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How to Study Linguistics

**A Guide to Understanding
Language**

Second Edition

Geoffrey Finch



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For Marion, who also loves language

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General Editors' Preface

If you are studying linguistics the chances are that you are looking for a book that will not only help you come to grips with the basic principles of linguistic study, but also a book that will help you understand the ideas behind linguistics in a clear, sensible way. The aim of *How to Study Linguistics* is to offer you guidance on how to gain both of these important skills by providing the sort of vital information you need to understand linguistics as a discipline and also by providing approachable discussions of the main aspects of linguistic analysis.

The first chapter offers a straightforward introduction to linguistics and the way in which language works and how we can describe it. Then come a series of chapters dealing with the major aspects of linguistic study, starting with the context of linguistics – what we do with language, how we use it, and its various functions. Following this come three chapters dealing with the central aspects of all linguistic study: sound, syntax, and meaning. Each of these topics is approached from a common-sense point of view, with each chapter slowly building into a full discussion of the topic. The emphasis throughout is on relating linguistics to our own experience as language users.

The final two chapters of the book deal with how to take the study of linguistics further, exploring its diverse strands and aspects, and also offer advice on how to write an essay on an aspect of linguistics. As with all the chapters of the book, these can be read separately or dipped into for information or guidance. In the first instance, however, it may well repay you to read quickly through the book as a whole, so that you gain a sense of what linguistics involves and how the essays you are asked to write relate to the wider study of language as the most distinctive feature of human beings. At once a guide to current ideas about linguistics and a practical textbook that will develop your skills as a student of language, *How to Study Linguistics* is designed to help you get the most out of your course and to achieve excellent results.

1 Beginning Linguistics

If you are just starting your studies in linguistics the first piece of advice I have may seem rather odd. It is this: **beware of all books on linguistics**. And that includes the one you are now reading. A healthy scepticism is not a bad thing. Most books on linguistics raise expectations of understanding which they cannot fulfil. This is not entirely their fault, of course. There is an undeniable technical and theoretical base to the subject, and negotiating through this whilst still remaining reasonably coherent is not easy. But in spite of all the technical terminology, linguistics is not a science. It's a pity that the subject doesn't have a different name. We tend to think of disciplines ending in 'ics' – e.g. statistics, mathematics, physics – as having a precise scientific core consisting of unchallengeable facts. Linguistics is not like that. Neither, of course, strictly speaking, are mathematics, statistics, or physics. Indeed, many scientists, nowadays, would question this view of science. Nevertheless, it's important to bear in mind that the subject matter of linguistics, language, is made up. Words do not grow out of the ground, they haven't evolved like matter from the interaction of natural elements. And whilst there is much to suggest that the structures and processes which enable language to develop are inborn, there is still a very important sense in which language is human-made. It is our possession in a way that nothing else is. And the process of making up, or inventing, never stops.

It's as well to remember this when government bodies go on, as they periodically do, about 'bad' English and the importance of maintaining standards. The question we should be asking is 'whose language is it anyway?' Language is one of the few truly democratic forces left to us. It may be used as an instrument of oppression, when one nation colonises or annexes another, but it has an unerring ability to turn on its handler. We have only to look at how international varieties of English are flourishing around the world in former colonies, from the Indian sub-continent to the Caribbean, to see the democratising influences of the language. And even in England, although it is sometimes argued that the combined forces of the media and public schools are producing a uniform

pronunciation, the truth is that conservative speech patterns are themselves subtly changing under the influence of newly emergent accents. Despite institutional pressure and manipulation, language is ultimately a law unto itself. Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth-century writer, and one of the first people to attempt to control linguistic behaviour, reflects soberly in the preface to his *Dictionary of the English Language* on the failure of nations to 'fix' their languages:

With this hope, however, academies have been instituted, to guard the avenues of their languages, to retain fugitives, and repulse intruders; but their vigilance and activity have hitherto been vain; sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind are equally the undertakings of pride unwilling to measure its desires by its strength. (Johnson, 1958, pp. 233–4)

Despite Johnson's lament about 'the boundless chaos of a living speech' (p. 219), however, language is not chaotic. There are rules governing linguistic behaviour just as there are everything else in life. They may not be the rules which people might wish to impose on us, but they are rules none the less. It is these rules which linguists are concerned with studying. Perhaps an analogy might help here. Imagine that I am attending an important function at my place of work. One of the things I have to do is decide what to wear. If there is a dress code I have to find out what it is in order to avoid embarrassing myself along with everybody else. Let's say it's a suit and tie affair. Now I may of course decide that wearing a suit and tie is rather stuffy and turn up instead in jeans and a tee-shirt. The reaction of people to this will inevitably vary. Some will think it refreshingly informal, whilst others will consider it 'bad form'. But no one will think me undressed. I have clothes on in all the right places even if some people don't like what I am wearing. If, however, I were to arrive with my underpants around my head, my trousers round my neck and my shirt tied round my waist I could be accused of being undressed, as well as running a serious risk of being locked up. There are two sorts of rules here. One is a rule about which part of the body, trousers, for example, are worn on, and the other is about what kind of trousers are worn. The first we could consider a clothing rule, and the second a social rule. The first one is not likely to change; it is doubtful that we will ever get a situation where it is considered normal to wear trousers around one's neck. The second, however, is changing all the time. There are many more occasions now when people dress casually where previously they would have dressed formally.

And it is similarly the case with language. Sometimes you will hear people object that certain expressions or constructions are ‘not English’ or ‘ungrammatical’. Some teachers still like to say this about *ain't* or the use of the double negative, as in *I ain't got no money*. But this is not so. Something is only ungrammatical if it fails to follow a rule in the way it is formed. *I ain't got no money* doesn't follow the same rule in its construction as *I haven't any money* but it's not without one. People who use this construction wouldn't dream of saying *got I have money n't no*, which would be uninterpretable. Someone who produced that would be like the hypothetical person mentioned above, wearing his clothes in all the wrong places. And, as in the clothing example, there are two sorts of rules here: a linguistic sort and a social sort. This is an important distinction to make because it's easy to mix them up. We mustn't confuse linguistic judgements with social ones. Of course, some people will attempt to prove that the double negative is ungrammatical by saying it's illogical, ‘two negatives make a positive’. But no one in the entire history of its use has ever understood it in that way. Up until the end of the Middle Ages it was a regular feature of English, as anyone who has studied Chaucer knows. Here is Chaucer, for example, in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, bemoaning the fact that people can no longer see fairies: ‘But now kan **no** man se **none** elves mo’ (‘but now no one can see no more elves’). The double negative was simply an emphatic way of negating something. What we have done in standard speech over the centuries is to weaken it. Other languages, like French, have resisted this, except in colloquial speech, where, ironically, it is the single negative which is non-standard.

The second piece of advice I wish to give therefore is this: **learn to think linguistically**. This doesn't mean ignoring social rules. They obviously have their place. We might want to argue about what that place is but they are an undeniable fact of life. There are some occupations where using forms like *ain't*, or double negatives, or saying *I done that* instead of *I did that*, could cost you your job. Oddly enough we have become a little more tolerant of certain accents than we have of non-standard grammar. It is quite common nowadays to hear the weather forecast in a regional accent on television, although more prestigious accents are still reserved for the main news. We need to know about social rules, therefore, but it is important to recognise that they are simply conventions. What weight we give to them is entirely relative. In ten or twenty years time, they could be less or more important. There is nothing to stop the Queen giving her Christmas broadcast in jeans, just as there is nothing to stop her saying *me and my husband*. No clothing, or linguistic rule, would be

broken. The publishing world, except in the case of creative writing, sticks rigorously to standard grammar, and one can see why. Using a uniformly accepted style is clearly convenient and runs less risk of offending anyone. In writing this book I have used standard forms although you will find many more contractions, *haven't*, *mustn't*, *isn't*, *it's*, than were acceptable some years ago. And I have several sentences which begin with *and* – like this one. The nature of social rules, and the way in which they operate, is itself a fascinating study and some areas of linguistics, notably sociolinguistics, are more concerned with them than others. But compared with linguistic rules they are only of fractional significance. The rules which enable us to produce either *I haven't any money*, or *I ain't got no money* are far more complex and profound than those which would discriminate against one in favour of the other.

The best place to start an investigation of the differences between social and linguistic judgements about language use is with your own speech habits. Try making a list of things you say which people object to and see if you can categorise them in terms of the nature of the objections and the contexts in which they are made. Some objections might be purely on grounds of politeness, like saying *what?* instead of *pardon?* when something is misheard. Others might concern the use of non-standard forms, as for example, *mine's better than what yours is* or *he done it very nice*. And some might entail a fine point of grammar quite impenetrable to all except those making the objection. Like most people, I can remember as a child being told to say *may I leave the table?* not *can I leave the table?* and failing to see the difference, let alone its importance. Picking others up on minor points of language use is very much a national pastime. People seize with glee on any deviation in spelling, pronunciation, or expression as if it were some failure of character or intelligence. This is partly because in England, at any rate, language use is unfortunately bound up with issues of class. Using 'incorrect' forms is frequently considered an indication of being lower class, and no one wants to be thought that.

If you do this exercise you will find that part of the problem of categorising your 'deviant' speech habits lies in the terms 'correct/incorrect' themselves. Apart from being very vague, they inevitably suggest social approval or disapproval and as such blur any distinction we might want to make between social and linguistic judgements. The whole notion of correctness is too prescriptive to be of any use linguistically. Not surprisingly, therefore, you will rarely find linguists referring to it, except in a social sense. They prefer to talk instead of usages being **well-formed** or **ill-formed**. A particular usage is only ill-formed if it is not generated by

a grammatical rule. Using this criterion, all the examples above are perfectly well-formed even though at first glance they might not appear to be so. Those who regularly produce forms such as *he done it very nice*, for example, are not ignorant of the existence of *did*. They will continue to say *he did do it* not *he done do it* (unless they are speaking Caribbean English). It is simply that a different rule is operating about when to use the past participle (*done*), as opposed to the past tense form (*did*). And as for the use of an adjective instead of an adverb, *nice* rather than *nicely*, this also occurs sometimes in **Standard English** – *come quick*, not *quickly*, and *open the window wide*, not *widely*. We can find frequent similar uses in Shakespeare: ‘How sweet [not “sweetly”] the moonlight sleeps upon this bank’ (*The Merchant of Venice*, V.i.54).

‘Well-formed’ and ‘ill-formed’ are terms which encapsulate linguistic judgements. We need another set of terms, however, to encapsulate social ones. In 1965 the linguist Noam Chomsky introduced the terms **acceptable/unacceptable**. The notion of ‘acceptability’ offers a much better way of coping with variant forms than that of ‘correctness’. Using it as a criterion we could say that all of the expressions in the last but one paragraph,

what?
mine’s better than what yours is.
he done it very nice.
can I leave the table?

are of varying acceptability depending on individual taste and conventions of politeness and context. Any usage which is ill-formed must of necessity be unacceptable whereas the reverse is not the case. The consequence of this is that we can categorise *he done it very nice*, for example, as well-formed, but unacceptable, if used in a BBC news broadcast. Between friends, however, it is both well-formed and acceptable.

The difference between concepts of well-formedness and acceptability on the one hand, and correctness on the other, is that the former are descriptive, rather than prescriptive, in character. That is, they seek to establish rules, whether of the social or linguistic kind, from actual use rather than from the pronouncements of some external authority. But, if that is the case, the question arises ‘in what sense are they rules?’ If they are merely describing what exists, how can that constitute a set of rules? In the case of social rules a better term, as suggested earlier, would probably be ‘conventions’. We could argue that it is a matter of social convention that newscasters avoid non-standard grammar. Conventions operate by a kind of unconscious agreement between the

parties involved. The matter is more complicated, however, with linguistic rules, to which we have said that the terms well-/ill-formed apply. What gives a linguistic rule its authority? A linguist might well reply, 'the language', in that a sentence like *got I have money n't no* is linguistically impossible, but we are entitled to probe a little further I think.

To begin with, linguistic rules are not immutable; they do change over time and across dialects. Consider, for example, the sentence *they disappeared him*, and ask yourselves whether it is well- or ill-formed. I am guessing that you would judge it to be ill-formed, that is, not linguistically possible, and many conservative grammars would agree with you. They would do so on the grounds that *disappear* is an intransitive verb, in other words, it can't take an object – you don't disappear something. Verbs are quite frequently classified into transitive and intransitive according to whether they have objects; so the verb *hit* is transitive – something has to be hit. Verbs such as *fall* and *die*, on the other hand, are intransitive, in that they cannot take an object – you don't *fall* or *die* something. According to this grammatical account, *disappear* is a similar kind of verb: *he disappeared* is complete, whereas *he disappeared him* is nonsense. However, it isn't nonsense to an increasingly large number of people. In some parts of the world *to disappear someone* means to make them vanish, usually in highly mysterious circumstances. It's a usage which has been popularised by the media, in particular the American film industry. So, we are faced with a dilemma here. We either pronounce the American usage incorrect and seek to outlaw it, which is the approach a prescriptive grammar might take, or, because we are taking a descriptive approach, we decide it is well-formed but then are faced with having to alter the rules and declare it transitive. And the problem doesn't end there, because there are other verbs which have this slippery habit of crossing over. If we look again at *fall*, for example, it's possible for that to be used transitively in Nigerian English. A Nigerian can say *don't fall me down*, meaning don't cause me to fall over. We should have to say *don't push/knock me over*, but the meaning there is subtly different.

If it is the case that particular communities can change the way in which words behave, is there any real point in talking about linguistic rules? Isn't it just a free for all? The answer to this is 'no', and we must realise why this is so. What we are witnessing in these innovations is the grammar of English growing with use. There's an important point here and one which, as students of linguistics, we have to keep hold of. The popular view of grammar sees it as something mechanical, the learning of which is akin to learning the laws of thermodynamics. But in reality grammar is organic, it resembles a living thing in its ability to produce

fresh matter apparently without end. What we term 'rules' are not so much laws, as linguistic patterns of behaviour governing the operation of English. Every speaker of English contributes to these, for not only do we speak the language, but in a more subtle sense, the language speaks through us. Rules are open to interpretation and negotiation, whereas laws, being immutable, are not.

But you're probably wondering where this leaves the issue of transitive and intransitive verbs. Well, the important thing about innovations is that they make us look more closely at the rules to see how they can be modified in order to take account of the new evidence. And what we begin to discover when we look more closely at verbs is that being transitive or intransitive is an operation potentially open to the great majority, and possibly all, of them. In other words, rather than classify them into transitive and intransitive, it's better to talk of transitive and intransitive *uses*. Those which we class as intransitive are simply the ones for which we have not yet discovered a transitive use. In the case of *disappear* we now have done this. The sinister process by which some governments cause people to disappear without trace has led to the verb developing a transitive sense. And just as some verbs can extend their grammatical range, others may contract theirs. Today, the verb *like* is only used transitively, the sentence *I like* is incomplete – we must like something or someone. In Shakespeare's time, however, it was quite normal for the verb *like* to be used without an object. In his preface to *The Devil is an Ass*, the seventeenth-century playwright Ben Jonson writes 'if this play do not like, the Devil is in it'. The verb *like* is being used here with our modern sense of 'please', a sense it has since lost. Because of this, the intransitive construction is no longer usable.

What I am suggesting, then, is that the linguistic rules which we extrapolate from actual use are inevitably provisional. Every time the language changes it offers us the chance to interpret them more accurately so that we have a more precise understanding of the way in which language works. Let me try another analogy here. Linguists like to compare language to a game, usually a board game because there are pieces which can be moved around, and usually chess, because it's arguably the most complex of the board games. It's quite a good analogy because in chess each piece moves in a specified way, but its power to do so at any particular moment in the game depends on the place it occupies on the board and its relationship to the other pieces. Similarly with words, their value is constantly changing depending on their freedom to manoeuvre. In the case of *disappear* an obstruction has been removed and its range increased because the state of play has changed; whereas with *like*,

however, an obstruction has been imposed and therefore its range has been limited.

But there is one important difference between chess and language. If you want to learn how to play chess you study the book of rules and these tell you exactly what you can and can't do. This is not, of course, how native speakers of English learn to use their language. We do not expect children to know the rules for forming questions or negating statements. And yet they must know them otherwise they couldn't frame questions or denials properly. They know them, but yet they don't know that they know them. And it's the same with a majority of adults. Try asking someone what the rules are for forming a question in English and you're likely to be met with a blank stare. Understandably so, after all it's not something you need to know unless you are studying linguistics. So there's a paradox at the heart of the subject which it's necessary for anyone starting out to be aware of. In studying linguistics we are trying to articulate what we already know; we are, in a sense, studying ourselves: the rule book exists inside us. Linguistics then is about discovery. Going back to the chess analogy, imagine trying to establish the rules of chess by watching an actual game in progress, rather than by looking at the rules in advance. What you would have to do in this case would be to observe the progress of the play, describe the moves being made, and from that description formulate a set of rules that the players were following. This is exactly the process that Chomsky elaborates for studying linguistics: linguists observe, describe, and explain. This is where linguistics does have something in common with science, namely that its method of enquiry is empirical. It assumes nothing in advance except the possibility of arriving at a principled description, and explanation, of the way in which language operates.

There is an important corollary to this method, however. You would have to watch a lot of chess games before you could be sure that you knew all the rules players were following. And in a sense you could never be completely certain about this. There would always be the possibility of two players making a move you hadn't thought allowable from your observations thus far. You would then have to decide whether they were using a little-known rule you simply hadn't come across, whether they were playing a new variety of the game, or whether they were simply ignorant of the rules. But what you couldn't do is pull out the book of rules and say 'you can't do that because it's not permitted'. You could only appeal to common practice and say 'that's not how everyone else plays it' and wait to be proved wrong. The final authority has to rest with the players, or in the case of language, with its users. 'The meaning of

a word,' said the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'is its use in the language' (Crystal, 1987, p. 102). If this is so, then there are some important points for us, as budding linguists, to take note of. Firstly, we should see ourselves, and indeed others, as linguistic resources; the rules are internalised in us as native speakers of the language. Secondly, we should trust our intuitions about language. If someone tells us that a particular construction which we instinctively feel to be well-formed is not so, we should credit our instincts until we are shown otherwise; they are, after all, a form of knowledge. Thirdly, we should develop a spirit of enquiry towards all language phenomena, taking nothing on trust and being willing to alter or amend our views in the light of fresh information and new knowledge.

What I have principally been urging on you as beginners in linguistics is the necessity of developing the right mental attitude towards the subject, seeing it as an open-ended and participatory pursuit. The structure of English is constantly evolving, bits wither away as new possibilities emerge. Thinking linguistically means viewing language as a dynamic entity, constantly changing, alive on the lips and on the pens of its users. If you begin with the right image of the subject you are much more likely to succeed in mastering it. 'That's all very well,' you may say, 'but the real difficulty I have is understanding the terminology which linguists use: if only they could write more simply.' This is a complaint which everyone makes at some time or other, so you are not alone. The problem is that for many people the terminology is the first thing they encounter when studying linguistics. As a consequence they think the only way to understand the subject is to decode the terms. They consult glossaries and book indexes hoping for enlightenment only to find they don't understand the explanations. This is trying to run before you can walk. There are no short-cuts here. Glossaries can be useful, and I'll recommend one in a moment which I have found particularly good, but there's a sense in which a new term will only have any meaning for you at the point at which you need to use it. I find myself needing one now: I need a term to describe all this new terminology which has evolved around linguistics, and the one which is most useful here is **metalanguage**. Metalanguage is language about language, it consists of words, usually of a technical variety, which enable us to comment on, and describe more accurately, our everyday use of words.

Take for example the term **lexeme**. When I first encountered it I couldn't really see why the writer didn't simply use the term **word**. The glossary I used defined it briefly as a 'dictionary item', but since that was my understanding of 'word' it didn't help much. It wasn't until I realised

that 'word' is itself a very vague term that light began to dawn. If you think about it, any simple word exists in a variety of different forms. The word *dogs*, for example, has a written form and a spoken one – 'dogz' – which are different from each other. None the less we still feel that they're the same word. We would feel odd describing them as two separate items. Not only that, but the word exists in a singular and a plural form – *dog(s)*. Our intuition here would be that there's still an important sense in which we are talking about the same word; there is a change in number but not meaning. However, by now the term 'word' has become hopelessly overworked. It's at this point that 'lexeme' becomes useful. We can think of *dog* as a lexeme, or underlying word, and the different versions of it as word forms. It has a singular and a plural form of which there are written and spoken forms. 'Word' thus becomes a term to describe the word as actual substance and 'lexeme' a term to describe the word as concept, or more accurately, as sign (see Chapter 5: 'Studying Meaning'). This is an important distinction because, of course, a lexeme may be realised in any number of ways including morse code, semaphore, or sign language. But what if we use *dog* in an entirely new way and with a completely different meaning, if, for example, we turn it into a verb *to dog* as in *to dog someone's footsteps*? Well, once again, the lexeme/word distinction helps. Instead of having the same lexeme realised by different words as before, here we have a new lexeme realised by the same word. Words can thus be seen to have an abstract and a physical dimension. This is something which we shall discover to be true of language generally. What I hope we shall see by the end of the book is that grammar is ultimately a mental phenomenon. It's a fundamental part of the Chomskyan tradition of linguistics that what linguists are studying is the human mind. If I have not made this clear enough yet, hang on to it for the time being and we shall return to it later.

What I'm suggesting to you then is, firstly, that terminology is not being used by linguists simply to put obstacles in your path, or to make a simple point seem more complicated than it is. Linguists are no more or less bloody-minded than anyone else. Secondly, only worry about the meaning of a term if not understanding it is preventing you from being able to read on. In other words, don't stop reading at every unfamiliar term you come across and start consulting dictionaries or glossaries. You will only find it frustrating and lose the thread of what you are reading. What you can do, however, is to make a note of all the terms which are unfamiliar to you and then at a later point look them up. One of the best sources of information is *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (1989), by Katie Wales. There are substantial entries for all the

linguistic terms you are likely to come across, sometimes a page long, and it also tells you if there is any difference of opinion about their meaning or use.

And finally, bear in mind that language is both a spoken and a written phenomenon. This may sound supremely obvious but it is still the case that people tend to judge spoken language by its written counterpart, as if one were simply a translation of the other. For a long time writers about English tended to regard the written form as the ideal model for the language. People were encouraged to speak as they wrote. Even today you may sometimes hear complaints about sloppiness of speech because people are not pronouncing the words as they are written. Like me you probably say *India rand Pakistan*, and *the idea rof it*. There is nothing unusual in this, most people do. It is in fact part of a regular process called **liaison**, but there are some who would find this unacceptable. I shall have more to say about this in Chapter 3, but the important thing to bear in mind is that speech is not writing in another form, nor vice versa. There is no punctuation in speech, for example. Speaking and writing are separate but related mediums through which language is expressed. They have their own procedures and rules of behaviour, both of the social and linguistic kind. Indeed modern linguistics has largely arisen from the realisation that speech is not a debased form of writing but a highly structured activity in its own right.

So, having primed yourself to think linguistically about language, the question is 'where to begin?' And as always, the best starting point is your own experience. Before plunging into the mysteries of **phonology** (the sound system) or **syntax** (word order), it's a good idea to reflect on what you use language for and how much you already know about some of the linguistic processes involved. Only in this way can you put some of the ideas you will come across later into a workable and relevant context. I propose, therefore, that we begin by considering language as an experiential phenomenon, in other words, as something we encounter as an intrinsic and essential ingredient of our everyday lives, and from that develop a way of describing the kinds of knowledge which linguists seek to explore. This is the subject of the next chapter.

2 The Linguistic Context

2.1 Language and competence

One of the extraordinary things about language is the way in which we take it for granted as though it were a given fact of life like being able to breathe. In a sense this is inevitable and to a certain extent, perhaps, even desirable. If every time we spoke or wrote anything we were struck not only by the strangeness or oddness of the words we were using, but also by the fact that we had the capacity to speak or write at all, we should probably never get anything done. Knowledge advances by making certain processes automatic, but in so doing it also hides from us their nature and operation, and even their very existence. We learn by taking things for granted or, to put it more bluntly, we learn by forgetting. In order to carry with us the knowledge of how we learnt things as well as what we learnt we should need brains of considerably greater capacity to deal with the additional mental load. Once we have passed the barrier of language acquisition and become experienced users of our native language, the processes by which we learnt to identify words in the apparently undifferentiated stream of sound, or first learnt to associate that sound with marks made on a piece of paper, pass out of view.

And yet language can never become so automatic as to be entirely instinctive. Whilst there is much to suggest that our capacity for language is innate, it is still the case that speaking and writing are significantly different from bodily functions such as breathing or eating which we do without conscious thought. Everyone has had the experience at some time of not being able to find the right words to express what they are feeling or thinking. Indeed, this is one of the chief frustrations of language. If only, when we are angry, the right words would come automatically to our mouths instead of occurring to us afterwards, when it is usually too late. In fact, such linguistic situations usually involve the

suppression or displacement of instinct rather than its release, since our natural response might be to lash out or simply yell incoherently. Instead, we often end up saying the wrong thing. As T. S. Eliot, the twentieth-century poet, laments in his poem *Four Quartets*:

One has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it.

(‘East Coker’, ll. 5–7)

Let’s begin thinking about language, then, by considering the unnaturalness of what we take to be an entirely natural function – in other words, by **defamiliarising** it. The sense of the unfamiliarity of language is one of those hidden bits of knowledge which we carry with us to some degree all our lives. We only become fully aware of it when we are engaged in an activity which foregrounds the medium itself; such as, for example, writing an essay or giving a speech, or indeed, preparing a book like this. At such times we become acutely aware of the intractability of language, of its resistance to the ideal shapes we envisage in our minds. The fact that words have to be in linear order, for example, is frequently frustrating since we normally experience things as a totality: our ideas are concurrent not consecutive experiences. Language forces us to pay attention to one thing after another. It imposes a discipline on us which every speaker/writer negotiates individually. But like all useful disciplines it also creates possibilities which could not exist without it. It is the nature and extent of those possibilities that this chapter is primarily intended to explore.

As a starting point for our ‘defamiliarising’ strategy, you might try listing some of the activities where you use language in which language itself seems problematic. And then see if you can account in any way for the difficulties you characteristically encounter. My own list would include the following:

- (a) giving street directions to someone;
- (b) telling jokes;
- (c) leave-taking;
- (d) writing on a transparency;
- (e) writing poetry.

Commentary

This is a fairly miscellaneous list of things and, quite clearly, the problems are not all down to language, although that may be the medium in which they manifest themselves. (b) and (c), for example, depend on personal

and social factors such as confidence and, in the case of telling jokes, an awareness of audience and a good sense of timing. Similarly, of the difficulties which are language specific, some may seem more trivial than others. Writing on a transparency, for instance, is a mechanical problem. It is a result of what handwriting specialists term **motor difficulty**. My physical control of the letter shapes is not very good so that my handwriting at the best of times is, to say the least, wayward. With the added complication of a slippery surface such as a transparency the result is usually a mess. Having said that, however, mechanical problems account for a significant number of language difficulties. All the forms of language activity – speaking/listening, writing/reading – depend on the successful performance of certain mechanical processes. To a large extent they are automatic but on occasions they become problematic. It is then that we become aware of just how much mental energy they consume. Most people will write out an important letter twice or say their name extra carefully over the phone. This is because slips of the tongue can be very annoying to make and sometimes result in the speaker becoming a figure of fun.

Mechanical skills, then, may be marginal to our consideration of language hurdles (except, of course, in the case of those with severe linguistic handicaps), but they are not insignificant even for competent language users. At a different level of linguistic analysis it is interesting how these skills can become indicators of class, education, and even personality. Just why this should be so is not obvious and it is in itself an important question to consider. People who pronounce words in a certain way are commonly thought to have an accent. These accents are grouped regionally so that we can talk of a Tyneside or Mancunian accent. But there is no regional manner of writing. No one ever says ‘He has Geordie handwriting’! Everyone’s handwriting is perceived to be individual. Speech is an interactive and corporate activity whereas writing is inherently less so. There is no real equivalent in writing to **received pronunciation** (r.p.) – the term given to the standard BBC way of pronouncing words. It’s true that a recognised standard shape does exist for each letter, in the form of print, but anyone who tried to write in that way would be thought of as odd. Clarity is not a high priority in socially approved styles of handwriting as we see daily in the flourishes and twirls of publicly successful people. Generally, it seems, society values conformity in pronunciation and individuality in writing. This is evident from the way some specialists see personality and character traits reflected in handwriting.

It’s important to bear in mind that mechanical skills (that is, the ‘motor’ skills involved in language activity) are the means by which the higher-order skills of understanding are realised. When we hear someone

speaking to us there is the physical reception of the sound in our ears, but in addition to that, we hear what is said to us as words. We make the mental act of endowing the sound with meaning. The difference is immediately apparent if we compare listening to something in a language we know with something in one we do not. In the latter case we would have no idea where words began or ended, or even what constituted a word. Indeed, listening to a foreign language can be an unsettling experience because it seems to be just a meaningless gabble with no discernible pattern and no natural boundaries, except in the occasional pause for breath. This, of course, is how we sound to foreigners. The problem does not lie with our, or their, hearing: it is not a motor problem. The real difficulty is that the patterns or mental shapes created by the sounds within the system of the particular language are not discernible to us (that is, we are unable to connect the sounds to words). Once we know the shapes we experience the language differently. This ability of sounds to function as carriers of meaning is referred to as **duality of patterning**. Later on we shall look at how English utilises this capacity of sound (see Chapter 3).

We can say, then, that the boundaries between words in spoken English are in the ear of the listener. There's a humorous poem by Eugene Field, called 'A Play on Words', which draws attention to this. Can you make sense of the following lines? If not, the solution is immediately below:

Assert ten barren love day made
 Dan wood her hart buy nigh tan day;
 But wen knee begged she'd marry hymn,
 The crewel bell may dancer neigh.

(from Aitchison, 1987, pp. 134-5)

Standard written version:

A certain baron loved a maid
 And wooed her heart by night and day;
 But when he begged she'd marry him,
 The cruel belle made answer nay.

It would be perfectly possible, given the spelling system of English, for this verse to sound to a native English speaker as Field represents it. The fact that native users wouldn't hear it like that is because they confer meaning on what they hear. They know, first of all, that certain sounds make up certain words. But it's more than that. Being able to recognise the word boundaries isn't simply a matter of knowing what words there are in the language. All the words in Field's poem are English words; it's just that they don't make sense in those sequences. 'Assert ten barren' is

not a meaningful sequence in English. In other words, word recognition depends on grammatical knowledge. As a consequence of this, the mechanical skill of hearing becomes transformed by the mental skill of understanding. It is this mental ability which is characteristically the concern of linguistics, and the term which I shall use from now on to describe it is 'cognitive'.

So far we have really been looking at various kinds of abilities in language in relation to different sorts of language difficulty. In the case of the mechanical skills we have been looking at we could say we are considering the **performance** of language. As we have already noted, however, the way in which we perform these activities is often taken as an indicator of a wide range of personal and social attributes. Nothing in language is ever innocent. But more importantly, performance is only significant in relation to the more cognitive activities involved in language, whether we are receiving it as listeners and readers, or producing it as speakers and writers. This ability to discern and interpret shapes both in sound and letter form as meaningful we could call **grammatical competence**.

Competence and performance are the terms which Noam Chomsky uses to distinguish two types of linguistic ability. As I have said, performance is concerned with the mechanical skills involved in the production and reception of language, that is, with language as substance. So, for example, the ability to form letter shapes correctly when writing, or to make the right movements with our speech organs when speaking, are aspects of performance. And some kinds of reading difficulty – notably the problem of distinguishing between letter shapes, commonly called dyslexia – are performance related. Grammatical competence, on the other hand, covers a range of abilities which are broadly structural. It entails two kinds of cognitive skills: firstly, the ability to assign sounds and letters to word shapes distinguished from each other by meaning – we can call this lexical knowledge: and secondly, the ability to recognise larger structures such as phrase and clause to which individual words belong – we can call this syntactic knowledge. And as we have seen from looking at the poem by Eugene Field, they are both necessary elements in the determination of meaning. The distinction between competence and performance, however, is not unproblematic since performance can itself be represented as a kind of competence, and indeed, deciding whether a particular language difficulty is a matter of performance or competence is not always easy. But what Chomsky wants to emphasise by this distinction is that the mechanical skills of utterance or writing only have any value linguistically if they are a representation of grammatical competence. It would be perfectly possible for someone to be trained to write or