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## How does language work?

Language is all around us.

Using language, we can share complicated thoughts, negotiate agreements, make communal plans. Our learning, our courting, our fighting -- all are mediated by language.

You may think of language as a *technology*. Depending on how you define the word, this is either a metaphor, or it is literal truth. It is the artificial use of natural phenomena -- sounds, gestures, appearances, textures -- for the purpose of communication.

How does the technology of language work? Answering this question is surprisingly hard. Most of us learned our native languages so early in our lives that we cannot remember what it was like to lack language. Our language skills are almost automatic -- so much so that it is very hard to introspect about them. Nevertheless, throughout the centuries scholars have devised ingenious ways to study the human language faculty, and we have learned a lot about how language works. But there is much more to learn, and many mysteries remain to be explored. The field of scholarship that tries to answer the question, "How does language work?" is called *linguistics*, and the scholars who study it are *linguists*. (In common parlance, a *linguist* can simply be someone who speaks many languages. This is not the sense we mean, and whenever we say *linguist*, we will mean a scholar of linguistics. We will call someone who speaks many languages a *polyglot*. Some linguists are also polyglots, but it is perfectly possible to be either one without being the other.)

## How do linguists learn about language?

Linguistics is a *science*. Although there has been a certain amount of debate about that statement, we will let it stand for now. What we mean is, that linguists answer questions about language by *observing the behavior of language users*.

This is not the only way one could imagine learning about language. For example, one could *study respected authorities*. But this approach raises an obvious question: how did the respected authorities learn what they knew? If each language were invented by an ancient sage, who determined once and for all how that language worked, the authoritative approach would have great appeal. We would go to the writings of the Founding Sage of Danish, for example, and to the writings of the sage's immediate disciples, to find out the Original Intent, much as American judges refer to the Constitution. But, as far as we can tell, this is *not* how most languages come to be. We have ancient authorities in plenty, but in most cases these authorities were merely trying to codify the practices of the people who seemed to them most skilful in the use of language. In other words, these authorities were themselves scientific linguists of a sort:

they observed language users and tried to describe their behavior. Modern linguists go straight to the source: we learn about language by observing language users in action.

Astronomy has its enormous telescopes, particle physics has its supercolliders, biology and chemistry have intricate and expensive apparatus, all for learning about their particular facets of the world. One of the charms of linguistics is that *the data is all around you*; you need nothing more than a patient ear and an inquiring mind to do original linguistic research of your own. But you need not start from scratch -- generations of linguists before you have laid a fairly stable groundwork for you to build on. Throughout the history of linguistics, the primary source of data for linguists has been the *speech, writing, and intuitions* of language users around them.

## Describing and prescribing

In literate cultures, it is common to have a tradition of *language instruction*. In formal classes, students are taught how to read and write. Furthermore, the teacher tells the students *rules of proper usage*. This is usually a *prescriptive* tradition, in which students are told (or prescribed) what to do, much as if they were being taught the proper way to do arithmetic or knit a sweater. Formal language instruction is usually *normative*, which means that it involves a sense of "should and shouldn't", a notion of right and wrong behavior.

In contrast, linguists follow a *descriptive* tradition, in which the object is to observe what people really do, and form theories to explain observed behavior.

As a member of a literate culture, you have probably been exposed to a certain amount of your culture's traditional language instruction. When you first take up the study of linguistics, you will probably experience some discomfort as you observe language behaviors that you have been taught are wrong. It will be hard to suppress an almost instinctive reaction: "This behavior is *incorrect*. My observation is no good; the person I am observing is an unreliable source of information."

It is important to remember: *traditional language instruction and scientific linguistics have completely different goals and methods*. Traditional language instruction is intended to train students to use a *standard language*. Language standards exist to make sure formal communication is possible between distant regions, between generations, between centuries, between social classes. Modern civilization depends on such formal communication. Its rules must be constant over wide areas, over long spans of time, across different social and economic groups. This leads to an interesting contradiction:

- The formal rules of a standard language are almost arbitrary. It doesn't matter in detail what they are, so long as everyone agrees to them and more or less follows them when formal communication is needed.

- Traditional language teachers need to imbue these mostly-arbitrary rules with a sense of *rightness*, in order to enlist the students' moral sense in the cause of preserving the stability of the standard language.

The natural result is that students emerge from traditional language instruction with a strong sense that certain language behaviors are *simply wrong*. Most members of a literate culture have this moral sense about language, and find it hard to suppress. Yet, to do objective science, to find out how language really works, it is necessary to adopt a detached viewpoint, and to treat all language users with a certain basic respect. *Don't think about what they are doing wrong. Just think about what they are doing.* In this book, we will adopt this objective stance: language behaviors are not intrinsically right or wrong, and we seek to *describe* what they are, not to *prescribe* what they should be.

The first principle of linguistics is, *Respect people's language behavior, and describe it objectively.*

## Hidden knowledge: how linguistic inquiry works

Linguists often say that they study the *knowledge that a native speaker must have, in order to use their language*. We are not referring to formal, school-learned knowledge, but rather to a more subtle kind of knowledge, a knowledge so deeply-ingrained that language users often do not know they know it.

We will illustrate this with a "consciousness-raising" exercise. We will show you some things about English that you *must already know*, but almost certainly don't *know you know*. (This discussion could be applied to any human language, but English is the only language we are certain you know, so these consciousness-raising examples will be confined to English.)

### Case study 1: English plurals

1. Suppose you have one **fork**, and I hand you another one. Now you have two **forks**.
2. If you have a **spoon** and find another, you have two **spoons**.
3. If your garden has a **rosebush**, you might plant a second to have two **rosebushes**.

(We will use **this font** for language examples, that is, things that people might actually say.)

In order to speak English, you have to know how to make the *plural*, or multiple form, of most nouns you hear. You probably do this effortlessly. If you ask most people how to do it, they will say "Oh, you just add s."

But listen carefully.

1. To form the plural of **fork**, you add a sound like a hiss, the first sound in the word **sap**.
2. To pluralize **spoon**, you add a buzzing sound, the first sound in the word **zap**.
3. To pluralize **rosebush**, you add an entire extra syllable, which sounds something like the word **is**.

You use these three different plural endings every day, effortlessly, without thinking about it. You always use the right one. It is amusing to *try* to use the wrong plural ending. You *can* say **\*forkiz**, or **\*spoonce**, but you *never do*. (We use an asterisk to draw your attention to the fact that *nobody* would ever say these things.) You must know, somewhere inside you, these different plural endings, but in all likelihood, until this moment, you never knew you knew. You must have some way to select the correct ending to use with each word: otherwise you would occasionally say things like **\*rosebushss**. But unless you have thought about this before, it is almost certain that even now that you have been exposed to the concept, *you still have no idea how you manage to select the appropriate plural suffix every time*. Here is something that you definitely know, but you cannot state it out loud. It is *unconscious knowledge*.

Can you analyze your own behavior and figure out how you decide whether to use **-s**, **-z**, or **-iz**? Take a few minutes and try. Write out a dozen or so common English nouns and classify them according to what plural ending you would use. Do you see any patterns? (Watch out for completely irregular nouns like **foot/feet**; for now we are only concerned with "S-plurals".)

One theory you might come up with is that the correct plural suffix must simply be memorized for each noun. This is a perfectly reasonable theory. Perhaps **forks** sounds better to us than **\*forkiz** simply because the former is the only plural we have ever heard. However, we can invent a simple experiment to *prove* that we do not learn to select English plural endings by memorization.

1. If you have a zug, and you find another, you now have two ...
2. Mike just finished making his third bidge, so he has made three ...
3. I inherited a blick from each of my grandparents, which is why I have four ...

Complete these sentences with the appropriate plurals. Then have five English-speaking friends do it, but don't let them collude: force them to form their own plurals. You and your five friends will all agree: the first example gets a buzzing plural **-z**, the second gets a whole syllable **-iz**, and the third gets a hiss **-s**. *And none of you have ever heard those words before, nor do you have any clue what they mean*. If plural endings were simply memorized, you and your friends would have had to guess the endings, and you would likely have made different guesses.

We hope you are at least slightly spooked by this. It's appropriate to be disconcerted by finding a mystery hidden in your own mind. We English speakers all *share* a system for deciding how to make plurals, but not one in a hundred can say out loud what that system is.

The second principle of linguistics is, *Language knowledge is often unconscious, but careful inquiry can reveal it.*

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