Chapter 1
Knowledge of Language: The Sound System, Words, and Sentences
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ABSTRACT

Human beings learn to speak or sign the language or languages they are exposed to as children. To have acquired the language(s) of one’s speech community is to have acquired both linguistic and communicative competence. Linguistic competence results from internalizing the knowledge of the basic elements of language (sounds, words, sentences) and the rules for combining these elements into units that enable users to express linguistic meaning. Communicative competence results when learners have acquired knowledge of the appropriate social conventions involved in interpersonal communication. Effective language teaching is enhanced through an understanding of both the structural and social aspects of linguistic communication as well as how these aspects challenge students in the process of second language acquisition.

LINGUISTICS AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Languages are complex systems through which people communicate the full range of human experience. Personal identity is expressed through language, and social interaction without language is almost unimaginable. The scientific study of the structure and use of language is known as linguistics, and a linguist is someone who engages in such study. (The term linguist may also refer to someone who is fluent in more than one language.) Depending on their subfield or specialty, linguists who are engaged in research may pursue the answers to questions pertaining to the nature of language itself, to the relationship of language to the human brain, or to the insights to be gained about society through the study of language use.

The major structural areas of linguistics include the study of speech sounds (the subfields of which are phonetics and phonology), words (morphology), phrases and sentences (syntax) and meaning (semantics and pragmatics). Each of these subfields is introduced in this chapter and explored in detail in the subsequent units of this book. The major subfield of linguistics that explores the systematic study of

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language use at both an individual and societal level is known sociolinguistics; in the final unit (Unit 9, “Sociolinguistics,”) this topic is explored in relation to culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners. There are many additional subfields of linguistics, as diverse as how languages change over time (historical linguistics) and how children learn their first language (language acquisition). What linguists working in each of the different subfields of linguistics have in common is their interest in contributing to the collective understanding about language.

In addition to research, there are many ways in which knowledge about language is applied to real-world situations. Applied linguistics makes use of linguistic theories and methods in order to address practical questions that are language-related. Language education is one of the major career fields in which applied linguistics is important, and this includes the profession of teaching English to CLD learners. Examples of some of the many additional professionals who make use of applied linguistics include computational linguists, who work in computer science in such areas as speech recognition, machine translation, and grammar checking; speech-language pathologists, who treat people with speech and language disorders; and court interpreters, who interpret for defendants, litigants, and witnesses in courtroom and other legal settings.

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

Language is a method of human communication consisting of the use of words or signs in a structured way in order to convey meaning. The word language is also used to mean the particular system of communication used by a community, such as English, Japanese, or American Sign Language. There are approximately 7,100 languages used in the world today, yet over half the world’s population speaks just 23 of those languages, and 86% of people speak an Asian or European language (Simons & Fennig, 2018). Languages change over time to meet the needs of their users, and they also change as groups of speakers come together or become isolated from each other. When a language no longer has any speakers, it is said to be extinct.

A fundamental question in linguistics has to do with how human beings produce and understand language. An early model that proposes how language functions continues to be influential today. This is the speech communication chain, first proposed by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in 1949 (cited in Dawson & Phelen, 2016, p.8-9). According to this model, any communication system will include an information source, a transmitter, a signal, a receiver, and a destination. In using language, the speaker/signer/writer is both the information source and transmitter; the signal—speech, signs, or writing—is sent to one or more others, who are both receiver and destination. Essentially, an idea is conceived by a sender, put into words, expressed through a physical medium such as sound or paper, and finally received and decoded in a receiver’s mind.

As advances have occurred in psycholinguistics (a subfield concerned with how the mind processes language), more refined models have emerged of speech perception (receiving and interpreting messages) and speech production (formulating and sending messages). In speech perception, for example, psycholinguists have studied how language users can understand utterances despite significant ambient noise or variation in speakers’ speech sounds. In speech production, for example, William Levelt (1989; discussed in Dawson & Phelen, 2016, p.374) proposed a model in which three major planning stages of language production happen simultaneously instead of sequentially. These include conceptualization, formulation (which encompasses grammatical and phonological encoding), and articulation.