USING THIS BOOK
Read me!

UNIT CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

This book is an introduction to how language is used in infinitely intriguing ways and how even rigorous analysis of these areas can be fun and fascinating. We focus unashamedly on language. However, while it is a particularly important part of communication, we unreservedly accept that the context (linguistic and non-linguistic) within which language is used is crucial for understanding how language is being used and what meaning is being expressed. We recognize that language use is problematical – it is not as simple as many would like to believe.

For instance, a recently produced Alternative York Guide is intended as a guidebook to the alternative scene in York (UK), but the title could be taken as meaning that it is simply another guide to the city, alternative to the ones that already exist. Infamous antique shops from the same publication is an interesting phrase. Infamous means the same as notorious. Is the writer using infamous with its conventional meaning of ‘having a bad reputation’ or using infamous with its newer meaning of ‘famous’? This could be related perhaps to the way wicked is changing – at least for younger people – into a term of approval.

This is a book which describes language in use and shows how that language can be analysed. It is not a prescriptive book full of rules that you should obey nor a dictionary telling you what words mean. It will not tell you how you should pronounce words. It will not tell you how to talk to your boss or your friends. It will not tell you how many words your child must understand by the age of one year nor how your brain should process language. It will not tell you whether it is right that English is a (the?) world language nor whether any action should be taken in relation to this.

We adopt a functional approach to language and language analysis, an approach that starts with language in use rather than abstract theories. A function is a use to which something is put. Language is used for many purposes, which perhaps all have in common that meaning is conveyed. Meaning depends on context as in the following two conversations.
Exactly the same words are used to answer a question but one (which?) is simply providing information whilst the other is arguably explaining why s/he cannot go to the door to find out who is there. Speakers (and writers) make choices about what language to use (how to say and how to sequence the words they choose to use) in relation to their audience, their topic of conversation and the context of their utterance.

**HOW DO WE THINK ABOUT LANGUAGE?**

Many people think of language in terms of bricks (the sounds and words) and mortar (the grammar) in the creation of the building or wall (the linguistic text). We asked our linguistics students how they thought about language and language analysis and they produced some very creative responses. One said that ‘language is like a new box of rubber bands – they are all messed up together and it is very hard to pull one single band out to use’ and explained that there were so many aspects to language that, while recognizing the interconnectedness, you need to be clear about which aspect of language you were analysing at any one time.

Another said that ‘analysing language was like climbing a mountain – just as you get to what you think is the summit, there is another peak on the horizon for you to consider … but that is what makes it fun’ and so recognized that while it can seem hard-going at times to understand the basics, there is a clear pay-off later.

A third student said ‘it’s a bit like being in a very large swimming pool – everything is very easy on the surface but you know – or think you know – that there is a lot going on underneath’. This view recognizes very clearly the ability to use language to achieve our aims with the recognition that there are dangers in the deep waters and that using language sometimes goes wrong.

Another expanded this image to claim that ‘it’s more like bobbing around on the wide ocean where there are no landmarks to help you and you know that there are dangers lurking beneath the surface but somehow you make sense of it all’.

When we reported such comments to our colleagues, one of them replied that language analysis was all a bit like sex – infinitely creative and only any fun when you are doing it. We certainly believe that the best way to learn about language and about how to analyse it is to do it rather than simply be told how to do it and such an approach is at the heart of every unit in this book.
But how do we think about language? Do any of these images help? Is language like a jigsaw such that all you have to do is get the right pieces in the right place and the picture is complete? Or does the image of cog wheels better allow for the dynamic nature of language and its ability to change constantly? Of course, cog wheels might suggest that language only moves in circles rather than in any particular direction! Are humans the only animals capable of using language? In the same way that the scientists are looking to see if there has ever been life on Mars, is there a comparable language question of ‘is there language out there?’, never mind the already researched questions of the extent to which other animals use their own language or communication systems or the extent to which they are capable of acquiring human language?

Language may involve one or more people, for sure, but are they always happy when they use language and are they always revealing themselves? Is language sometimes used as a disguise?

What are the building blocks of language? An individual sound or an individual letter can be meaningless on its own but in combination with other symbols the meanings can be very significant. For any language, there are a limited number of words in a dictionary, a countable number of sounds and a restricted set of rules for combining sounds and words to create comprehensible utterances. If the resources of any language are finite, as it appears, how extraordinary that language in use appears to allow us to express novel and unique utterances to an apparently infinite extent.

How, then, is language to be analysed? In this book, we take the approach that the best starting point is to look at and listen to language in use and then analysis can begin to explain how the resources of the language are being exploited. There are clearly different approaches to analysis that are possible – the functional approach here considers the different forms of language, in use within given contexts, to express given meanings. Because of our emphasis on language in use, as far as possible the language extracts used for presentation or analysis are authentic pieces of language. Only where absolutely necessary have we created language samples to demonstrate a particular point.
WHY IS LANGUAGE WORTH STUDying?

Some people want to argue that our ability to use language is actually the essence of what makes us human and that it marks us out from the other animals. For that reason alone, language in use is well worth studying but there are other reasons. We use language to convey information to each other, to ask about opinions or interpretations, to express our feelings to each other. Sometimes it is very easy to say what we mean and sometimes we find that we have said something that we did not intend. Sometimes we find that we are saying two things at the same time in the same way that artists can draw two things at once. Surely, the more the workings of language are understood, the more effective the desired communication is likely to be.

However, there are other, more instrumental, reasons for studying language and having a detailed knowledge of how the system works. There are many areas of work where a particularly detailed knowledge of how language works is very important.

- The caring professions of teaching and medicine use language to educate, to nurse, to explain and to reassure and specifically within this group:
  - foreign language teachers use the rules of language to help learners learn another language more effectively;
  - speech and language therapists use their insights into language to help people who find using language problematic in a variety of ways.
- Broadcast and print journalists use language to tell us what is going on in our world and many people choose which TV channel to watch or which newspaper to read by the way the language is used to present events. Other parts of the media in advertising and marketing use language in conjunction with visual images to persuade us that we really do want and need that stuff.
- A company’s staff are its greatest asset, so there are financial reasons for having Human Resources managers who know how to use language in dealing with people.
- Some workers use language to talk about language: lexicographers (dictionary writers), editors, publishers, academics in universities.
- Actors use the insights of language analysis to achieve plausible renditions of accents for roles that they are playing; dramatists create dialogue that can be seen as realistic; novelists and poets craft their language with enormous care to enhance their readers’ artistic experience.
- Legislative and criminal justice systems use language very precisely to frame and debate laws and decide innocence or guilt. Increasingly, forensic linguists are brought in as expert witnesses for the prosecution or for the defence.
Anyone who can justifiably claim that they have a detailed understanding of how language can be used to achieve specific aims has to be of interest to an employer. Writing this section led us to wonder yet again whether there are any human endeavours where a sound knowledge of how language works is not applicable – we still cannot think of many. Even a Trappist monk who has taken a vow of silence prays to his God – in silence, perhaps, but still using language.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

What is in each unit?

Each unit has been written so that it can be read fairly independently of the others, but frequent cross referencing (indicated by this symbol ➔) indicates how one area of language analysis might impinge on many others at the same time. The cross referencing also shows how the units link in sequences other than the order in which they are presented in the book – sequences which you will find explained later in this section where we suggest other routes through the material.

Each unit contains activities which you should carry out. Students very often learn better through an active approach to the material and we recommend very strongly that you should have a go at each of the activities. Do read the commentaries (indicated by the symbol ⇐) after you have tried to do the activity – they can include additional material on the topic that does not appear elsewhere in the unit.

Some units are likely to be easier to read than others. Some present the more technical concepts that you need for analysing language in use, making precise statements about it and understanding the work of professional linguists. Other units show you how to apply that core knowledge. This is clarified later in this unit where we show you different possible ways to access the material.

Many units suggest that you use a good dictionary. It is not our place to prescribe which dictionary you should use – though the Oxford English Dictionary or Webster’s would certainly be good starting points. Whichever you choose to use, we would recommend that:

- the bigger the version of the dictionary, the better. Small dictionaries are unlikely to contain enough detail for the work you will be doing.
- the newer the dictionary, the better. It will then contain the most recent usages of different words.
- if you want to use a dictionary based on a corpus of English usage, Collins COBUILD is well worth considering.

All units follow conventional bracketing and notation systems which are listed on pages xix-xx.
The data that we use is mostly just language stuff that we happened to have. We did not sit down and invent the language samples to prove the point we wanted to make, nor did we rush round looking for particular examples to make our points—the language was there, all around us, and we simply adopted it as useful to our purposes. You can do the same, if you start looking and listening actively to what is going on around you. We have put some extra texts into Unit 16 to give you more samples on which to hone your analytical skills. We have also put data on the website associated with this book at www.routledge.com/textbooks/0415291798.

All units necessarily introduce some technical linguistic terms and by the end of the book you will have a large metalinguistic (language terms to talk about language) tool-bag. Many of these terms are in bold type to indicate that they are used in more than one unit and that they appear in the glossary. This is useful if you come across a term (for example in a unit where an explanation is not provided) and are uncertain of its meaning. The purpose of the glossary is to help your memory, not to teach you the item in the first place.

MOVING FROM ONE UNIT TO ANOTHER

As with any journey (and learning about something or simply reading a book can be seen as a metaphorical journey), there are different means of transport and different routes that can be taken. Imagine travelling from a country town to the capital city. How many routes are there? How many different modes of travel could you choose? In the same way, there are different routes through this book and we outline some of those here. You may come up with another route, though, that we have not thought of. If it is right for you then that is all that matters.

A straight line

This linear route will lead the reader from the wide issues of language and communication (Unit 1) to consideration of language in its most frequent manifestation of talk (Unit 2), hence starting from an aspect of language use with which all will be very familiar even if it is an unconventional place to start the analysis of language. When we talk, we are aiming to achieve our purposes in that talk (Unit 3) and we aim to achieve that purpose as effectively and as appropriately as possible (Unit 4). To achieve those purposes, we need to use words (Unit 5) with
their associated meanings (Unit 6) and we combine those words according to the rules of grammar or syntax (Unit 7). To speak a language we need some knowledge of the phonetic system of that language (Unit 8) and there is a clear link from that topic to the topic of accent and dialect and other individual and group variation in use of language (Unit 9). All our current knowledge of language will have been acquired when we were young children (Unit 10) and we will have stored that acquired knowledge in our brains (Unit 11). Some children will have acquired more than one language from birth and others will have learnt another language later in life (Unit 12). What is certain is that patterns of language use change over time (Unit 13) and that the relatively recent phenomenon of English as a world language (Unit 14) has implications for everyone, not just for speakers of English. Some of those implications, especially within the field of education, are addressed in the penultimate unit (Unit 15).

We think that this is the most likely route through the book that students will choose to take.

However, tutors might wish to deal with the topics in a different order from the order that we might choose. There are other routes through the material and we suggest some here.

A topic-based route

For all their independence of each other and interdependence on each other, the units can be grouped in different ways. After this introduction, Unit 1 sets the scene for the whole book. Thereafter the units might be grouped in relation to content as follows:

- discourse is addressed in Units 2, 3 and 4
- core areas of linguistics are addressed in Units 5, 6, 7 and 8
- psycholinguistic and language acquisition issues are addressed in Units 10 and 11
- sociolinguistic variety is addressed in Units 9, 12, 13, 14 and 15.

These topics could, of course, be addressed in any order, not necessarily the order in which they are listed here.
A traditional route

A relatively traditional route through the material might initially consider the core areas of linguistics before moving on to the applications. The units might therefore be considered in the following order:

1. Unit 1 to contextualize language within the area of communication
2. Core areas of linguistics in Units 5, 6, 7 and 8
3. Discourse in Units 2, 3 and 4
4. Sociolinguistic variety in Units 9, 12, 13, 14 and 15
5. Psycholinguistic issues in Units 10 and 11.

A less conventional route

On this route, it is argued that for each peripheral area of linguistics, there is a related core area of study (or that each core area of study has a closely related application). The authors might prefer to move from language in use to the core areas but recognize that readers will have their own preferences in this matter.

Unit 1 sets the scene for all that follows (or provides a summarizing conclusion to what has been read) and then:

- Unit 9 deals with sociolinguistic variety with Units 5, 6 and 7 as supporting material
- Unit 2 discusses oral discourse with Unit 8 as supporting material
- Unit 4 addresses issues of linguistic politeness with Unit 3 as supporting material
- Unit 10 addresses issues of language acquisition with Unit 11 as supporting material
- Unit 14 addresses the role of English in the twenty-first century with Unit 12 as supporting material
- Unit 13 addresses how language use has changed over the centuries with Unit 15 as supporting material.
Arguably, this list of matched units could be read from top to bottom or from bottom to top. Another way of presenting this route might be as two concentric circles with the inner circle ‘supporting’ the outer circle. You could go either way round the circles.

A serendipitous route

Of course, you could just stick a pin into the table of contents and take that unit as the first one to read and then repeat the process until you have read all the units—or read as many as you want to read.

All we can hope now is that, wherever you start and whatever route you take, you continue reading, you enjoy learning about language and you become ever more fascinated by this amazingly complex phenomenon of language in use.