

PREFACE

Many introductions to linguistics have been written, and I would like the reader to know what persuaded me to write still another. In several respects I have tried to treat the subject a bit differently than other introductions to linguistics do.

First, I felt that our understanding of linguistic variation has reached the point where it can be integrated more closely with other linguistic topics. Since variation is the raw material from which the various changes develop, language variation forms the natural bridge between language structure and language change, between synchrony and diachrony. Instead of isolating variation as a separate topic, therefore, I have treated it along with other aspects of language. Admittedly, this arrangement comes at the price of breaking up the treatment of variation and change into several parts—lexical, phonological, and syntactic—but I believe the advantages of this arrangement offset the cost.

Second, I believe functional and typological approaches to syntax can now play a larger role in an introductory treatment than has been possible in the past. Our rapidly expanding knowledge of syntactic typology gives a sense of the diversity of the world's languages, which is in danger of being obscured in more exclusively formal approaches. The related functional perspective can add context and provide some understanding of the reasons why syntax assumes the forms found in various languages. Of course, students deserve to enjoy the beauties of formal approaches to syntax, and I introduce generative syntax in Chapter 9. However, I have tried not to let the technicalities of the more formal syntactic frameworks lead to the slighting of other topics and points of view.

I have used examples from a wide variety of languages. I understand the attractions and advantages of working with one's native language, and it is certainly true that any book on linguistics written in English must give ample examples from the only common language of all its readers. Nevertheless, both the intrinsic interest of diversity and my hope of conveying a sense of the range of similarities and differences among the world's languages argued for the plentiful use of examples from other languages.

I have tried to avoid dogmatism and to offer alternative ways of looking at language. I point out areas where linguists disagree, where our knowledge is still limited, and where important work remains for the next generation of linguists, some of whom, I hope, will be among the readers of this book. I also wanted to demonstrate the logic of theory construction and theory testing. I wanted to be clear about the relationship between observation and theoretical

claims, to ask not only how data lead us to build theories, but also how our theories define what we take to be data. An introduction is not too early a point to raise questions about the relation between observations and theory and about the structure of our knowledge. In no other subject is it more profitable to raise such questions than in linguistics.

This book may seem advanced to some readers because I include a number of topics that most introductory books avoid. Others may find it elementary because I focus less than some introductions on the technical apparatus of linguistics. I have used technical terms, symbols, and formulas where they added clarity, but technical apparatus has an unfortunate way of becoming an end in itself, and where no precision is lost I have preferred to write in prose, rather than in symbols and formulas. I deeply believe that there is little in any field that cannot be made clear to interested beginners, and it is beginners, of any age or from any background, for whom I have written. At the same time, beginners should learn about the issues that linguists themselves find interesting. They do not need to be restricted to elementary topics. Language is endlessly fascinating, not only to linguists but to every speaking human being, and linguistics does not have to be presented with such obscurity that it becomes inaccessible to the average student, scholar, or interested general reader. Readers deserve to know what linguists quarrel about and what issues make them quarrel. I do not find it contradictory to suggest that I have written an advanced book for beginners.

Far too much is known about language to be squeezed into a single book, and anyone venturing to write an introduction to linguistics faces some awful choices about what not to include. Often, I had to resist the temptation to include too much, but only firm resistance kept the size of the book from growing completely out of control. In the end, I made choices that reflect my own particular interests and biases. I have surely omitted or skimmed on topics that are the favorites of other linguists, but even if there were a clear consensus about what should be found in an introduction to linguistics, I would rather write a book that conveys an enthusiasm for my own favorite topics than a book that represents a flat consensus.

The chapters are divided among four parts. The first three deal with what many linguists still consider to be the core areas of the field: words, sounds, and sentences, or, in the jargon of linguistics, lexicon, phonology, and syntax. Within each of these I deal not only with synchronic structure but also with variation and change. I have written these three parts so that they can be read in any order. This requires a modest amount of repetition, but I believe the advantages of flexibility will outweigh whatever awkwardness this repetition brings. The topic of language change, as linguists generally understand it, is divided among Parts I–III, but Part IV, “Growth,” deals with several other kinds of language development. These include pidgins, creoles, language acquisition in the child, and the evolution of language in the species. In all of these a more elaborate kind of language has grown from simpler beginnings.

A number of conventions are helpful when writing about language. When words and sentences are cited in their conventional spelling they are written in italics. Single quotes are used for translations of words or sentences into another language or a different dialect. Square brackets surround phonetic symbols that indicate pronunciation. Slanting brackets surround phonemic transcriptions. In a few places small curly brackets are used around the transcription of morphemes. Important technical terms are written in bold face when they are first introduced and occasionally when reintroduced later.

This book is the result of a long fascination with language and of repeated attempts to convey my fascination to students. I am indebted to the many students who have helped me to understand my subject better, even as I have tried to learn how to help them. Several of my students have done much more than just push me to make better sense. Jay Coskey, Tim McDuff, and Paul Wang each gave detailed comments on earlier drafts. Cheryl Carter and Naomi Gurt not only corrected my commas and spelling but spent many hours patiently pointing to the places where I was awkward or unclear. Regina Johnston turned out to be a slang expert. The largest part of the work on the manuscript was done during several long visits in Oslo, Norway, where the Department of Social Anthropology at The University of Oslo offered me a desk and warm hospitality. To the Oslo anthropologists and also to the Oslo linguists, in whose fine reading room I spent many hours, I owe a debt that will be difficult to repay.

Friends and colleagues, many of them at the University of Michigan and the University of Oslo, have read parts of the manuscript and offered their criticism, allowed me to use their examples, discussed linguistic issues, tried to straighten out my confusions, and even experimented with parts of the manuscript with their students. My warm thanks go to Patrice Beddor, Kirsti Koch Christensen, Norma Diamond, Steven Dworkin, Deborah Jackson, Deborah Keller-Cohen, Elizabeth Lanza, Ernest McCarus, John Myhill, Paz Naylor, Helen Ottaway, Emanuel Polioudakis, Roy Rappaport, Hendrik Sinding-Larsen, Hanne Gram Simonsen, Thomas Toon, Frances Trix, and Anna Wierzbicka. Bente Odner and Nancy Hansen drew the fine diagrams and drawings. I am also indebted to several anonymous reviewers who were recruited by Academic Press and who offered their sage criticism. Suzanne Kemmer was an anonymous reviewer who, after offering wonderfully detailed, thoughtful, and helpful comments, revealed her identity so now I can thank her by name. Kari Gluski spent far more time than she should have had to spend squeezing phonetic symbols out of computer programs. And, finally, my ideas have been repeatedly clarified by many long hours of talk about language with Anne Hvenekilde. None of these good friends should be blamed for my continued confusions. To all of them, my thanks.

While I have had help from all these people, I would welcome additional help from others. I would be pleased to have comments from students, from teachers, or from anyone else who happens to pick up the book. Reader's

reactions will be important to me whether they concern a misplaced comma or a linguistic theory that I have misunderstood, and I invite correspondence: Robbins Burling, Program in Linguistics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109 USA.