

Comment: The Medial Aspect of Language: A Linguistic Framework for Literacy

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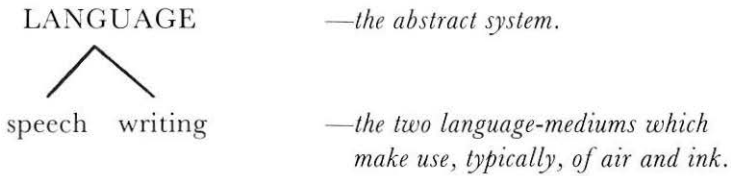
Linguistics is the scientific study of language. Language, for the linguist, is a purely human phenomenon: linguistics is one of the sciences of Man.

The central discipline of linguistics is the description of languages, living or dead, written or unwritten; both cross-sectionally, as systems working at a point in time, and longitudinally as systems undergoing change with the passage of time. Such descriptions are often known as grammars—descriptive grammars of a state of a language, historical grammars of changing states of a language. This discipline of the description of languages—the study of languages *per se*—belongs to linguistics and to no other science. A grammar of English may include sections on its sentence-structure (syntax) and its sound-structure (phonology), as they are today or as they have changed down the centuries—in either case this is the exclusive province of linguistics. In this task of language-description, linguists make use of several interrelated levels of description: in addition to syntax and phonology, they are concerned with meaning-structure (semantics), vocabulary-structure (lexis), word-structure (morphology), script-structure (graphology), and discourse-structure (stylistics).

The details of this list of linguistic levels are not of importance here (the inclusion of the study of discourse-structure is tendentious, and its description as stylistics even more so); what matters is that the medial aspect of language is incorporated. Medial, in this use, is the adjective from medium and the reference is to the mediums of language; viz., speech and writing. The level of phonology studies the sound-structure of language in its realization in the medium of speech. The level of graphology studies the

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script-structure of language in its realization in the medium of writing. The relations between language (structured semantically, syntactically, lexically, morphologically, and stylistically) and each of its two normal mediums are the same—represented by the lines in the following:



This linguistic model differs significantly from the lay model, represented by the following:



The lay model is plausible in a culture in which the system of writing is phonological; e.g., Western Europe with its alphabetic writing-systems; it is not plausible in a culture in which the system of writing is non-phonological; e.g., China, with its “character” writing-system. Any writing-system is a system for realizing the grammatical units of a given language by means of visible shapes. When we read and write, we read and write not sounds, but sentences. The Western system of writing differs from the Chinese system of writing in that it takes advantage of the economy of realization furnished by the phonology in its phoneme-system. All languages have large vocabularies running into thousands of words, and all languages make the economy of representing each word by a “different combination of a relatively small set of sounds” (John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, p. 54). The Western system of writing carries this economy over from the sound-structure to the script-structure; the Chinese system of writing doesn’t. Words, in an alphabetic writing-system, are represented each by a different combination of a small set of letters (alphabet), and quite close correlations exist between the letter-

structures of words and the sound-structures of words. No such correlation exists between the stroke-structures of Chinese characters and the sound-structures of Chinese words. In order to take account of the variable relationship which exists between sound-structure and script-structure, we can add a dotted line to the linguistic model as follows:



The description of particular languages in terms of their grammar (in a narrower sense) and their phonology and graphology gives rise to general theory: for instance, that all languages have the same fundamental structure of semantics, grammar, and phonology. In making his description of particular languages, the linguist is always making use of general theory, applying categories which are language-general and distinguishing features which are language-specific: e.g., all languages have a system of phonemes; English has this particular system of phonemes.

Not all languages, however, have a system of letters—or even a writing-system. So that some languages have no level of graphology, because no ready-made writing-system exists for the linguist to describe. Nonetheless linguists always publish their descriptions in writing. The concrete meaning of grammar, which most of us learn first, is that of a book. And the word grammar itself comes from the same Greek root as graphology. The linguist describing a tribal language with no socially used writing-system, designs his own writing-systems for the sake of his description. The scientific study of language relies, like other sciences, on writing for its prosecution. This is not to say that oral grammars are impossible (Panini's grammar of Sanskrit was an oral grammar). What is meant is that in human history science has developed as it has *with* writing and not without. Some kinds of discourse and some kinds of social organization (*viz.*, those characteristic of technological advance) have proved dependent upon writing. And the science of language itself owes its development to this medial aspect of language evolution.

Linguistics, however, is not confined to language description, though this is its central province which it shares with no other discipline. This central branch is sometimes referred to as linguistics proper. It can be called, for convenience, centro-linguistics, and can be pictured as being flanked by two disciplines, complementary to each other, and each overlapping with another science of Man. These two branches are sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics—respectively the study of language in society (the intersection of linguistics and sociology), and the study of language in the individual (the intersection of linguistics and psychology). Linguistics can thus be an umbrella term over the three branches, the central one and the two lateral ones.

In these two lateral disciplines, the medial aspect of language is crucial. The kinds of organization open to a society depend on the extent and degree of literacy within it; the kinds of mental organization open to an individual depend upon the extent and degree of his literacy: literacy underlies education in both.

To all three branches of linguistics the same dichotomies apply—general and particular, pure and applied, synchronic and diachronic.

It is with the second member of the last pair that this note is concerned—with the time axis in the study of literacy.

Just as, in centro-linguistics, languages can be studied as working systems at a point in time (i.e., synchronically) or as systems undergoing change with the passage of time (i.e., diachronically), so the linguistic profile of a society or of an individual can be studied cross-sectionally or longitudinally.

Sociolinguistics has been, for example, particularly interested in (amongst other things) multilingualism in societies, especially in national societies—with linguistic demography, and with the changing roles of languages. A linguistic profile of a society at a given time is a synchronic study; charting changes in linguistic profiles (e.g., the rise of Standard English in Britain) is a diachronic study.

Likewise, psycholinguistics studies linguistic ability and behavior (e.g., listening comprehension in a second language, reading comprehension in the mother-tongue, or hesitation phenomena in speaking) in the individual at a given time, or it studies

change in the individual's linguistic profile in the course of time (obvious examples being language acquisition in the child, or the learning of a second language).

The framework for literacy study proposed here is arrived at by relating three time scales to the three branches of linguistics. The three time scales (or diachronic scales) are:

1. The evolutionary scale —the diachrony of the human race
 2. The historical scale —the diachrony of particular societies
 3. The individual scale —the diachrony of the human person
- (See Roger Brown's "The Three Progressions" in *Words and Things*, Chapter VIII)

Psycholinguistics, on its diachronic axis, is obviously concerned with the linguacy of the individual—its inception and growth, its extension into literacy, its decline.

Sociolinguistics, on its diachronic axis, is concerned with the linguacy of societies—their growth and decline, and accompanying linguistic changes, including the presence or absence of literacy, and its extent, degree, and kind.

Centrolinguistics, for all its concentration on language structure, is no less concerned with linguacy, since at its most general it is based on the recognition of levels; and, on its diachronic axis, the scale with which it is concerned is the evolutionary scale, the scale on which the linguacy of Man is studied. On this scale, the biological beginnings of language are studied yielding the characteristic features of organization and the choice of speech as a medium. Also on this scale must be reckoned the change in the medial aspect of language which came about with the advent of writing—the watershed between human pre-history and human history.

John Mountford teaches in the English Department of La Sainte Union College of Education, Southampton, England. At the Reading Research Unit of London University's Institute of Education he became interested in the teaching of initial literacy. Literacy at all stages has since become his main interest, and he is at present especially concerned with "tertiary-level literacy," that is, the literacy of students in higher education. Two articles by him have appeared in *Visible Language*: "'Writing' and 'Alphabet'" in Vol. II (1968) and "Some Psycholinguistic Components of Initial Standard Literacy" in Vol. IV (1970).