

Branches of Linguistics

Psycholinguistics

Psycholinguistics, one of the branches of linguistics, as a branch of cognitive science, investigates how we acquire language, how we produce language and how we acquire language. In other words, Psycholinguistics examines language acquisition, language production and language comprehension. It is the study mental aspects of language and speech. It looks critically into how we represent and process language in the brain.

Alan Garnham, in his book *Psycholinguistics: Central Topics*, defines Psycholinguistics as “the study of the mental mechanisms that make it possible for people to use language. It is a scientific discipline whose goal is a coherent theory of the way in which language is produced and understood.” Psycholinguistics is a branch of both linguistics and psychology. The American psychologist, Jacob Robert Kantor introduced the term ‘Psycholinguistics’ in his book, *An Objective Psychology of Grammar*, published in 1936.

Semantics

Semantics, one of the major branches of linguistics, is the study of meaning. This branch of linguistics has a lot of definitions as many scholars have advanced; but basically, Semantics has to do with the functions of signs in language. Semantics differentiates between two major concepts on which meaning rests. These are **Sense** and **Reference**. According to linguists, sense has to do with the how a word relates to other words in a **language** while reference deals with how a word relates to real word concepts. In other words, the sense of a word has to do with its linguistic boundaries in a particular language and the reference of a word has to do with which concepts it refers to in the real world. Sometimes, it is problematic to distinguish between sense and reference because of the biases in languages and the varying linguistic boundaries between conceptual **features of language**. One of the interests of Semantics is the study of meaning in terms of words and **sentence** relationships.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics, which is one of the interesting branches of linguistics, has to deal meaning beyond the surface level; that is, it engages meaning beyond the literal level. Pragmatics highlights the study of meaning in the interactional context. As language is an instrument of interaction, Pragmatics focuses on what implied meanings, that is what people mean when they make use of language. Semantics

deals with what a word means while Pragmatics deals with what is meant by a word. Pragmatics has more to do with what a speaker means by a word rather than what the word means in itself.

Morphology

Morphology is a branch of linguistics which deals with the study of words; precisely the study of the internal structure of words. The term originates from the Greek and it deals with ‘morph’ which means ‘shape’ or ‘form’. Morphology is a branch of linguistics that came into existence in 1859. The German linguist, August Schleicher, first made use of the term to describe the study of the form of words. Morphology deals with word formation out of morphemes. It is the study and description of word formation (such as inflection, **derivation**, and compounding) in language; it is the system of word-forming elements and processes in a language. Morphemes are the building blocks of morphology and they are the smallest meaning-bearing units of language (O’Grady, 1997). Read more in this post on **Morphemes**.

Syntax

Edward J. Vajda informs us that ‘Syntax’ is a derivative of the Greek word *syntaxis*, which means *arrangement*. Syntax deals with phrase and sentence formation out of words. Syntax is the study of the arrangement of words in sentences, clauses, and phrases; it is also the study of the formation of sentences and the relationship between their component parts. A major concern of syntax is ‘word order’ which is a main device for showing the relationship among words. Usually, the subject comes first in a sentence; the verbs follows and the object or complement follows the verb. (See Patterns of the English Sentence) and (The Syntactic Elements of the Clause Structure). When the order changes, it may affect the meaning of the utterance. Syntax is the grammar, structure, or order of the elements in a language statement. In essence, syntax is the way in which we put **linguistic elements** together to form constituents such as **phrases** or **clauses**. We also refer to the part of **grammar** dealing with this as syntax. In a sentence, syntax tells us which word comes before and after another word. Syntax deals with arrangement of words to form meaningful sentences.

Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is an interface between sociology and linguistics or language and the society. This accounts for the definition of sociolinguistics as the study of patterns and variations in language within a society or community. Sociolinguistics, another branch of linguistics, focuses on the way people use language to express

social class, group status, gender, or ethnicity, and it looks at how they make choices about the form of language they use. It also examines the way people use language to negotiate their roles in a society and to achieve positions of power. Sociolinguistics also deals with the assignment of roles to various languages that exist in a speech community such as First Language, Official Language, National Language, etc.

Discourse Analysis

This branch of linguistics is the study of language of sentences; the analysis of features of language that extend beyond the limits of a sentence. A scholar suggests that the term discourse analysis is very ambiguous. According to him, Discourse Analysis “refer mainly to the linguistic analysis of naturally occurring connected speech or written discourse.” Explaining further, discourse analysis “refers to attempts to study the organisation of language above the sentence or above the clause, and therefore to study larger linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written texts.” Discourse Analysis takes linguistic enquiry beyond the clause-bound ‘objects’ of grammar and semantics to the level of analysing ‘utterances’, ‘texts’ and ‘speech events’. It engages itself with meaning that cannot be located in the ‘linguistic system’. Discourse Analysis deals with language use in social contexts; and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers.

Stylistics

This is one of the most interesting branches of linguistics that explores the linguistic choices available to users of language in a particular language. We cannot talk about stylistics without talking about style. Stylistics is the study of textual meaning. It arose from the Russian formalist approach to literary meaning. Stylistics deals with style and its consequent meaning. Stylistics is the study of linguistic styles in a language. It is the use of linguistic tools to arrive at the meaning of an utterance or a text. Stylistics explores how readers interact with the language of (mainly literary) texts in order to explain how we understand, and how texts affect us when we read them. Stylistics is also the study of the devices in languages (such as rhetorical figures and syntactical patterns) that are considered to produce expressive or literary style. Modern stylistics makes use of the tools of formal linguistic analysis alongside methods of literary criticism and the goal is to try to isolate characteristic uses and functions of language and rhetoric rather than advance normative or prescriptive rules and patterns.

Phonology

Phonology, a major branch of linguistics, deals with sounds of a language. It is the study of the patterns of sounds in a language. It deals with how speech sounds are organised and used in a language; especially how the sounds are organised in the mind and how they are used to convey meaning. The phonological system of a language has to do with two basic foci: the inventory of sounds and their features and the rules which govern how sounds interact with one another. Phonology is related to other branches of linguistics like phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Phonology is different from phonetics. Phonetics analyses the production or articulation of speech sounds irrespective of the language, but phonology analyses the sound patterns of a particular language. Phonetics is concerned with the physical properties of sounds while phonology deals more with how the sounds function in a language. There are some other aspects to Phonology which study specific things. These include: Generative Phonology, Auto-segmental Phonology, Metrical Phonology, Lexical Phonology, etc. The person who specialises in Phonology is a Phonologist.

Phonetics

Phonetics, closely related with phonology, is another important branch of linguistics that studies speech sounds. It deals with how we produce speech sounds and how we perceive speech sounds. There are three major aspects to the study of phonetics: **articulatory phonetics** (the exploration of how the human vocal tract or apparatus produce speech sound, the way the articulators or speech organs interact together to produce sounds); **acoustic phonetics** (studies the sound waves the human vocal apparatuses produce; it deals with the physical or acoustic properties of speech sounds) and **auditory phonetics** (this studies or determines how the human ear perceives speech sounds which the articulators produce). There are other posts on this site that focus specifically on some of these branches of linguistics in a more detailed manner. You can check them out.

Design Features of Language – C. F. Hockett

Tecumseh Fitch, in his paper, Unity and diversity in human language, highlights C. F. Hockett's 16 design features of language which the latter presented in his paper titled, *Logical considerations in the study of animal communication*. Some features in the list are similar to the ones we discussed above. Let us see each of Hockett's features:

- **Vocal-auditory channel**—signal modality involves vocalization and sound perception.
- **Broadcast transmission**—everyone in earshot can hear what is said.
- **Rapid fading**—signals fade quickly, and do not ‘clog the airwaves’.
- **Interchangeability**—any speaker can also be a listener and vice versa.
- **Total feedback**—speakers can hear everything that they say.
- **Specialisation** (speech as ‘trigger’)—linguistic signals accomplish their results not via raw energy (as in pushing or biting) but by their fit to the receiver’s perceptual and cognitive systems.
- **Semanticity**—some linguistic units have specific meanings (words or morphemes).
- **Arbitrariness**—meanings are generally arbitrarily related to signals, rather than iconic.
- **Discreteness**—each utterance differs from all others discretely (by at least a distinctive feature).
- **Displacement**—meanings about past, future or distant referents can be encoded and understood.
- **Productivity/openness**—new utterances can be readily coined and understood.
- **Duality of patterning**—meaningless units (phonemes) are combined into meaningful ones (**morphemes**), which can then be combined into larger meaningful units (**sentences**).
- **traditional (cultural) transmission**—languages are learned, not genetically encoded
- **Prevarication**—it is possible to lie.
- **Reflexivity**—it is possible to use language to talk about language.
- **Learnability**—it is possible for a speaker of one language to learn additional languages.