

Language in the real world



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Introduction

This free course, *Language in the real world*, illustrates why knowledge about how language works (i.e. 'linguistics') is helpful (some might say essential) for different aspects of our everyday lives. It provides an introduction to ideas about what language is before introducing applied linguistics – a field dedicated to exploring and addressing situations where language plays a crucial role.

In this course we explore why it is important for us in our everyday lives to understand how language works. By this we mean: how language is learnt, how it is used for social, political or economic purposes, how it constructs identity and reality, and how its particular use in a specific interaction may lead to the success or failure of that interaction. In this way, this exploration provides an introduction to some areas of interest in the discipline of applied linguistics.

The course defines what we mean by 'language' by contrasting 'language' and 'languages', as well as human and (other) animal communicative behaviours. We look at the 'design features' of language and whether any can be recognised as unique to human languages. We then move on to the disciplines of linguistics and applied linguistics before considering different puzzles that knowledge about language can help to resolve.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [EE817 Applied linguistics and English language](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand and describe the key features of (human) language and languages
- understand what applied linguistics is
- explore different contexts where language is a central issue.

1 What is language?

Language is of central importance to our everyday lives: we are constantly reading, writing, listening, speaking, gesturing, grimacing, laughing, crying, etc. You are using language right now! Given its importance, perhaps it's useful to begin by asking ourselves: ***What exactly do we mean by 'language'?***

As a first step, consider the difference between 'language' and 'languages'.

Activity 1

Allow 30 minutes

Watch the videos below, which were recorded in China, Zimbabwe and Spain. You will see people speaking three different languages – Mandarin Chinese, Shona and Spanish – in three different cultural settings.

Try to observe as if encountering language for the first time. Make a list of things that all the extracts have in common and a list of things that are different. Include observations on as many aspects of communication as possible (e.g. meanings, body language, sounds, grammar, social conventions, etc.)

Video content is not available in this format.



Video content is not available in this format.



Video content is not available in this format.



Discussion

We take the differences and similarities between languages so much for granted that it is very easy to overlook the obvious. Nevertheless, you might have noticed the following.

Similarities

In all three videos:

- people make sounds with their mouths which speakers of the same language perceive as strings of words, and interpret as meaningful
- there is a tendency for one person to speak at a time, and to supplement their words with meaningful gestures, facial expressions and intonation
- you will probably be able to make a good guess at the type of interaction, the emotions expressed, and the relationship between the speakers – suggesting perhaps that these aspects of interaction have at least some universal characteristics.

Differences

Sounds, words, gestures and their meanings are all different, and it is these differences which (bar a few coincidences) make languages mutually unintelligible.

1.1 Language, languages and linguistics

Scholars of various persuasions have been fascinated by the questions of how much languages have in common and how much they differ. At one extreme, universalists have said that despite appearances, languages are fundamentally similar – so much so that an extra-terrestrial anthropologist visiting Earth might say that there is one human language with many varieties. At the other extreme, relativists have said that languages are fundamentally dissimilar, so much so that speakers of different languages perceive the world in very different ways.

Almost any statement we might make about language can be challenged. Nevertheless, let's hazard two, perhaps obvious, generalisations as a starting point:

1. All human societies and all human individuals know and use language.

For this reason, many have seen language as defining of what it means to be human. 'Language' (used in this uncountable form without an article) is a general human phenomenon, a faculty of our species.

Equally obvious, as you saw in the previous activity, is the fact that:

2. 'Languages' (used in this countable form) are markedly different from each other.

While language is a human trait, this is not the case for any particular language.

The scientific study of both language and languages is called linguistics, with different sub-disciplines focusing more on one or the other. The description of systems of sound

(phonology), word formation (morphology and lexis) and grammar, and the ways in which these encode meaning are within the remit of linguistics both in relation to specific languages and in relation to commonalities across languages. But linguistics is also concerned with how these systems are learned, how they are used in producing and understanding messages, how they change over time. Of course there are also other aspects of human communicative behaviour which could be included under the heading of language and increasingly, linguistics has also started to focus on these. Examples include:

- non-verbal communication such as gestures, body language and facial expressions
- communication through visual images, music or movement
- communication that combines all of these different modes at the same time.



Figure 1 Indian classical dance show: is this language?

1.2 Humans and other animals



Figure 2 Two ravens ‘talking’.

But let’s return to the question of ‘what is language?’ just once more. Another way of approaching the definition of ‘language’ is to consider the similarities and differences between human and (other) animal communicative behaviour. Such a perspective forces us to consider the things which different languages have in common.

Activity 2

Allow 10 minutes

Some animals (for example chimpanzees, dolphins, parrots and dogs) succeed in communicating their feelings or needs, both to each other and to humans. To what extent do you think their communication is like, or unlike, human communication?

Discussion

In terms of communicating attitudes, pet dogs can do many of the things we, humans, do. For example, they can tell us, and each other, that they are ‘only playing’, or that they are happy, hungry, angry, about to attack, and so on. And their messages vary considerably in intensity: a wagging tail can be wagged a little, a lot, or anything in between; a growl can be quiet and sporadic, or loud and sustained. But are these ‘signals’ part of a ‘language’ similar to human language? Can animals use these signals to refer to a point in future, to reflect on a particular action or to tell a story? If not, why? What kinds of features would animals need to have at their disposal to communicate more than just specific present states and imminent intentions?

Let's pursue this issue of the similarities and differences between animal and human communication further in the next activity.

Activity 3

Allow 1.5 hours

Read [*The 'Design Features' of Language by Guy Cook*](#). As you read through the list, think about which of these features, if any, are unique to human language, and are never found in animal communication.

Discussion

Many of the design features listed here are actually also found in animal communication, although not together, and not in such complex forms. Three, however, seem to be unique to human languages.

- **Dual structure:** the way in which language operates at two levels – at one level, language consists of discrete sounds which in themselves are not meaningful, and at another, in which these sounds are combined into meaningful units or signs – usually words – which can then be further combined to make more meanings.
- **Structure dependence:** in which the meaning of any combination of words is dependent on the underlying structure of the utterance of which they form part.
- **Reflexivity:** the use of language to talk about language, also known as metalanguage, without which this course would not be possible!

In summary, on this course we see 'language' as a human faculty, characterised by the design features of dual structure, structure dependence and reflexivity and we see 'linguistics' as the field that is concerned with both the study of language as an abstract system and its specific instantiations in the form of different languages.

2 Applied linguistics

Now that we have working definitions of 'language' and 'linguistics', what could 'applied linguistics' be?

Activity 4

Allow 5 minutes

What does 'applied linguistics' mean to you? Use what you have learned so far in this course to come up with a definition.

Discussion

Broadly speaking, applied linguistics can be seen as one sub-discipline of linguistics, albeit one that is also broad and itself encompasses other fields. Watch the short animation in the next activity for a more specific definition of applied linguistics.

Activity 5

Allow 15 minutes

Watch the animation 'What is applied linguistics?' As you watch, make notes on:

- what applied linguistics is and is not
- the difference between applied linguistics and linguistics applied
- Brumfit's definition of applied linguistics and the problems with it.

Video content is not available in this format.



Discussion

Applied linguistics is not about the theory of language or the description of the structure of language. It is also not just about language teaching. Instead, applied linguistics is a field of study that connects knowledge about language in theory with knowledge about how people use language in various contexts.

'Linguistics applied' embodied a 1970s attitude: practitioners simply took insights from theoretical linguists and applied them to situations in everyday life. It was a one-way process. 'Applied linguistics', on the other hand, is a more recent view that sees the applied field as also being able to contribute to theoretical linguistics in a mutually beneficial way. The new view also allows for a wider range of contexts to be investigated.

Brumfit defined applied linguistics as 'the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue' (1995, p. 27). The word 'problem' suggests that applied linguistics is only concerned with situations where something has gone wrong and always has a 'solution'. However, sometimes applied linguistics is simply about understanding what is actually going on.

2.1 Defining the field

The 'What is Applied Linguistics?' animation gave you a taster of how the field developed and some of the debates within it. Now it's time to go into it in a bit more depth.

Activity 6

Allow 1 hour

Read '[What is applied linguistics?](#)' (Burns et al., 2009) and note any similarities or differences in how these ten linguists define their field of study.

Discussion

Applied linguistics potentially covers a vast area, and both academic researchers and practitioners necessarily tend to focus on a small area of particular interest. Not all academics use the term 'applied linguistics' to describe their work – some call themselves sociolinguists or language teaching specialists, for example. Some also focus very much on making a practical contribution. What they share is a concern with language and linguistics in real-world contexts, rather than as an abstract system. Their work often aims to enhance understanding of how language works in those chosen contexts, and/or tries to help alleviate a problem affecting language users.



Figure 3 A range of real-world contexts which have been investigated by applied linguists.

As you saw in the animation, for much of its history, applied linguistics was almost entirely concerned with one central research question: how do we best teach and learn languages? For political and commercial reasons, the focus was, in large measure, specifically on English. Today, however, applied linguistics (broadly defined) brings together research in a much wider range of areas, for example:

- law and criminal investigation
- speech and language therapy
- healthcare
- business and marketing
- language policy and multilingualism
- intercultural communication

- lexicography
- translation and interpreting
- language pedagogies and assessment.

2.2 Problems with ‘problem’

You may have noticed that quite a few of the scholars you encountered in Activity 6 mentioned language-related ‘problems’. This goes back to the much-cited definition of the academic discipline of applied linguistics put forward by Brumfit in 1995, which you saw in the animation. This useful and widely quoted definition is precise in one sense: it pinpoints applied linguists’ concern with investigating the ‘real world’, and thus differentiates it from other types of linguistics. But there is a problem with the word ‘problem’.

Activity 7

Allow 20 minutes

Listen to the interview with applied linguist David Block below. He describes a particular language-related problem he has investigated, and defines this ‘problem’ as something he wished to understand rather than solve. Make notes on what situation he was investigating and the distinction he draws between issues which are ‘problems’ and those which are ‘problematic’. Think also about the following:

- To what extent was Block’s study about language?
- What does he mean by ‘violating the research process’ when he describes how his students sometimes try to approach research?

Audio content is not available in this format.

Discussion

David Block was trying to understand how Spanish-speaking Latinos lived in the context of multilingual London. He gives a subtle and complex take on the notion of language-related problems which will help to guard against any simplistic notion that they can be ‘solved’ by ‘experts’. He outlines how he needed to locate the issue he had encountered locally (in London) in the wider context of research conducted in other countries and contexts, and in terms of migration and globalisation, and how this led him beyond a narrow view of what language and applied linguistics research means. Block describes the focus of his research as a ‘puzzle’ rather than as a problem. He is clear in particular about the need to avoid framing his research subjects – the Spanish speakers – as a ‘problem’; rather, he chooses ‘focus of enquiry’ to make it clear that his interest in them is not geared towards ‘fixing’ them.

When Block describes some of his students violating the research process, he means that they sometimes don’t begin from a puzzle – something that they want to understand. He describes how such puzzles then naturally lead to research questions that then guide the rest of the research process.

Aside from the issues with ‘problem’ that Block outlines, as we noted earlier, not every area worthy of investigation by applied linguists necessarily constitutes a ‘problem’. Some

scholars therefore prefer to adopt an alternative, broader, definition to allow for a range of contexts in which an understanding of language can be useful or simply of interest:

Applied linguistics is the academic field which connects knowledge about language to decision-making in the real world.

(Simpson, 2011, p. 1).

3 Using knowledge about language

Now let's turn to five different real-world scenarios or puzzles, where knowledge about language can be used to inform decision-making.

Activity 8

Allow 1.5 hours

Consider each of the following puzzles in which decisions about language need to be taken. These are all real situations, though some identifiers have been changed. How would you go about investigating these in order to formulate and give your advice to those who have to take these decisions? (You do not need to come up with solutions, just a possible process for arriving at one.) Make notes of your ideas.

Puzzle 1

The head teacher of a London secondary school is thinking of offering another foreign language in addition to French. The options are Chinese (the world's largest first language), Spanish (one of the world's largest and most widely distributed languages) or the Indian language Gujarati (the largest home language in the school and local community – and one which has approximately 43 million speakers worldwide). Which of these languages should be taught, and why?

Puzzle 2



Figure 4 Improving care in a healthcare clinic.

In Metropolis, a US city with a large immigrant population, a specialist healthcare clinic wants to improve the care they offer to people with low English proficiency. They have already introduced translated versions of their information leaflets and provide interpreters on demand. However, even with interpreters present, the clinic finds that consultations involving patients with low English proficiency don't go as smoothly as

others and they want to find out why. What aspects of communication might be at play here? What should the clinic investigate?

Puzzle 3

Zramzshra is a small island in the Indian Ocean. The Zramzshran language uses a unique alphabet, which (like Greek) developed from the Phoenician alphabet when traders came there 3000 years ago. The island's finance minister argues for a 'reform' in which this alphabet will be replaced by the Roman alphabet (the one used in English and many other languages). This change, she argues, will make the island's life easier and more prosperous, with benefits for English teaching, computer-mediated communication, trade and tourism. Is this the best policy? What other factors should the finance minister consider?

Puzzle 4

Two medium sized travel agencies are about to merge and form a new mass market travel company. They are trying to decide what to name their new company and have a shortlist of two names: 'Destinations' and 'Going Places'. Which name would you recommend and why?

Puzzle 5

The interaction below took place in an office in Australia. Why did the first speaker not achieve her goal of getting time off?

Video content is not available in this format.



Discussion

In responding to such language-related problems, one can of course draw upon common sense and experience to judge what action should be taken. Yet, if called upon to offer advice on these problems as an applied linguist, a more systematic approach is needed, as Block's description of the research process suggests. Each puzzle was set so the next step might be to study what other people have said on similar matters and to see what other information may need to be gathered to understand the situation better. You may have noted down different approaches, but our suggestions are:

- Puzzle 1: Sometimes the best option for an applied linguist is not offer any answers, but to ask more questions. The head teacher could use questionnaires to find out what parents and pupils think would make sense.
- Puzzle 2: Language and culture interact in complex ways so linguistic competence (whether someone has low or high language proficiency) may not be the only thing at play here. The clinic could investigate what differences there might be between how medical consultations work in the patients' home country and in Metropolis.
- Puzzle 3: While the finance minister might be right about the economic advantages of switching alphabets, she should also consider that language, including its script, is part of culture, as a number of scholars have pointed out. She is asking the islanders to give up something that is part of their cultural heritage and identity.
- Puzzle 4: With these kinds of decisions one needs to think about all possible meanings of the words. One has to consider not only the dictionary definitions,

but also their social meanings and emotional impact. In short, their associations and connotations. Associations and connotations of words develop through usage so a good starting point would be investigating how these are used by speakers in different contexts.

- Puzzle 5: There could be lots of factors involved here and an applied linguist would need to consider the institutional context, the relationship between and relative positions of speaker and addressee, how important those project reports are and the language (including body language and facial expressions) that was used. A change in any of these could lead to a different outcome.

In the video below, you can see the difference a change in communicative style made. Think about what aspects of communication have changed.

Video content is not available in this format.



Conclusion

This free course, *Language in the real world*, explored what we mean by 'language', by contrasting 'language' and 'languages', and comparing the features of human language with features of (other) animal communicative behaviours. The course also introduced the field of applied linguistics and outlined a number of different scenarios in which knowledge about how language works can usefully inform decision making.

Of course, such decisions are also influenced by other (often cultural, political or economic) factors, which might mean that the applied linguist's advice, however well-informed, is not taken up. Not much can be done about that. What is crucial, however, is that applied linguistic advice is based on systematic analysis and careful consideration of all contributing aspects of context. In addition, it is important that applied linguistic perspectives on particular issues get communicated to interested parties in an intelligible and engaging manner. As you can see, applied linguistics is serious business.

References

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- Brumfit, C. J. (1995) 'Teacher professionalism and research' in Cook, G. and Seidlhofer, B. (eds) *Principle and Practice in Applied Linguistics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Cook, G. (2009) *The 'Design Features' of Language*, Milton Keynes, The Open University.
- Simpson, J. (2011) 'Introduction' in J. Simpson *The Routledge Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, Abingdon, Routledge.

Further reading

For more examples of applied linguistics in action read the following OpenLearn articles:

- Leedham, M. (2014) 'Can I use 'we' and 'I' in my essay? Introducing corpus linguistics', *OpenLearn* [Online]. Available at www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/more-languages/linguistics/can-i-use-we-and-i-my-essay-introducing-corpus-linguistics (Accessed 9 November 2016).
- Demjén, Z. (2013) 'Can corpus linguistics help with branding?', *OpenLearn* [Online]. Available at www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/can-corpus-linguistics-help-branding (Accessed 9 November 2016).
- Monaghan, F. (2016) 'David Bowie: identity is creativity', *OpenLearn* [Online]. Available at www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/more-languages/linguistics/david-bowie-identity-creativity (Accessed 9 November 2016).

Nakayiza, J. and Ssentanda, M. (2015) 'Is English squeezing out local languages in Uganda?', *OpenLearn* [Online]. Available at www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/more-languages/linguistics/english-squeezing-out-local-languages-uganda (Accessed 9 November 2016).

Demjén, Z. (2015) 'Sylvia Plath and the linguistics of depression', *OpenLearn* [Online]. Available at www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/more-languages/linguistics/sylvia-plath-and-the-linguistics-depression (Accessed 9 November 2016).

Demjén, Z. (2014) 'What's in a name?' *OpenLearn* [Online]. Available at www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/whats-name (Accessed 9 November 2016).

For a more detailed overview of the field of applied linguistics see:

Simpson, J. (2011) *The Routledge Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, Abingdon, Routledge.

Hall, C.J., Smith, P.H., and Wicaksono, R. (2011) *Mapping Applied Linguistics*, Abingdon, Routledge.

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Video

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