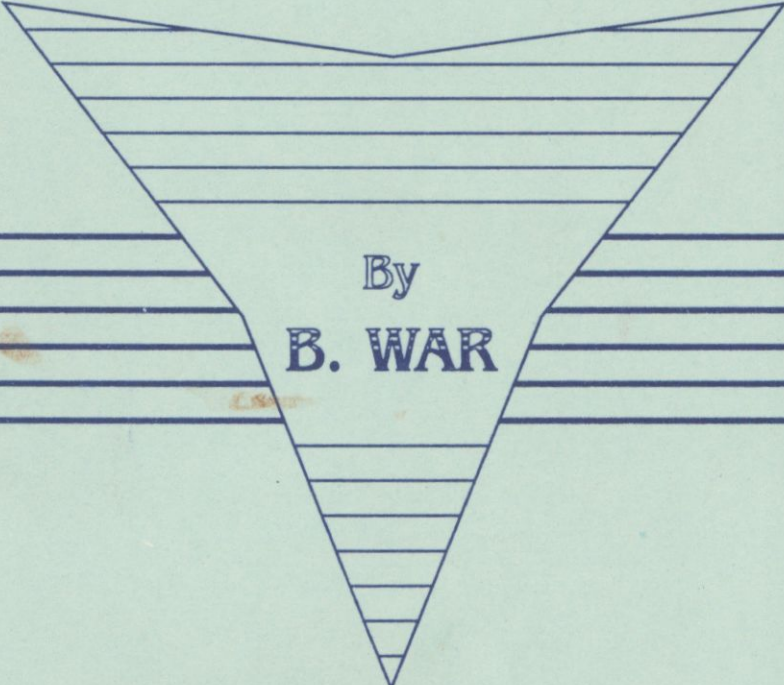


AN  
INTRODUCTION  
TO  
LINGUISTICS



By  
**B. WAR**

## Preface

# AN INTRODUCTION TO LINGUISTICS

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# LINGUISTICS

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## Preface

**E**ver since I started teaching linguistics in Khasi Department of the North-Eastern Hill University, I have noted a deep-felt need for an introductory text book on the subject. My students since 1983 have urged me time and again to write an easy-to-read book on General Linguistics in order to help them prepare for more specialized courses in Linguistics. However, it is only in 1996 that I seriously started collecting materials and writing down important aspects of this study. I have purposely organised the chapters of the book in accordance with the topics designed for M.A. (Course I), Khasi Department, so that students will have a proper foundation in the subject. It is my earnest hope that this book will enable them to realize the varied fields of linguistics and will, therefore, encourage them to investigate the different aspects of the Khasi language. The scope is vast and wide open for scholars who, I hope, will find the subject as fascinating and fulfilling as it has been for me.

*Dated Shillong*

**(B. War)**

*The 30th January 1997*

1. David Crystal. 1969. *What is Linguistics* p. 1-9
2. David Crystal. 1969. *ibid.* p.28

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## CHAPTER I

# Definition and Scope of Linguistics

**E**tymologically, the term 'linguistics' is derived from Latin **lingua** which means 'tongue' and **istics** which means 'knowledge' or 'science'. However, the need to give a more comprehensive definition of linguistics as a discipline has been long felt as is indicative by attempts to do so by scholars such as David Crystal, Jean Aitchison and others. David Crystal, in particular, has pointed to the fact that linguistics as a discipline should not be considered an off-shoot of other disciplines. He also dispels notions of equating linguistics with Philology, Language learning or teaching, or even with language study.<sup>1</sup>

There is now a general consensus in the definition of linguistics as a scientific study of language. The above definition entails two parts, namely, 'scientific study' and 'language'. It is the former which differentiates linguistics from an older scholarly discipline known as language study. The fact that linguistics uses "electronic equipments for speech analysis and synthesis, and abstract symbols" is not the only reason that makes it a scientific study.<sup>2</sup> What makes it scientific is also because of its techniques, approaches and methods. A study that can be considered to be scientific is generally one that is objective and explicit. However, there are different opinions on the stages of a scientific study. Basing his principles of scientific study on John Dewey's **How we think**, David Crystal mentions six interdependent stages, namely, the development of intellectual uncertainty over a problem, an intellectual expression of that problem, an attempt to formulate a hypothesis, the deductions of the consequences of the hypothesis, the testings of the implications of the

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1. David Crystal. 1969. *What is Linguistics* p. 1-9

2. David Crystal. 1969. *Ibid.* p.28

hypothesis and finally the evaluation of the hypothesis and the modification of the terms of the theory.<sup>3</sup>

Aitchison, on the other hand, is of the view that a scientific study generally involves the following three stages:

The first stage is one of speculation and it is a crucial stage for it is this stage that motivates a researcher to make a further study of any phenomenon. Aitchison points to the fact that "people have speculated about language for centuries".

The second stage is a stage of observation and classification. Aitchison is of the view that "minute observation and the systematic collection of facts characterise this phase. Such work starts off without any preconceived notions and is objective rather than subjective".<sup>4</sup> This objectivity is the reason why linguistics is ranked a 'science' since the nineteenth century.

The third stage is the stage of the formulation of a hypothesis. Simply collecting and cataloguing the data is not complete and it is vitally necessary for the study at this stage to focus on the problems pertaining to the phenomenon and to raise valid questions on these problems. The formulation of hypothesis is an attempt to account for these problems and to answer the questions raised. Once a hypothesis is tested and verified, it will be accepted as a theory. Aitchison is of the view that a scientific theory has to be exhaustive, consistent and economical. It is exhaustive when it accounts for all the facts. It is consistent when there are no internal contradictions within it. It is economical when it is presented in a straight-forward manner.<sup>5</sup>

A study which has passed all the three stages has, therefore, fulfilled the requirement of being a scientific study.

We now come to the second part of our definition and that is the question of what is language. Attempts to define what language is has brought the 'know the

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3. David Crystal. 1971. *Linguistics* p. 125

4. Jean Aitchison. 1972. *General Linguistics* p.2

5. Jean Aitchison. 1972. *Ibid.* p.5.

elephant' situation for we have a discussion of language from the point of view of philosophy, anthropology, sociology etc. Language, with all its intricacies, is an extremely complex phenomenon. In most linguistic studies, language is usually discussed in terms of its two aspects: (A) the formal aspect and (B) the functional aspect.

**(A) The formal aspect of language :**

The formal aspect of language is the bread and butter of linguistics. It is usually considered an area of 'pure linguistics'. The formal aspect of language is concerned with the forms and structure of a language. This is usually discussed under the three linguistic levels of analysis :

- I. Phonetics and Phonology
- II. Morphology
- III. Syntax and Semantics

**I. Phonetics and Phonology :**

Phonetics is the general study of the characteristics of sounds of human language. David Abercrombie in his work still considered to an important text-book in phonetics states that the "study of the medium of spoken language in all its aspects and all its varieties, constitutes the subject of phonetics. Phonetics is concerned with the medium as used in speaking all human languages ..... and as used in all styles of speech ...".<sup>6</sup> In short, phonetics studies the way sounds are produced, transmitted and perceived. There are three main branches of phonetics and these are (a) articulatory phonetics (b) acoustic phonetics and (c) auditory phonetics. The study of phonetics is usually concentrated on articulatory phonetics which studies the way in which speech sounds are articulated by the vocal organs. The organs involved in the production of speech sounds cover more than half of the human body – the respiratory system which comprises the lungs and their

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6. David Abercrombie. 1967 *Elements of General Phonetics* p.2.

muscles, the bronchial tube and the trachea, all of which perform the primary function of breathing; the phonatory system which comprises the larynx or 'voice-box' whose primary function is to prevent foreign objects from entering the lungs; the articulatory system comprising the nasal cavity and the oral cavity including lips whose primary function is eating, smelling, etc. Acoustic phonetics studies the physical properties of speech sounds as transmitted between mouth and ear while auditory phonetics studies the perceptual response to speech sounds as mediated by ear, auditory nerve and brain.

Phonology, on the other hand, is a study of sounds and sound patterns of a language. Humans are capable of producing a numerous number of sounds. However, a language makes use of a very limited number of these sounds. Phonology studies the way a language organises these sounds. The concept of a phoneme which is the minimal unit of sound but which is a meaning-distinctive sound, is usually the foundations for the study of phonology. "An essential property of a phoneme is that it functions contrastively. This contrastive function of a phoneme is the basic operational test for determining the phonemes which exist in language".<sup>7</sup> Examples of this are seen in the way sounds such as /p/ and /b/ contrasts in English words **pin** and **bin**. Nevertheless, it is found that phonemes are realized as variants in actual speech. For example, the phoneme /t/ may be realized by the variants /t/ or aspirated /th/ in the pronunciation of a word such as **stick** and **table**. But /t/ and /th/ are separate phonemes in Khasi as seen in words such as **teh** and **theh** which means 'to tie' and 'to pour' respectively. The study of these discrete segments known as phonemes is called Segmental Phonology whereas a study of features extending over one or more segments such as intonation, tone, accent etc. is called Supersegmental Phonology.

## II. Morphology :

The term 'morphology' originates from biology meaning the study of forms. Morphology in linguistics is the "branch

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7. George Yule. 1985. *The Study of Language* p.55

of linguistics which is concerned with the forms of words in different uses and constructions".<sup>8</sup> In nineteenth century linguistics, morphology is the basis on which a typological classification of languages is made, namely, the analytic type of language, the agglutinative type of language and the inflectional type of language.

Morphology is generally studied under two fields: inflectional morphology and derivational morphology, their analysis being based on linguistic units known as morphemes. A morpheme is a minimal meaningful unit of grammar and it can be a free morpheme or a bound morpheme. A free morpheme is one that can stand on its own, e.g., English **go, boy, tall** etc. while a bound morpheme is one that leans on another morpheme, e.g. English prefix **un-** as in **unloved**, past morpheme suffix **-ed** as in **wanted**, plural morpheme suffix **-s** as in **boys** etc.

### III. Syntax and Semantics :

The term 'syntax' came originally from Ancient Greek **syntaxis**, a verbal noun which means 'arrangement' and traditionally refers to the rules governing the arrangement of words to form a sentence. Householder discusses syntax under the following points:

"1. Syntax (occasionally called also grammar) is the study of the meaning and the function of the various inflections (cases of nouns, moods of verbs etc.) and of the different parts of speech (especially prepositions and subordinating conjunction) ...

2. Syntax is the study of rules combining words into sentences (or 'into phrases, clauses and sentences') ...

3. Syntax is the study of the devices by which a language expresses the semantic (or logical, or psychological) relations between and among the various parts of a sentence".<sup>9</sup>

Chomsky puts this more succinctly: "Syntax is the study of the principles and processes by which sentences

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8. P. H. Matthews. 1974. *Morphology, an Introduction to the theory of Word-structure.* p.2

9. F. W. Householder. (ed) 1972. *Syntactic Theory I.* p.10-11

are constructed in particular languages".<sup>10</sup> Broadly speaking, therefore, syntax is a study of elements combined together to form a sentence. An analysis of a language at the phonological level seeks to establish the sounds and sound patterns of a language; at the morphological level the structure of words; and at the syntactic level the interrelationships between 'words' as elements of sentence structure.

Initially, a syntactic analysis of a language involves establishing its basic word order, that is, if it is S(ubject) V(erb) O(bject) like English, SOV like Hindi or VOS like Tagalog.<sup>11</sup> This is important in the light of recent syntactic theories whose goal is to provide a Universal Grammar. The establishment of word orders of languages will help them formulate rules with parametric variation.

Much of what is usually known as grammar is a study of the syntax of a language.

Semantics, on the other hand, is a linguistic study of meaning. This field of linguistics has been ignored by most structural grammars on the ground of its being difficult to analyse meaning within the framework of classification and segmentation. However, linguists in the last few decades have given its rightful place in linguistic study. Kempson is of the view that all "languages depend on words and sentences having meaning; every word and every sentence is conventionally associated with at least one meaning".<sup>12</sup> Meanings are generally discussed as conceptual meanings which are basic meanings of words and associative meanings which are connotative meanings of words. Chomsky shows how a sentence could be described as well-formed syntactically but illformed semantically, in his famous example:

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.<sup>13</sup>

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10. Noam Chomsky. 1957. *Syntactic Structure* p.1

11. Susan Steele. 1978. "Word Order Variation" in J.H. Greenberg (ed). *Universals of Human Language*. Vol. 4. *Syntax* p.590

12. R.M. Kempson. 1977. *Semantic Theory*. p.12

13. Noam Chomsky. 1957. Op.cit. p.15

## **(B). The functional aspect of language :**

The functional aspect of language deals with the uses of a language. It shows how and why a language is used. Roman Jakobson, in the early twenties, made a functional distinction between everyday language and poetry. He discussed the various functions of language as communicative function, conative function, phatic function, referential function, metalinguistic function and poetic function.<sup>14</sup>

The importance of language as a medium of communication cannot be over-emphasized and the most basic function of language is to communicate factual information. This kind of function is also called the directive function of language. Secondly, language can also be used to communicate feelings and emotions. This is also called the expressive function of language. Thirdly, language is also a means of social acknowledgement. Sometimes this appears to be meaningless social interaction. For example, in English, on being introduced for the first time, two people may greet each other with the sentence 'how do you do?'. This is called phatic communion. There are many other important functions of language. As indicated by Roman Jakobson, a poet for example, uses languages as the vehicle of his ideas, thoughts, feelings in the same way that an artist uses clay, or brush and canvas to create a picture.

### **The Scope of Linguistics :**

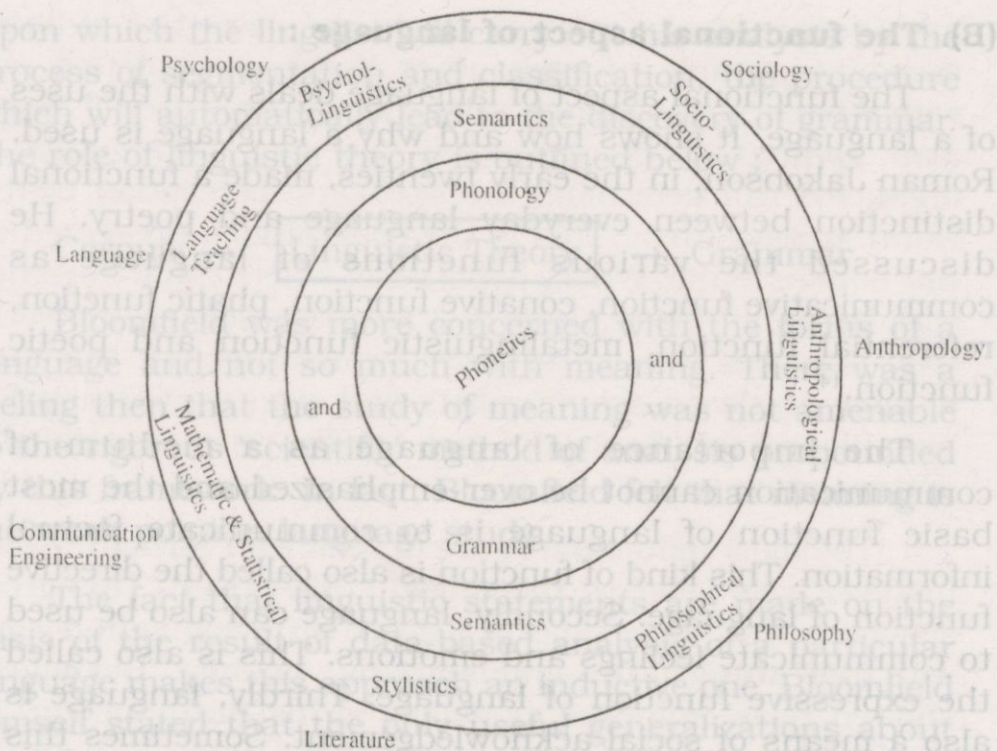
As indicated in the above sections of the chapter, the core areas of linguistics are those of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. An interaction with other disciplines, however, has resulted in branching out to fields such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, language teaching, stylistics etc.

The following diagram is Aitchison's presentation of the scope of linguistics:<sup>15</sup>

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14. Elmar Holenstein. 1974. *Roman Jakobson's Approach to Language* p.153-164.

15. Jean Aitchison. 1972. Op. cit p.



Phonetics is usually the prerequisite to linguistics. Grammar, which is seen to include both morphology and syntax, together with phonology are the integral part of Pure Linguistics. Semantics, as has been discussed above, has also come to be recognised as an integral part of linguistics. The three inner circles, therefore, represent the core areas of linguistics. The outer circle shows the branches of linguistics such as sociolinguistics, anthropological linguistics, stylistics, language teaching, psycholinguistics etc. which are a part of the interaction of linguistics with other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, literature, languages, psychology etc. The diagram above does not give an exhaustive list of the branches of linguistics. There are other areas such as computational linguistics, therapeutic linguistics etc. which are a part of the interaction between linguistics and other disciplines such as computer science, speech rehabilitation etc.

14. Einar Holmstein. 1974. *Grundriss der Linguistik*. 34 (Linguistik) 153-154. Bloomington, 1974. 151 p.

15. Jean Allchison. 1972. *Op. cit.* p. 151.

## CONCLUSION

This book is an attempt to present an insightful account into what linguistics is and how it has emerged and developed throughout the centuries. As has been stated time and again, linguistics is concerned with the study of language. The fact being so, linguists have always paid attention to discussion on what is language. This has led to many attempts to ascertain the characteristics of natural human language. Charles Hockett, in particular, lists thirteen design features of language, namely, vocal-auditory channel, broadcast transmission and directional reception, rapid fading, interchangeability, total feedback, specialization, semanticity, arbitrariness, discreteness, displacement, productivity, traditional or cultural transmission, duality of patterning. The last four design features are considered to be unique to human language.

In presenting the development of linguistics from the eighteenth century, one can see how the focus of the discipline has shifted from one period to another. Nonetheless, the fact remains that each movement, be it by an individual or by a group, has contributed enormously to the study of linguistics.

Chapter IV of this book deals with the development of linguistics both in Europe and in the USA during the first half of the twentieth century. Even though the sections show the names of the different school of linguistics, yet these have been dealt in a very condensed manner. In particular, the European schools, namely, the Prague School, the Copenhagen School, and the Firthian School have been focussed on the pioneers of the schools, namely Roman Jakobson-Nikolai Trubetzkoy, Hjelmslev and J.R. Firth respectively. No attempt is made to present a discussion on the followers of the schools. For example, Firth's concept of polysystems has given rise to many important linguistic theories. The most well-known among them is the Scale-and-Category Grammar developed by M.A.K. Halliday and his colleagues.

Finally, the second half of the twentieth century has been deliberately left untouched in this volume as this period unfolds a new era in linguistics. The discipline has developed so rapidly in all its branches of study with new theories and new frameworks emerging thick and fast. This has also led to the problem of methodology in relation to the study of language, be it in the area of pure linguistics such as syntax, phonology etc. or in sociolinguistics, language teaching etc. It is, therefore felt necessary that a new and separate volume should be prepared that will deal exclusively with the development of core areas of linguistics in the latter half of the twentieth century.

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