04 deciding where to begin

This chapter shows that language can be explored in different ways, and outlines how this book plans to conduct the exploration.

Language is an enormous and very complex phenomenon. If one wants to study it, where should one begin? People tend to argue about this. Let us therefore consider the various possibilities. First, however, it may be useful to discuss why people disagree over the best way to go about it.

Language as a game

Language can be regarded as a complicated type of game, assuming a 'game' to be 'a specified type of activity governed by rules'. The various facets involved in a game can show why there is some argument when linguists try to decide where to begin studying language.

In a typical game, such as chess or soccer, anyone trying to find out how the game is played has to deal with three broad types of question: the *aims of the game*, the *principles of interaction*, and the *permitted moves*.

Under the **aims of the game**, comes the fundamental question: what are people trying to do when they play it? In soccer, the players are trying to kick the ball into a net in order to score. The 'aims' of language involve not only the broad functions outlined in Chapter 2 (conveying information, expressing emotion, keeping in touch socially, and so on), but also more specific purposes for which language can be used, such as:

Obtain information: *Where's the parrot?*
Make someone do something: *Shut the door!*
Make a promise: *I'll pay you next week.*

The **principles of interaction** involve questions such as: How many people can play? Do they all play at the same time, or do they take it in turns? If so, how does one know when a person's turn is over? Within language, people take it in turns to speak, and each language tends to have certain socially prescribed 'turns'. For example, in English, a greeting is usually followed by another greeting:

John: *Good morning, Felicity.*
Felicity: *Why hello there, John.*

Under **permitted moves**, linguists explore which 'moves' are permitted, and which not. In chess, some pieces can move across the board only in straight lines, and others only diagonally. With regard to language, there are rules underlying well-formed sequences of a language. In English, for example, verbs precede

their objects, as in *The cat ate the canary*, rather than **The cat the canary ate* which would be the standard order in, say, Turkish.

All of these aspects of a game are important, and no one could play the game without some acquaintance with them. In language also, all these facets are relevant, and native speakers have a firm knowledge of them.

When dealing with language, one might at first sight want to tackle these facets in the order listed above. But in practice, there is a problem. It is easier to specify the basic permitted moves than it is to give an equivalent account of the aims and principles of interaction, which are closely interwoven with the social structures of the society involved. For this reason, the majority of professional linguists prefer to begin with those aspects of language which can most easily be detached from the social background. They therefore start with the permitted moves or, in linguistic terminology, the grammar of the language. They consider this to be the core of linguistic study, and expect to add on its interrelationships with society at a later stage. A knowledge of the linguistic resources of a language is often a prerequisite to an intelligent discussion of how these resources are used.

In this book, therefore, we shall be moving from the basic linguistic core outwards, in other words, we shall start from the centre of the circle diagram shown in Chapter 1 (Figure 1.1), and move out to the edges later. But a decision as to where to begin does not necessarily imply an overall order of importance: people put on their socks before their shoes, but they are not necessarily attributing greater importance to socks than to shoes.

Universal and particular

Controversy does not necessarily cease even among those who agree that it is useful to begin studying language by looking at the three central components which make up a grammar: phonology, syntax and semantics (Figure 4.1). In general, people fall into one of two categories. On the one hand, there are those who want to study language because they are interested in knowing more about one particular language. Into this first category might come a teacher of French, or a missionary who had discovered a new South American language, or a person who has an American-Indian great-grandmother and wants to know more about Nootka. On the other hand, there are those who want to find out more about language as such. Into this second category come the majority of professional linguists and other social scientists – people such as sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists, who need to know about the phenomenon of language as a whole.

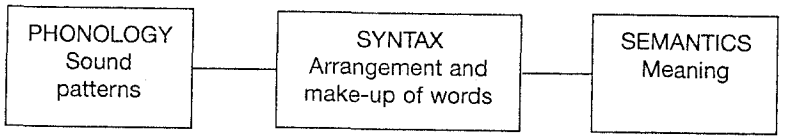

figure 4.1

These two groups of people are likely to write very different types of grammar, and to view linguistics quite differently. Those interested in a particular language will be trying to write a perfect grammar of that language (or one section of it), usually by making a detailed study of the patterns of that language alone. For example, they might be interested in the relationship of French vowels to one another. It would be quite irrelevant to them whether this vowel system coincided with that of any other language, and such people would probably pick those aspects of linguistics to help them which seemed to be best suited to the phenomenon they were examining, even if it meant choosing an unfashionable or unknown model of grammar. They are likely to consider that the chief role of linguistics is the development of analytic techniques which will enable them to fulfil their chosen task.

Those interested in language as a whole, on the other hand, will be trying to lay down a grammatical framework which will be suitable for all languages. Although such people may well write a grammar of a particular language, they will be doing this in order to test out a theory with wider implications, since one way of testing a proposed universal framework is to see whether it will fit any given language. If it does not, then it must be amended or abandoned. This type of person might also be working on French vowels, but they would be interested not so much in the vowels themselves, as in finding a framework which could 'capture' their peculiarities alongside those of other languages. A framework which was perfect for French, but was inadequate for, say, Greek, Swahili and Icelandic, would have to be abandoned.

Unfortunately, in recent years, extremists from each of these groups of people have spent an unnecessary amount of time attacking one another. Those interested in a particular language have argued that those searching for a universal framework are too theoretical and irrelevant to everyday life. One hears comments such as, 'Modern linguistics doesn't help me very much when it comes to teaching my Spanish class', and 'I'm doing a thesis on fish imagery in Shakespeare, and I can't see where linguistics fits in'. The 'universalists' counter this criticism by saying that the 'particularists' are narrow-minded people who simply like collecting facts, and one hears comments such as, 'I wish she'd stop making lists of irregular verbs in Arawak and get on with something useful'.

As will be clear from Chapter 3, the reasons for this controversy are partly historical. It is characteristic of an academic discipline to take new turnings: the 'old' school will regard the new with suspicion and distaste, and the 'new' will condemn the old as misguided and out of date. Since those who are interested in individual languages have very similar aims to the Bloomfieldian descriptivists, they tend to be treated as old-fashioned by the universalists, who are often convinced that they are 'right' merely because their type of linguistics is currently more fashionable.

In fact, the universalist and particularist views are complementary, not contradictory. No one can work seriously on a universal framework unless they have at their disposal a considerable amount of information about individual languages against which to test their theories. Conversely, the heaping up of masses of information about diverse languages reduces linguistics to the level of a hobby such as stamp-collecting unless some attempt is made to relate the miscellaneous facts within a wider framework.

Moreover, it is perhaps wrong to assume that anyone interested in linguistics *must* fall into either the particularist or the universalist category. Nowadays, a growing number of people are carrying out both types of study. In addition, those who start out with an interest in a particular language ideally move on to becoming interested in language as such. The progression from a predilection for, say, German word formation or French vowels, to a desire to help develop a universal grammatical framework can be likened to the possible progression of an intelligent motor mechanic, who is likely to move from a wish to service their own car, to an interest in how cars work in general. A person may, initially, want to learn only how to fit a new fan-belt onto a vintage Rolls-Royce. This may lead them to an interest in identifying and labelling the various components of the car's engine, and an understanding of how they fit together. Eventually, they may become curious as to how the Rolls-Royce compares with other cars, and to start looking into the theory of the internal-combustion engine as a whole.

The progression from the particular to the universal is perhaps more important for the linguist than for the motor mechanic. Anyone working seriously on a language is likely to need to know whether the phenomena they meet are unique or commonplace. To take a trivial example, someone working on English may be intrigued by the division of nouns into those that can be counted, as in *six hens*, *three cabbages*, and those that cannot: we do not normally say *six butters*, or *three soaps* (unless we mean three types of butter or soap). We have to say *some butter*, *some soap*, or use a word expressing a quantity, as in *six pounds of butter*, *three bars of soap*. How widespread is this phenomenon in the languages of the world? Is English exceptional in this respect? Or is, say, Igbo, exceptional in not having such a distinction? Furthermore, if a language *does* make this distinction, are there any other related characteristics which are likely to follow in consequence? These are the types of question which, in the short run, are likely to lead someone to study language in a wider way.

In the long run, a 'universal grammar' (if one could ever be written) would have enormously important implications for our knowledge of the human race. Such a grammar might well reflect innate properties of the human mind. In the opinion of Chomsky, 'There are very deep and restrictive principles that determine the nature of human language and are rooted in the specific character of the human mind'.

However, the idea of finding a fixed universal grammar has been slowly fading, as noted in the last chapter. Trying to find absolute constraints may be as pointless as trying to find if there is a limit on the height of human beings. It does not matter if a man 10 feet tall were to be found. What matters is understanding the normal range. Similarly, with linguistics, a search for abnormalities may not be as useful as finding out how most languages behave.

Meanwhile, ideas on any universal framework are in a continuous state of flux, particularly those of Chomsky, still the most widely worked-on theory. It is quite unrealistic to expect everyone to be aware of the latest proposed amendments, which

change all the time. Because of the technical, and perhaps ephemeral nature of much recent work, this topic has been placed at the end of the book (Chapters 16–18). These chapters can be ignored by those interested only in a particular language, but are essential reading for people who want to delve further into current theories on language and linguistics.

But it is important for anyone studying linguistics to have a basic background knowledge of the techniques of descriptive linguistics, particularly the procedures and terminology used in the identification of linguistic units. The use of such techniques is essential if one is faced with a hitherto unknown, unwritten language, where the flow of speech must be broken down into segments. They can be of value in other circumstances also. Language teachers, for example, may gain new insights into the languages they teach if they approach them as if they were totally new, unwritten languages. Such people need to know the answers to such questions as: 'How can one identify words?', 'What is a word?', 'Can a word be split up into smaller segments? If so, by what criteria can one do this?', 'How is it possible to identify the basic sounds in any language?', and so on. These and similar questions will be dealt with in the next few chapters.

To return to the wheel diagram discussed in Chapter 1, we will first of all deal with the inner circles of phonology, syntax and semantics (Chapters 5–8). We will then move on to the outer rings, looking in turn at pragmatics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and stylistics (Chapters 9–12). We shall then consider areas which did not fit into the circle diagram, language change and language comparison, including typology (Chapters 13–15). Finally, we shall turn to Chomsky's proposals for a universal framework (Chapters 16–18).

Questions

1 Why is language like a game?
2 Which aspects of a language are most easily detachable from social structures?
3 Why is someone working on a single language likely to want to widen out this study?

part two

the inner circles

Alice was too much puzzled to say anything, so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. 'They've a temper, some of them – particularly verbs, they're the proudest – adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs – however, I can manage the whole lot!'

Lewis Carroll