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## 1.1 Introduction

If you ask people to name the most consequential invention in world history, you will probably hear a list that includes the wheel, the telephone, the airplane, the computer, the mobile phone, and the robot. What might be missing from the answers, and is often overlooked, is human natural language. Language is an invention, a fantastically successful one. Judged by its longevity and the extent of its daily use in the modern world, it compares with the wheel.

Language comes so naturally to us that it is easy to forget what a strange and miraculous gift it is. The gift of language is the distinctive human trait that marks us all genetically, setting us apart from other forms of life. All over the world, we humans fashion our breath into hisses, hums, squeaks, and pops, and listen to others do the same. We do this, of course, not only because we like the sounds but because the details in the sounds contain information about the intentions of the person making them.

Language is one of the key features that make us human. Just as it is said in 《春秋穀梁传·僖公二十二年》：“人之所以为人者，言也”。Perhaps it is language that makes human beings different from other animals. Whatever we do, language is central to our lives and the use of language underpins the study of every other discipline. We discover our identity as individuals and social beings when we acquire it during childhood. It serves as a means of cognition and communication: It enables us to think for ourselves and to cooperate with other people in our community; it is the key to the understanding of so much of human behavior, both of ourselves and of our interaction with others. It provides for present needs and future plans, and at the same time carries with it the impression of things past. By language, we think, we live, we communicate, and we get things done. By language, we read, we write, and we maintain harmonious relationships with the people around us. People with a good mastery of language and its associated skills are more likely to succeed in their lives and careers. What is language, then?

## 1.2 Language

### 1.2.1 Definition of language

Language has fascinated people for thousands of years, and linguists have studied its every possible aspect, from the number of languages spoken in New Guinea to why English-speaking people say *razzle-dazzle* instead of *dazzle-razzle*. Every day we speak and hear language, but we never stop to ask what language is. Linguists have offered various definitions of language. Yet, none succeeds in satisfying all. According to the important features of languages that most linguists agree on, a generally acceptable definition is: **Language** is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication.

Language is a **system**—elements in it are not arranged and combined randomly but according to some rules and principles. For example, we can say “Can you speak Chinese?”, but we cannot say “Can speak you Chinese?” Man is born free, yet everywhere he is in chains. So it is with using language. Language is arbitrary—there is no intrinsic connection between the word (e.g. *pen*) and the thing (e.g. something we write with). Language is vocal—the primary medium for all language is sound. Language is used for human communication—it is human-specific and differs greatly from the systems of animal communication. Birds, bees, crabs, spiders, hippos, and most other creatures communicate in certain ways, but the information imparted is severely limited and stimulus-bound, confined to a small set of messages.

### 1.2.2 Design features of language

If language is viewed only as a system of communication, then many species communicate. Then it seems that language is not the exclusive property of the human species. But, as a matter of fact, human natural language is quite different from the systems of animal communication (e.g. bees’ dance, birds’ song). Just as the British philosopher Bertrand Russell said, “No matter how eloquently a dog may bark, he cannot tell you that his parents were poor but honest.” Similarly, 《礼记·曲礼上》 has the insightful statement: “鸜鹆能言，不离飞鸟；猩猩能言，不离禽兽”。

The American linguist Charles Hockett (1966) proposes a set of 16 design features for the definition of language. Only if all of these are present simultaneously can the communication system be called a language. The features are 1) using the vocal-auditory channel, 2) broadcast transmission with directional reception, 3) rapid fading, 4) interchangeability, 5) complete feedback, 6) specialization, 7) semanticity, 8) arbitrariness, 9) discreteness, 10) displacement, 11) openness, 12) tradition, 13) duality of patterning, 14) prevarication, 15) reflexiveness, and 16) learnability. Although human language shares some features with other animals, at least five features are specific to early hominids and modern humans:

arbitrariness, cultural transmission, displacement, productivity, and duality.

### 1) Arbitrariness

What's in a name? That which we call a rose.

By any other name would smell as sweet.

(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene 2)

Human language is arbitrary. There is no logical or intrinsic connection between meanings and sounds, or between the things signified and the words used to signify them—between the **signified** and the **signifier**. This feature of language is usually called **arbitrariness**. In English, for example, bakers make bread. The French call it *pain*, the Russians *xleb*. In Chinese, the word is *mianbao*. Not only can a given thing be signified differently in different languages, but even in a single language, several signs can represent the same entity or notion. We purchase a *dozen* or *twelve* books for the same price. We can write *12* or *XII* for the same concept, as well as *TWELVE*, *twelve*, or *Twelve*. Thus, to represent even a straightforward numerical concept, English permits several alternative signs. For more complex content, the variety of possible expressions in phrases and sentences seems limitless.

### 2) Cultural transmission

Language is also culturally transmitted rather than genetically. Human language is only acquired through a process of learning: A child completely cut off from the sound of language will acquire absolutely no facility in the use or understanding of language. Moreover, a child will acquire only that language which forms part of the culture in which they are brought up. Although the language faculty rests upon our genetic endowment, we learn the specific words and grammatical structures of the language community in which we are raised. For example, a Chinese baby born and brought up in London by an English family will speak English, while an English child, brought up in Beijing by a Chinese aunt, will speak Chinese.

### 3) Displacement

**Displacement** is the feature of language that allows us to talk about things remote in time or space, or both, from the site of communication: about the past or the future, about places that are far away, and even about hypothetical and non-existent states of affairs. For example, we can use language to create fiction and tell lies. With the sole exception of the bee dance, displacement appears to be unique to human beings.

### 4) Productivity

Another feature of language is **productivity** or **creativity**, which means there is no limit to the number of different things we can say. Language users can produce and understand an infinite number of utterances they have or have never heard before. This feature appears to be unique to human language: All other creatures are restricted to choosing from a short fixed list of possible utterances. Although robins are creative in their ability to sing the same

thing in many ways, they are not creative in their ability to use the same units of the system to express many different messages with different meanings.

### 5) Duality

Language has at least two levels of structure. First, minimal meaningless units are combined into larger, meaningful units. Specifically, meaningless sounds are combined into meaningful words. For example, the four meaningless English phonemes /p/, /t/, /k/, and /æ/ can be arranged into /æt/ *at*, /pæt/ *pat*, /kæt/ *cat*, /tæp/ *tap*, /tæk/ *tack*, /tæt/ *tat*, /æpt/ *apt*, /ækt/ *act*, /tækt/ *tact* or *tacked*, /kæp/ *cap*, /kæpt/ *capped*, /pækt/ *pact* or *packed*, and several other items. Second, these minimal meaningful units can be combined into longer, more complex expressions. Thus, words can be combined into phrases and sentences. This higher level of organization is the essential basis for productivity: Even if the range of words is limited to a small, fixed repertoire (e.g. the 850 words of C. K. Ogden's *Basic English*), an enormous number of sentences can be made. This feature of language is crucial because if every speech sound had its meaning, we would not be able to produce more different meanings than the number of speech sounds we can produce. Animal systems of communication generally lack this feature, though bird songs and whale songs arguably contain an element of duality.

### 1.2.3 Functions of language

Linguistic studies in language functions were long in the background. By making a distinction between *la langue* and *la parole*, Ferdinand de Saussure instigated the study of variation in time, and how language varies among its users, but analysis of how language is actually used in communication did not come about until Roman Jakobson's work in the 1960s. Jakobson suggested different language functions focusing on the message (the informative function), the speaker (the expressive function), and the listener (the social function), respectively. Simply speaking, communication is the act of passing or sharing information between individuals. Of course, not all communication has to do with the transfer of information, but there may be other goals. Because we live in a complex society, we have to depend on communication to help our lives run more smoothly. Language is a tool of communication, which can be applied to perform some functions. Generally speaking, language has seven basic functions: phatic, directive, informative, interrogative, expressive, evocative, and performative.

**Phatic function:** Language is used to establish an atmosphere or maintain social contact among the communicators. Greetings, farewells, and comments on the weather serve this function.

**Directive function:** Language is used to get the hearer to do something. Most imperative sentences are of this function.

**Informative function:** Language is used to convey something, to give information



about facts, or to reason things out. Declarative sentences serve this function.

**Interrogative function:** Language is used to obtain information from others. All questions expecting replies serve this function. However, rhetorical questions do not have an interrogative function. For example, *O Wind, if Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?* This is a rhetorical question that does not expect a reply.

**Expressive function:** Language is used to reveal the speaker's attitudes and feelings. Interjections serve this function.

**Evocative function:** Language is used to create certain feelings in the hearers. Jokes, advertising, and propaganda serve this function.

**Performative function:** Language is used to do things or to perform things. The judge's imprisonment sentence, the president's declaration of war or independence, etc. serve this function.

## 1.3 Linguistics

### 1.3.1 Definition of linguistics

The English word *linguistic* is derived from the Latin *lingua*, "tongue," and refers to the study of human language. The field of linguistics is a growing and exciting area of study, with an important impact on such fields as philosophy, cognitive psychology, pedagogy, anthropology, sociology, language learning and teaching, computer science, neuroscience, AI (artificial intelligence), cultural studies, intercultural communication, among others. That is why linguistics is called the pilot science of humanities and social sciences. If we have much knowledge of linguistics, it is much easier for us to understand other disciplines such as language learning and teaching, translation studies, and literature. At first glance, this approach might seem to lie in the great academic tradition of knowing more and more about less and less until you know everything about nothing. But please don't put the book down just yet. Read it, and you will be interested in it. It will be a travel guide leading you into the wonders of human language and the kingdom of linguistics.

What is linguistics, then? Fundamentally, the field is concerned with the nature of language and verbal communication. **Linguistics** may be defined as the scientific study of language. Perhaps this definition is hardly sufficient to give you a positive indication of the fundamental principles of the subject. However, it will be enough to say that the scientific study of language involves its investigation by means of controlled and empirically verifiable observations, with reference to some general theory of language. Many linguists today assume that theirs is an empirical and deductive science and that scientific progress in the domain of their research is possible.

### 1.3.2 The scope of linguistics

The purpose of linguistics is to provide models of language which reveal features that are not immediately apparent. Linguistics seeks to describe and explain this human faculty. It is concerned with three things: discovering precisely what it means to “know a language”; providing techniques for describing this knowledge; and explaining why our knowledge takes the form it does.

Linguistics is a relatively young science, but it covers a wide scope of topics and its boundaries are difficult to define. A diagram in the shape of a wheel gives a rough impression of the scope covered (Figure 1.1). The major branches of linguistics include phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. They are fields of inquiry purely about language itself.

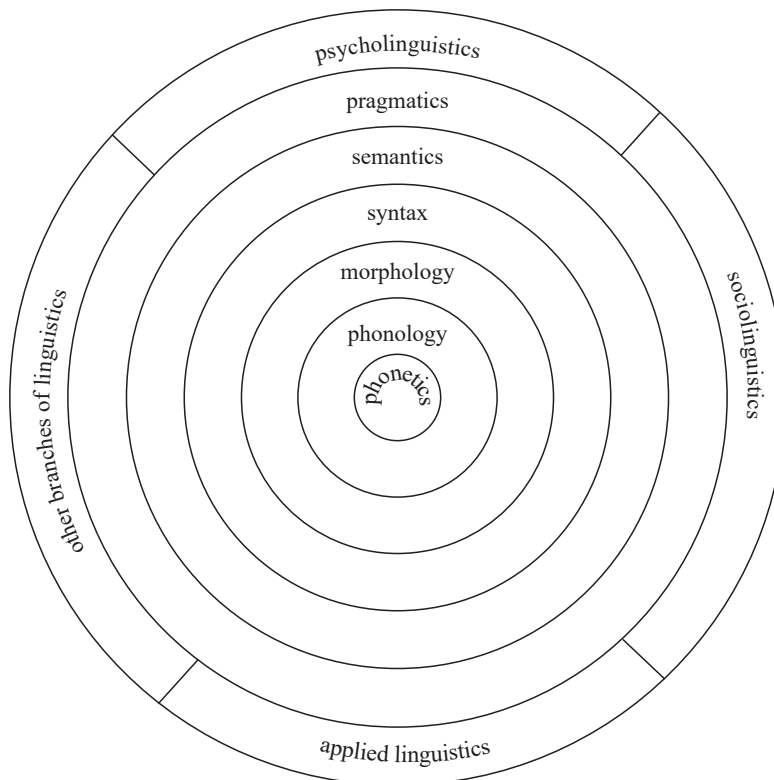


Figure 1.1 Scope of linguistics

**Phonetics** is the scientific study of speech sounds. It studies how speech sounds are articulated, transmitted, and received. It deals with the physical nature of speech sounds, rather than their relations to other speech sounds in particular languages. It is a pure science that examines speech sounds in general.

**Phonology** is the study of how speech sounds function in a language. It studies the ways speech sounds are organized. It can be seen as the functional phonetics of a particular language.

**Morphology** is the study of word formation. It is a branch of linguistics that breaks words down into morphemes. It can be considered as the grammar of words as syntax is the grammar of sentences.

**Syntax** is the study of sentence structure. It deals with the combination of words into phrases, clauses, and sentences. It is the grammar of sentence construction.

**Semantics** is a branch of linguistics that is concerned with the study of meaning in all its formal aspects. Words have several types of meaning. A sentence needs to be well-formed both syntactically and semantically. The sentence *Mary married Mickey Mouse*, for example, is syntactically well-formed but semantically ill-formed, for we know that one cannot marry a fictional character. Semantics is concerned with such information.

**Pragmatics** can be defined as the study of language in use. It deals with how speakers use language in ways that cannot be predicted from linguistic knowledge alone and how listeners arrive at the intended meaning of speakers. In a broad sense, pragmatics studies the principles observed by human beings when they communicate with one another. We can roughly say that pragmatics takes care of the meaning that is not covered by semantics. So people use the formula as its definition: PRAGMATICS = MEANING – SEMANTICS.

The branches of linguistics above are at the very center of its scope. However, language can also be studied in relation to something else. Here, for the sake of simplicity, we just list some of them:

**Discourse analysis, or text linguistics**, is the study of the relationship between language and the contexts in which language is used. It deals with how sentences in spoken and written language form larger meaningful units, such as paragraphs, conversations, and interviews, as well as the various devices used by speakers and writers when they connect single sentences into a cohesive and coherent whole.

**Sociolinguistics** is the study of language in relation to society: How social factors influence the structure and use of language. It studies such matters as the linguistic identity of social groups, social attitudes to language, standard and non-standard forms of language, the patterns and needs of national language use, the relations between language and ideology or language and power, linguistic aspects of social psychology, and so on. Another name for sociolinguistics is the **sociology of language**. Linguistic and social problems are closely related, so much so that linguistics itself has sometimes been regarded as a “social” science.

**Psycholinguistics** is the study of connections between language and mind: the mental structures and processes which are involved in the acquisition, comprehension, and production of language. Perhaps the most well-developed part of psycholinguistics is concerned with language acquisition and development in children although there is a growing amount of work being done on second language acquisition and learning.

**Stylistics** is the study of style in language. Narrowly, it refers to the use of the concepts

and techniques of linguistics in studying the language of literary texts like poetry and novels. Broadly, it refers to the study of the aesthetic use of language, in all circumstances, not just in literature.

**Forensic linguistics** is the examination of linguistic evidence for legal purposes. It refers to the use of linguistic techniques to investigate crimes in which language data forms part of the evidence, such as in the use of lexical or grammatical criteria to authenticate police statements. The field of **forensic phonetics** is often distinguished as a separate domain, which refers to the use of phonetics in criminal investigations, especially in trying to identify the sex, age, and geographical background of a person whose voice is recorded, hence identifying the speaker.

**Anthropological linguistics**, also **linguistic anthropology**, is the discipline that combines the concepts and techniques of linguistics and anthropology to examine the relationship between language and culture. Anthropological linguists typically look at such phenomena as kinship terms and methods of constructing personal names and place names.

**Corpus linguistics** is an approach to linguistic description based on large collections of texts known as corpora. It utilizes computational tools and methods to analyze and extract linguistic patterns, trends, and information from these text collections. By analyzing corpora, corpus linguistics provides valuable evidence for understanding language structure, usage, and variation.

**Computational linguistics** is an approach to linguistics that employs mathematical techniques, often with the help of a computer. It includes the analysis of language data, the research on machine-aided translation, the electronic production of artificial speech, and the automatic recognition of human speech. It has produced programs for collecting and evaluating large amounts of language data, making frequency word lists, automatically indexing, and producing concordances (word lists with contexts).

**Biolinguistics** is an interdisciplinary field that explores the biological basis of human language. It studies the cognitive and neural mechanisms that underlie language acquisition, processing, and use from a biological perspective, and also studies the evolution of language, seeking to understand how language may have evolved in the human species and what biological adaptations enabled the development of complex linguistic abilities. Biolinguistics emerged as a field of study in the mid-20th century, drawing on insights and methodologies from linguistics, psychology, neuroscience, biology, anthropology, and computer science. It employs a variety of research methods, including behavioral experiments, computational modeling, neuroimaging techniques (such as fMRI and EEG), and comparative studies with non-human animals to investigate language-related cognitive processes.

**Ecolinguistics** is also an interdisciplinary field that examines the relationship between language, communication, and the environment. It explores how language both reflects and influences our perceptions of the natural world, ecosystems, and environmental issues.

Ecolinguistics emerged in response to growing concerns about environmental degradation, climate change, and the loss of biodiversity. Its research methods include discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, ethnographic studies, and qualitative analysis of environmental texts and communication.

**Cultural linguistics** is a discipline that explores the relationship between language and culture. It examines how language reflects and shapes cultural norms, values, beliefs, practices, and identities. In addition, it may study new areas such as digital communication, multilingualism, language revitalization, and the impact of technology on language and culture. Cultural linguistics draws on insights and implications from linguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies. By exploring the cultural dimensions of language, cultural linguistics enhances our understanding of human communication, cultural diversity, and the complex interplay between language and society.

**Applied linguistics** is primarily concerned with the application of linguistic theories, methods, and findings to the elucidation of language problems that have arisen in other areas of experience. The most well-developed branch of applied linguistics is the learning and teaching of foreign languages, and sometimes the term is used as if this were the only field involved.

## 1.4 A brief history of linguistics

Nothing is more helpful to a student making their first acquaintance with the science of linguistics than some knowledge of the history of the subject. Many of the ideas about language that the linguist will question will seem less obviously self-evident if one knows nothing of their historical origin. Linguistics can be compared to a pathway being cut through the dark and mysterious forest of language. Different parts of the forest have been explored at different times.

### 1.4.1 Historical linguistics

Before the 19th century, language in the Western world was of interest mainly to philosophers. It is significant that the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle made major contributions to the study of language. For example, Plato is said to have been the first person to distinguish between nouns and verbs.

The study of the Chinese language has a long and rich tradition. It can be traced back to the philosophical discussions on the nature of speech, meaning, name, and referent during the Pre-Qin Period (prior to 221 BC). The well-known discussions are the debate on “speech” (言) and “meaning” (意), and that on “name” (名) and “referent” (实) (“言意之辩” 和 “名实之争”) by the great philosophers, such as Kongzi (孔子, Confucius), Mozi (墨子), Xunzi

(荀子), and Gongsun Longzi (公孙龙子). Chinese linguistics reflects a long tradition of scholarly inquiry into the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic characteristics of the Chinese language. From ancient philosophical discussions to modern cognitive analyses, Chinese linguistics continues to be a bright field that sheds light on the structure, evolution, and diversity of the Chinese language.

1786 is the year that many people regard as the birthdate of linguistics. On the 27th of September, 1786, an Englishman, Sir William Jones, read a paper to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta (now Kolkata), pointing out that Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Celtic, and Germanic languages all had striking structural similarities. He concluded that these languages must have originated from one common source. Jones's discovery fired the imagination of scholars. For the next hundred years, all other linguistic work was eclipsed by the general preoccupation with writing **comparative grammar**, which first compared the different linguistic forms found in the various members of the Indo-European language family, and second attempted to set up a hypothetical ancestor, Proto-Indo-European, from which all these languages were descended.

The 19th-century concern with reconstructing Proto-Indo-European and making hypotheses about the way it split into various modern languages was encouraged by the general intellectual climate of the times. In 1859, Darwin published his famous *Origin of Species*, putting forward the theory of evolution. It seemed natural to attempt to chart the evolution of language alongside the evolution of species. This emphasis on language change eventually led to a major theoretical advance. In the last quarter of the century, a young group of scholars, nicknamed the “Young Grammarians,” claimed that language change is regular. It was an important step forward for linguists to realize that language changes were not just optional tendencies, but definite and clearly stateable “laws.”

### 1.4.2 Descriptive linguistics

In the 20th century, the emphasis shifted from language change to language description. Instead of looking at how a selection of items changed in a number of different languages, linguists began to focus on describing single languages at a particular point in time.

If any one person can be held responsible for this change of emphasis, it is the Swiss scholar Saussure, who is labeled “the father of modern linguistics.” His book *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) exerted a major influence on the course of linguistics, particularly in Europe. Saussure's crucial contribution was his explicit and reiterated statement that all language items are essentially interlinked. This was an aspect of language that had not been stressed before. It was Saussure who first suggested that language was like a game of chess, a system in which each item is defined by its relationship to all the others. His insistence that language is a carefully built structure of interwoven elements initiated the era of **structural linguistics**. All linguistics since Saussure is structural, as “structural” in this broad sense only

means the recognition that language is a patterned system composed of interdependent elements, rather than a collection of unconnected individual items.

In America, linguistics began as an offshoot of anthropology. Around the beginning of the 20th century, anthropologists were eager to record the culture of the fast-dying Native American tribes, and the Native American languages were one aspect of this effort. This state of affairs changed with the publication of American structural linguist Leonard Bloomfield's comprehensive work entitled *Language* in 1933, which attempted to lay down rigorous procedures for the description of any language. Bloomfield considered that linguistics should deal objectively and systematically with observable data. So he is more interested in how the items were arranged than in their meaning. He concluded that the study of meaning was "the weak point in language study, and will remain so until human knowledge advances very far beyond its present state." Bloomfield had far more influence than European linguists working during this period, and the so-called "Bloomfieldian era" lasted for more than 20 years. The Bloomfieldians laid down a valuable foundation of linguistic methodology for future generations. However, by around 1950, linguistics had lost touch with other disciplines and had become an abstruse subject of little interest to anyone outside it. It was ready for a revolution.

### 1.4.3 Generative linguistics

In 1957, linguistics took a new turn. Noam Chomsky, then aged 29, a teacher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, published a book called *Syntactic Structures*, which sparked a revolution in linguistics. Chomsky is arguably the most influential linguist of the 20th century, whose reputation has extended far beyond linguistics. He has transformed linguistics from a relatively obscure discipline of interest mainly to Ph.D. students and future missionaries into a major social science of direct relevance to psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and others.

Chomsky shifted attention away from the detailed description of actual utterances and began asking questions about the nature of the system that produces the output. According to him, a grammar should be more than a description of old utterances. It should also take into account possible future utterances. A grammar that consists of a set of statements or rules specifying which sequences of a language are possible and which are impossible is a **generative grammar**. In Chomsky's words, a grammar will be "a device that generates all the grammatical sequences of L [language] and none of the ungrammatical ones." Such a grammar is perfectly explicit, in that nothing is left to the imagination.

### 1.4.4 Cognitive linguistics

The movement, known as cognitive linguistics, is one of the most rapidly expanding schools in modern linguistics and cognitive science. Cognitive linguistics is not a single



theory but a paradigm within linguistics, subsuming a number of distinct theories and research programs. It began to emerge in the 1970s and flourished in the 1980s. By the end of that decade, it had amassed a relatively large international community of adherents, the International Cognitive Linguistics Association (ICLA) had been established, a journal *Cognitive Linguistics* founded, and a series of biennial conferences established. From the outset, cognitive linguistics sought to create a scientific approach to the study of language, incorporating the tools of philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and computer science. While cognitive linguistic approaches to language were initially based on philosophical thinking about the mind, more recent work emphasizes the importance of convergent evidence from a broad empirical and methodological base. In the first decade of the 21st century, cognitive linguistics represents one of the most exciting and innovative interdisciplinary approaches available for the study of the complex relationship between language and mind.

**Cognitive linguistics** is an approach to the analysis of natural language that focuses on language as an instrument for organizing, processing, and conveying information. The analysis of the conceptual and experiential basis of linguistic categories is of primary importance within cognitive linguistics: It primarily considers language as a system of categories. Therefore, the main topics that cognitive linguistics is interested in are categories and categorization, conceptual metaphors and metonymies, image schemas, iconicity, subjectivity, and grammaticalization.

## 1.5 Summary

This chapter is a very general introduction to language and linguistics. We have explained language, its features, and functions. Linguistics is the scientific study of language. Language is the central object of study in linguistics but can be approached from several points of view. So, linguistics has various branches, such as phonetics, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and some other fields, such as sociolinguistics, stylistics, psycholinguistics, and applied linguistics. Linguistics is a pilot science, which is relatively young but has a wonderful history ranging from historical linguistics to cognitive linguistics. Language is deeply embedded in the human heart, and humanity is deeply rooted in the essence of language. If we understand linguistics, how can we not excel in learning languages?



## ***Self-study Activities***

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1. Define the following terms briefly.

- |                       |                        |                        |                |
|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| 1) language           | 2) arbitrariness       | 3) duality             | 4) linguistics |
| 5) phonetics          | 6) phonology           | 7) syntax              | 8) semantics   |
| 9) pragmatics         | 10) discourse analysis | 11) sociolinguistics   |                |
| 12) psycholinguistics | 13) stylistics         | 14) corpus linguistics |                |

2. If language is partially defined as communication, can the sounds that dogs make be called language? Why or why not?
3. List at least four features of language that are rare or absent in animal communication.
4. Briefly explain how language is systematic, symbolic, and social.
5. Why is Saussure an important figure in linguistics?
6. Why were the 19th-century linguists so interested in historical linguistics?
7. Suppose you taught a dog to *heel*, *sit up*, *roll over*, *play dead*, *stay*, *jump*, and *bark* on command, using the italicized words as cues. Would you be teaching it language? Why or why not?

## ***Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading***

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