narr BACHELOR-WISSEN.DE

Christian Mair

English Linguistics

An Introduction

4th edition

narr\f
ranck
e\atte
mpto

Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Christian Mair ist Inhaber des Lehrstuhls für Englische Linguistik der Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg.

narr **BACHELOR-WISSEN.DE**

English Linguistics

narr BACHELOR-WISSEN.DE

narr BACHELOR-WISSEN.DE ist die Reihe für die modularisierten Studiengänge

- die Bände sind auf die Bedürfnisse der Studierenden abgestimmt
- das fachliche Grundwissen wird in zahlreichen Übungen vertieft
- der Stoff ist in die Unterrichtseinheiten einer Lehrveranstaltung gegliedert
- auf www.bachelor-wissen.de finden Sie begleitende und weiterführende Informationen zum Studium und zu diesem Band

Christian Mair

English Linguistics

An Introduction

4th updated edition

narr\f
ranck
e\atte
mpto

Idee und Konzept der Reihe: **Johannes Kabatek**, Professor für Romanische Philologie mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der iberoromanischen Sprachen an der Universität Zürich.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.dnb.de abrufbar.

DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.24053/9783823394488

4., aktualisierte Auflage 2022
3., aktualisierte Auflage 2015
2., aktualisierte Auflage 2012
1. Auflage 2008

© 2022 · Narr Francke Attempto Verlag GmbH + Co. KG
Dischingerweg 5 · 72070 Tübingen · Deutschland

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Das gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

Alle Informationen in diesem Buch wurden mit großer Sorgfalt erstellt. Fehler können dennoch nicht völlig ausgeschlossen werden. Weder Verlag noch Autor:innen oder Herausgeber:innen übernehmen deshalb eine Gewährleistung für die Korrektheit des Inhaltes und haften nicht für fehlerhafte Angaben und deren Folgen. Diese Publikation enthält gegebenenfalls Links zu externen Inhalten Dritter, auf die weder Verlag noch Autor:innen oder Herausgeber:innen Einfluss haben. Für die Inhalte der verlinkten Seiten sind stets die jeweiligen Anbieter oder Betreibenden der Seiten verantwortlich.

Internet: www.narr.de
eMail: info@narr.de

CPI books GmbH, Leck

ISSN 1864-4082
ISBN 978-3-8233-8448-9 (Print)
ISBN 978-3-8233-9448-8 (ePDF)
ISBN 978-3-8233-0286-5 (ePub)

Contents

Preface: how to use this book IX

1 Introduction – linguistic and other approaches to language 1

1.1 Orientation 1
1.2 Demonstration/discussion 9
1.3 Problems and challenges 14
1.4 Practice 18

2 Phonetics and phonology – the sounds of speech 21

2.1 Orientation 21
2.1.1 Sounds and letters: The need for a phonetic alphabet . 21
2.1.2 Sounds as sounds, and sounds as elements of linguistic systems: From phonetics to phonology 24
2.1.3 Stress, pitch, intonation – phonetics and phonology beyond the individual sound 29
2.2 Demonstration/discussion 31
2.3 Problems and challenges 35
2.4 Practice 38

3 Morphology and word-formation – the structure of the word 41

3.1 Orientation 41
3.1.1 Free and bound morphemes 41
3.1.2 Lexical and grammatical morphemes 45
3.2 Demonstration/discussion: The major word formation strategies of present-day English 47
3.3 Problems and challenges 53
3.4 Practice 57

4 Syntax I/general principles – the structure of the clause . 61

4.1 Orientation 61
4.1.1 Words, phrases, clauses and sentences 61
4.1.2 Form categories and their grammatical functions 66

4.2 Demonstration/discussion 68
4.2.1 Basic strategies for the expression of grammatical relations 68
4.2.2 Typological classification of languages 72
4.3 Problems and challenges 74
4.4 Practice 76

5 Syntax II/the fundamentals of English grammar 79

5.1 Orientation 79
5.1.1 Parts of speech 79
5.1.2 Phrases 82
5.1.3 Seven basic clause patterns 82
5.2 Demonstration/discussion 85
5.3 Problems and challenges 87
5.4 Practice 91

6 Semantics and lexicology – the meaning of words 95

6.1 Orientation 95
6.2 Demonstration/discussion 99
6.3 Problems and challenges 105
6.4 Practice 110

7 Pragmatics and discourse analysis 115

7.1 Orientation 115
7.2 Demonstration/discussion 125
7.3 Problems and challenges 128
7.4 Practice 131

8 Applied linguistics, language teaching and translation studies 135

8.1 Orientation 135
8.2 Demonstration/discussion 136
8.3 Problems and challenges 143
8.4 Practice 147

9 A pluricentric language – standard Englishes around the world 151

9.1 Orientation 151
9.2 Demonstration/discussion 156

9.3 Problems and challenges 162
9.4 Practice 168

10 Dialectology – regional variation in English 171

10.1 Orientation 171
10.2 Demonstration/discussion 172
10.3 Problems and challenges 177
10.4 Practice 180

11 Language in the city – social and ethnic variation, multilingualism 185

11.1 Orientation 185
11.2 Demonstration/discussion 186
11.3 Problems and challenges 191
11.4 Practice 198

12 Language change and the history of English 203

12.1 Orientation 203
12.1.1 Old English period (c. 500 – c. 1100) 207
12.1.2 Middle English period (c. 1100 – c. 1500) 209
12.1.3 Early Modern English period (c. 1500 – c. 1750) 210
12.1.4 Late Modern English and Present-Day English (since c. 1750) 212
12.2 Demonstration/discussion 213
12.3 Problems and challenges 216
12.4 Practice 220

13 Past masters, current trends – theorising linguistics for students of English 223

13.1 Orientation 223
13.2 Demonstration/discussion 224
13.3 Problems and challenges 234
13.4 Practice 237

14 Linguistics and the public – language myths, language politics, language planning and language rights 239

14.1 Orientation 239
14.2 Demonstration/discussion 245

14.3 Problems and challenges 248
14.4 Practice 256

Glossary of linguistic terms 259

Index 279

Preface: how to use this book

The present book is obviously not the first introduction to linguistics for students of English. It complements and competes with a number of related titles, some published in Britain and the United States for international audiences, and some published in Germany with the needs of a more local readership in mind. Some of what this book presents is new and original material not found elsewhere; a fair amount is just the basic stuff that undergraduates in English have to master if they want to understand the complexities of the structure and the use of the (foreign) language they have decided to focus on in their studies.

Nevertheless, the author has a clear justification for publishing just this book. It is the unified perspective it is written from – a perspective which he hopes will be useful and productive for the intended audience. A factor that motivated the first edition of the present book was an external political one, the profound transformation in European higher education that started in 1999, was implemented in the following decade and has come to be known as the "Bologna Process." In Germany, Austria and many other European countries, this led to the creation of numerous new BA programmes – a reform that obviously required re-thinking of curricula. The present book was a response to this in that it aims to meet bachelor students' needs **without diluting and lowering academic standards**.

Secondly, the book aims to present linguistics not as an end in itself, but **specifically for students of English,** i. e. students wishing to make productive use of what they learn about language and linguistics in other areas of their academic courses (cultural studies, literature) and in their later professional careers in language teaching, the media, public relations or similar areas of language- and culture-related professional activity.

Thirdly, the book is not designed as a manual of information to be learned and reproduced, but as an invitation to explore the fascinating complexity which the English language, and languages in general, display both in their structure and in their use. The focus is thus on **learner autonomy as an essential first step towards independent research.** As readers will see, each of the following 14 units has the following structure:

1. Orientation
2. Demonstration/discussion
3. Problems and challenges
4. Practice

The reader's careful attention is invited for the first. The reader's own initiative, activity and creativity are vital prerequisites to the success of the

other three. To help readers with basic concepts and terminology, the book contains a comprehensive glossary at the end. If you experience difficulties with some of the exercises, or if you want to check your results, you can consult the web-page accompanying the book at www.meta.narr.de/9783823384489/Zusatzmaterial.zip, which gives you the solutions. This site also contains some useful additional materials.

The book will no doubt serve many practical purposes – as a class text, helping students prepare for their exams, or as a reference work consulted occasionally. Beyond that, however, I hope that readers will retain a few essential insights even after they have forgotten about the inevitable detail, such as the lesser-used symbols of the phonetic alphabet, or some technical definition of a grammatical concept, or the specifically New Zealand realisations of the short vowels. These include:

- a fascination with the intricate structural complexity of the English language, and – by implication – that uniquely human endowment, the language faculty;
- an appreciation of the diversity of a global language, of the many varieties of English that have arisen in response to the expressive, social and cultural needs of an extremely heterogeneous community of speakers; and – not least –
- a theoretically grounded understanding of the true role of language in society.

The importance of language in fostering human community and society cannot be over-estimated. And yet public debates about language issues are still too often informed by half-truths and myths – propagated by educators, politicians, cultural critics. What the trained linguist can bring to this debate is two academic virtues: a respect for empirical data and a commitment to rational argument. In the public discourse on the shape of English and the role the language plays in the world today, this is a much needed contribution.

I would not like to close this preface without re-expressing my thanks to a number of people involved in the previous three editions of this book, in particular Jürgen Freudl (with Narr Publishers at the time of the first edition, dedicated editor and much needed and appreciated enforcer of deadlines) and my former Freiburg team members Dr. Birgit Waibel, Dr. Udo Rohe, Anastasia Cobet and Luminița Trașcă, and adding to this an equally heartfelt "Thank you!" to Rafaela Tosin, who helped in the preparation of the fourth edition, and to Kathrin Heyng (at Narr Verlag), who saw the typescript through the production process professionally and with a sharp eye for detail.

Freiburg, October 2021 *Christian Mair*

Introduction – linguistic and other approaches to language

Orientation

1.1

What is linguistics?

Any book introducing undergraduate students to a new academic field, its terminology and investigative methods must start by answering the defining question, which in our case is simply: "What is **linguistics**?" To say that "linguistics is the rational and systematic scientific study of language, usually based in institutions of higher learning such as colleges or universities" seems a fairly helpful first approximation. Of course, in offering an answer to this first question, I have raised two more. First, it is not at all clear what we mean by **language** in an academic-linguistic context. The every-day English word *language* has multiple meanings (as do its equivalents in other languages), as can easily be demonstrated by comparing its meaning in the following two sentences (see Exercise 1 below for further examples):

> The language of the British press has changed considerably over the past few decades.
>
> Language is what distinguishes human beings from apes.

In the first example, the word *language* denotes a particular functional variety of one specific language, in this case English, whereas in the second it could be glossed as the "ability to learn and use any of a large number of human languages."

A subfield of the humanities, a social science, an experimental natural science?

Secondly, while its home in universities as one academic discipline among others is secure, the precise status of linguistics as a **science** is contested territory (as we shall see in many places throughout this book). Is linguistics part of the **humanities**, close to literary and cultural studies, with which it shares an interest in the phenomenon of style for example? Is it an empirical **social science**, using quantitative and qualitative methods to study the communicative networks among people which ultimately constitute society? Is it an **experimental** science like psychology, studying the role of language in human cognition, or the place of language-acquisition in the development of the human personality? Or is it a **natural science**, in that it helps us to understand the complex physiology of the human speech apparatus, or the neurological basis of language both in the healthy person and in those suffering from various kinds of language disorder or language loss?

In an introduction to linguistics it is worth noting that the way we answer this question partly depends on the language we conduct the debate in. The English word *science*, for example, has a much narrower range than German *Wissenschaft*. While *science* is largely confined to the natural sciences and a

small number of other fields using statistical and mathematical procedures of analysis, the German term is also regularly used to describe disciplines such as *Literaturwissenschaft*, *Geschichtswissenschaft*, *Musikwissenschaft* and *Kulturwissenschaft*, which in English would not be considered sciences, but part of the humanities. Thus, the German word *Sprachwissenschaft* is very inclusive in its meaning and therefore a good translation for the English term *linguistics*; its literal equivalent, *language science,* is much narrower than German *Sprachwissenschaft*, implying a way of studying language that is inspired by the rigorous methodological procedures of the exact sciences.

Linguistics for students of English

This incomplete list of possible orientations in linguistics opens up many vistas that the present introduction will not explore. Its aims are more practical and limited. The first is to equip readers with the terminology and methods necessary to describe present-day English, the language they have made the focus of their studies, both in its structure and in its use. The second aim is to introduce students to the major theoretical positions and trends in the field, so as to give them the basis for independent further work. And not least the book aims to show where a knowledge of linguistics can be made productive outside the field, for example in the teaching and learning of foreign languages, or for developing a more sophisticated grasp of language-related issues in literary and cultural studies.

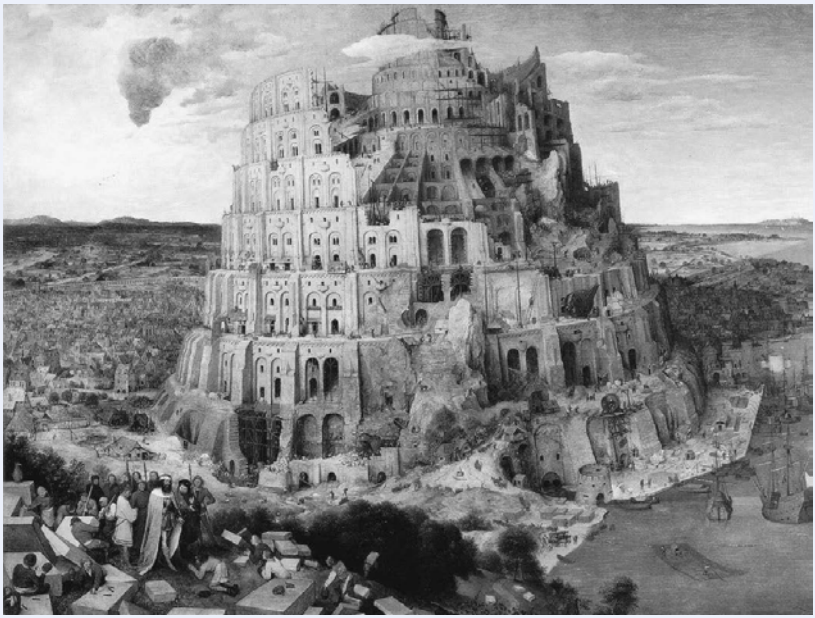

Fig. 1.1 | Pieter Breughel the Elder, "Tower of Babel" (1563), Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

Linguistics – the pre-history of the field

But how did the burgeoning discipline of linguistics arise historically? In answering this question, we cannot help but be struck by an apparent paradox. We find signs of people's keen interest in linguistic issues for practically the whole recorded history of humanity, but dispassionate scientific objectivity in the study of language, the scholarly study of language for its own sake, or – for short – linguistics as an academic discipline, are historically very recent pursuits.

One marvel that seems to have caused people to wonder in many places and at different times in history is the fact that human beings live in a world of many languages, which is obviously impractical. A well-known non-scholarly answer to this puzzle is contained in the *Old Testament* of the Bible (Genesis 11), where multilingualism is explained as God's punishment for the human pride manifested in the attempt to build the enormous Tower of Babel (see Figure 1.1).

Within one and the same language community, people are keenly aware of sometimes very slight differences in pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary. In a British context, for example, "aitch-dropping," technically speaking the dropping of initial /h/ in stressed syllables, is a strong social marker. If someone says *'eavy metal music* instead of *heavy metal music*, the contrast is trivial, and any confusion about the intended meaning is unlikely. However, this detail of pronunciation will instantly mark out the speaker as either educated, standard or middle-class (if *heavy* is pronounced with *h*) or uneducated, non-standard or working-class (if the aitches are dropped). Of course, the general public, including literary writers, are aware of this, so that aitch-dropping becomes available as an efficient device for literary characterisation, as it does, for example, in the case of Uriah Heep (from Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*), who styles himself as *'umble* (← *humble*) all the time. The motif is taken up by the rock band of the same name, whose first album is called *Very 'eavy, very 'umble*.

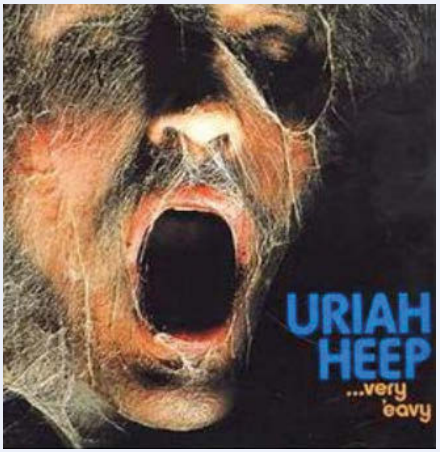

Fig. 1.2
Very 'eavy: Cover of LP record

Among those fascinated by language long before the emergence of linguistics as a specialised discipline have been major philosophers. The classical Greek thinker Plato (428/27 BC – 348/47 BC), for example, thought a lot about the question of whether the form and shape

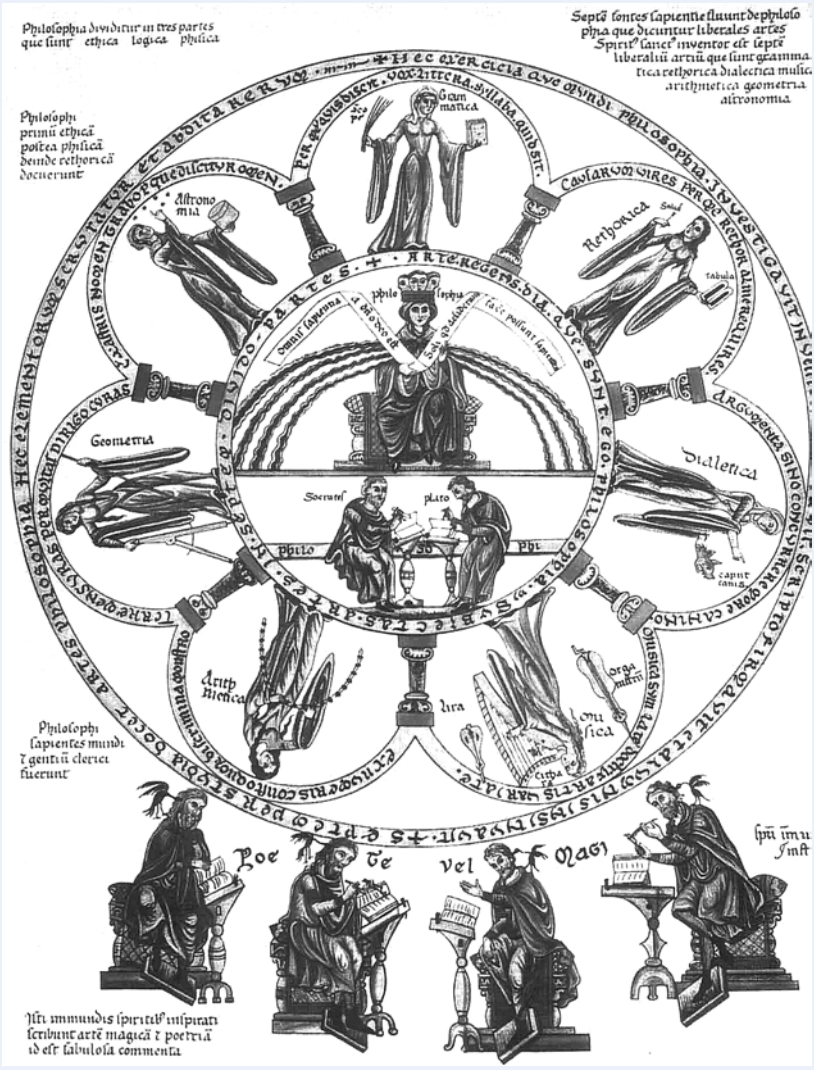

Fig. 1.3 | The "seven liberal arts," with Grammatica and Rhetorica on the top and top-right (from: Herrad of Landsberg, "Hortus deliciarum" [1180])

of a word have any natural or logical correspondence to the person, thing, quality, activity or process it refers to, or whether this relation is arbitrary.

If we think of verbs such as German *zischen* or English *hiss*, we might conclude that the former view is plausible – the sound of the words seems to be motivated by the sound in the real world. If we think about a sound sequence such as /i:gl/, there is clearly no such correspondence between the form and the denoted concept. By convention, this sound sequence corresponds to *Igel* "hedgehog" for those who speak German and to an

entirely different animal, *eagle* "Adler," for those who speak English. More importantly, there is nothing about either of the two animals that makes this particular word a natural choice to name them. In the typical fashion of a dialogical Platonic argument, the philosopher develops a compromise position: Kratylos argues that names are motivated; Hermogenes claims that they are arbitrary; Socrates moderates between the two.

Linguistics and philosophy

Modern linguists are less circumspect and tend to agree that Hermogenes' position is the appropriate one. First, there are far more words for which the relation between sound and meaning is arbitrary than there are **onomatopoetic** forms in which the sound of the words appears to imitate some natural sound. Secondly, even those words that seem to be imitations of actual natural sounds turn out to be highly arbitrary and language-specific on closer inspection. Note, for example, that the initial letter <z> in German *zischen*, which corresponds to the sounds /ts/, would be a forbidden combination in English (see Exercise 5 below for further discussion).

"Onomatopoeia" – the imitation of natural sounds

Apart from philosophical concerns about language, there have also been practical ones. Language teaching, for example, has a history to look back on which is at least as old as the philosophical debate about language. In fact, two of the seven Classical "liberal arts," which formed the core curriculum of higher education well into the Early Modern period, are language-related, namely grammar (which in the old understanding included the study of pronunciation) and rhetoric (see Figure 1.3).

Linguistics and language teaching

For a long time, the foreign languages that were studied and taught most in our part of the world were Latin, Greek and Hebrew, the three sacred languages of the Bible. From the 16th and 17th centuries onwards, teaching and reference materials, such as dictionaries and grammar books, started being developed for more and more of the modern European languages. Some of the pedagogical works that have come down to us over the ages clearly reveal a lot of linguistic insight, but as a whole this tradition does not amount to more than a precursor of the scholarly linguistic perspective on lan-

GRAMMATICA ANGLICANA
CONCENTRATA,
Oder
Kurtz-gefaßte
Englische Grammatica.
Worinnen
Die zur Erlernung dieser Sprache
hinlänglich-nöthige
Grund-Sätze
Auf eine sehr deutliche und leichte Art
abgehandelt sind.
Philadelphia, gedruckt und zu finden bey Gotthard Armbrüster.

Fig. 1.4 *Grammatica Anglicana concentrata, oder Kurtz-gefaßte englische Grammatica. Worinnen Die zur Erlernung dieser Sprache hinlänglich-nöthige Grund-Sätze Auf eine sehr deutliche und leichte Art abgehandelt sind* (Philadelphia 1748), title page

guage. Figure 1.4 presents the title page of one such practical grammar of English, which was presumably produced for the benefit of German immigrants to British North America.

Linguistics and textual criticism

Another precursor of academic linguistics is the tradition of textual criticism which first flowered during the Renaissance, when scholars looked at ancient texts from classical antiquity very closely in order to determine their authentic versions, which had often been corrupted in centuries of transmission. Very often, such a comparison of different manuscript versions was a necessary step to prepare the first printed editions of these texts. This pursuit was known as **philology** (from the ancient Greek for "love of the word" or "love of language"). Originally, philology comprised the study of language and literature. Today the term is preserved in expressions such as "Englische Philologie," one of the traditional German designations of English Studies. In a modern linguistic context, the term *philology* refers to the specialist study of language history, especially in the context of editing texts.

Finally, the fact that Europeans conquered and colonised ever growing portions of the world meant that many new and exotic languages were encountered, translated from and into, documented and taught. Arabic, Chinese, Persian and the ancient and modern languages of India thus became of interest to Europeans. This meant that, slowly but surely, a critical mass of knowledge about languages accumulated which led to the birth of linguistics as an academic discipline toward the end of the 18th century.

The birth of linguistics as an academic discipline

In this early phase, language scholars' orientation was strongly historical. Building on an insight first formulated in 1786 by William Jones (1746–1794), who worked as a judge on behalf of the British East India Company in Calcutta, subsequent generations of scholars traced the history of the various members of what was later to be referred to as the **Indo-European family of languages** in order to reconstruct their common origin (proto-Indo-European or *Ursprache*) and their mutual relationship. In particular, Jones' seminal insight was to note systematic correspondences between Sanskrit, an ancient language of the Indian subcontinent, and Ancient Greek, which made it plausible to trace both back to a common historical source (see Unit 12 for further discussion of the historical relationships among the Indo-European languages, esp. Figure 12.1).

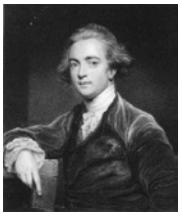

Fig. 1.5 | William Jones (1746–1794), pioneer of historical-comparative (Indo-European) linguistics

What was found out in the course of the 19th century still holds in its essence today. The Celtic languages spoken in the very West of Europe, the Germanic, Romance, Slavic languages, some languages of the Baltic region (Latvian, Lithuanian), Albanian, Greek, Persian and some of the major languages of the Indian subcontinent such as Hindi or Punjabi all go back to a common ancestor. Before the emergence of **historical-comparative linguistics**, people indulged in bizarre speculations on historical relation-

ships between languages and peoples on the basis of a few pairs of words that happened to sound similar. Today, we have a rigid methodology to assess the value of such claims, and people who will still argue for direct links between the civilisations of ancient Asia and ancient America just because a few place names, names for gods or food-stuffs happen to sound similar are fortunately not taken seriously any more – a modest triumph of science over speculation.

Diachronic and synchronic approaches to the study of language

One practitioner of historical-comparative linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), based at the University of Geneva in Switzerland, was instrumental in bringing about a re-orientation of approach which has dominated the field to the present day. He pointed out that the **diachronic** study of language (i. e. the study of its development through time) produced interesting insights of many kinds, but these never explained how a particular language worked as a system of choices for its speakers at a particular time (the **synchronic** perspective).

To illustrate this with an example: if I tell you that the word *nice* originally meant "foolish" or "ignorant" when it was first used in English around 800 years ago, I am telling you a truth that you can find recorded in any good **etymological dictionary** (i. e. a dictionary that traces the history of a word in the language back to the oldest attested forms or to other languages from which it was borrowed). Obviously, the original meaning and the present one are so different that one cannot have changed into the other overnight. There must have been many intermediate steps. One such step is illustrated in the following extract from a classic novel written in the first half of the 18th century, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*:

> I was really with child [= pregnant].
> This was a perplexing thing because of the Difficulty which was before me, where I should get leave to Lye Inn; it being one of the **nicest** things in the World at that time of Day, for a Woman that was a Stranger, and had no Friends, to be entertain'd in that Circumstance without Security, which by the way I had not, neither could I procure any. (Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*. 1722: ch. 32)

The context, a single mother preparing to give birth in a strange city, makes clear that the situation is far from *nice* in the present sense of "pleasant." Rather, the idea is that the situation is tricky or difficult to handle. You may find these language-historical facts boring and irrelevant. You may find them to have some practical use, because they help you understand older texts better. Or you may even find them fascinating because such complex changes of word-meaning raise interesting issues relating to human psychology and cognition. What, for example, is the connection between ignorance and the quality of being pleasant? Is it that simple minds are conventionally regarded as harmless, non-threatening and therefore "nice" company?

Whatever your views may be, one thing is certain, however. No amount of historical information on the changing meanings of *nice* in the past will help you learn how to use this adjective in the present. Here, we are faced with other problems – for example understanding the difference in meaning and style between *how nice of you* and *how kind of you* in native-speaker usage or explaining why we can say *how unkind of you*, but not *how unnice of you* (even though negation of *nice* easily works if we use another strategy: *that was not nice of you*!).

In practice the move from the diachronic approach to the synchronic one often meant that the focus of interest shifted from the oldest stages of the language (in the case of English the Old English period lasting from c. 500 to c. 1100) to the contemporary language, but this does not necessarily have to be the case. We can study Old English from a synchronic perspective, for example, by showing how it worked as a structured system at a given point in time, let's say the well-documented period immediately before the Norman Conquest in 1066. Alternatively, we can take a diachronic approach to present-day English, for example by focussing on those processes of historical change that are going on right now. Here we could point to the adjective *awesome*, which has developed considerably over the past 100 years, from a very specific and narrow meaning ("awe-inspiring") to a much wider one, as a general-purpose positive evaluation ("great," "excellent," "terrific"). The last adjective, *terrific*, shows that history has repeated itself, because *terrific* had moved along the same course a couple of centuries earlier (from "inspiring terror" to "great").

What unites both historical-comparative (diachronic) and structuralist-synchronic approaches to language and sets them apart from all the precursor traditions is their explicitly **descriptive** orientation. Teachers instruct pupils in how to use a language correctly (that is according to the educated standards prevalent in a community). Some of them might even discourage pupils from using the adjective *nice* in writing, because they consider it too informal and imprecise. No doubt, there are many native speakers of English, especially outside the United States, who still react negatively to the contemporary use of *awesome* described above. This notwithstanding, academic linguists – whether working in the diachronic or synchronic traditions – generally do not pass value judgments on the linguistic forms and structures they are studying.

Demonstration/discussion

1.2

Prescriptive and descriptive approaches to the study of language

In this section we will illustrate the contrast between various judgmental or **prescriptive** perspectives on language and the strictly **descriptive** take on linguistic phenomena which is the hallmark of academic linguistics. After the discussion of the examples, you will be able to more clearly understand the concerns of linguistics and distinguish them from other ways of analysing language.

As a first illustration, consider the general American pronunciation of English, the most widely spoken and certainly the most widely heard accent in the world today. In comparison to British English, it is characterised by a number of well-established pronunciation features. Probably most salient among them is the fact that the <r> is pronounced wherever you find it in spelling (unlike British English, where <r> is silent if it follows a vowel). Thus, you hear an /r/ in the American pronunciation of words such as *water*, *car* or *hard*, whereas the <r> is silent in a British pronunciation. Also, the /t/ tends to be weakened in certain positions in American English, in particular between vowels if the first one is stressed (e. g. in words such as *water* or *Betty*). Trivial though these details of pronunciation may seem, they occasionally provoke strong negative reactions. Compare, for example, the following quotation from a letter written by American novelist Henry James (1843–1916):

> There are, you see, sounds of a mysterious and intrinsic meanness, and there are sounds of a mysterious intrinsic frankness and sweetness; and I think the recurrent note that I have indicated – fatherr and motherr and otherr, waterr and matterr and scatterr, harrd and barrd, parrt, starrt, and (dreadful to say) arrt (the repetition it is that drives home the ugliness), are signal specimens of what becomes of a custom of utterance out of which the principle of taste has dropped. (Henry James, "The Question of Our Speech," in *The Question of Our Speech/The Lesson of Balzac: Two Lectures*. Boston and New York 1905: 29)

Fig. 1.6
Henry James, novelist (1843–1916)

This is an interesting example of linguistic self-hatred, as the famous novelist Henry James was an American by birth (even though he died a naturalised British subject). The next quotation is not from a famous individual of the past but taken from the present and the World-Wide Web. It was posted by an instructional designer with a British background and shows that some of the prejudice voiced by Henry James has survived. Here the focus in not on the pronunciation of the /r/, but on the way in which the consonant /t/ is handled in American English:

> How did the T become a D when in the middle of a word? I am a British lady and find this very annoying and hard to understand what was meant. For years

> I really thought that Nita Lowy's name was spelt NEDA! How do the students manage in dictation (or don't they have that in schools now). It affects everyone, as I just saw in print someone referring to Dr. Adkins, which would be the obvious spelling if one had only heard the word spoken and did not know that the correct spelling is Dr. Atkins. The sentence below gives an example of problems in understanding the spelling of certain words.
> I am writing this as I hear it pronounced: Paddy and Neda attended the innerview and were congradulated on the recipe with the budder badder for the cake they cooked with their dada. (daughter).
> (source: http://linguistlist.org/ask-ling/message-details1.cfm?asklingid=200¬316347)

This statement provides an illustration of the slight animosity which educated British speakers sometimes feel towards American speechways, probably because – as the people who got the language going – they resent the political, economic and cultural pre-eminence of the United States in the world today.

What would descriptive linguists make of the statement by Henry James? The answer is simple. They would dismiss it as a completely unfounded and subjective value judgment. Even worse, some linguists might add, is the fact that this type of negative judgment on linguistic forms usually masks contempt for the speakers who use them. This, they would argue, is dishonest and unethical, as people should be judged by what they do and not by how they speak. Historical linguists might point out that among the people who pronounced the /r/-s after vowels was one William Shakespeare (1564–1616). The r-less pronunciations of words such as *father*, *mother* or *part* arose only in the 18th century among the lower classes of London and then took some time to become the general British standard.

In the "British lady's" pronouncement, the descriptive linguist would first point out that in the word *congradulated* as spelled here there is a mistake, because the stereotypical American would pronounce it as *congraduladed*, weakening the /t/ in both instances and not just in the first. Whereas Henry James does not give any rational reasons for his dislike of the American accent, the British lady presents an argument: Americans do not distinguish between certain pairs of words, which makes their English difficult to understand and confusing. To this objection, the descriptive linguist would respond that for every instance in which two words sound the same in American English there is at least one comparable case in British English. For example, the words *source* and *sauce* are clearly distinct in their pronunciation in American English but sound completely alike in British English. As it happens, the reason for this is precisely the r-less pronunciation so much favoured by Henry James.

In real life, unlike constructed examples and jokes, the danger of misunderstandings resulting from the identical pronunciation of words with different meanings is minimal. If the topic of a conversation is urban problems in the United States and we hear *inner city*, we know from the context that we are talking about neglected city centres and do not even think of the theoretical alternative *inter-city*. If in a conversation in Britain somebody says /sɔ:s/ and the topic is food, we hear *sauce*, and not *source*.

Flapped /t/ in American English

What really might intrigue the descriptive linguist in the case of the American /t/ is the intricate set of rules which governs the weakening or "tapping"/"flapping" of the /t/. The latter terms are intended to capture the fact that in the American articulation of the sound the tip of the tongue just briefly taps or flaps against the palate (on which more will be said in Unit 2). As has been mentioned, such flapped or tapped /t/-s occur between vowels**, but only if the first one is stressed**. Thus we find them in *Italy*, but not in *Italian*, in *atom* (which sounds like *Adam*), but not in *atomic*, and so on. It occurs after /r/, as in *dirty*, *hurting*, and the /t/ disappears entirely after /n/, as in *enter* or *centre*, **but again only if the syllable preceding the /t/ is stressed.** This is why we would not get it in a word such as *entire*, which is stressed on the second syllable. Having been given so many clues, you can further hone your analytical skills as a budding descriptive linguist in Exercise 6 below.

Different definitions of *language*

Here, we shall return to the question raised at the very beginning – how to define language, the object of linguistic description. As has already been hinted at, it seems to be a much easier task to define linguistics than it is to define its object of study, human language and the diversity of languages – past and present – spoken in the world. To get a flavour of the diverse ways in which great thinkers in the field have approached the problem, consider the following proposals. Note that there is little overlap between the definitions, and that each emphasises a different aspect of the object to be defined:

> Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of volitionally produced symbols. (Sapir 1921: 8)

> From now on I will consider a language to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements. All natural languages in their spoken or written form are languages in this sense. […] Similarly, the set of 'sentences' of some formalized system of mathematics can be considered a language. (Chomsky 1957: 13)

> The essence of speech is that one human being, by movements beginning at his diaphragm and involving various parts of his chest, throat, mouth and nasal passages, creates disturbances in the air around him, which within a certain distance from him have a perceptible effect on the ear-drums and through

> them on the brains of other people, and that the hearers can, if they belong to the same language community, respond to these disturbances, or noises, and find them meaningful. (Robins 1971: 77)

After reading through the three definitions, one might well start wondering whether they actually target the same phenomenon. Sapir's definition comes closest to our common-sense understanding; it emphasises the role of language as a tool for human communication, its symbolic character, and the fact that it is not an instinct or reflex but volitional and conscious. Chomsky's definition, by contrast, is much more narrow and technical, drawing an analogy between the grammar of a language and a mathematical algorithm; nothing is implied about the role of language in society and communication. Robins, finally, approaches language through the sound of speech, emphasising the physical and acoustic sides of the phenomenon and disregarding grammatical function, meaning and content.

In view of these various emphases, it is probably not a mistake to have an amateur have the final say. The following definition is by the famous 19th-century American poet and writer Walt Whitman (1819–1892):

Fig. 1.7 | Walt Whitman (1819–1892)

> Language is not an abstract construction of the learned, or of dictionary-makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, and has its bases broad and low, close to the ground. (Walt Whitman, "Slang in America," 1885)

Linguistic intuition and well-formedness

Before going on with our defining work, let us pause to consider what it means to "know" a language. It certainly means to be able to speak it fluently and to communicate effectively. In addition, our linguistic intuition ("Sprachgefühl") enables us to make judgments about nuances in meaning between alternative expressions or about the well-formedness of certain grammatical structures. Thus, native speakers of English know with absolute certainty that both of the following sentences are possible utterances in their language:

> Inflation more than tripled between 1973 and 1983.
> Inflation will more than triple over the next 20 years.

A German speaker, by contrast, will accept only one of the structurally analogous sentences:

> *Die Inflation mehr als verdreifachte sich zwischen 1973 und 1983.
> Die Inflation wird sich in den nächsten Jahren mehr als verdreifachen.

The ***-sign** is a widely used convention in linguistics. In synchronic linguistics it indicates that a construction or sentence is ungrammatical. In diachronic linguistics it signals that a form is assumed as a plausible

reconstruction although direct evidence (for example in old texts) is missing. *Die Inflation verdreifachte sich zwischen 1973 und 1983,* by itself, is a well-formed sentence. The problem thus is to find a place for the modification *mehr als*. The sentence given above does not work, and no amount of moving around the parts will make it work: **Die Inflation verdreifachte sich mehr als*, **die Inflation mehr als verdreifachte sich*, etc. On the other hand, any structure that has a form of *verdreifachen* in clause-final position is possible:

Die Inflation hat sich in den letzten Jahren mehr als verdreifacht.
Ich weiß, dass sich die Inflation alle hundert Jahre mehr als verdreifacht.

The complexity of language

This is a statement of the facts. At this stage in our introduction to linguistics we are not interested in a search for possible reasons. However, it is clear that the **rules** which are at work here are not those which are usually taught to foreign learners of English and German as part of their grammar teaching, nor are the sentences of the kind that children would get practice on in the early stages of natural language acquisition. In this sense, the example serves well to illustrate the enormous formal complexity of human languages. This formal complexity is capable of expressing similarly complex meanings. While it is fairly easy to define the meaning of the verb *triple* ("increase threefold"), the combination *more than triple* raises a problem. Theoretically, this expression covers anything from "increase a little more than three-fold" to "increase a hundred-fold" and beyond. In a natural communicative situation, however, we are very likely to assume that we are talking about an increase which is between three-fold and four-fold. Why? Such problems of the logic of natural languages will be discussed in more depth in Unit 7.

A working definition of *language*

After this exercise in consciousness-raising, we can now return to the initial question and name a number of features which must figure in any definition of language. Together they make up a good composite working definition of what a human language is.

1) New-born human beings have a genetic or natural predisposition to acquire a language (or languages) spoken in their communities. They are rather free to decide on what occasions and for what purposes they use language (which is an important contrast to many more instinct-based communication systems prevalent among animal populations).
2) Human languages represent meaning symbolically. The relationship between the sound of a word and the concept it denotes is thus arbitrary, as is easily shown by the following words used to denote the concept "bread": *ekmek* (Turkish), *Brot* (German), *pane* (Italian).
3) Words are combined into larger constructions by rules which are language-specific conventions. German *es wurde gesungen und getanzt*

expresses roughly the same idea as English *there was singing and dancing*. It is not possible to re-create the German structure in English or vice versa.

4) Human languages are sound-based. For a small number of the world's ca. 6,000 languages writing systems have been developed. Deaf people are capable of expressing themselves through signing.

While, as has been hinted at, several animal species have developed very complex **systems of communication**, the above-named features in their combination ensure that language is a uniquely human achievement. Animals may be able to communicate warnings or directions to their fellows, but only human beings use languages for complex reasoning, to talk about alternative worlds or possible behaviour, or to systematically lie and deceive.

1.3 | Problems and challenges

Corpora and the study of language

In Section 1.2 above we had a look at how people developed negative attitudes towards particular ways of pronouncing the English language. Of course, this problem is not restricted to matters of pronunciation. Similar responses are occasionally provoked by grammatical constructions, as well. Again, the linguistic details in question are trivial, but the social consequences may be considerable. This section will introduce you to the use of **computerised language corpora**, i. e. textual data-bases that have been compiled and annotated for the purposes of linguistic research. They are powerful tools, not the least of their advantages being that they allow students to gain hands-on research experience very early on in their coursework. The portal https://www.english-corpora.org/, hosted by US linguist Mark Davies, offers convenient access to a wide range of corpora. You can register as a user for free, preferably using your university e-mail address for better user rights, which you should do at your earliest convenience, because many of the exercises in this book will require you to carry out corpus searches. Note that the website offers instructive tutorials for self-study.

Register at the english-corpora.org website.

For an example of the stigmatisation of a grammatical construction, consider the following extract from a play by the renowned British dramatist Tom Stoppard (b. 1937):

Max: […] if you don't mind me saying so.
Henry: *My* saying, Max.
Max gets up and wants to leave
Henry: I'm sorry, but it actually *hurts*.

(source: Tom Stoppard, *The Real Thing*. London 1983: 34)

Without going too deeply into the details of grammatical analysis, let us make the problem explicit. Max uses the verb *mind* followed by a pronoun in the object form followed by the participle of the verb. In present-day English, there are numerous instances of this pattern: *I found him reading*, *I caught them napping*, etc. Henry resents the usage when it is extended to the verb *mind*, insisting on a supposedly correct alternative: the verb *mind*, followed by a possessive pronoun and a verbal noun (or gerund). Again, there are numerous instances of this pattern: *I hate his singing*, *I am tired of your complaining*, etc. Max is offended because his partner in conversation comments on the form of his utterance rather than the content. This is impolite. As the following examples show, Max has the usage facts of present-day English on his side. In most cases, both variants are possible, and if only one works, it is Max's and not Henry's:

She doesn't mind **his smoking** during lunch.
She doesn't mind **him smoking** during lunch.

She doesn't object to **Peter's smoking** during lunch.
She doesn't object to **Peter smoking** during lunch.

??Who would have dreamed of **such a thing's happening** a year ago?
Who would have dreamed of **such a thing happening** a year ago?

I can tell you that I'm not looking forward to **this happening** again.
*I can tell you that I'm not looking forward to **this's happening** again.

There just is no genitive or possessive case for the demonstrative pronoun *this*, and the genitive is a rather unusual choice for a noun denoting a lifeless object such as *thing*. In other cases, the contrast is neutralised, because a form such as *her* functions both as object case and as a possessive:

Nobody objects to **her smoking** after lunch.

What we learn from this analysis is that certain linguistic prejudices may persist for a long time and be articulated with a lot of conviction and arrogance, even if they have no basis in fact – as can easily be verified from digital language corpora. Let us search for examples in the British National Corpus (BNC), a database comprising the unbelievable amount of almost 100 million words of running text covering a wide variety of written and spoken genres. It is among those accessible through the english-corpora.org website. The collection of the data was completed in the early 1990s, that is not long after Stoppard's play was written. To look for examples of the construction investigated here I first searched for the two-word sequence *mind him* and found 35 hits, of which 14 illustrate the construction under study:

"Don't you mind him stealing your father's eggs?"
Therefore I don't mind him hearing the very worst about my past.

She didn't mind him telling her things, and learned very quickly.
Diana, Barry's wife of 35 years, doesn't mind him meeting all the great screen goddesses.
I wouldn't mind him being Heathcliff's son, if only he loved her and could be a good husband to her."
If he did not know that, I do not mind him admitting it, but it is extraordinary ignorance on his part.
I wouldn't mind him sitting on top of my Christmas tree," said either Dosh or Freddie.
I wouldn't mind him missing sundays game.
Apparently, she did not mind him being a mop head when occupying other Government positions, but felt it would not be fitting for the role of Chancellor.
I mean I don't mind him popping out as long as he's […] gone to their house and stays there.
Well, I don't mind him walking across that bit but <pause>
Actually, I don't really mi– mind him looking after me, he's very good!
Did you mind him going over there, staying over there?
he didn't mind him speaking and as soon as <name> yeah right then he said I'm not I'm not telling <unclear>

Henry's desired alternative occurs less often, a mere six times:

Gullit, of course, is injured and there are still fears for his playing career, never mind his appearing in Italy.
Never mind his scrummaging, or doubts about his fitness round the park, he was worth his ticket for his line-out work.
But I didn't mind his thinking it, his sudden flattering benignity.
No, she didn't mind his ringing so late.
She wanted to tell him they didn't mind his being there, it didn't matter, he wasn't trespassing.
Why did she mind his being hurt so much?

Sycnronically, both Henry and Max use grammar that is correct and natural in late 20th-century British English. Diachronically, Max represents the mainstream and the future, and Henry a recessive older form. Rationally, Henry was wrong to start a dispute over linguistic usage. If his aim is to stop linguistic change, he is already too late. In this example, you have seen linguistic argumentation in action: we have used empirical evidence to systematically explore a research question and we have refuted Henry's point of view in the process. What we shall leave open for the time being is how much more evidence would be needed to blaze a trail for this research finding

in the real world and convince the many Henrys out there that they should stop discriminating against people on the basis of spurious claims about what proper English is.

As is common in the study of language corpora, new questions arise from the data the moment you have answered the original one. Note, for example, that the expression *never mind his + VERB-ing* occurs twice, whereas *never mind him + VERB-ing* is not attested. Is this latter form impossible, or is its absence from the British National Corpus accidental? This would be a question worth further corpus-based inquiry. We could also categorise the examples according to whether they come from written and formal texts or from spontaneous informal conversations.

References and further reading

Chomsky, Noam. 1957. *Syntactic structures*. The Hague/Paris: Mouton.

Oxford English Dictionary. Second edition, 1989. Ed. by John Simpson and Edmund Weiner. Oxford: OUP. ‹www.oed.com›

Robins, R. H. 1971. *General linguistics: An introductory survey*. London: Longman.

Sapir, Edward. 1921. *Language: An introduction to the study of speech*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Comp.

There are numerous introductions to linguistics aimed at student and academic audiences.

For a work which has long been in successful use internationally see:

Yule, George. 2020. *The study of language: An introduction*. 7th ed. Cambridge: CUP.

For works geared to the needs of a German-speaking readership and focussed on English compare:

Bieswanger, Markus, and Annette Becker. 2010. *Introduction to English linguistics*. 3rd ed. Tübingen: Narr.

Kortmann, Bernd. 2020. *English linguistics: Essentials*. 2nd ed. Berlin: Springer/Metzler.

In addition, there are numerous books on language, languages, and the English language in particular that are addressed to a non-expert readership. Many of them do not even pretend to objectivity but represent their authors' personal prescriptive agenda. For a point of view which is presented forcefully, and not without entertainment value, but would be considered as plain reactionary by most linguists, compare:

Amis, Kingsley. 1997. *The King's English: A guide to modern usage*. London: Harper-Collins. (also available as Penguin Modern Classic, 2011)

[Kingsley Amis (1922–1995) was a major 20th century English novelist.]

A popular treatment that some professional linguists would sneer at because it is sometimes rather superficial is:

Bryson, Bill. 1990. *Mother tongue: The English language*. London: Hamish Hamilton. (Penguin paperback edition 2009; slightly modified title *Mother Tongue: The story of the English language*)

Popular treatments which aim high intellectually and successfully combine expert