Linguistics for Language Teachers

Lessons for Classroom Practice

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1 The Components of Language

1.1 Introduction

What do you know when you know a language?

Many people may say that when you know a language, you can communicate a message or perhaps hold a conversation in the language. You might be able to exchange information, greet someone, ask someone for directions, read a menu, or write a letter. These are certainly important language functions and tasks that we want our students to learn—and you might feel like you know the language when you can accomplish these tasks—but it still doesn't quite describe what language is. To use an analogy, we know the human body has important functions for survival, like breathing, blood circulation, and digestion. However, these functions do not exactly describe *what* the human body consists of or how it uses its components to accomplish those tasks. Similarly, to answer the question *What do you know when you know a language?*, we need to know what language consists of and how it uses its components to accomplish language functions. That's where linguistics steps in.

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. Linguists aim to look at language objectively, observing how it functions "in the wild", how it grows, how it changes, and how it is used. Language is studied scientifically like any natural phenomenon, as a botanist would study a plant or a microbiologist would study bacteria. This is different from what grammar books sometimes do, which is to prescribe how it *should* be used and what constitutes proper language. Linguists analyze language for what it is and how it is actually used by its speakers. They study everything from the smallest components (e.g., how much air is needed to make a /p/ sound like a /p/) to the largest components (e.g., how people apologize politely in text messages). They study everyone from newborn babies to elderly people. They study spoken and signed languages. They study languages spoken by billions of people and languages spoken by ten people. They study how language changes over hundreds of years and how language changes over a couple of months. They study languages with social power and languages that are forbidden and spoken in secret. There are entire books written on the syntax and pragmatics of profanity. The sky's the limit.

1.2 Linguistics and Language Teachers

Language teachers are linguists. While you may believe that teaching students how to speak a language is a different job description than analyzing language, the two are inextricably linked. In order to develop the best way to approach a new lesson, address a pattern of errors across a student's work, or explain a concept in the target language that simply does not exist in the students' first language, teachers have to first identify and understand the inner workings of the language. A doctor would not begin a treatment without understanding how the human body works; a mechanic would not begin to fix a car without understanding how the machinery functions. It's important for language teachers to be able to recognize and understand the parts, as well as the relationships between those parts.

Related to this, language teachers are more than just users of the language themselves. Simply being able to speak the language does not mean you can necessarily teach it; we certainly would not expect that someone can be a doctor simply because they have been sick before, or that they can be a mechanic because they drive a car regularly. To teach a language, it's helpful to not only be able to speak the language but understand what it is you are using when you speak it. Additionally, if you are to be a language teacher, you need to know how to analyze and consider language metalinguistically. When students ask you "why is it X but not Y?" and if your answer to their question is, "I don't know, that's just how it is", then they're not learning much from the experience. Or, if a student in your class makes the same error time after time, it's not enough that we say, "let's practice not making that error". The language teacher has to identify the error and recognize the pattern of occurrence. That's a main part of what linguistics is: patterns and tendencies and characteristics of language. But we don't stop there. Not only is it important for teachers to recognize the pattern, but then try to explain it. That is where linguistics—and specifically linguistic theories—comes into play. Theories help us make sense of what is going on with our students, and from there we have solutions that we can bring back to the classroom. Language teachers are linguists because they need to be aware of what is going on in the language they speak and teach, analyze these patterns, and make sense of them.

However, there is a problem. Linguists are trained to do these things, but language teachers are not. This is a grave error and a gap in our teacher training. Much of the focus of language teacher training is on methods and the teacher's own language proficiency, both of which are certainly important and necessary. However, language teachers do not receive much linguistics training; they are not often explicitly taught the structure of their language, or how to analyze linguistic data. Consequently, being less knowledgeable about the target language means teachers often rely on the textbook to learn about the language, which takes away from the autonomy of the teacher. Many language teacher candidates have sheepishly confessed that they "don't really get grammar" or that they feel intimidated by linguistics and wished it was part of their training.

Language teachers also benefit from linguistics training because there is an entire world of research and resources out there about language acquisition, bilingualism, heritage languages, classroom language learning, and how the specifics of your target language work (e.g., how German speakers determine which pronoun to use to mean *you*, what sound changes are occurring in contemporary Quechua). The problem is, these academic sources are written for linguists, not practitioners. Like many scientific fields, linguistics has a complex set of jargon that is not transparent for the majority of the population, even language teachers who really have an invested interest in language. Theta roles, sister nodes, and voiceless alveolar fricatives have no meaning for people outside of the linguistic subfields. Not to mention the array of acronyms that we must muddle through: NOM, ACC, NP, VP. Accessibility for teachers means that when they read a linguistics article, book, or academic resource, they can understand what they mean and use these resources to expand their knowledge base. It is not acceptable that language teachers are simply cut off from these resources that can help them continue to learn or to find helpful guidance about a particular aspect of the language they are teaching (or the language(s) their students are coming to school with). Are teachers supposed to twiddle their thumbs and wait for an "easy-to-read" version of the research—which could take years—or should teachers be given the tools and skills from the start so they can access the latest, most up-to-date research and resources? We will let you guess what we think.

1.3 The Layers

Language consists of multiple layers, much like a layered cake. Each layer serves an important function, but to get the full experience, you need all of these components in order for a language to be a language. When you serve a piece of cake, you slice your knife downward so that you get a little of every layer. Language works the same way: when you know a language, you have to know a portion of all of those layers. Let's inspect each layer briefly here.

The first layer is phonetics, which is the smallest unit of language. **Phonetics** is the study of the sounds of languages, which come together to form syllables, words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. It is analogous to the cells in our bodies: they are the building blocks. Every language and dialect has a unique set of sounds, or **phonetic inventory**, that is used to build the language. As language teachers and learners, we know that there are sounds in the target language that might be different from the languages we already know, and one of the many challenges is to learn how to make these sounds that are new to us. Perhaps you have struggled with rolling your *r* sounds when learning Spanish or making the *th* sound in English, as in the word *think*. What can be even more difficult is learning how to hear and distinguish sounds that are not in the languages you speak, like the distinction between *tal* (moon), *ttal* (daughter), and *t*^{h}*al* (mask) in Korean, which is very difficult to distinguish if you are a native English speaker. This is because we tend to hear and produce sounds that are

most familiar to us. Another important aspect of phonetics is the acoustics of sound, like pitch, length, or amplitude, which can change how we hear the sound. Thus, knowing the phonetics layer of a language means you know how to use, hear, and differentiate sounds in the language.

The next layer of the language cake is **phonology**. Many people use phonology interchangeably with phonetics, but there is an important distinction. While phonetics is the study of sounds, phonology is the study of the relationship between these sounds. For example, think of a string of numbers as in a phone number: 754–6794. When you say each individual number in isolation, it will sound like it does in (1). But when you say the numbers together in a string, which is what most people do, you glide from one sound to another. Some of the sounds even change. See (2).

(1) *seven five four, six seven nine four*
(2) *sevem fife four, sik seven nime four*

You will notice that when you say the string of numbers naturally at normal speed, the /n/ in *seven* changes to something that sounds more like /m/ before the /f/ in *five*, so that you end up saying *sevem* instead of *seven*. Similarly, the /n/ in *nine* changes to /m/ before /f/ in *four*, so it sounds more like *nime* than *nine*. These changes occur to make the transition from one number to the next sound more natural. The /n/ literally changes shape to be more like the following consonant. When you use paint, two colors next to each other may blend and create a natural transition. This kind of blending happens between sounds in language, too. Phonological processes like the one just described occur to make them easier to pronounce and seem more natural. When a computer automated voice reads a string of numbers or a sentence aloud, it might sound awkward and choppy because it is pronouncing every sound in isolation. When a human speaks a series of numbers or a sentence aloud, however, that person draws from their phonology layer to make those subtle changes that help them sound more natural. Thus, for language learners to sound more natural and less choppy, we as teachers can help learners understand phonological processes that help them to blend sounds from one to another.

Morphology is the next layer. **Morphology** is the study of word formation, where morphemes, or the smallest unit of language with meaning or function, come together to form words, new and old. Think about a word like *disembarkation*. Although it is one word, it has a lot of parts: first, you have the root word *embark* (verb), then it takes on the prefix *dis-* to change the meaning to the opposite. Then you add the suffix *-ation* to change the part of speech from verb to noun. Roots and affixes, or add-on morphemes, allow us to come up with an infinite number of new words from preexisting words, like *unfriending* or *friendzone*. The morphology layer also tells you that while you can make a word like *unturtlelike* (to be not like a turtle), a word like *disturtlely* breaks the rules somehow. Language learners have to be aware of the word-formation

rules of the target language, which not only helps them use and understand existing words and meanings, but also use and understand new ones that come into the vocabulary.

The next layer of the cake is **syntax**, which often turns people off because they think it is either computer language or grammar. A less intimidating way to think about syntax is simply how words come together. There are not a lot of languages that allow you to just put words together however you want and it would still be considered grammatical. Some languages are more permissive than others about word order, but even those have word orders that are more common, or canonical, than others. Syntax is an important layer for language learners because, as many of us know from experience, you cannot just translate a sentence word for word from one language to another. You have to follow the rules of the target language, which can be difficult to learn. In German, for instance, verbs have to go in second position, while in Japanese, the verbs go at the end of a sentence. When you know a language, you know these rules without even realizing you know them, such that when you hear a phrase like *the big red leather cowboy boots*, you know that's right, but there is something odd about *the red cowboy leather big boots*. You might not be able to explain it, but your intuition tells you something has gone awry.

Semantics is the next layer of language. Semantics deals with meaning. Not just the kind of meaning you look up in a dictionary, but really understanding the nuance behind the word, phrase, or sentence. For example, look around you right now and find objects that are *red*. You might find objects that are redder than others, some of which may just barely pass as red. Now, what if you were asked to identify something that is *red-red*. As in, *really* truly red. Suddenly, the field narrows, and you might find yourself excluding some objects because they are too light or too dark or too orangey. *Red-red* isn't an entry you are going to find in a dictionary, nor is the definition consistent from person to person. However, you have a certain intuition about it, and the semantics layer of your language competence tells you that.

Pragmatics is the last layer of language, the layer that deals with how language is used. Pragmatics gives you information about what is appropriate, what is permissible, what makes sense to say given known information, and how you use language to achieve certain acts, like apologizing, thanking, insinuating, or insulting. For instance, pragmatics tells us why the following conversation is perfectly acceptable:

Steve: Hey, Coco, what's up?
Coco: Not too much.

But why this conversation below does not quite work:

Steve: Hey, Coco, what's up?
Coco: Fine, thank you.

And why this conversation is kind of rude or, at least, eye-roll inducing:

Steve: Hey, Coco, what's up?
Coco: The sky.

Pragmatics tends to be more difficult to teach and learn because not only does it utilize the sounds and words and sentences you build from knowledge of the other layers, but you have to understand context and nuance.

These six layers—phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics—exist in all human languages, dialects, and creoles. Every language, however "primitive" it may be considered by society or how frowned-upon it might be by people in power, has a full-fledged system containing all these layers. Signed languages have phonetics and phonology too, as we will later discuss. There is no such thing as a language that simply does not have one of these layers. If you look closely, it will be there.

1.4 Linguistic Competence

Now, let's circle back to the original question: *what do you know when you know a language?* Knowing a language means you need to know all of these components of language. As a learner, you cannot learn just the phonetics layer but ignore the syntax layer. In other words, you might have excellent pronunciation in Arabic, but if you have no idea how to string words together, you cannot really communicate. Similarly, you may know how to string words together in Arabic, but if you don't know what they mean, then it's empty and useless. Or you might have excellent semantic and pragmatic skills, but if your pronunciation is so nontargetlike that people cannot understand you, then you cannot communicate either. When you know a language, you need to have at least some competence in every layer. You do not need to have mastery of every layer to communicate, of course, but you cannot get by without some of each component.

This knowledge of the components is what we call **linguistic competence**. As speakers (or signers) of a language, you have this knowledge of the layers to some extent. Language acquisition, therefore, is the gaining of this linguistic competence. We have mentioned several times as we went over the layers the importance of intuition when analyzing language. Your linguistic competence is what allows you to form your language and also what tells you whether something sounds off or not. However, there is an important distinction between knowledge and awareness. Having the knowledge does not necessarily mean that you are aware of these components and their intricacies. People use very complex linguistic processes all day every day, but most people are not aware of what those processes are or even that they are using them. This is especially true if you learned a language as a child. No one sits down a baby, hands her a notebook, and explains the word order rules of her language. Because language learning tends to happen in natural environments—most

often in the home—when you are a baby or small child, you are not aware that you are using the subjunctive mood, labiodental fricative, or nasal assimilation. You just do it because it sounds good and your gut tells you whether something sounds off or not. You know it when you hear it. This is similar to learning to walk. You don't have to know what gravity is or how the human muscular system works in order to walk. You might have excellent competence in forming noun phrases but not know how to describe it or even put a name to it.

This is where teachers who are native speakers of the target language struggle a bit. If you are a native Italian speaker and you are teaching Italian to English-speaking students, it could be somewhat difficult to put yourself into your students' shoes because you don't remember the process of learning to speak Italian: you probably learned it at home with your family as a small child. You did not learn Italian sitting in a classroom like your students. Same goes for many ESL teachers who did not have to learn English in a classroom, but rather at home with their family. You might not have thought about how *few* and *a few* can have quite different meanings: *Few people showed up to the meeting* versus *A few people showed up to the meeting*. However, by studying your language objectively like a linguist, you become aware of the structure and components of the language, making it that much easier and more helpful when you teach it.

It is also important to mention that even if a person is not a fluent speaker of a language—say, an intermediate student of ESL—they still have linguistic competence, and therefore some intuition about the language. As language learners become more and more proficient in the language, they develop more targetlike intuitions that tell them that something sounds right or wrong in the target language. This is important because it gives a lot of credit to the language learner. Your intermediate student might not have the complexity that your advanced students have in their language, but they have some linguistic competence—knowledge about the layers of language—that allows them to then build on it.

1.5 Myths and Truths About Human Language

Before we delve further into the layers of language, it is important for teachers to be aware of the common myths and misconceptions of language. Because language is such a pervasive part of human life, it is easy for these myths and misconceptions to start, spread, and become ingrained in our systems of belief. Next we discuss a few that are especially relevant for language teachers.

Myth 1: Some languages are not as developed as others. Myths like this one stem from people's lack of understanding of the complexity of languages. People usually make this kind of comment regarding languages that are spoken by minority groups or indigenous peoples. The fact is, all languages have all of the layers of languages we discussed, but some of these languages that are less powerful in society are not studied as often, and therefore misunderstood

to be less developed. By claiming that a language (or dialect or creole) is not as developed as another language, we fail to recognize the systematic complexities that the language has. It not only belittles the language but it also belittles the people who speak it. As an objective study of language, linguistics shows us that despite social hierarchies amongst languages, every single one has a system of rules governing its sounds, structure, meaning, and use.

Myth 2: We need to preserve language to keep it from changing. You may have heard (or said!) such statements as "young people are ruining the language" or "people don't speak correctly anymore". There tends to be negative reactions to languages changing. However, all languages change over time. What we know as modern-day English is nothing like Old English or Middle English; if you went back in time and found people that speak Middle English, you would not be able to understand them at all. The fact is, all languages change over time. Why? Language is human behavior, and human behavior—as we well know—changes all the time. People sometimes feel threatened by changes in their language and believe that it is our job to maintain that "integrity". Try as we may, language change is a natural process that has been ongoing since the beginning of human language. The only time that a language does not change is when there are no speakers left.

Myth 3: *We need to teach students the correct way to speak and write*. While there are some varieties of languages that are more accepted by academic and professional communities, there is no such thing as one correct way to speak and write. Even the so-called newscaster dialect varies regionally. In fact, language variation—or different people saying things differently—is as normal as people who have different skin color or different hair types. Of course, it is important to demonstrate to students that there are certain varieties or styles that are more expected for academic purposes, but it is equally important for students to learn that using that same variety and style could ostracize them in social situations. You would not greet a friend the same way you would write an email to your boss's boss. Rather than teaching students the idea of correctness, it is more in their best interest to expose them to a wide variety of the ways that people actually use language.

1.6 Descriptive Linguistics

This brings us to **descriptive linguistics**. We have said before that linguists study languages scientifically and objectively—or essentially, *describe* the language as it is. This is what descriptive linguistics is: a scientific and objective description of language. In contrast, **prescriptive linguistics** tells people what is proper or improper language and how they should use the language—they *prescribe* what people should be doing. Some examples of prescriptive rules you may have heard are as follows:

Don't end a sentence with a preposition.
Use nominative pronouns after the verb *to be*.

Prescriptive grammar rules are like social etiquette rules. They have the tenor of proper rules for society, like *Don't put your elbows on the table* or *Dishes should be passed counterclockwise*. The problem with these prescriptive grammar rules (and maybe etiquette rules as well) is that they do not describe what people actually do. People end sentences with prepositions all the time, and not ending the sentences with a preposition might make you sound overly formal or stilted.

What are you looking for? vs. For what are you looking?
Who'd you talk to? vs. To whom did you talk?

Using nominative pronouns after the verb *to be* makes you sound overly grandiose.

It's me. vs. It is I.

If we encourage our students to follow the prescriptive rules, they will quickly realize that other speakers of the target language do not use it except in the most formal cases. If they use a sentence like *To whom did you talk?* to a friend or knock on the door and announce *It is I*, they will likely fall victim to some light mocking. That is the danger of prescriptive rules and prescriptivism. Instead, by describing the way people actually use language—in informal, neutral, and formal contexts—students are able to learn the complex nature of how their target language functions in real life.

1.7 How to Use This Book

What will this book do for you? At its core, this book is an introduction to linguistics. But unlike many intro books, this one is specifically written and tailored for language teachers, especially ESL, bilingual, world language, and heritage language educators. Because this book is designed for teachers, the lens through which we look at linguistics is through that of language acquisition and teaching. As we delve further into each layer of language, we will highlight areas that are especially pertinent for language learning and teaching, as well as areas that learners might struggle with in each layer.

This book is not a how-to for teaching language. Rather, this book trains language teachers to be linguists themselves. This entails two major skills. The first is to train language teachers to observe language objectively, looking at it "in the wild" as it is used by actual speakers. As we explore the topics of each chapter, the exercises and activities at the end of each chapter may ask you to think of examples from the language(s) you speak and/or teach, and also examples from students learning the target language. Secondly, the book will train you to analyze language. It is quite helpful for teachers to be able to identify patterns in language and use them to help students understand how the language works, as well as identify patterns in the students' errors so teachers can address them

and use them to inform their teaching. With these two skills—objective observation and language analysis—the linguist-teacher can really get at the heart of what makes the target language tick, and how to get their students to the next level.

Additionally, this book is not a description of one single language. It considers all languages, and the concepts and skills you learn are meant to serve as a gateway. If you want to study the phonetics of Nahuatl, the syntax of Greek, or the pragmatics of Inuktitut, you will be able to do that. This book will have given you the basic tools to pursue further study into the topics you are interested in. If you get a student in your class who speaks a language you have never heard of (don't be embarrassed, this is very common), you will have the skills to read academic texts and learn more about how that language works. If you are not sure why your French students are having trouble with grammatical gender and want to read about how you can help them, this book will have prepared you to crack that literature.

And if you are a language lover at heart—you love how meaning is created, you love new sounds, you love diagramming sentences—then this book will open your eyes to patterns in the languages you hear all around you that you may have never noticed before. This book can be used as a main text or as a supplementary text in linguistics courses in teacher education programs. At the end of each chapter, **Further Reading** will direct readers to additional resources, and **Exercises** will reinforce the concepts reviewed. In addition, the **Voices From the Classroom** boxes found in every chapter feature first-hand accounts of teachers who have used their knowledge of linguistics to help language learners. The **Glossary** at the end of the book lists key words and phrases, which are bolded the first time they are used in the text.