Linguistics

Broadly conceived, **linguistics** is the scientific study of human [language](#), and a **linguist** is someone who engages in this study.

Dichotomies and language

The study of linguistics can be thought of along three major axes, the endpoints of which are described below:

- Synchronic and Diachronic - [Synchronic](#) study of a language is concerned with its form at a given moment; [Diachronic](#) study covers the history of a language (group) and its structural changes over time.
- Theoretical and applied - Theoretical (or general) linguistics is concerned with frameworks for describing individual languages and theories about universal aspects of language; applied linguistics applies these theories to other fields.
- Contextual and independent - *Contextual* linguistics is concerned with how language fits into the world: its social function, how it is acquired, how it is produced and perceived. *Independent* linguistics considers languages for their own sake, aside from the externalities related to a language. Terms for this dichotomy are not yet well established--the [Encyclop桃a Britannica](#) uses *macrolinguistics* and *microlinguistics* instead.

Given these dichotomies, scholars who call themselves simply *linguists* or *theoretical linguists*, with no further qualification, tend to be concerned with independent, theoretical synchronic linguistics, which is acknowledged as the core of the discipline.

Linguistic [inquiry](#) is pursued by a wide variety of specialists, who may not all be in harmonious agreement; as [Russ Rymer](#) flamboyantly puts it:

> "Linguistics is arguably the most hotly contested property in the academic realm. It is soaked with the blood of [poets](#), [theologians](#), [philosophers](#), [philologists](#), [psychologists](#), [biologists](#), and [neurologists](#), along with whatever blood can be got out of [grammarians](#)." [1]

Areas of theoretical linguistics

Theoretical linguistics is often divided into a number of separate areas, to be studied more or less independently. The following divisions are currently widely acknowledged:

- [Phonetics](#), the study of the different sounds that are employed across all human languages
- [Phonology](#), the study of patterns of a language's basic sounds
- [Morphology](#), the study of the internal structure of words

- [Syntax](#), the study of how words combine to form grammatical sentences
- [Semantics](#), the study of the meaning of words ([lexical semantics](#)), and how these combine to form the meanings of sentences
- [Pragmatics](#), the study of how utterances are used (literally, figuratively, or otherwise) in communicative acts
- [Historical linguistics](#), the study of languages whose historical relations are recognizable through similarities in vocabulary, word formation, and syntax
- [Linguistic typology](#), the study of the grammatical features that are employed across all human languages
- [Stylistics](#), the study of style in languages
- [Discourse analysis](#), the study of sentences organised into texts

The independent significance of each of these areas is not universally acknowledged, however, and nearly all linguists would agree that the divisions overlap considerably. Nevertheless, each area has core concepts that foster significant scholarly inquiry and research.

Diachronic linguistics

Whereas the core of theoretical linguistics is concerned with studying languages at a particular point in time (usually the present), diachronic linguistics examines how language changes through time, sometimes over centuries. Historical linguistics enjoys both a rich history (the study of linguistics grew out of historical linguistics) and a strong theoretical foundation for the study of [language change](#).

In American universities, the non-historic perspective seems to have the upper hand. Many introductory linguistics classes, for example, cover historical linguistics only cursorily. The shift in focus to a non-historic perspective started with [Saussure](#) and became predominant with [Noam Chomsky](#).

Explicitly historical perspectives include [historical-comparative linguistics](#) and [etymology](#).

Applied linguistics

Whereas theoretical linguistics is concerned with finding and [describing](#) generalities both within particular languages and among all languages, [applied linguistics](#) takes the results of those findings and *applies* them to other areas. Often *applied linguistics* refers to the use of linguistic research in language teaching, but results of linguistic research are used in many other areas, as well.

Many areas of applied linguistics today involve the explicit use of computers. [Speech synthesis](#) and [speech recognition](#) use phonetic and phonemic knowledge to provide voice interfaces to computers. Applications of [computational linguistics](#) in [machine translation](#), [computer-assisted translation](#), and [natural language processing](#) are extremely fruitful

areas of applied linguistics which have come to the forefront in recent years with increasing computing power. Their influence has had a great effect on theories of syntax and semantics, as modelling syntactic and semantic theories on computers constrains the theories to computable operations and provides a more rigorous mathematical basis.

Contextual linguistics

Contextual linguistics is where the discipline of linguistics interacts with other academic disciplines. Whereas in core theoretical linguistics language is studied for its own sake, the interdisciplinary areas of linguistics consider how language interacts with the rest of the world.

Sociolinguistics, anthropological linguistics, and linguistic anthropology are social sciences that consider the interactions between linguistics and society as a whole.

Critical discourse analysis is where rhetoric and philosophy interact with linguistics.

Psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics combine medical science and linguistics.

Other cross-disciplinary areas of linguistics include language acquisition, evolutionary linguistics, stratificational linguistics, and cognitive science.

Individual speakers, language communities, and linguistic universals

Linguists also differ in how broad a group of language users they study. Some analyze a given speaker's language (idiolect) or language development in great detail. Some study language pertaining to a whole speech community, such as the dialect of those who speak African American Vernacular English ("Ebonics"). Others try to find linguistic universals that apply, at some abstract level, to all users of human language everywhere. This latter project has been most famously advocated by Noam Chomsky, and it interests many people in psycholinguistics and cognitive science. It is thought that universals in human language may reveal important insight into universals about the human mind.

Prescription and description

> Main article: *Prescription and description*.

Research currently performed under the name "linguistics" is purely *descriptive*; linguists seek to clarify the nature of language without passing value judgments or trying to chart future language directions. Nonetheless, there are many professionals and amateurs who also *prescribe* rules of language, holding a particular standard out for all to follow.

Prescriptivists tend to be found among the ranks of language educators and journalists, and not in the actual academic discipline of linguistics. They hold clear notions of what is right and wrong, and may assign themselves the responsibility of ensuring that the next generation uses the variety of language that is most likely to lead to "success", often the acrolect of a particular language. The reasons for their intolerance of "incorrect usage" may include distrust of neologisms, connections to socially-disapproved dialects (i.e., basilects), or simple conflicts with pet theories. An extreme version of prescriptivism can be found among censors, whose personal mission is to eradicate words and structures which they consider to be destructive to society.

Descriptivists, on the other hand, don't accept the prescriptivists' notion of "incorrect usage". They might describe the usages the other has in mind simply as "idiosyncratic", or they may discover a regularity (a *rule*) that the usage in question follows (in contrast to the common prescriptive assumption that "bad" usage is unsystematic). Within the context of fieldwork, descriptive linguistics refers to the study of language using a descriptivist approach. Descriptivist methodology more closely resembles scientific methodology in other disciplines.

Speech versus writing

Most contemporary linguists work under the assumption that spoken language is more fundamental, and thus more important to study than written language. Reasons for this perspective include:

- Speech appears to be a human universal, whereas there have been many cultures and speech communities that lack written communication;
- People learn to speak and process spoken languages more easily and much earlier than writing;
- A number of cognitive scientists argue that the brain has an innate "language module", knowledge of which is thought to come more from studying speech than writing, particularly since language as speech is held to be an evolutionary adaptation, whereas writing is a comparatively recent invention.

Of course, linguists agree that the study of written language can be worthwhile and valuable. For linguistic research that uses the methods of corpus linguistics and computational linguistics, written language is often much more convenient for processing large amounts of linguistic data. Large corpora of spoken language are difficult to create and hard to find, and are typically used in transcriptional form anyway.

Furthermore, the study of writing systems themselves falls under the aegis of linguistics.

Research areas of linguistics

- etymology
- historical-comparative linguistics

- [lexicography](#)
- [lexicology](#)
- [phonetics](#)
- [phonology](#)
- [pragmatics](#)
- [semantics](#)
- [syntax](#)
- [theoretical linguistics](#)
- [computational linguistics](#)
- [corpus linguistics](#)
- [descriptive linguistics](#)
- [linguistic typology](#)
- [semiotics](#)

Interdisciplinary linguistic research

- [anthropological linguistics](#)
- [applied linguistics](#)
- [cognitive science](#)
- [comparative linguistics](#)
- [computational linguistics](#)
  - [natural language processing](#)
  - [speaker recognition](#) (authentication)
  - [speech processing](#)
  - [speech recognition](#)
  - [speech synthesis](#)
- [critical discourse analysis](#)
- [cryptanalysis](#)
- [decipherment](#)
- [evolutionary linguistics](#)
- [glottometrics](#)
- [historical linguistics](#)
- [language acquisition](#)
- [neurolinguistics](#)
- [orthography](#)
- [psycholinguistics](#)
- [second language acquisition](#)
- [sociolinguistics](#)
- [stratificational linguistics](#)
- [text linguistics](#)
- [writing systems](#)

Important linguists and schools of thought

Early scholars of linguistics include Jakob Grimm, who devised the principle of consonantal shifts in pronunciation known as Grimm's Law in 1822, Karl Verner, who discovered Verner's Law, August Schleicher who created the "Stammbaumtheorie" and Johannes Schmidt who developed the "Wellentheorie" ("wave model") in 1872. Ferdinand de Saussure was the founder of modern structural linguistics. Edward Sapir a leader in American structural linguistics, was one of the first who explored the relations between language studies and anthropology. His methodology had strong influence on all his successors. Noam Chomsky's formal model of language, transformational-generative grammar, developed under the influence of his teacher Zellig Harris, who was in turn strongly influenced by Leonard Bloomfield, has been the dominant one from the 1960s.

Other important linguists and schools include Michael Halliday, whose systemic functional grammar is pursued widely in the U.K., Canada, Australia, China, and Japan; Dell Hymes, who developed a pragmatic approach called The Ethnography of Speaking; George Lakoff, Leonard Talmy, and Ronald Langacker, who were pioneers in cognitive linguistics; Charles Fillmore and Adele Goldberg, who are associated with construction grammar; and linguists developing several varieties of what they call functional grammar, including Talmy Givon and Robert Van Valin, Jr..

Representation of speech

- International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), a system used to write down and reproduce the sounds of human speech.
- SAMPA, an ASCII-only transcription for the IPA used by some authors. See also the SAMPA home page.

Narrower conceptions of "linguistics"

"Linguistics" and "linguist" may not always be meant to apply as broadly as above. In some contexts, the best definitions may be "what is studied in a typical university's department of linguistics", and "one who is a professor in such a department." Linguistics in this narrow sense usually does not refer to learning to speak foreign languages (except insofar as this helps to craft formal models of language.) It does not include literary analysis. Only sometimes does it include study of things such as metaphor. It probably does not apply to those engaged in such prescriptive efforts as found in Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*; "linguists" usually seek to study what people do, not what they *should* do. One could probably argue for a long while about who is and who is not a "linguist".

See also

- History of linguistics
- Linguistics basic topics, a page designed to organize information about linguistics on Wikipedia
- List of linguistic topics

- [List of linguists](#)
- [Philology](#), the study of [ancient texts](#) and languages
- [Structuralism](#)

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External links

- [Linguistics and Human Languages in the Yahoo! Directory](#)
- [Glossary of linguistic terms](#) at [SIL International](#)
- [Amazon.com Books - Linguistics](#)
- ["Linguistics" section](#) of A Bibliography of Literary Theory, Criticism and Philology, ed. J. A. Garc Landa (University of Zaragoza, Spain)