

Dividing up the field of linguistics

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What is linguistics? A simple – and complete – definition is that it is the study of language; but this definition only raises a new question, what is language? And it is with the definition of language that the arguments about linguistics begin.

There are many, often contradictory, ways to define language. Is it something already in our heads when we are born, a capacity that is activated by encountering other people using language, but which requires no teaching? Or is it a way of communicating we can only learn from others, not activated but positively taught? The answers we give to these questions dictate how we think about language, and how we should react around young people – and to our own children.

Or perhaps it is the uniqueness of language that intrigues us. Is language a special human-only system which is self-contained and unlike anything else in nature? Or is it just the practical use of other aspects of cognition and communication, many (or all) of which can be seen in the cognition and communication of other animals? The answers to these

questions tell us how we see language itself: is it amazingly different and strange, or is it a link to the rest of nature? And they also tell us how we see our own species: amazingly different and strange, or just part of nature?

There is also the dual role of language as a way of communicating and as a way of thinking. It seems very likely that having language has given us new ways of thinking about the world; but did language start as cognitive and then become communicative, or was it the other way around? There are compelling arguments for both sides. On the one hand, most of our language happens inside our heads; only a small fraction comes out through our mouths; so language is clearly mostly cognitive. On the other hand, when we use language inside our heads we are holding an inner conversation with ourselves; we couldn't have this inner dialogue unless we were already aware of language as a communication system.

Currently, we do not have definitive answers to any of



these questions – and there are linguists who take positions on each side of these three fences. We can describe the different approaches to these questions as **isms**, systems or practices which emerge from a particular set of personal beliefs – and the many linguistic theories do all seem to end in –ism!

Over the page you will be able to discover your own linguistics ism. Remember that this quiz is for fun! It does not give a complete list of isms in linguistics, nor does it cover all the discussions that are going on. You don't need an ism to be a good linguist; but it is useful to know how people around you may be thinking, and why they may be thinking what they are thinking. ¶

Pull-out What kind of linguist are you?

ARE ALL THESE ISMS A BAD THING?

Pull-out What kind of linguist are you?

Should we be surprised that there are so many, sometimes contradictory, ways to do linguistics? Surely if linguistics is a scientific search for answers then we should by now have some agreed ideas about how language works, what it does, and how we should understand it; but it seems that we have not even agreed on a common definition of language! Does this mean that linguistics is not yet thorough enough to be called a science?

A science can be defined as a body of knowledge which is systematically related to the real world – if the body of knowledge cannot show itself to be both systematic and related to the real world, then it is not science. For instance, homeopathy is systematic, but it relies on ideas about ‘water memory’ which can only be related to the real world by an act of faith. There is no provable evidence of water memory other than ‘it works (except when it doesn’t)’. On the other hand, beauty is clearly related to the real world – we know a beautiful sunset

when we see one, and can even identify aspects of this sunset which make it more beautiful than yesterday’s sunset; but those aspects of beauty are not systematic. The particular shade of red that makes a sunset so spectacular can be terrifying when seen in a forest fire.

So do the isms of linguistics show that it is systematic and real, or not? If we look at Physics (the King of Sciences) then we can see similar controversies on basic matters (and the basics of matter). Is the Universe composed of 11 (or 13) dimensions, with most of the dimensions curled up tight and virtually inaccessible to the knowable four dimensions? This is the weird world of string theory, a mathematically coherent explanation of matter which nonetheless is currently unprovable in the real world. Or what of quantum theory? This explains many features of the Universe, but it contains inconsistencies which seem to indicate that physical reality only occurs when measurement happens; without measurement,

reality is a set of superimposed probability (or quantum) states.

It is the debates about the nature of language that makes linguistics a science. We may not yet have answers, but we do know where we should look for them. We constantly test our ideas against the real world of language use, and we also constantly try to build our ideas into more general theories; and our search is not blind: we do know what will count as proof or disproof for our theories.

As Marcus Aurelius reminded us, “Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth.” Yet we can move towards the truth in linguistics if we weigh the different opinions against each other, and identify the most coherent perspectives. We need isms in linguistics because comparative opinion backed by physical evidence is the only way to do good science. ¶

Martin Edwardes is the author of *The Origins of Grammar: An Anthropological Perspective*. He lectures at King’s College London on a range of courses and modules. His BA module, ‘The Making of Language’, has an unusual assignment: you have to create your own language!

Book

If you would like to learn more about some of the controversies of linguistics, you may be interested in: Vyvyan Evans (2014) *The Language Myth: Why Language Is Not an Instinct*, Cambridge University Press.