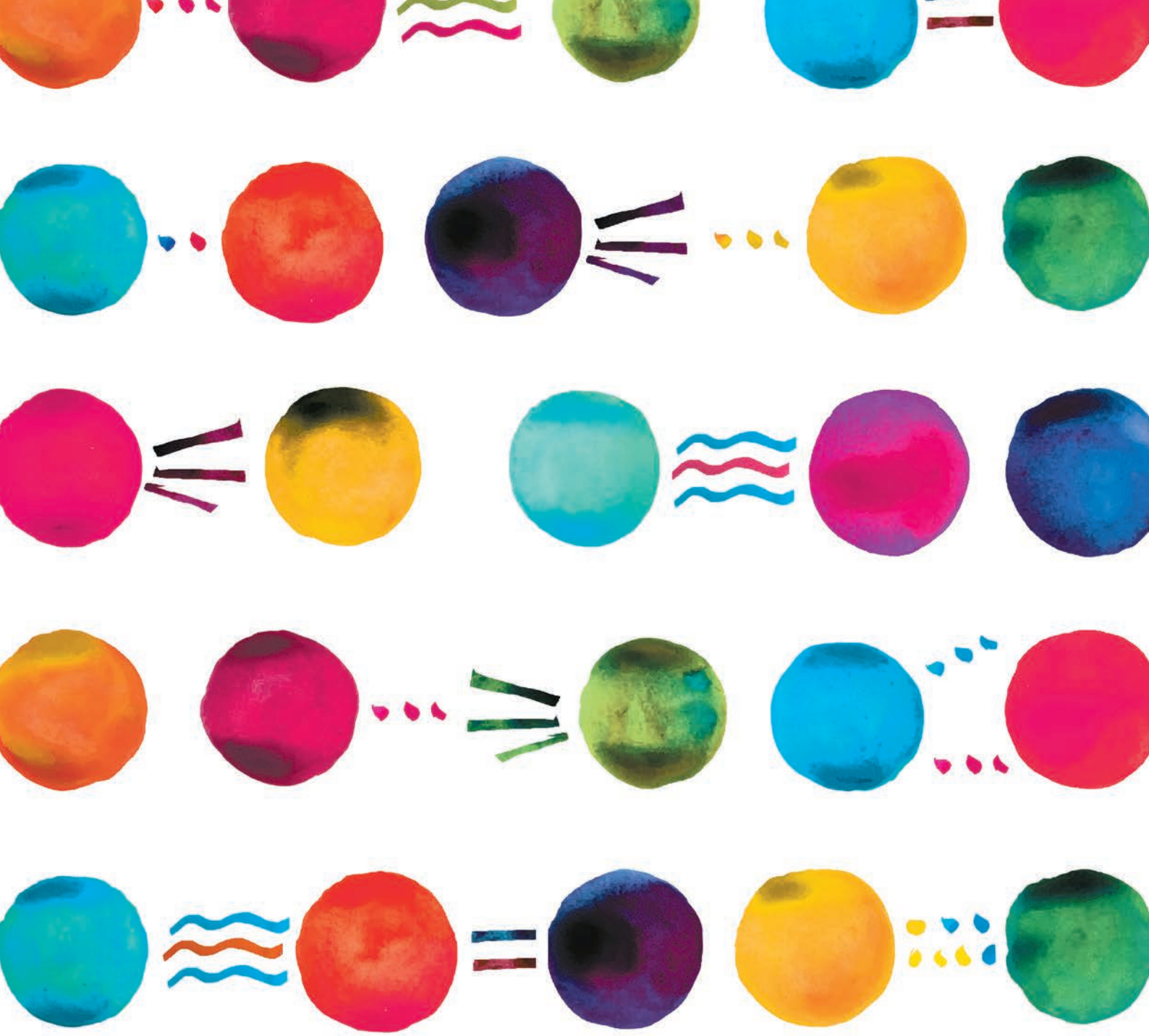

An Introduction to Language

AUSTRALIAN & NEW ZEALAND 10TH EDITION

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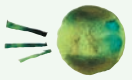


section on the acquisition of Murrinhpatha, an Australian indigenous language spoken in the Northern Territory. Bilingualism and L2 acquisition are taken up in detail, including a section on L2 teaching. This edition includes both usage-based approaches to language acquisition as well as the generative approach. The arguments for innateness and Universal Grammar that language acquisition provides are, nevertheless, exploited to show the student how scientific theories of great import are discovered and supported through observation, experiment and reason. As in most chapters, Australian Sign Language (Auslan) is discussed, and its important role in understanding the biological foundations of language is emphasised.

In Chapter 8, 'Language processing and the human brain', the section on psycholinguistics has been revised to accommodate recent discoveries. This chapter may be read and appreciated without technical knowledge of linguistics. When the centrality of language to human nature is appreciated, students will be motivated to learn more about human language, and about linguistics, because they will be learning more about themselves. As in the previous edition, highly detailed illustrations of MRI and PET scans of the brain are included, and this chapter highlights some of the new results and tremendous progress in the study of neurolinguistics over the past few years. There is a section on how MEG (magnetoencephalography) can be used to study aspects of our linguistic knowledge. The arguments for the autonomy of language in the human brain are carefully crafted so that the student sees how experimental evidence is applied to support scientific theories.

Part 4 is concerned with language and society, including sociolinguistics and historical linguistics. Chapter 9 emphasises the important relationship between language and society and includes a focus on the concept of social dialect and style. Pidgins and creoles are discussed with greater reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. The 'Language in use' section takes up slang, profanity, racial epithets, euphemisms and similar topics. Attitudes towards language and how they reflect the views and mores of society are also included in this chapter. We also discuss topics such as English spoken by non-native speakers and so-called standard languages. A section on language and sexism reflects a growing concern with this topic. An expanded list of references in this chapter is a valuable resource for further study.

Chapter 10, on language change, includes the latest research on language families, language relatedness and language typology. There is also a section 'Extinct and endangered languages', which reflects the intense interest in this critical subject. In response to reviewers' requests, a detailed and more complex illustration of the application of the comparative method to two contemporary dialects to reconstruct their ancestor – often called 'internal reconstruction' – is included in this chapter.

Chapter 11, on writing systems, has been updated with a discussion on emojis, adding a further dimension to what it means to write a language.

Key terms, which are bold in the text, are defined in the margin close to where they appear, as well as in the revised glossary at the end of the book. The glossary has been expanded and improved so that this edition provides students with a linguistic lexicon of nearly 550 terms, making the book a worthy reference volume.

This new Australian edition continues to reflect the study of linguistics in Australia by taking account of the place of language in Australian society and by basing its detailed description of English on the Australian English dialect. The phonemic symbols, for example, are those that are in standard use in this country, and the discussion of social and regional variation in Chapter 9 continues to focus on Australia and New Zealand. This book assumes no previous knowledge on the part of the reader. An updated list of references and list of weblinks at the end of each chapter are included to accommodate any reader who wishes to pursue a subject in more depth. Each chapter concludes with a summary and exercises to enhance the student's interest in, learning and comprehension of the textual material. We wish to thank the reviewers of this edition. We have benefited greatly from discussions with and suggestions from friends,

1 What is language?

> When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the 'human essence', the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to [humankind].
>
> Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind*, 1972

Learning objectives

After reading Chapter 1, you should be able to:

- understand the arbitrary relation between linguistic form and meaning
- distinguish between linguistic knowledge (competence) and linguistic behaviour (performance)
- distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive rules of grammar
- understand the relationship between grammatical rules of individual languages and principles of language structure that may hold across all languages
- explain the difference between human language and the communicative systems of other animals.

Whatever else people do when they come together – whether they play, fight, make love or make cars – they talk. We live in a world of language. We talk to our friends, our associates, our wives and husbands, our lovers, our teachers, our parents, our rivals and even our enemies. We talk to bus drivers and total strangers. We talk face-to-face and over the telephone, and everyone responds with more talk. Television and radio further swell this torrent of words. Hardly a moment of our waking lives is free from words and even in our dreams we talk and are talked to. We also talk when there is no-one to answer. Some of us talk aloud in our sleep. We talk to our pets and sometimes to ourselves.

The possession of language, perhaps more than any other attribute, distinguishes humans from other animals. To understand our humanity, one must understand the nature of language that makes us human. According to the philosophy expressed in the myths and religions of many peoples, language is the source of human life and power. To some people of Africa, a newborn child is a *kintu*, a 'thing', not yet a *muntu*, a 'person'. Only by the act of learning language does the child become a human being. According to this tradition, then, we all become human because we all know at least one language. But what does it mean to know a language?

Linguistic knowledge

> Do we know only what we see, or do we see what we somehow already know?
>
> Cynthia Ozick, 'What Helen Keller Saw', *New Yorker*, 16 and 23 June 2003

sign language
A language used by deaf people in which linguistic units, such as morphemes and words as well as grammatical relations, are formed by manual and other body movements.

When you know a language, you can speak and be understood by others who know that language. This means you are able to produce strings of sounds that signify certain meanings and to understand or interpret the sounds produced by others. But language is more than speech. Deaf people produce and understand **sign languages** just as hearing people produce and understand spoken languages. The languages of the deaf communities throughout the world are equivalent to spoken languages, differing only in their modality of expression.

Almost everyone knows at least one language. Five-year-old children are nearly as proficient at speaking and understanding speech as their parents. Yet the ability to carry out the simplest conversation requires profound knowledge that most speakers are unaware of. This is true for speakers of all languages, from Albanian to Zulu. A speaker of English can produce a sentence that has two relative clauses without knowing what a relative clause is, such as:

My goddaughter, who was born in Sweden and who now lives in Australia, is named Disa, after a Viking queen.

In a parallel fashion, a child can walk without understanding or being able to explain the principles of balance and support or the neurophysiological control mechanisms that permit one to do so. The fact that we may know something unconsciously is not unique to language.

Knowledge of the sound system

Part of knowing a language means knowing what sounds (or **signs**)[1] are in that language and what sounds are not. One way this unconscious knowledge is revealed is by the way speakers of one language pronounce words from another language. If you speak only English, for example, you may substitute an English sound for a non-English sound when pronouncing words of another language, such as French *ménage à trois*. If you pronounce it as the French do, you are using sounds outside the English sound system.

sign
A single gesture (possibly with complex meaning) in the sign languages used by the deaf.

French people speaking English often pronounce words such as *this* and *that* as if they were spelt *zis* and *zat*. The English sound represented by the initial letters *th* in these words is not part of the French sound system, and the French pronunciation reveals the speaker's unconscious knowledge of this fact.

Knowing the sound system of a language includes more than knowing the inventory of sounds. It means also knowing which sounds may start a word, end a word and follow each other. The name of a former president of Ghana was *Nkrumah*, pronounced with an initial sound like the sound ending the English word *sing*. Although this is an English sound, no word in English begins with the *ng* sound. Speakers of English who have occasion to pronounce this name often mispronounce it (by Ghanaian standards) by inserting a short vowel sound, such as *Nekrumah* or *Enkrumah*. Similarly, the first name of the New Zealand mystery writer *Ngaio Marsh* is often mispronounced with an 'n' sound at the beginning instead of the 'ng' sound. Children who learn English recognise that *ng* does not begin a word, just as Ghanaian and Māori children learn that words in their language may begin with the *ng* sound.

We will learn more about sounds and sound systems in Chapters 2 and 3.

Knowledge of words

Knowing the sounds and sound patterns in our language constitutes only one part of our linguistic knowledge. Knowing a language means also knowing that certain sequences of sounds signify certain concepts or meanings. Speakers of English know what *boy* means, and that it means something different from *toy* or *girl* or *pterodactyl*. When you know a language, you know words in that language; that is, which sequences of sounds are related to specific meanings and which are not.

Arbitrary relation of form and meaning

> The minute I set eyes on an animal I know what it is. I don't have to reflect a moment; the right name comes out instantly. I seem to know just by the shape of the creature and the way it acts what animal it is. When the dodo came along he [Adam] thought it was a wildcat. But I saved him. I just spoke up in a quite natural way and said, 'Well, I do declare if there isn't the dodo!'
>
> Mark Twain, *Eve's Diary*, 1906

arbitrary
Describes the property of language, including sign language, whereby there is no natural or intrinsic relationship between the way a word is pronounced (or signed) and its meaning.

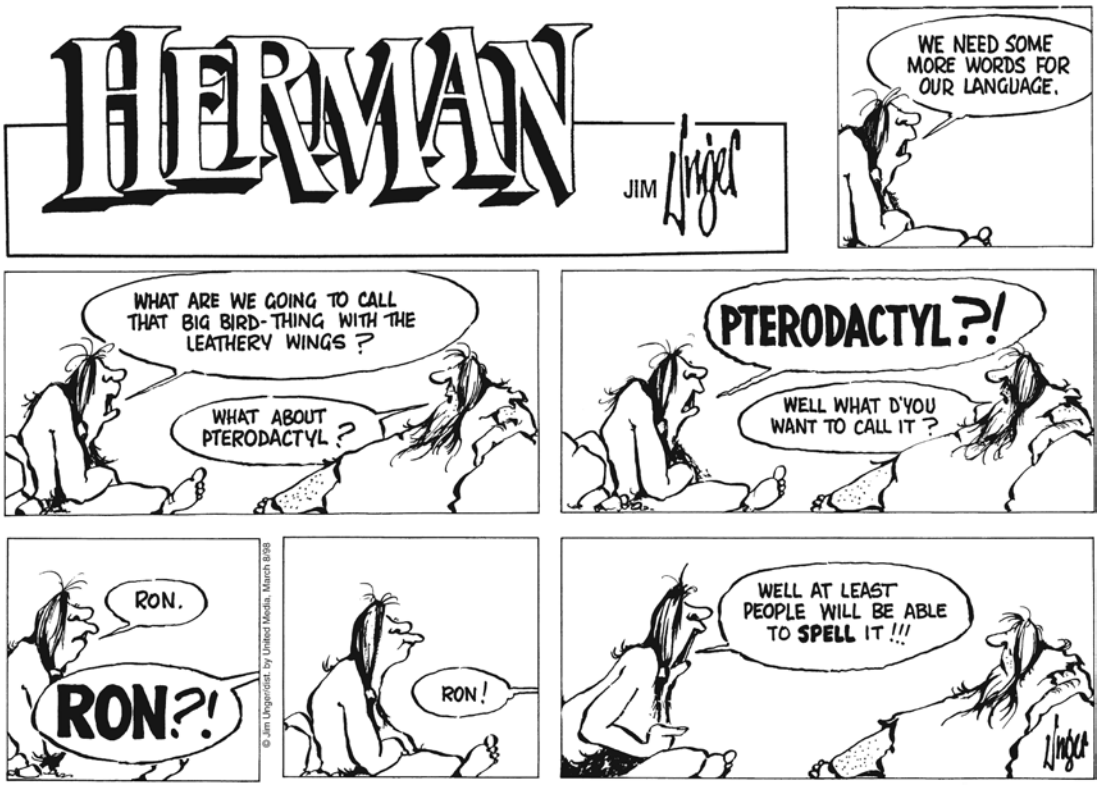
If you do not know a language, the words (and sentences) of that language will be mainly incomprehensible because the relationship between speech sounds and the meanings they represent in the languages of the world is, for the most part, an **arbitrary** one. When you are acquiring a language, you have to learn that the sounds represented by the letters *house* signify the concept  ; if you know French, this same meaning is represented by *maison*; if you know Spanish, by *casa*, if you know Amharic, by *bet*. Similarly,  is represented by *hand* in English, *main* in French, *nsa* in Twi, and *ruka* in Russian. The same sequence of sounds can represent different meanings in different languages. The word *bolna* means 'speak' in Hindu-Urdu and 'aching' in Russian; *bis* means 'devil' in Ukrainian and 'twice' in Latin; a *pet* means 'a domestic animal' in English and 'a fart' in Catalan; and the sequence of sounds *taka* means 'hawk' in Japanese, 'fist' in Quechua, 'a small bird' in Zulu, and 'money' in Bengali.

These examples show that the words of a particular language have the meanings they do only by convention. This arbitrary relationship between form and meaning is shown in **Figure 1.1**, whereby a *pterodactyl* could have been called a *ron*, *blick* or *kerplunkity* and remained the same type of dinosaur.

As Juliet says in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*:

> What's in a name? That which we call a rose
> By any other name would smell as sweet.

Figure 1.1 **Form and meaning**



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descriptive grammar
A linguist's description or model of the mental grammar, including the units, structures and rules; an explicit statement of what speakers know about their language.

mental grammar
The internalised grammar that a descriptive grammar attempts to model; see linguistic competence.

grammatical
Describes a well-formed sequence of words, one conforming to rules of syntax.

ungrammatical
Describes a structure that fails to conform to the rules of grammar.

dialect
A variety of a language whose grammar differs in systematic ways from other varieties. Differences may be lexical, phonological, syntactic and/or semantic.

Linguists use the word *grammar* in two ways: the first refers to the **mental grammar** speakers have in their brains; the second to the model or description of this internalised grammar studied by linguists. Almost 2000 years ago the Greek grammarian Dionysius Thrax defined grammar as that which permits us either to speak a language or to speak about a language. From now on we will not differentiate these two meanings because the linguist's descriptive grammar is an attempt at a formal statement (or theory) of the speaker's grammar.

When we say in later chapters that a sentence is **grammatical**, we mean that it conforms to the rules of the mental grammar (as described by the linguist); when we say that it is **ungrammatical**, we mean it deviates from the rules in some way. If, however, we posit a rule for English that does not agree with your intuitions as a speaker, then the grammar we are describing differs in some way from the mental grammar that represents your linguistic competence; that is, your language is not the one described. No language or variety of a language (called a **dialect**) is superior to any other in a linguistic sense. Every grammar is equally complex, logical and capable of producing an infinite set of sentences to express any thought. If something can be expressed in one language or one dialect, it can be expressed in any other language or dialect. It might involve different meanings and different words, but it can be expressed. We will have more to say about dialects in Chapter 9. This is true as well for languages of technologically underdeveloped cultures. The grammars of these languages are not primitive or ill formed in any way. They have all the richness and complexity of the grammars of languages spoken in technologically advanced cultures.

Prescriptive grammars

> It is certainly the business of a grammarian to find out, and not to make, the laws of a language.
>
> John Fell, *Essay Towards an English Grammar*, 1784

> Just read the sentence aloud, Amanda, and listen to how it sounds. If the sentence sounds OK, go with it. If not, rearrange the pieces. Then throw out the rule books and go to bed.
>
> James Kilpatrick, 'Writer's Art' (syndicated newspaper column), 1998

> Any fool can make a rule
> And every fool will mind it.
>
> Henry David Thoreau, journal entry, 1860

Not all grammarians, past or present, share the view that all grammars are equal. Language 'purists' of all ages believe that some versions of a language are better than others, that there are certain 'correct' forms that all educated people should use in speaking and writing, and that language change is corruption. The Greek Alexandrians in the first century, the Arabic scholars at Basra in the eighth century and numerous English grammarians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries held this view. They wished to *prescribe* rather than *describe* the rules of grammar, which gave rise to the writing of **prescriptive grammars**.

prescriptive grammar
Rules of grammar brought about by grammarians' attempts to legislate what grammatical rules for speakers should be, rather than what they are.

In the Renaissance a new middle class emerged who wanted their children to speak the dialect of the 'upper' classes. This desire led to the publication of many prescriptive grammars. In 1762 Bishop Robert Lowth wrote *A Short Introduction to English Grammar with Critical Notes*, in which he prescribed a number of new rules for English, many of which were influenced by his personal taste. Before the publication of his grammar, practically everyone – upper class, middle class and lower class – said 'I don't have none', 'You was wrong about that' and 'Matilda is fatter than me'. Lowth, however, decided that 'two negatives make a positive' and therefore one should say 'I don't have any', that even when *you* is singular it should be followed by the plural *were* and that *I* not *me*, *he* not *him*, *they* not *them* and so forth should follow *than* in comparative constructions.