. The study of an individual language is the \_\_\_\_\_ of that language.



### 1.1.3 What is 'language'?

Animals, it is said, have a *communication system* as opposed to humans who have *language*. Language, in the restricted sense in which linguists define the term, is a special gift to human beings. Only human beings have the power of speech. The logical question, therefore, to ask at this point is: in what way does human language differ as a means of communication from the system of animal communication?

In order to answer this question, we shall now read about the differences and similarities between human languages and natural animal communication system. These characteristics are set up (perhaps unfairly) with reference to *human* languages. Some of the important characteristic features or design characteristic features of human languages were listed by Hockett (1955), which when taken together help us isolate language from other forms of communication. These are:

1. Duality of structure or patterning
2. Creativity or productivity
3. Interchangeability
4. Cultural transmission
5. Displacement
6. Specialization.

We shall now examine these concepts in detail. (While reading about these do keep in mind that today in the year 2012, many new discoveries have been made regarding animal system of communication. Hence some of the issues discussed here may not be completely valid today.)

#### 1. Duality of structure or patterning

Human language displays two levels of patterning. One at the level where, meaningless units (i.e. phonemes) are combined to form arbitrary signs (i.e. words) and the other at the level where these signs in turn are recombined to form new meaningful larger units (i.e. sentences) (In later blocks you will read in detail about what a phoneme or a word or a sentence is in linguistics).

In other words, in languages investigated so far, two levels of structure are found:

Primary level - compounding of sounds into words, - and  
Secondary level - compounding of words into sentences.

Level I (compounding of sounds P+O+T+S= POTS  
or phonemes) S+T+O+P= SPOT

Level II (compounding of words) spot+the+tops+of+the+pots

There is no evidence of this type of patterning in any known animal communication system. Therefore, we can say that one major difference

between human language and the animal communication system is the duality of structure present in human languages.

## **2. Creativity or productivity**

This feature refers to the fact that human language has the ability to produce new messages on any topic at any time. A sentence never heard before can be created by human beings. That is, the same limited sets of phonemes are combined in a novel form to give novel messages. For example, if I say "last night I had a pleasant meal with a leopard on top of a tree" it would be a novel sentence which I don't think I have ever heard or read anywhere. The construction of such a sentence, therefore, involves creativity/productivity.

## **3. Interchangeability**

This feature means that all members (male or female) of the species can both send and receive messages. This is obviously true of human language. This is not the case with the animal communication system. Bee dance is done only by foragers and birdsong is performed only by males. The calls are not interchangeable between the sexes in the animal communication system. But they are fully interchangeable in human language.

## **4. Cultural transmission**

Language is a set of conventions that have grown as a result of the common living of a large number of people. These are, therefore, conventions common to the entire social group which uses the language. This implies that languages have to be learnt. They cannot be transmitted through heredity. Hockett (1955) points out that the system of conventions particular to each language is *culturally transmitted* (i.e. acquired through learning) and not *genetically transmitted*. (i.e. acquired through heredity).

Psychologists often make a distinction between *instinctive* and *non-instinctive* behavior. For example, human beings have no instinct about building houses. They have to *learn* how to build houses because nature has not supplied them with an inbuilt knowledge of engineering. Bees, on the other hand, can build beehives in hexagonal shapes without learning geometry. For them the knowledge about hexagonal shapes is inbuilt, and genetically transmitted. We can therefore say that for bees, making use of hexagons is *instinctive*, whereas for human beings building a house is *non instinctive*.

Instinctive behaviour is handed down from one generation to the next through heredity. All the relevant information is built into the genes of the organism.

Non-instinctive behaviour, on the other hand, has to be acquired. Therefore human beings can speak Hindi, Malayalam, Chinese, Japanese, Swahili or Pushto depending on the "culture" where they have been brought up. (However, recent developments in linguistics talk about the "universal

grammar" which is genetically transmitted in the case of human beings. You will read more about this in Block V of this course.)

## 5. Displacement

Displacement implies that users of the system are able to refer to events remote in space and time. Animals cannot communicate about an imaginary past or future which humans are able to do with language. In other words, animal communication is *context-bound* but human language is *context-free*.

## 6. Specialization

Specialization implies that there should not be a total physical involvement in the act of communication. Human beings can talk while engaged in activities totally unrelated to the subject under discussion. For example, they can talk about cricket while cutting vegetables. A bee in a bee dance, however, is completely involved physically in the communication process. At that point it cannot do anything else.

Several other features relating to the differences between the animal communication system and the human language have also been listed by other linguists. Some of these are listed below.

### Arbitrariness

This feature implies that there is no natural or inherent connection between a written word (or sounds) and its reference (or symbols). This is overwhelmingly true of human language with the possible exception of a few onomatopoeic terms. That is, the relationship between words and their meanings is quite arbitrary; it is a matter of convention. For example, there is no logic behind why a word like *rose* refers to a flower and not to a horse or a cat or a pencil or a mouse! The decision that *rose* should refer to a flower of a specific kind is purely arbitrary. There is nothing scientific about it. A few people decided to call it a rose and the society accepted it as a word of the English language. The animal communication system generally does not have any arbitrariness, although vervet (a kind of a monkey) alarm calls are said to have arbitrariness.

### Redundancy

There is a lot of redundancy in human languages. For example, when we speak a sentence like: *Are you coming?* There are two markers to show that it is a question:

- i. the placement of the helping verb at the beginning, and
- ii. the rising tone with which the question would be asked.

And when we *write* the sentence there are also two markers to show that it is a question:

- i. the placement of the helping verb at the beginning, and
- ii. the use of question mark at the end of the sentence to show that it is a question.

This kind of redundancy i.e. two or three markers to show the same thing does not exist in the animal communication system.

**Discreteness**

Bee-dancing or bird-song seems to have very few discrete units which are recombina- ble. Human language has phonemes, syllables, morphemes, (you will read about this in the following block) words, etc. which are discrete units and can be recombined to mean different things. That is, language consists of isolatable, repeatable units. For example, with the help of three discrete units like [p, a] and [t] we can create *pat*, *tap*, and *apt*. This is not possible in the animal communication system.

**Reflexiveness**

By reflexiveness we mean the ability to use the communication system to discuss the system itself. No evidence exists that any other species writes grammar or linguistic textbooks.

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**Activity D**

*Give examples from your language to illustrate the following:*

- i. duality of structure

\_\_\_\_\_

- ii. arbitrariness

\_\_\_\_\_

- iii. discreteness

\_\_\_\_\_

- iv. redundancy

\_\_\_\_\_

- v. creativity

\_\_\_\_\_

**Discussion**

All languages have these features. You may have to think a bit and revisit the paragraphs where these features are discussed. All languages will have different examples for these features.

## 1.2 Summary

In this unit, we have defined linguistics and explained how human languages differ from the animal system of communication. Here are the main points:

- a. Linguistics is a *scientific study of language*.
- b. The function of a scientific theory is to not only offer *explanation* of the data but also to *predict* the potential data.
- c. *Studying a language* is different from learning a language. When we study a language we look at language itself by analysing different aspects of its structure.
- d. The term language in linguistics refers to natural languages. *Natural languages* differ from the animal system of communication in terms of the following design features:
  - creativity
  - interchangeability
  - duality of structure
  - cultural transmission
  - displacement
  - specialization
  - arbitrariness
  - redundancy
  - discreteness
  - reflexiveness

Thus, the subject matter of linguistics is all natural languages, living or dead. Like all other sciences linguistics employs careful methods to observe, record, and analyse the data related to its subject matter, namely, language. Similarly, like a scientist a linguist constructs a theory and tests it against the facts of language. The theory should explain observed data and predict potential data.

## 1.3 Sources and suggested reading

I am giving this list of sources in case some of you are interested in reading directly from the book. However, the unit in itself is self-contained and I do not see any need for you to read any extra material on the issue discussed in this unit.

Lyons, J. (1968). *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge: CUP

O'Grady, W; O. M. Dobrovolsky, and M.Aronoff (1994). *Contemporary Linguistics - An Introduction*. New York: St. Martin's Press. (Chapter 14 pp 523-526)

Verma, S. K. and N. Krishnaswamy (1989). *Modern Linguistics - An Introduction*. New Delhi: OUP. (Section 1 pp 15-17)

The books listed above contain exhaustive bibliographies on all aspects of linguistics.

#### **1.4 Answers to review questions**

##### **Review question I**

- i. False
- ii. True
- iii. False
- iv. True
- v. True

##### **Review question II**

- i. explanation
- ii. prediction
- iii. methods, theories
- iv. studying
- v. grammar