Christian Mair

English Linguistics

2nd edition

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English Linguistics

An Introduction

2nd updated edition

narr VERLAG

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Idee und Konzept der Reihe: **Johannes Kabatek**, Lehrstuhl für Romanische Sprachwissenschaft an der Eberhard Karls-Universität Tübingen.

Contents

Preface:
how to use this book

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

Nevertheless, the author has a clear justification for publishing just this book at just this time. It is the unified perspective it is written from – a perspective which he hopes will be useful and productive for the intended audience.

A first factor which motivates the present project is an external political one. Currently, in Germany, Austria and Europe as a whole, higher education is being profoundly transformed, the most conspicuous outward sign of reform being the restructuring of entry-level undergraduate courses in the B. A. framework. The present book is a response to this in that it aims to meet bachelor students' needs **without diluting and lowering academic standards**.

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

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

As readers will see, each of the following 14 units has the following structure:

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

The reader's careful attention is invited for the first. The reader's own initiative, activity and creativity are vital prerequisites to the success of the other three. To help readers with basic concepts and terminology, the book contains a comprehensive glossary at the end. If you experience difficulties with some of the exercises, or if you want to check your results, you can consult the web-page accompanying the book at www.bachelor-wissen.de, which gives you the solutions. This site also contains useful additional material and sound samples.

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

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

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

I would not like to close this preface without a few heartfelt words of gratitude – to Dr. Birgit Waibel, English Department of the University of Freiburg, for invaluable help in the final stages of the project, in preparing diagrams, the solutions to the exercises and the web-page accompanying the book, to Luminita Trasca, also of Freiburg, for patient and competent proof-reading, and to Jürgen Freudl, Narr Publishers, who was a stern taskmaster when it came to deadlines and a constructively critical reader of a previous version of the present book. Anastasia Cobet helped in updating the references and web-links for the second edition.

Freiburg, December 2011   *Christian Mair*

Introduction – linguistic and other approaches to language

Orientation

Any book introducing undergraduate students to a new academic field, its terminology and investigative methods must start by answering the defining question, which in our case is simply: "What is linguistics?"

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

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

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

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

This incomplete list of possible orientations in linguistics opens up many vistas which the present introduction will not explore. Its aims are more practi-

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

Linguistics for students of English

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

Linguistics – the pre-history of the field

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

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

Fig. 1.1
Pieter Breughel the Elder, "Tower of Babel" (1563), Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum
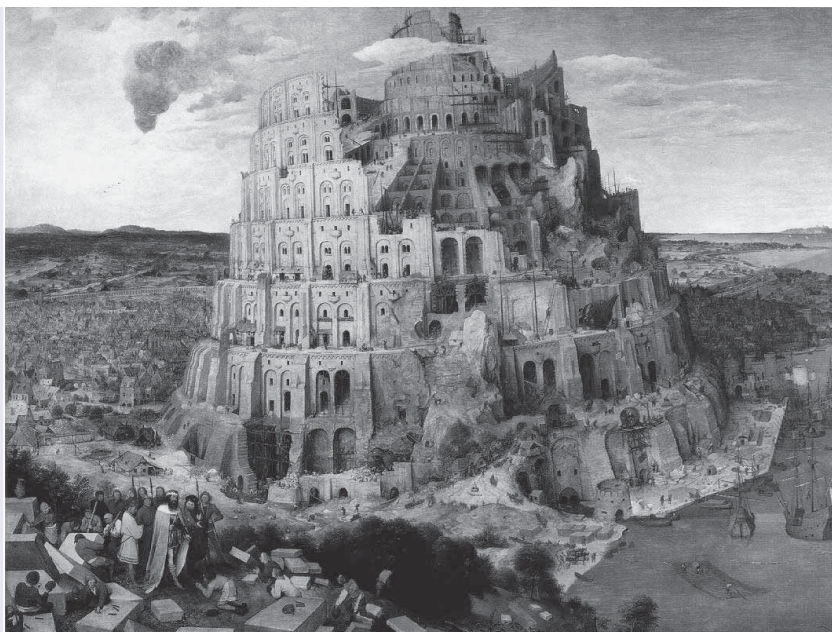
Within one and the same language community, people are keenly aware of sometimes very slight differences in pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary. In a British context, for example, "aitch-dropping," technically speaking the dropping of initial /h/ in stressed syllables, is a strong social marker. If someone says *'eavy metal music* instead of *heavy metal music*, the contrast is trivial, and any confusion about the intended meaning is unlikely. However, this detail of pronunciation will instantly mark out the speaker as either educated, standard or middle-class (if *heavy* is pronounced with *h*) or uneducated, non-standard or working-class (if the aitches are dropped). Of course, the general public, including literary writers, are aware of this, so that aitch-dropping becomes available as an efficient device for literary characterisation, as it does, for example, in the case of Uriah Heep (from Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*), who deceptively styles himself as *'umble* (← *humble*) all the time. The motif is taken up by the rock band of the same name, whose best-known album is also called *Very 'eavy, very 'umble*.

Among those fascinated by aspects of language long before the emergence of linguistics as a specialised discipline have been major philosophers. The classical Greek thinker Plato (428/27 BC – 348/47 BC), for example, seems to have thought a lot about the question of whether the name (i. e. the sound of a word) has any natural or logical correspondence to the person, thing, quality, activity or process it refers to, or whether this relation is arbitrary.

Linguistics and philosophy

If we think of verbs such as German *zischen* or English *hiss*, we might tend to give credence to the former view – the sound of the words seems to be motivated by the sound in the real world. If we think about a sound sequence such as /iːgl/, we will tend to favour the latter as this sound sequence corresponds to *Igel* "hedgehog" in German and *eagle* "Adler" in English, and it is difficult to see any connection whatsoever between either animal and the words used to refer to them. In the typical fashion of a dialogical Platonic argument, the philosopher develops a compromise position: Kratylos argues that names are motivated; Hermogenes claims that they are arbitrary; Socrates moderates between the two.

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

"Onomatopoeia" – the imitation of natural sounds

Apart from philosophical concerns about language, there have also been practical ones. Language teaching, for example, has a history to look back on which is at least as old as the philosophical debate about language. In fact,

Linguistics and language teaching

two of the seven Classical "liberal arts," which formed the core curriculum of higher education well into the Early Modern period, are language-related, namely grammar (which in the old understanding included the study of pronunciation) and rhetoric.

For a long time, the foreign languages which were studied and taught most were Latin, Greek and Hebrew, the three "sacred" languages of the Bible. From the 16th and 17th centuries onwards more and more of the modern European languages started developing coherent traditions of producing teaching and refer-

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ence materials, such as dictionaries and grammar books. Some of the works which have come down to us over the ages clearly reveal a lot of linguistic insight, but as a whole this tradition does not amount to more than a precursor of the scholarly "linguistic" perspective on language. Figure 1.3 presents the title page of one such practical grammar of English, which was presumably produced for the benefit of German immigrants to British North America.

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

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

In this early phase, language scholars' orientation was strongly historical. Building on an insight first formulated in 1786 by William Jones (1746–1794), who worked as a judge on behalf of the British East India Company in Calcutta, subsequent generations of scholars traced the history of the various members of what was later to be referred to as the Indo-European family of languages in order to reconstruct their common origin (proto-Indo-European or *Ursprache*)

| Fig. 1.3
Grammatica Anglicana concentrata, oder Kurtz-gefasste englische Grammatica. Worinnen die zur Erlernung dieser Sprache hinlänglichnöthige Grund-Sätze auf eine sehr deutliche und leichte Art abgehandelt sind (Philadelphia 1748), title page

Linguistics and textual criticism

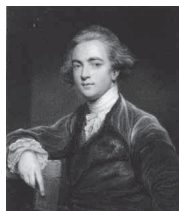The birth of linguistics as an academic discipline

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and their mutual relationship. In particular, Jones' seminal insight had been to note systematic correspondences between Sanskrit, an ancient language of the Indian subcontinent, and Ancient Greek which made it plausible to trace both back to a common historical source (see Unit 12 for further information on historical relationships among the Indo-European languages, esp. Fig. 12.1).

What was found out in the course of the 19th century still holds in its essence today. The Celtic languages spoken in the very West of Europe, the Germanic, Romance, Slavic languages, some languages of the Baltic region (Latvian, Lithuanian), Albanian, Greek, Persian and some of the major languages of the Indian subcontinent such as Hindi or Punjabi all go back to a common ancestor. Before the emergence of historical-comparative linguistics, people indulged in bizarre speculations on historical relationships between languages and peoples on the basis of a few pairs of words which sounded similar. Today, we have a rigid methodology to assess the value of such claims, and people who will still argue for direct links between the civilisations of ancient Asia and ancient America just because a few place names, names for gods or food-stuffs happen to sound similar are fortunately not taken seriously any more – a modest triumph of science over speculation.

One practitioner of historical-comparative linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), based at the University of Geneva in Switzerland, was instrumental in bringing about a re-orientation of approach which has dominated the field to the present day. He pointed out that the **diachronic** study of language (i.e. the study of its development through time) did not make it possible to understand how languages worked at any given point of time. The most trivial argument to prove this is, of course, that we can speak and write a language perfectly without knowing anything at all about its history. For example, it does not bother us in the least that the word *nice* meant "difficult" a few centuries ago, as is shown by the following extract from Daniel Defoe's well-known novel *Moll Flanders*:

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

The context here makes clear that the situation is far from *nice* in the present sense of "pleasant." At the time, the word meant "difficult, tricky." Looking around hard enough, we can find some old-fashioned or fossilised usages of *nice* which remind us of this older use even today, for example, a *nice distinction* (i.e. a difficult or pedantic distinction).

De Saussure proposed that the most appropriate approach to the scholarly study of language should be a **synchronic** one, with a focus on how a language

Fig. 1.4
William Jones (1746–1794), pioneer of historical-comparative (Indo-European) linguistics

Diachronic and synchronic approaches to the study of language

functioned as a structural system at any given time. In practice the move from the diachronic approach to the synchronic one often meant that the focus of interest shifted from the oldest stages of the language (in the case of English the Old English period lasting from c. 500 to c. 1100) to the contemporary language, but this does not necessarily have to be the case. We can study Old English from a synchronic perspective, for example, by showing how it worked as a structured system at a given point in time, let's say the well-documented period immediately before the Norman Conquest in 1066. Alternatively, we can take a diachronic approach to present-day English, for example by showing which processes of historical change are going on right now.

Fig. 1.5
William, Duke of Normandy, "the Conqueror," from the Bayeux Tapestry

What unites both historical-comparative ("diachronic") and structuralist-synchronic approaches to language and sets them apart from all the precursor traditions is their explicitly **descriptive** orientation. Where the teacher instructs in how to use a language correctly (that is according to the educated standards prevalent in a community), where ordinary speakers react to linguistic difference primarily emotionally ("I just hate that New York City accent," "all those Anglicisms are ruining the German language"), academic linguists generally do not pass value judgments on the linguistic forms and structures they are studying.

Demonstration/discussion

Prescriptive
and descriptive
approaches to the
study of language

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

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

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

This is an interesting example of linguistic self-hatred, as the famous novelist Henry James was an American by birth (even though he died a naturalised British subject).

The next quotation is not from a famous individual of the past but taken from the present and the World-Wide Web. It was posted by an instructional designer with a British background and shows that some of the prejudice voiced by Henry James has survived:

> How did the T become a D when in the middle of a word? I am a British lady and find this very annoying and hard to understand what was meant. For years I really thought that Nita Lowy's name was spelt NEDA! How do the students manage in dictation (or don't they have that in schools now). It affects everyone, as I just saw in print someone referring to Dr. Adkins, which would be the obvi-

Henry James,
novelist (1843–1916)

ous spelling if one had only heard the word spoken and did not know that the correct spelling is Dr. Atkins. The sentence below gives an example of problems in understanding the spelling of certain words.

I am writing this as I hear it pronounced: Paddy and Neda attended the innerview and were congradulated on the recipe with the budder badder for the cake they cooked with their dada. (daughter).
(source: http://linguistlist.org/ask-ling/message-details1.cfm?asklingid= 200317769)

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

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

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

In real life, unlike constructed examples and jokes, the danger of misunderstandings resulting from the identical pronunciation of words with different meanings is, of course, minimal. If the topic of a conversation is urban problems in the United States and we hear *inner city*, we know from the context that we are talking about neglected city centres and do not even think of the

theoretical alternative *inter-city*. If in a conversation in Britain somebody says [sɔːs] and the topic is food, we hear *sauce*, and not *source*.

Flapped /t/ in American English

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

Different definitions of *language*

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

> Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of volitionally produced symbols. (Edward Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*. New York 1921: 8)

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

> The essence of speech is that one human being, by movements beginning at his diaphragm and involving various parts of his chest, throat, mouth and nasal passages, creates disturbances in the air around him, which within a certain distance from him have a perceptible effect on the ear-drums and through them on the brains of other people, and that the hearers can, if they belong to the same language community, respond to these disturbances, or noises, and find them meaningful. (R. H. Robins, *General Linguistics: An Introductory Survey*. London 1971: 77)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The *-sign is a widely used convention in linguistics. In synchronic linguistics it indicates that a construction or sentence is ungrammatical. In diachronic linguistics it signals that a form is assumed as a plausible reconstruction although direct evidence (for example in old texts) is missing.

Die Inflation verdreifachte sich zwischen 1973 und 1983, by itself, is a well-formed sentence. The problem thus is to find a place for the modification *mehr als nur*. The sentence given above does not work, and no amount of moving around the parts will make it work: **Die Inflation verdreifachte sich mehr als*

|Fig. 1.7
Walt Whitman
(1819–1892)

Linguistic intuition
and well-formedness

nur, die Inflation mehr als verdreifachte sich nur, etc. On the other hand, any structure which has a form of *verdreifachen* in clause-final position is possible:

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

The complexity of language

This is a statement of the most important facts. At this stage in our introduction to linguistics we are not interested yet in a search for possible reasons. However, it is clear that the **rules** which are at work here are not those which are usually taught to foreign learners of English and German as part of their grammar teaching, nor are the sentences of the kind which children would practice massively in the early stages of natural language acquisition. In this sense, the example serves well to illustrate the enormous formal complexity of human languages.

This formal complexity is capable of expressing similarly complex meanings. While it is fairly easy to define the meaning of the verb *triple* ("increase threefold"), the combination *more than triple* raises a problem. Theoretically, this expression covers anything from "increase a little more than three-fold" to "increase a hundred-fold" and beyond. In a natural communicative situation, however, we are very likely to assume that we are talking about an increase which is between three-fold and four-fold. Why? The adverb *merely*, in its turn, introduces another nuance, namely that the increase was less than expected under the circumstances. In other words, it signals the speaker's attitude towards the event reported.

A working definition of *language*

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

1) New-born human beings have a genetic or natural predisposition to acquire a language (or languages) spoken in their communities. They are rather free to decide on what occasions and for what purposes they use language (which is an important contrast to many more instinct-based communication systems prevalent among animal populations).
2) Human languages represent meaning symbolically. The relationship between the sound of a word and the concept it denotes is thus arbitrary, as is easily shown by the following words used to denote the concept "bread":

> *ekmek* (Turkish), *Brot* (German), *pane* (Italian)

3) Words are combined into larger constructions by rules which are language-specific conventions. German *es wurde gesungen und getanzt* expresses roughly the same idea as English *there was singing and dancing*. It is not possible to re-create the German structure in English or vice versa.

4) Human languages are sound-based. For a small number of the world's c. 5,000 languages writing systems have been developed. Deaf people are capable of expressing themselves through signing.

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

Problems and challenges | 1.3

In Section 1.2 above we had a look at how people developed negative attitudes towards particular ways of pronouncing the English language. Of course, this problem is not restricted to matters of pronunciation. Similar responses are occasionally aroused by grammatical constructions, as well. Again, the linguistic details in question are trivial, but the social consequences may be considerable. This section will introduce you to the use of computerised **language corpora**, i. e. textual data-bases which have been compiled for the purposes of linguistic research. Such corpora are a relatively recent innovation in linguistics. They are powerful tools, not the least of their advantages being that they allow students to gain hands-on research experience very early on in their coursework.

Corpora and the study of language

Consider the following extract from a play by the renowned British dramatist Tom Stoppard (b. 1937):

> Max: […] if you don't mind me saying so.
> Henry: *My* saying, Max.
>   *Max gets up and wants to leave*
> Henry: I'm sorry, but it actually *hurts*.
> (source: Tom Stoppard, *The Real Thing*. London 1983: 34)

Without going too deeply into the details of grammatical analysis at this stage, let us state the problem. Max uses the verb *mind* followed by a pronoun in the object form followed by the participle of the verb. In present-day English, there are numerous instances of this pattern: *I found him reading, I caught them napping*, etc. Henry resents the usage, insisting on a supposedly correct alternative: the verb *mind*, followed by a verbal noun (or gerund) which is modified by the possessive pronoun. Again, there are numerous instances of this pattern: *I hate his singing, I am tired of your complaining*, etc. Max is offended because his partner in conversation comments on the outer form of his utterance rather than the message. This is impolite. As the following examples show, the plain grammatical facts are somewhat in favour of Max. In

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most cases, both variants are possible, and if only one works, it is in fact Max's and not Henry's:

> She doesn't mind his smoking during lunch.
> She doesn't mind him smoking during lunch.
>
> She doesn't object to Peter's smoking during lunch.
> She doesn't object to Peter smoking during lunch.
>
> ?? Who would have dreamed of such a thing's happening a year ago?
> Who would have dreamed of such a thing happening a year ago?
>
> I can tell you that I'm not looking forward to this happening again.
> * I can tell you that I'm not looking forward to this's happening again.

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

> Nobody objects to her smoking after lunch.

It is in such instances of divided usage that corpora are useful. The British National Corpus (BNC) is an up-to-date database comprising the unbelievable amount of almost 100 million words of running text covering a wide variety of written and spoken genres (see Fig. 1.8).

Mark Davies, of Brigham Young University (Provo, UT, USA), makes this material available in a very user-friendly format at his BNC View homepage (http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/). For the construction at issue here a search for "mind him" produces 35 hits, of which 14 illustrate the construction under study:

> "Don't you <u>mind him</u> stealing your father's eggs?"
> Therefore I don't <u>mind him</u> hearing the very worst about my past.
> She didn't <u>mind him</u> telling her things, and learned very quickly.
> Diana, Barry's wife of 35 years, doesn't <u>mind him</u> meeting all the great screen goddesses.
> I wouldn't <u>mind him</u> being Heathcliff's son, if only he loved her and could be a good husband to her."
> If he did not know that, I do not <u>mind him</u> admitting it, but it is extraordinary ignorance on his part.
> I wouldn't <u>mind him</u> sitting on top of my Christmas tree," said either Dosh or Freddie.
> The Guardian also says Shearer twisted an ankle avoiding a lunge from Carl Bradshaw on Sat and may miss their game with Pompey on Wednesday, I wouldn't <u>mind him</u> missing sundays game.
> Apparently, she did not <u>mind him</u> being a mop head when occupying other Government positions, but felt it would not be fitting for the role of Chancellor.
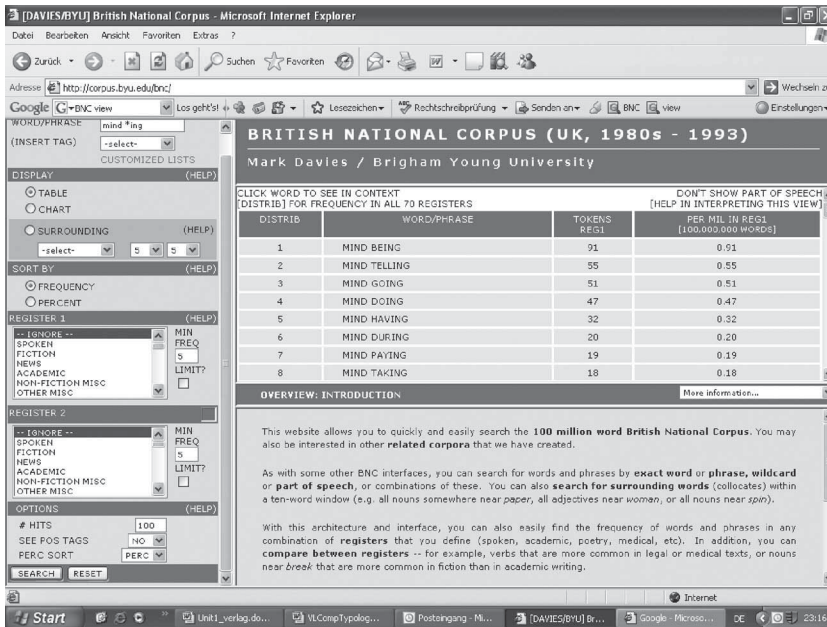
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Fig. 1.8
BNC Screenshot –
search for *mind* +
VERBing through the
"BNC View" website

ignore her and er <pause> pop next door and <pause> I mean I don't <u>mind him</u>
popping out as long as he's
Well, I don't <u>mind him</u> walking across that bit but <pause>
Actually, I don't really mi-- <u>mind him</u> looking after me, he's very good!
Did you <u>mind him</u> going over there, staying over there?
he didn't <u>mind him</u> speaking and as soon as <name> yeah right then he said I'm
not I'm not telling <unclear>

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

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

Corpus examples illustrate what we know and have suspected all along. In
addition, they alert us to determinants of variation which we have not consid-
ered. Note, for example, that the expression *never mind his + VERB-ing* occurs
twice, whereas *never mind him + VERB-ing* is not attested. Is this latter form

impossible, or is its absence from the British National Corpus accidental? This would be a question worth further corpus-based inquiry.

Another promising avenue of research would be to tabulate the origins of the various quotations. Are they from written texts – and hence formal? From spontaneous conversations – and hence informal? Systematic study will help us answer these questions – and others which will arise in the course of the work. At the end of our research, we will be in a position to offer a well-documented and comprehensive description of current usage.

References and further reading

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

Oxford English Dictionary. Second edition. Ed. by **John Simpson** and **Edmund Weiner**. Oxford: OUP. ‹http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl›

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

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

There are numerous introductions to linguistics aimed at student and academic audiences. For a work which has long been in successful use internationally see:

Yule, George. 2010. *The study of language: An introduction*. 4th ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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

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

Kortmann, Bernd. 2005. *English linguistics: Essentials*. Berlin: Cornelsen.

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

Amis, Kingsley. 1997. *The King's English: a guide to modern usage*. London: Harper-Collins. [Kingsley Amis (1922–1995) was a major 20th century English novelist.]

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

Bryson, Bill. 1990. *Mother tongue: the English language*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

Popular treatments which aim high intellectually and successfully combine expert knowledge, clear exposition and a broad inter-disciplinary horizon are:

Crystal, David. 2003. *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: CUP.

Pinker, Steven. 1994. *The language instinct: how the mind creates language*. New York NY: Morrow.

Practice

1 Consider the meaning of the word *language* in the following expressions and paraphrase it in such a way as to bring out the contrasting usages clearly:

Example:

> *The language of the British press has changed considerably over the past few decades.*

The word *language* here denotes a specific way or style of using the English language in a particular written genre.

> *Language is what distinguishes human beings from apes.*
> *She teaches sign language in a school for the deaf.*
> *Sally can conduct fluent conversations in at least four languages.*
> *Watch your language, kid!*
> *As a teacher I sometimes feel that the children speak a completely different language from me.*
> *Lëtzebuergesch used to be a dialect of German but has been one of the three official languages of Luxemburg since 1984.*
> *Who was the guy who got the Nobel Prize for decoding the language of the bees?*
> *If you know how to read the language of graffiti, they tell you a lot about life in the city.*

2 Why did the instructional designer quoted in Section 1.2 above refer to herself as *a British lady* rather than *a British woman* or an *Englishwoman*? What are the differences in meaning between the words *lady* and *woman* in present-day English?

   a) As a first step, note down your intuitions about – say – the contrast between *Ask the lady over there* and *Ask the woman over there*.

   b) Discuss your intuitions with a native speaker of English and consult entries for *woman* and *lady* in a dictionary of your choice.

   c) Collect a largish number of authentic uses of the two words from corpora and discuss the material.

3 To prove the point made above that knowledge of language history (diachrony) is irrelevant to the working of language as a structured system (synchrony), look up the words *woman* and *lady* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). This is the largest and most comprehensive dictionary ever produced for any language. It occupies almost two metres of shelf-space in its printed version, and is likely to be on hand in your departmental or university library. Alternatively, if your institution has a subscription, you may check the regularly updated online version (http://www.oed.com). One special feature of the OED is that it charts the history of English words beginning with the first attested uses and through all subsequent expansions and changes of meaning. What do the entries for *woman* and *lady* say about the earliest meanings of the words? Is this knowledge useful in any way?