

History of the English Language: Introductory Notes and Notes from Chapter Zero

What is **linguistics**? It is the scientific study of language.

Language as a conventional, arbitrary system of sounds used for communication in a human linguistic environment.

-Language as system.

Language is a system at many levels. Not just a collection of words, language consists of rules and patterns that relate the words to one another.

A. **Phonemes** are the smallest meaningless components that constitute the sound system of a language. Sounds that are capable of indicating a difference in meaning are called phonemes, as in “cat” and “hat.”

B. **Morphemes** are the smallest meaningful components of a language. Morphemes are words or parts of words that have a consistent meaning in speech. For example, the word cats consists of two morphemes, {cat} and {-s}. Morphemes can be lexical (having dictionary definitions) or grammatical (affixes and function words). They can be free (able to stand alone) or bound (complete only when combined with other morphemes.) Bound grammatical morphemes (or affixes) can be either derivational (used to create new words) or inflectional (used to signal grammatical relationships).

C. **Syntax** governs the way words come together to create sentences. In some languages there are many morphemes which indicate the relationships. In English, we rely more on word order. However, the syntax of English has become **less synthetic** (grammatical structures are signaled primarily by inflectional endings) and **more analytic** (grammatical structures are signaled primarily by word order and function words).

D. **Semantics**, or meaning, is the most important aspect of language. Studies of semantics concern the meaning of words, though dictionary meanings are narrow and only one part of semantics. Semantics is contingent on context. Meaning also depends on the person who hears the utterance or reads the text.

E. **Lexicology** includes spelling, the formation and use of words.

F. The existence of alternative ways of saying things allows for great flexibility in human relationships and is known as **stylistics**. Differences that do not affect the meaning are often called stylistic differences.

G. **Pragmatics** is the study of the meaning of words in context. (i.e., I like your dress). A difficult distinction is where, if at all, the line should be drawn between pragmatics and semantics.

H. **Rhetoric** is, very simply stated, the ways in which a language is used persuasively.

-Language is **arbitrary**. Aside from **echoic words**, there is no intrinsic relationship between words and the objects or concepts they represent.

-Language is **conventional**. Language is passed down from one generation to the next. It is the nature of language to change. Notions of absolute correctness are imposed by writers,

linguists, scholars, etc. and may slow down but do not prevent the natural process of language evolution.

-Language as **sound**. Linguists are primarily concerned with speech. Writing is a secondary activity. Standard English is the form of English used in formal speech events such as news broadcasts and lectures.

-Language as a **human** activity. The ability to produce and understand utterances never heard before is called **linguistic competence**. Though some apes have been taught to use sign language (a **paralanguage**, or parallel system of communication), the breadth of ideas that they express is, arguably, limited. Regardless of how animals communicate and regardless of how they process human speech, linguists are primarily concerned with human language.

-The purpose of language is to **communicate**. Linguists are interested in how language is organized in the minds of individuals and also in how communities shape language purposefully.

-Does language influence thought and behavior? According to the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, yes, it does.

-Language is an **open system**, meaning that we are capable of limitless utterances.

-**Linguistic corruption** is the mistaken view that language change is corrupt, that earlier speakers of a language spoke a purer form of language and that young people are 'ruining' the language.

-**Language variation** is natural for any 'living' language. We say that a language is **dead** when it ceases to change, meaning it is no longer the everyday language of any group of people.

-One way to approach language is **diachronically**, or through a consideration of historical variation. Another way is to look at language **synchronically**, considering how a language is spoken at a certain time and in a particular place, social level, ethnic group, etc.

-**Standard English** is the form of English used in most printed works and in formal speech events. **Acceptability** concerns the degree to which users of a language tolerate variation.

CHAPTER ZERO (This is mostly additional terminology to supplement workbook.)

1. **phoneme**: the smallest meaningless component of a language. Phonemes must be combined with other sounds to produce meaning.
2. The **International Phonetic Alphabet**, established in the late 1800s, provides a means of recording the meaningful sounds of language.
3. **allophones**: sounds that are not distinctive, as [t] in the words 'tone' and 'stone.'
4. **assimilation**: sounds that become more alike, often affected by their linguistic environment and often for **ease of articulation**. One type of assimilation is **palatalization**, which occurs when sounds become palatalized, as in 'watcher name?' An example of **homorganic assimilation** is 'samwich' for 'sandwich.'
5. **dissimilation**: sounds become less similar, for the same reasons noted above, as evidenced in the typical pronunciation of the word 'diphthong.'
6. **elision**: sounds are omitted, usually due to lack of stress. Some types of elision follow:
 - A. **aphesis**: elision of initial unstressed sounds, as in "bout' for 'about'
 - B. **apheresis**: loss of any sound at the beginning of the word, as in "most' for 'almost'
 - C. **apocope**: loss of sounds at the end of a word, as 'chile' for 'child'
 - D. **syncope**: loss of a weakly stressed syllable in the middle of a word, as in 'fam'ly' for 'family'
7. **intrusion**: sounds are added, usually for ease of articulation. For example, some speakers add an intrusive -r to certain words, as in "Noer's ark." Some other types of intrusion follow:
 - A. **svarabhakti** (a term from Sanskrit): intrusive schwa, as in 'ath-a-lete' for 'athlete'
 - B. **homorganic intrusion**: similar kinds of sounds are added to a word, as in 'warmph' for 'warmth'
8. **hypercorrection**: In addition to syntactic hypercorrection, phonemic hypercorrection can also occur, such as when speakers pronounce the 't' in the word 'often.'
9. **metathesis**: occurs when sounds are reversed from their usual order, such as 'nucular' for 'nuclear' and 'aks' for 'ask'
10. All of the above are examples of **syntagmatic change**, which occurs when one sound or element influences another. **Paradigmatic change**, or **associative change**, occurs when words are affected by other words not immediately around them. An example is 'chaise lounge,' occurring because of confusion between French 'longue' and English 'lounge.'
11. **Social change** occurs when we pick up the speech habits of others, or when language is influenced by society, as in our quest for an **epicene**, or gender-neutral, pronoun.