

Seventh Edition

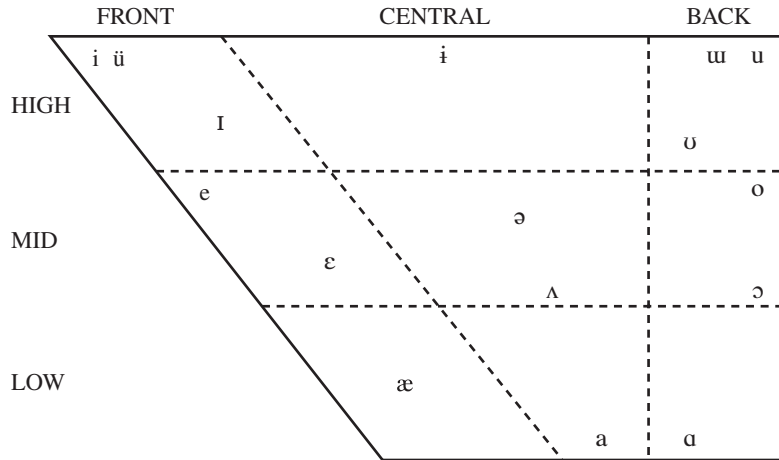
Language

ITS STRUCTURE AND USE



Edward Finegan

Vowels



A Phonetic Alphabet for American English

CONSONANTS

p ^h	pill	t ^h	till	k ^h	kill
p	spill	t	still	k	skill
b	bill	d	dill	g	gill
f	fill	θ	thin	ʃ (š)	shell
v	villa	ð	then	ʒ (ž)	measure
l	lily	s	sin	tʃ (č)	chill
w	will	z	zebra	ʒ (j)	jelly
m	mill	n	nil	ŋ	sing
r	rent	j (y)	yes	h	hill
		r	later	ʔ	uh_oh!

VOWELS AND DIPHTHONGS

i	beat	ə	sofa	u	boot
ɪ	bit	ʌ	but	ʊ	foot
e	bait	aʊ	cow	o	boat
ε	bet	aɪ	buy	ɔ	long
æ	bat	ɔɪ	boy	ɑ	pot

See inside back cover for Phonetic Symbols for Consonants.

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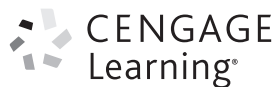


Language

Its Structure and Use

SEVENTH EDITION

Edward Finegan
University of Southern California



Australia • Brazil • Japan • Korea • Mexico • Singapore • Spain • United Kingdom • United States

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Seventh Edition**
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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 17 16 15 14 13

Contents in Brief

Preface xix

Chapter 1 Languages and Linguistics 1

Part One Language Structures 31

Chapter 2 Words and Their Parts: Lexicon and Morphology 32

Chapter 3 The Sounds of Languages: Phonetics 77

Chapter 4 Sound Systems of Language: Phonology 109

Chapter 5 The Structure and Function of Phrases and Sentences: Syntax 153

Chapter 6 The Study of Meaning: Semantics 187

Chapter 7 Language Universals and Language Typology 232

Part Two Language Use 267

Chapter 8 Information Structure and Pragmatics 268

Chapter 9 Speech Acts and Conversation 302

Chapter 10 Language Variation Across Situations of Use: Registers 339

Chapter 11 Language Variation Among Social Groups: Dialects 372

Part Three Language Change, Language Development,
and Language Acquisition 419

Chapter 12 Language Change Over Time: Historical Linguistics 420

Chapter 13 Historical Development in English 467

Chapter 14 Acquiring First and Second Languages 506

Glossary 539

Answers to Practice Exercises 557

Index 563

Index of Languages 569

Index of Internet Sites 573

Index of Films and Videos 575

Contents in Detail

Preface xix

Chapter 1 | Languages and Linguistics 1

How Many Languages Are There? 2

Does the United States Have an Official Language? 3

What Is Human Language? 4

Three Faces of a Language System 5

Language: Mental and Social 6

Signs: Arbitrary and Nonarbitrary 6

Arbitrary Signs 7

Representational Signs 7

Language—A System of Arbitrary Signs 8

Languages as Patterned Structures 8

Grammatical Competence 8

Discreteness 9

Duality 9

Displacement 9

Recursion and Productivity 10

Speech as Patterned Language Use: Communicative Competence 10

Languages and Dialects 11

Different Dialects or Different Languages? 13

Modes of Linguistic Communication 13

Speaking 14

Writing 14

Signing 15

Do Only Humans Have Language? 17

How Animals Communicate in Their Natural Environment 18

Can Chimpanzees Learn a Human Language? 18

Project Nim 20

The Origin of Human Languages: Babel to Babble 21

What Is Linguistics? 22

What Are the Branches of Linguistics? 23

Summary 25

Exercises 26

Other Resources 28

Internet 28

Films and Videos 29

Suggestions for Further Reading 29
Advanced Reading 30
References 30

Part One

Language Structures 31

Chapter 2 | Words and Their Parts: Lexicon and Morphology 32

Introduction: Words Seem Tangible 33
What Does It Mean to Know a Word? 33
Lexical Categories (Parts of Speech) 34
 How to Identify Lexical Categories 34
 Nouns 35
 Adjectives 35
 Verbs 36
 Adverbs 37
 Pronouns 37
 Determiners 38
 Prepositions and Postpositions 39
 Conjunctions 39
Morphemes: Word Parts with Meaning or Function 40
 Morphemes Can Be Free or Bound 40
 Morphemes That Derive Other Words 41
 Inflectional Morphemes 43
How Are Morphemes Organized Within Words? 43
 Morphemes Are Ordered in Sequence 43
 Morphemes Can Be Discontinuous 44
 Portmanteau Words Contain Merged Morphemes 44
 Morphemes Are Layered Within Words 45
How Does a Language Increase Its Vocabulary? 46
 Some Word Classes Are Open, Others Closed 46
 How to Derive New Words 46
 Compounds 48
 Shortening 49
 Back Formation 51
 Conversion or Functional Shift 51
 Semantic Shift 51
 Borrowed Words 52
 Inventing Words 53
What Types of Morphological Systems Do Languages Have? 54
 Isolating Morphology 54
 Agglutinating Morphology 55
 Inflectional Morphology 55
Variant Pronunciations of a Morpheme: Allomorphy 60
Summary 63

Exercises 64

Other Resources 74

Internet 74

Suggestions for Further Reading 75

Advanced Reading 75

References 76

Chapter 3 | The Sounds of Languages: Phonetics 77

Sounds and Spellings: Not the Same Thing 78

Same Spelling, Different Pronunciations 78

Same Pronunciation, Different Spellings 78

Why and Wherefores of Sound/Spelling Discrepancies 79

Phonetics: The Study of Sounds 82

Phonetic Alphabets 82

The Vocal Tract 84

Describing Consonant Sounds 85

Voicing 85

Manner of Articulation 86

Place of Articulation 86

Kinds of Consonant Sounds 87

Stops 88

Fricatives 88

Affricates 90

Obstruents 90

Approximants 90

Nasals 91

Clicks, Taps, Trills 92

Vowel Sounds 92

Vowel Height and Frontness 93

Diphthongs 94

Other Articulatory Features of Vowels 94

Summary 100

Exercises 102

Other Resources 107

Internet 107

Suggestions for Further Reading 108

Chapter 4 | Sound Systems of Language: Phonology 109

Introduction: Sounds in the Mind 110

Physical Sounds and Sound Spectrograms 111

What a Child Must Learn 112

Phonemes and Allophones 113

Distribution of Allophones 115

Phonological Rules and Their Structure	118
Generalizing Phonological Rules	120
Natural Classes of Sounds	121
Underlying Forms	122
Rule Ordering	123
Syllables and Syllable Structure	126
Sequence Constraints	127
Stress	129
Syllables and Stress in Phonological Processes	131
Morphology and Phonology Interaction: Allomorphy	131
English Plural, Possessive, and Third-Person Singular Morphemes	131
English Past-Tense Morpheme	133
Underlying Phonological Form of Morphemes in the Lexicon	134
Phonological Processes	138
Assimilation	138
Deletion	139
Insertion	140
Metathesis	140
From Lexical Entries to Surface Realizations: What the Brain Knows	140
Summary	141
Exercises	143
Other Resources	150
Internet	150
Suggestions for Further Reading	151
Advanced Reading	151
References	152

Chapter 5 | The Structure and Function of Phrases and Sentences: Syntax 153

Introduction	154
Constituency	154
Tree Diagrams	155
Major Constituents of Sentences: Noun Phrases and Verb Phrases	157
Noun Phrase and Verb Phrase	157
Testing Constituency	160
Phrase-Structure Expansions	161
Expanding Noun Phrase	161
Expanding Prepositional Phrase	161
Expanding Sentence and Verb Phrase	161
Phrase-Structure Expansions and Tree Diagrams	163
Grammatical Relations: Subject, Direct Object, and Others	164
Immediate Dominance	164
Subject and Direct Object	165
Grammatical Relations	166
Passive Sentences and Structure Dependence	166

Surface Structures and Underlying Structures	166
Syntactic Operations: Question Formation and the Auxiliary	167
Embedded Clauses	170
Relative Clauses	171
COMP Node	172
Types of Syntactic Operations	173
Functions of Syntactic Operations	174
Yes/No Questions and Echo Questions	174
Active and Passive Structures	175
Recursion and Novel Sentences	176
Summary	178
Exercises	179
Other Resources	186
Suggestions for Further Reading	186
Advanced Reading	186
References	186

Chapter 6 | The Study of Meaning: Semantics 187

Introduction	188
What Is Meaning?	188
Linguistic, Social, and Affective Meaning	189
Linguistic Meaning	189
Social Meaning	191
Affective Meaning	191
Word, Sentence, and Utterance Meaning	193
Meaning of Words and Sentences	193
Scope of Word Meaning	193
Meaning of Utterances	194
Lexical Semantics	196
Semantic Fields	196
Hyponymy	197
Meronymy: Part/Whole Relationships	200
Synonymy	200
Antonymy	201
Converseness	203
Polysemy and Homonymy	204
Metaphors	205
Lexical Semantics: Discovering Relationships in the Lexicon	207
Function Words and Categories of Meaning	208
Tense and Modality	208
Reference	209
Deixis	210
Semantic Roles and Sentence Meaning	214

Semantic Roles and Grammatical Relations 217

Summary 222

Exercises 224

Other Resources 230

Internet 230

Suggestions for Further Reading 230

Advanced Reading 231

References 231

Chapter 7 | Language Universals and Language Typology 232

Similarity and Diversity Across Languages 233

Why Uncover Universals? 233

Language Types 234

Semantic Universals 235

Pronouns 236

Phonological Universals 239

Vowel Systems 239

Nasal and Oral Vowels 241

Consonants 241

Syntactic and Morphological Universals 242

Word Order 242

Possessor and Possessed Noun Phrases 244

Prepositions and Postpositions 244

Relative Clauses 245

Overall Patterns of Ordering 245

Relativization Hierarchy 246

Types of Language Universals 248

Absolute Universals and Universal Tendencies 248

Implicational and Nonimplicational Universals 249

Explanations for Language Universals 249

Original Language Hypothesis 250

Universals and Perception 250

Acquisition and Processing Explanations 250

Social Explanations 251

Language Universals, Language Diversity, and Language Acquisition 252

Summary 256

Exercises 257

Other Resources 264

Suggestions for Further Reading 264

Advanced Reading 264

References 265

Part Two

Language Use 267

Chapter 8 | Information Structure and Pragmatics 268

Introduction: Encoding Information Structure 269

Categories of Information Structure 270

Given Information and New Information 271

Topics 273

Contrast 275

Definite and Indefinite Expressions 276

Referential Expressions 278

Generic and Specific Expressions 279

Categories of Information Structure 280

Information Structure: Intonation, Morphology, Syntax 280

New-Information Stress 280

Information Structure Morphemes 281

Fronting 281

Left-Dislocation 282

It Clefts and WH-Clefts 284

Passives 286

Word Order 287

The Relationship of Sentences to Discourse: Pragmatics 289

Summary 291

Exercises 292

Other Resources 300

Internet 300

Suggestions for Further Reading 300

Advanced Reading 300

References 301

Chapter 9 | Speech Acts and Conversation 302

Language in Use 303

Sentence Structure and the Function of Utterances 304

Speech Acts 305

Types of Speech Act 305

Locutions and Illocutions 306

Distinguishing Among Speech Acts 306

Appropriateness Conditions and Successful Declarations 307

The Cooperative Principle 309

Maxim of Quantity 309

Maxim of Relevance 310

Maxim of Manner 310

Maxim of Quality 311

Violations of the Cooperative Principle	312
Indirect Speech Acts	312
Politeness	315
Respecting Independence and Showing Involvement	315
Speech Events	316
Conversation Is Organized	317
Turn Taking and Pausing	317
Adjacency Pairs	320
Opening Sequences	323
Closing Sequences	325
Conversational Routines	326
Repairs	326
Politeness: An Organizational Force in Conversation	327
Cross-Cultural Communication	328
Summary	330
Exercises	331
Other Resources	336
Internet	336
Video	336
Suggestions for Further Reading	337
Advanced Reading	337
References	338

Chapter 10 | Language Variation Across Situations of Use: Registers 339

Introduction	340
Language Varies Within a Speech Community	340
Language Choice in Multilingual Societies	340
Linguistic Repertoires in Brussels, Tehran, and Los Angeles	340
Switching Varieties Within a Language	341
Speech Situations	342
Elements of a Speech Situation	342
Registers in Monolingual Societies	344
Markers of Register	345
Lexical Markers of Register	345
Phonological Markers of Register	347
Grammatical Markers of Register	349
Semantic Markers of Register	351
Similarities and Differences Between Spoken and Written Registers	355
Two Registers Compared	356
Lexicon and Grammar	358
Phonology	361
Comparing Registers	361
Summary	362

Exercises	364
Other Resources	369
Internet	369
Suggestions for Further Reading	370
Advanced Reading	370
References	371

Chapter 11 | Language Variation Among Social Groups: Dialects 372

Language or Dialect: Which Do You Speak?	373
Social Boundaries and Dialects	373
Distinguishing Among Dialect, Register, and Accent	373
How Do Languages Diverge and Merge?	374
Language Merger in an Indian Village	375
Language/Dialect Continua	376
National Varieties of English	376
American and British National Varieties	377
Regional Varieties of American English	379
Mapping Dialects	379
Dialect Boundaries	385
<i>Dictionary of American Regional English</i>	385
The Atlas of North American English	386
Vowel Mergers	387
Vowel Shifts	388
ANAE Findings	390
Ethnic Varieties of American English	391
African American English	392
Chicano English	395
Ethnic Varieties and Social Identification	396
Socioeconomic Status Varieties: English, French, and Spanish	397
New York City	397
Norwich, England	401
Montreal, Canada	401
Argentina	401
General Comments	402
The Language Varieties of Women and Men	403
Why Do Stigmatized Varieties Persist?	405
Summary	407
Exercises	409
Other Resources	414
Internet	414
Video and Audio	415
Suggestions for Further Reading	416
Advanced Reading	416
References	417

Part Three

Language Change, Language Development, and Language Acquisition 419

Chapter 12 | Language Change Over Time: Historical Linguistics 420

- Do Living Languages Always Change? 421
- Language Families and the Indo-European Family 422
- How to Reconstruct the Linguistic Past 424
 - Polynesian and Pacific Background 424
 - Polynesian Languages and Their History 426
 - Comparative Reconstruction 428
 - Reconstructing the Proto-Polynesian Vocabulary 431
 - Historical Linguistics and Prehistory 434
- What Are the Language Families of the World? 434
 - Counting Speakers and Languages 436
 - Indo-European Family 436
 - Sino-Tibetan Family 442
 - Austronesian Family 442
 - Afroasiatic Family 444
 - The Three Major Language Families of Sub-Saharan Africa 445
 - Other Language Families of Asia and Europe 445
 - Native American Languages 448
 - Languages of Aboriginal Australia 450
 - Papuan Languages 450
 - Nostratic Macrofamily 451
- Language Origins and Language Evolution 451
- Languages in Contact 452
 - Multilingualism 453
- Summary 458
- Exercises 459
- Other Resources 463
 - Internet 463
 - Video 464
 - Suggestions for Further Reading 464
 - Advanced Reading 464
 - References 465

Chapter 13 | Historical Development in English 467

- A Thousand Years of Change 468
- Where Does English Come From? 470
 - English Is a Germanic Language 471
 - Grimm's Law 471

Morphology and Syntax in Indo-European	472
Periods in the History of English	473
Old English: 700–1100	473
Old English Script	473
Old English Sounds	475
Old English Vocabulary and Morphology	475
Inflections and Word Order in Old English	480
Companions of Angels: A Narrative in Old English	482
Vocabulary in the Narrative	483
Grammar: Syntax and Morphology in the Narrative	483
Text Structure of the Narrative	483
Middle English: 1100–1500	484
The Norman Invasion	484
Middle English Vocabulary	484
Middle English Sounds	485
Middle English Inflections	485
Middle English Word Order	487
Where Men and Women Go All Naked: A Middle English Travel Fable	488
Vocabulary in the Fable	488
Morphology in the Fable	488
Syntax in the Fable	490
Modern English: 1500–Present	490
Early and Late Modern English	490
Phonology: The English Vowel Shift	492
Modern English Morphology	492
Modern English Word Order	495
Modern English Vocabulary	496
Modern English Grammar	497
Summary	499
Exercises	500
Other Resources	504
Internet	504
Video and Audio	504
Suggestions for Further Reading	504
Advanced Reading	505
References	505

Chapter 14 | Acquiring First and Second Languages 506

Introduction 507

Acquiring a First Language 508

Principles of Language Acquisition	509
Adult Input in Language Acquisition	510
Stages of Language Acquisition	513

How Do Children Acquire Morphology and Grammar?	516
How Fast Do Children Acquire Vocabulary?	518
How Do Children Acquire Speech Sounds?	518
Studying Language Acquisition	522
Receptive Competence and Productive Competence	522
Wugs and Other Experimental Techniques	523
Acquiring a Second Language	524
First and Second Languages	524
Comparing First- and Second-Language Acquisition	525
The Role of Motivation in Second-Language Learning	526
The Role of Attitudes in Second-Language Learning	527
Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages	528
Summary	531
Exercises	532
Other Resources	535
Internet	535
Videos	535
Suggestions for Further Reading	535
Advanced Reading	536
References	537
Glossary	539
Answers to Practice Exercises	557
Index	563
Index of Languages	569
Index of Internet Sites	573
Index of Films and Videos	575

A Special Word to Students

Language scientists in recent decades have generated a burst of insight into the structure of languages, the interactions between language use and social structures, and even into the representation of language in the brain. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, philologists at first and then linguists and cognitive scientists deepened our understanding of the singularly human trait that is language. We have returned to questions about the origins of language, which were thought too speculative for serious inquiry in an earlier age.

What we do know about languages comes from comparatively deep knowledge about very few of the world's 7,000 languages, staggeringly difficult questions still challenge linguistic researchers, and entire arenas of inquiry remain underexplored. The good news for university students is that significant work remains to be undertaken, and in an information-hungry universe connected through an astonishingly robust Internet, major companies bearing the most familiar names are seeking talented, informed, and dedicated explorers of language and its patterns of use. If you aim to contribute to our understanding of language in the brain or in interaction, rest assured that what we know now will be dwarfed by what you and your peers will discover in the decades just ahead. This book invites you to raise questions about language structures, language acquisition and language development, and the roles of language in human interaction and perception.

Most of us learn early in life how powerful an instrument for good language can be. Think of the many otherwise difficult or impossible achievements that speaking makes possible for children. Think of the delights of song lyrics, screenplays, poems, fiction, and tweets! But language can also be an instrument for ill, and the wisdom in “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is limited to the proverb's first half. Language does much more than describe or report. Language performs: it acts and achieves things. Given that speaking is as central to our social interactions as to our cognitive endeavors, the ability to accomplish good or inflict harm is unsurprising. Irrespective of your college major and career goals, the benefits of knowing as much as possible about language and how it works are incalculable.

As you read *Language: Its Structure and Use—LISU* for short—you'll see certain words in **boldface** type even when they are not examples or captions. When an important concept is first discussed (not necessarily when first mentioned), the term for that concept appears in boldface to highlight its significance; those boldfaced terms also appear in the glossary toward the back of the book. At the end of the glossary you'll find a guide to the meaning of asterisks and other mechanical notations used throughout this book, although phonetic symbols appear instead on the inside front and back covers. If, as you read, a question or interest

prompts you to learn more about the topic, you will find leads at the end of the chapter in “Suggestions for Further Reading.” You’ll also find website addresses and mentions of video recordings. For further leads and other helpful discussion, go to <http://www.CengageBrain.com> and click your way through to the *LISU* pages. Then bookmark the URL for easy return visits.

A Word to Instructors

LISU includes more chapters than can be covered in a semester-long course. Most instructors cover the first six chapters and then select among the others. Here the chapter discussing morphology appears before the chapters treating phonetics and phonology. That order reflects two facts: students find words more tangible than sounds, and morphology can be discussed without phonetic symbols, whose appearance at the gateway to the study of language can be discouraging. Still, if you prefer to teach phonetics and phonology before morphology, skip Chapter 2 until you have taught Chapters 3 and 4; you need only postpone the section on “Morphology and Phonology Interaction: Allomorphy” in Chapter 4 until you’ve completed Chapter 2. A few instructors have suggested combining the chapters on pragmatics and conversation or the chapters on historical linguistics and the history of English, but because many others have found one or the other of these pairs satisfies the particular needs of their audience I have kept all four. In an effort to contain costs, the chapter on “Writing” is available only on the *LISU* website.

Special Features

At the head of each chapter, “What Do You Think?” describes quotidian interactions and asks questions to which the chapter provides answers. The questions aim to engage students before they start reading and to establish a few key points at the outset. Brief responses to the questions can be found at the end of each chapter, preceding the exercises, and students may find it useful to check their answers before returning to the top of the chapter.

Within chapters, the “Try It Yourself” sections straightforwardly address what has just been or is about to be discussed in the text and foster the practice of students playing an active role in their learning.

New to this edition are sections called “At the Bar,” which appear in some chapters to illustrate real-life use of matters under discussion. These features describe direct application of linguistic analysis to crimes and other forensic matters. They show the application of language analysis in a growing arena outside more traditional fields of applied linguistics.

The sections called “Computers and . . .” have been revised to give sharper focus where possible to developments in voice recognition, speech synthesis, and automatic translation, phenomena taken for granted by younger students but excitingly at the heart of some of the most ambitious R&D sections of major corporations.

Exercises in each chapter separate those analyzing English from those analyzing other languages. Exercises designated “Especially for Educators and Future Teachers” will likely prove helpful to most students, perhaps especially if framed as of interest beyond educators to parents and future parents, whose children’s success will be significantly affected by school practices and teachers’ attitudes.

Practice exercises are given in the Exercises section of Chapters 2 through 8 and Chapter 10, and students can check their answers against suggested ones on pages 555 through 558.

What’s New

This edition of *LISU* has been expanded in some respects, condensed in others, and recast for greater clarity wherever possible. Chapter 1 has been trimmed. Additional tree diagrams appear in Chapter 2, and the discussion of morphological types is expanded. Where relevant, newer words like *tweet* and *google* are discussed, as well as Google n-grams, for example to trace the rise of words like *snuck* for *sneaked*. Chapters 3 and 4 on phonetics and phonology have been revised for clarity, with a rule-based approach maintained for its pedagogical value. Chapter 5 on syntax contains additional tree diagrams with more explicit trees and a section on testing for constituency by movement, substitution, and coordination. Chapters 6 through 9 on universals, pragmatics, and conversation have benefited chiefly from improved clarity and updated examples. Chapter 10, on registers, has been simplified and relies for much of its analysis on passages that contrast the conversational style of Merle Miller’s book of interviews with President Harry Truman (which remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for over a year) with a formal biographical passage from David McCullough’s Pulitzer Prize–winning biography of the same president. Chapter 11, on dialects, contains no *DARE* maps; instead, students are referred to websites, where they may serendipitously find their way to further links. The chapters on historical linguistics and the history of English are updated, including added discussion about the development of periphrastic modals in Chapter 13. Chapter 14 expands the discussion of second-language acquisition, a subject of interest to university students facing a language requirement. At the end of the Glossary, a set of explanations for symbols and typographical conventions has been added.

I hope this edition will continue to meet your aims and your students’ needs.

Workbook and Answer Keys

Accompanying this seventh edition of *LISU* is a new (sixth) edition of *Looking at Languages: A Workbook in Elementary Linguistics* by Paul Frommer and me. Among other additions and enhancements, it contains exercises dealing with new technologies in word processing, automatic translation, and speech recognition. These exercises will help students apply and extend basic linguistic tools of analysis.

Spoken-language files to accompany many workbook exercises are available via Linguistics CourseMate at <http://www.CengageBrain.com>. Urge your students to bookmark the *LISU* and *LOLA* websites once they click their way through to them the first time.

Answer keys for *LISU* and *LOLA* are available to instructors from the publisher. In *LISU*'s answer key, some chapters offer guidance for instructors on ways to supplement the text or take advantage of matters otherwise unexplored in the text itself.

Acknowledgments

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A Word to All

Your comments and suggestions are welcome: Finegan@USC.edu.

—Edward Finegan
Santa Barbara, California

Language

Its Structure and Use

SEVENTH EDITION

1

Languages and Linguistics



What Do You Think?

- Rob and Rod, college roommates who'll argue over almost anything, are debating the number of languages in the world. Rob says thousands. Rod says there's no way to count 'em. What do you say?
- Lauren in Los Angeles opens her utility bill and says with alarm as she glances at an insert, "Look at this! Five different languages! Spanish and Chinese and who knows what else! Isn't English the official language of the USA?" Is it?
- Reading a magazine, sixth-grade Sydney looks up and asks what *note* means. Figuring she knows its meaning in expressions like *thank-you note* and *musical note*, you ask her to read the sentence aloud. She reads it, and you say it means 'paper money' or 'bill,' as in "\$20 bill." She asks how hearing the whole sentence helped you. Your explanation?
- Fifteen-year-old Felix is teasing seven-year-old Seth at a family picnic and asks, "Do you know when your birthday is?" When Seth says, "May ninth," Felix retorts, "I didn't ask *when* your birthday is, dude! I asked if you *knew* when it is!" What does Seth understand about the question that Felix pretends not to know?

How Many Languages Are There?

Some dictionaries include language names among their entries, and you've probably seen lists that provide information about the number of speakers of various languages. When the U.S. Census Bureau compiles its data, it records which languages residents speak and makes that information publicly available. At the United Nations, most countries are represented, and their ambassadors would likely know which languages are spoken in their home countries. With all that information, it should be easy to answer the question, "How many languages are there in the world?"

Actually, enumerating the languages of the world is not a straightforward task. First, it's not always clear whether to call two language varieties *dialects* of one language or *different languages* altogether. Then, too, languages previously unknown to outsiders are sometimes discovered in the Amazon, Papua New Guinea, and other remote parts of the world. Some compilations of languages may be limited to spoken tongues, while others include signed languages. Finally, languages die when their last speaker dies, and that happens more often than you'd think.

Even when criteria are established for inclusion on a language list, compiling the information may be tough. For one thing, a given language may have different names, as with *Hebrew/Ivrit* and *Irish/Erse/Gaeilge/Irish Gaelic*. For another, a name may be spelled in different ways. One language spoken mainly in China (but not related to Chinese) can be spelled *Uyghur*, *Uighur*, *Uighar*, *Uyгур*, *Uigur*, *Uighuir*, *Uiguir*, *Weiwuer*, and *Wiga*. And that's if you're using the Roman alphabet! By its speakers, Uyghur (we had to choose one!) is spelled with Arabic script, and it is also sometimes represented in Cyrillic letters or Chinese characters.

In the course of a century, many languages die and a few may be born. Occasionally, a dead language may be revived, as Hebrew has been. Similarly, the last speaker of Cornish, a Celtic language, died in 1777, but in the southwest of England it is being revived and is in use now among several hundred speakers, including some native speakers under 20 years of age. Manx, also Celtic and formerly spoken on the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea, is now extinct as a first language, but some second-language speakers are endeavoring to revive it. In Worcester, Massachusetts, Red Thunder Cloud died in 1996—and with him died Catawba, a Siouan language. In 2010 Boa Sr., the last native speaker of Bo, died in the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, and with her died her language. It is estimated that one natural language dies every couple of weeks.

New languages can also be born. Pidgins are spoken in some places as a second language, usually for limited functions such as bartering or commerce between speakers of different languages, but when circumstances in those places allow children to acquire a pidgin as their first language it will undergo a process called **creolization**, through which it develops into a full-blown language. Creoles such as Nigerian Pidgin and Saramaccan must be counted among the world's languages (even when their speakers call them pidgins).

One useful source of information, *The Ethnologue*, lists 7,105 languages. But don't take that number to be exact. Consider that in this book we sometimes refer to "Chinese" and that the U.S. Census Bureau allows residents to identify themselves as speaking "Chinese," whereas *The Ethnologue* cites Chinese

only as a “macrolanguage,” with 13 distinct language members carrying names such as Hakka Chinese, Mandarin Chinese, Wu Chinese, Xiang Chinese, and Yue Chinese, each of which may have dialects of its own. In the English-speaking world, Mandarin Chinese is known simply as Mandarin and Yue Chinese as Cantonese. Included among the *Ethnologue’s* 7,105 languages are some sign languages. Except for their channel of expression, sign languages are like spoken languages and share with them the challenges of being identified and counted. In the city of Chiangmai in Thailand, Chiangmai Sign Language is known only among older signers in the deaf community, while younger signers use a distinct language called Thai Sign Language.

It seems safe to stick with the conventional wisdom that there are about 7,000 languages in use in the world. Of those, only six—Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish—have official status at the United Nations, and only five of those rank among the top 10 languages in the world in number of speakers. French does not. On the other hand, Hindi, Bengali, Portuguese, German, and Japanese have greater numbers of speakers than some official U.N. languages. The U.S. Census Bureau identified well over 300 individual languages in use in the United States between 2006 and 2008. The *New York Times* reported in 2010 that New York City’s public schools were home to speakers of 176 languages and that residents of Queens, one of the city’s five boroughs, spoke 138 languages. In all, the Big Apple was home to some 800 languages. Given that the U.S. Census Bureau reports over 300 and the *New York Times* about 800, the difficulty of counting languages becomes apparent. Consider, too, that *The Ethnologue* lists over 40,000 primary names, alternate names, and dialect names for language varieties. Determining an exact number of languages in the entire world is a significant challenge!

Does the United States Have an Official Language?

Many people, including many U.S. residents, think the United States has English as its official language. It does not. In fact, the United States does *not* have an official language—and has never had one. Like the nation as a whole, some states have no official language; other states designate English as their official language; the only state with more than one official language is Hawaii, where English and Hawaiian are both official.

Some Americans also tend to think of the United States as essentially a monolingual nation, albeit with large numbers of Spanish speakers in the Southwest, Southeast, and Northeast. Actually, 55 million U.S. residents 5 years old or older speak a home language other than English (that’s almost 20 percent). Thirty-four million of those speak Spanish, and more than half of those Spanish speakers report that they also speak English very well. In seven heavily populated states at least one of every four residents over the age of 5 speaks a home language other than English. All 50 states have speakers of Arabic, Hindi, Hungarian, Korean, Tagalog, Thai, Urdu, and Vietnamese. All 50 states also have Native American speakers of indigenous North American languages. Navajo, with about 170,000 speakers,



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Los Angeles, California. Polling place notice posted in seven languages: English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese.

is spoken in homes in New Mexico, Arizona, and several other states. According to figures in *The Ethnologue*, 176 living languages are used in the United States today. They range from Achumawi, Alabama, and Louisiana Creole French to Hawaiian, Lakota, Maricopa, Uyghur, Vietnamese, and Yatzachi Zapoteco. The California Department of Motor Vehicles administers its driver's license written examination in no fewer than 32 languages, including Amharic, Armenian, Cambodian, Hindi, Hmong, Hungarian, Indonesian, Laotian, Persian, Punjabi, Samoan, Tongan, and Turkish. At the 2010 U.S. Census website, instructions for filling out the census form were available in 59 languages, including Cebuano, Chamorro, Chuukese, Dinka, Haitian Creole, Marshallese, Navajo, Nepali, Swahili, Tamil, and Telugu. Wherever useful, election ballots are printed in multiple languages.

Still, the linguistic richness of the United States is not stable. The survival of most Native American languages is threatened. Because speakers tend to be older and because insufficient resources support these heritage languages, they are yielding to English among younger Native Americans. After English, no language spoken in the United States comes close to Spanish in number of speakers. Its 34.5 million U.S. speakers far exceed the 2.5 million who speak Chinese

and the 2.0 million who speak French, the two next popular. With few exceptions the children or grandchildren of immigrants cannot comfortably speak or readily understand the language of their grandparents, and this is true even of Spanish. Moreover, for all the richness of languages other than English throughout the United States, 225 million U.S. residents above the age of 5 speak only English at home—that's a whopping 80 percent.



Try It Yourself Using your knowledge about current and past immigration

patterns, identify the eight most popular non-English languages spoken among U.S. residents aged 5 and older. Spanish, Chinese, and French fill the first three slots, and Italian and Arabic are ranked ninth and tenth. Which languages are in between?

What Is Human Language?

The modern study of language is rooted in questions first raised millennia ago. As old as speculation on any subject, inquiry into the nature of language occupied Plato and Aristotle and other Greek philosophers, as well philosophers from India. In some areas of grammatical analysis, the ancients made contributions that have remained useful for 2,000 years and established some of the categories still used today. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,

the field of linguistics emerged to address certain age-old questions, including these:

- ◆ What is the nature of the relationship between signs and what they signify?
- ◆ What are the basic elements of a language?
- ◆ How are the basic elements of language organized into words, sentences, and discourse?
- ◆ What enables us to produce and understand countless sentences never encountered before?
- ◆ How do languages achieve their communicative goals?
- ◆ What is the origin of language?
- ◆ In what ways do languages change and develop?
- ◆ What does it mean to say two languages are related?
- ◆ What is the relationship between a language and a dialect?
- ◆ What enables a young child to learn a language so efficiently?
- ◆ What makes it so challenging for an adult to learn a language?
- ◆ Are there right and wrong ways to express things, and—if so—who decides?

This book provides a modern context for asking and addressing these and other questions about language.

Three Faces of a Language System

The fundamental function of every language system is to link meaning and expression—to provide verbal expression for thought and feeling and for that expression to be comprehensible to others. A grammar can be viewed as a coin whose two sides are *expression* and *meaning* and whose function is to systematically link the two. But language is not simply a two-sided coin; it has a third face so important in producing and interpreting utterances that it can override almost all else. That face is *context*, and only in context can an expression convey a speaker's intended meaning and be correctly interpreted by a hearer.

Imagine a New England dinner-table conversation about, say, the cost of living. In the course of the conversation, a guest asks the host, “Is there a state income tax in Connecticut?” The question could elicit replies of “Yes,” “No,” or “I don't know” because in this context it is likely to be understood as a request for information. But consider an equally straightforward inquiry made of the host on the same occasion: “Is there any salt on the table?” To this question earnest replies of “Yes,” “No,” or “I don't know” would mark the host as inconsiderate.

Is there a state income tax in Connecticut?

Is there any salt on the table?

The form of the salt question resembles the form of the income tax question, but the *point* of the questions—their *intended* meaning—and the expected responses could hardly be more different. At a dinner table, a guest inquiring about salt expects a host to recognize that it's *salt* that's wanted, not *information*! By contrast, in a related context—with the host in the kitchen, pepper

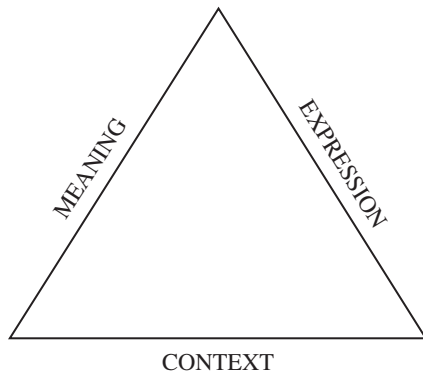


Figure 1.1 Three Faces of Language

mill in hand, and facing a guest who's just come from the dining room—the question, “Is there any salt on the table?” is likely to be understood as seeking information even though *the form of the question* is exactly the same as the one asked by the guest at the table. In answer to the question asked in the dining room, a reply of “Yes” or “No” or “I don’t know” would seem bizarre. In the kitchen, it would be altogether appropriate.

You can see, then, that conversationalists cannot interpret the point of an utterance from expression alone. To grasp the intended meaning of an expression, hearers must consider it *in its context*. Likewise, speakers routinely rely on a hearer’s ability to recognize their intentions in uttering an expression in a specific context.

Besides meaning and expression, then, at the base of language use is context, and language can be better viewed as a three-sided triangle comprising expression, meaning, and context, as shown in Figure 1.1.

Expression encompasses words, phrases, and sentences, including intonation and stress. **Meaning** refers to the senses and referents of those elements of expression. **Context** refers to the social situation in which expression is uttered and includes whatever has been expressed earlier in that situation and any shared knowledge between speaker and hearer. What links expression and meaning is grammar. What links grammar and interpretation is context. Without attention to both grammar and context, language utterances cannot be understood.

Language: Mental and Social

Language is often viewed as a vehicle of thought, a system of expression that mediates the transfer of thought from one person to another. It does—and in everyday life it also serves equally important social and emotional functions.

Linguists are interested in models of how language is organized in the mind and how it is shaped by the social structures of human communities, reflecting those structures in expression and interpretation.

Signs: Arbitrary and Nonarbitrary

In everyday conversation we talk about signs—*signs* of trouble with the economy, no *sign* of a train arriving at a railway station, someone’s vital *signs*, and so on. **Signs** are indicators of something else. In the examples just mentioned, the indicator is inherently related to the thing indicated, and such nonarbitrary signs have a direct, often causal relationship to the things they indicate. Smoke is a nonarbitrary sign of fire, clouds a nonarbitrary sign of impending rain.

Arbitrary Signs

Nonarbitrary signs such as clouds and smoke differ from partly or wholly arbitrary signs. With arbitrary signs like traffic lights, railroad crossing indicators, wedding rings, and national flags, no causal or inherent connection exists between the sign and what it signifies. Arbitrary indicators can be present even when the thing indicated is absent (as with a bachelor wearing a wedding ring). Because they are conventional representations, arbitrary signs can be changed. If a national transportation department decided to use the color blue as the signal to stop traffic, it could do so. Or it could use red or, for that matter, green. The relationship between words and what they signify is generally arbitrary, and we say that language is a system of *arbitrary* signs.

Representational Signs

Some essentially arbitrary signs are not entirely arbitrary and may suggest their meaning. Poison may be suggested by a skull and crossbones ☠, while an icon such as ☀ may suggest the sun, and the roman numerals II and III, with two and three strokes respectively, represent the numbers two and three. Because these signs suggest what they indicate, they are partly iconic. Signs that are basically arbitrary but partly iconic are called **representational**. Linguistic examples include the English *meow* and *boom*, insofar as those words suggest what they signify, but even words that mimic natural noises are cross-linguistically different.

Iconic expression can also appear spontaneously in ordinary speech. I once telephoned the home of a friend, and her 4-year-old son answered. He reported that his mother was showering, and when I said I'd call back in a few minutes he indicated that calling back soon would do no good. His explanation was this: *My mother is taking a long, loong, looong shower*. By stretching out his pronunciation of the vowel sound in *long*, the boy demonstrated the potential for iconicity in human language. By making his vowels longer, he directly signaled length of time and thus iconically emphasized the salient part of his meaning. Representational language (also called iconic) is expression that in any fashion mimics or directly suggests its content.

Iconicity can also be expressed in grammar. Consider that English has two ways of organizing conditional sentences—such as those with *if*. The condition (the “if” part) can precede the consequence or follow it.

If you behave, I'll give you some M&Ms. (condition precedes consequence)

I'll give you some M&Ms if you behave. (condition follows consequence)

English permits placing the condition (*if you behave*) before or after the consequence (*I'll give you some M&Ms*). While contextual factors may influence the



Try It Yourself Besides the boy's stretching out the vowel in *long* to represent length of time, identify a second way in which “My mother is taking a long, loong, looong shower” is iconic. Now, identify another very, very common example in English in which the second way conveys a meaning different from extended length. (Hint: Examine the preceding sentence attentively.)

choice, speakers and writers show a strong preference for the condition to precede the consequence, a preference shared with many languages. The reason has to do with the order of occurrence of real-world events described by conditional sentences. In our example the addressee must *first* behave; only *after that* will the speaker provide some M&M candies. These real-world events are ordered in time, and the real-world order is reflected in the preferred linguistic order of condition before consequence. With condition before consequence, the expression mimics the sequencing of real-world events. Some languages allow *only* the condition-before-consequence pattern; others permit both patterns. But no language appears to limit conditional sentences to the non-iconic order of consequence before condition.

Language—A System of Arbitrary Signs

Despite occasional iconic characteristics, human language is essentially arbitrary. Except for the associations established by convention, the form of an expression is generally independent of its meaning. Imagine a parent trying to catch a few minutes of the televised evening news while preparing dinner. Suddenly a strong aroma of, say, burning rice wafts into the TV room. This *nonarbitrary sign* will send the parent scurrying to salvage dinner. The aroma is *caused* by the burning rice and would convey its message to speakers of any language. There is nothing conventionalized about the message. Now consider the words of a youngster in the kitchen who shouts, “The rice is burning!” That utterance is just as likely to send the parent hurtling to the kitchen, but the words are arbitrary. It is a set of facts about *English* (not about burning rice) that enables the utterance to alert the parent. The utterance is thus an arbitrary sign.

Other languages express the same meaning differently: Korean by *pap t^handa*, Swahili by *wali inaunguwi*, Arabic by *yahtariqu alruzzu*. The forms of these utterances are not iconic and have nothing to do with rice or the manner in which it is cooking. Instead, they reflect only the language systems of Korean, Swahili, or Arabic. As you see, a central characteristic of human language is that the connection between words and what they mean—between signifier and signified—is largely arbitrary.

Languages as Patterned Structures

Grammatical Competence

Given the arbitrary relationship between linguistic signs and what they represent, languages must be highly organized systems in order to function as reliable means of communication.

What underlies the observable patterns that languages follow are called “rules.” Not rules imposed from the outside like traffic regulations, linguistic rules do not specify how something *should* be done. Instead, the rules described in this book are based on the observed regularities of language behavior and the underlying systems that can be inferred from that behavior and

certain kinds of intuitions. They are the rules that even very young children acquire unconsciously and put to use when they display mastery of their native tongue.

A language is a set of elements and a system of rules for combining those elements into patterned expressions that serve to accomplish specific tasks in specific contexts. Utterances report news, greet relatives, invite friends to lunch, request the time of day from strangers. With language, we make wisecracks, poke fun, express admiration, propose marriage, create fictional worlds, argue for a course of action, and so on. And a language accomplishes its work with a finite system that a child masters in a few years. The mental capacity that enables speakers to form grammatical sentences such as *My mother is taking a long shower* rather than “A taking long my shower is mother” (or thousands of other possible ill-formed strings of those seven words) is **grammatical competence**. It enables speakers to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences they haven’t heard before. Besides arbitrariness, then, four other hallmarks of human language systems deserve highlighting.

Discreteness

Speakers can identify the sound segments in the words of their language. Most speakers of English would agree that the words *sat*, *pat*, and *kid* have three sounds each, while *spat*, *pats*, and *kids* have four each, and *spats* and *skids* five each. Likewise for the three sounds in *then*: the initial consonant sound represented by *th*, the vowel sound represented by *e*, and the final sound represented by *n*. It is a structural feature of language that words are made up of discrete (separate) elemental sounds.

Duality

Human languages can be analyzed on two levels. At one level, a language can be viewed as having meaningful parts. For example, *tabletop* has *table* and *top* as meaningful parts. At a lower level the elements that make up the meaningful parts do not themselves carry meaning. The sounds of *top* don’t individually mean anything but form a meaningful unit only when combined in a particular order. Precisely because the individual sounds in *top* don’t carry meaning, they can be formed into other combinations with different meanings, as in *pot*, *opt*, *topped*, and *popped*. This two-level analysis—of meaningless elements combined into meaningful ones—is what we call the *duality* hallmark.

Displacement

Human languages are capable of representing things and events that are not present but are spatially or temporally distant. Speakers aren’t confined to discussing events of the here and now but can talk of faraway places and events of yesterday, yesteryear, and even yet—or never—to occur. We call this feature **displacement**.