

A Comprehensive Introduction to Linguistics

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Course Overview

Preface

This is a broad introduction to classical and modern linguistics. It is intended to be studied by independent scholars who already possess some technical knowledge of the trivial and non-trivial workings of the English language, such as grammar, usage, and mechanics. A typical high school student in the United States or United Kingdom would likely be more than well-equipped to proceed with the study. It may be helpful for the scholar to be natively or bilingually proficient in another language of the world, but this is not wholly necessary. This course will span an extended period of time (i.e. several months), and requires nothing short of utmost dedication and hard work. The designer of the course has fashioned a schedule that should appeal to the learned scholar: a paced and structured organization of the procession of learning. He has included this document elsewhere.

One must really consider the overarching philosophical goals of such a course prior to dissecting its content. Surely scholars participate in such a venture so as to broaden their visions and enjoy a worldlier view. The architecture involved in such a program serves not only to thrust the scholar into the views of the pundit, but also to allow the scholar to contribute to the existing knowledge base, thereby expanding the depths of human knowledge. That is, the approach by which the scholar obtains knowledge of his or her subject must be in such a manner so as to allow him or her to depose the notion that knowledge is fixed; his or her faculty should enable a broader view on the subject matter, so that he or she, and the successors, can understand more universal truths about the nature of mankind. In short, the program is constructed with the institution of the growth mindset as the primary goal. In addition to this, three important axioms are highlighted in **boldface** in the succeeding analysis. The scholar should do due diligence and heavily contemplate the significance of these maxims in his or her study.

One may ask how the scholar (perhaps a high school student) may proceed on a path of the growth mindset; how can the scholar grow if he or she knows not how? To this, there are two major schools of thought on how to approach self-teaching and self-learning over an indefinite period. One starts at the periphery and works its way inward, until the scholar arrives at a core Truth. This is commonly labelled as *reductionism*, as the scholar reduces the Unknown by peeling off a petal, revealing the layer underneath, then choosing another petal to peel, revealing the layer underneath that one, and repeating this indefinitely until he or she arrives at the first sight of a Truth. The method of reductionism is appealing to the shrewd scholar since it enables him or her to find a self-fulfilling path and determine how precisely to arrive at Truth. On the other hand, this approach fails to reveal the whole Truth; the scholar is limited by his or her dogmatism in choosing just one matter in each layer of the Unknown into which to keep delving. Of course, backtracking after discovering the Truth is common, but while this spiralling method reveals some, in time it cannot tell the scholar everything.

The other school of thought explodes from the center, taking whatever it can with it. That is, it starts with a few fundamental known Truths in the knowledge base (perhaps discovered via reductionism at an earlier time) and blooms outward. It aims to emulate how the Truth could have created the mysteries of today (the Unknown), thereby capturing the essence of the Truth from a bigger picture. This approach is known as *holism*, as the scholar blooms outward and arrives at the petals that wholly shroud the Truth. This method is also generally appealing to scholars, as it prevents disingenuity; the scholar can capture all that he or she wishes to know by spiralling outward from the epicenter. However, while this method may help explain the world more clearly from known Truths, it similarly exhibits narrow-mindedness in that few additional Truths are discovered along the way, and thus any model of the world is incomplete, no matter how precise, may be fully accurate (as it fails to account for information about the missing Truths). Clearly **holism cannot work without reductionism, and the same holds in reverse**.

This last point is perhaps best exemplified with the following visual realization of the deeply-entrenched relationship between the two schools of thought, created by Douglas Hofstadter in his famous work *Gödel, Escher, Bach*:



The dichotomy in perceiving a novel subject matter from its whole or as a collection of constituent parts is a difficult one to resolve, and the above realization can similarly be perceived from both perspectives. It is clear that the image contains two substructures, namely the one on the left and the one on the right, which happen to spell the English letters ‘M’ and ‘U’. A keen eye (perhaps squinting would help) would notice that the arches of the ‘M’ spell HOLISM thrice and the ‘U’ is made up of a single occurrence of REDUCTIONISM. More interestingly, each HOLISM on the ‘M’ is made up of smaller instances of the word REDUCTIONISM, and similarly the REDUCTIONISM on the ‘U’ is made up of letters written with the word HOLISM. If one zooms in further still, he or she would see that each letter of the REDUCTIONISM within the HOLISM within the ‘M’ and each letter of the HOLISM within the REDUCTIONISM within the ‘U’ is made up of little ‘MU’s. This image poses quite an interesting interpretation of the dichotomy inasmuch as it alludes to *mu*¹, a Zen Buddhist concept that—in context—refers to the ideology that one should reject the assumption that there is necessarily a forced choice between holism and reductionism. Indeed, pure reductionists and holists may observe entirely different parts of this image, but at its core the message is the same whether one is a holist and sees the top-level ‘MU’ or one is a reductionist and sees the inner-most little ‘MU’s: making a choice between the two ideologies is not necessary.

Indeed, to this extent, a third school of thought, of modern invention, often serves as the running philosophy of modern scientists and researchers. It employs a hybrid approach, a type of *emergentism*. The scholar starts at fundamental axioms and slowly spirals outward over time, but with a solid center rather than a hollow one. That is, as new ideas emerge, the scholar aims to connect them to the previous ones, thereby unravelling more Truths and providing more paths on which to base the research. It simultaneously appeals to reductionists and holists, but it takes longer than either method alone (though it aims to discover more in practice). Everything is this connected rather than a path outward or inward, and in the limit more Truths are uncovered with this approach than either of the other two alone. The process of examining and threading things together takes the “worker bee approach”, so to speak, as the scholar both understands each part in its effect to the larger mechanism as well as the mechanism as a whole. The scholar is not so inflexible as to assume that there is only one method; metaphysically, then, even this spin-off of emergentism is not the only one. There are many others, and the scholar’s journey is to find those for him- or herself. Although others before the scholar may not have discovered these other methods, one of the key facets of the scholar’s journey is to leave behind the notion that guiding principles of experienced predecessors must serve as the basis for new ones; that is, **the scholar must one day become the designer via his or her own means.**

For this reason, the designer delightedly assures the scholar that his schedule will NOT (and should not) work for the scholar’s own needs. He has simply provided a plan that works for himself, in the past and even now. The scholar himself must choose his or her own methodology of learning—it is inevitable that a different style will one day yield fruit at the boundary; there will be rewards reaped in human knowledge progression as different methodologies of learning are empirically explored. In this manner, the metaphysical tools that such an approach lends to the scholar are invaluable. It services as a toolkit by which the scholar can learn *anything*, as he or she learns how to self-learn, how to self-teach, how to teach others in turn, and how to produce new knowledge out of all that he or she has consumed. That is, the scholar learns to celebrate autodidacticism as a consequence of the designer’s methods. The rest, of course, is up to the personal program of study. This fashions a most exciting approach for the otherwise-bored scholar. In effect, the designer has simply provided the scholar with his own humble approach in the hopes that the latter may modify it or denounce it rather than accept it with open arms. The scholar must always maintain that **the true desire of learning and research is freedom from the known.** That is, the scholar should be vigil so as to explore the unknown, but always question the known. The designer’s suggested methods by which one should approach these tasks are detailed on the following page.

⁰ Chinese: 无 (*wú*); Japanese: 無 (*mu*)

How to Learn by Yourself

This methodology extends far beyond just linguistics; indeed, once the scholar learns to self-learn using these or similar methods, he or she should easily be able to extend it to broader fields of study.

1. Skim the whole lecture in the course notes to get an idea about the concepts.
 - (a) Read the lecture's title and the section titles.
 - (b) Study the figures and diagrams and read the captions/descriptions.
2. Read each section of the lecture in a more focused manner.
 - (a) Take notes as you read.
 - i. Restate each definition (in *italics*) as a question.
 - ii. Study the examples discussed in the text.
 - iii. At the end, write down the major concepts introduced in the lecture in your notes.
 - (b) Avoid writing what is in the text verbatim—it is crucial to use your own wording!
3. Put away the lecture.
 - (a) Silently try to answer your own questions without the aid of the notes
 - (b) When you finish, open the lecture notes and compare your original answers with what the text suggests.
 - (c) It is okay to be incorrect about your answers to the questions at this stage!
4. Test your knowledge using a multiple-passes (i.e. **black-blue-red**) approach.
 - (a) Using a **pencil** or a **black pen**, begin working on the provided exercises for that lecture with the aid of both sets of notes (i.e. your own annotations and the original lecture notes).
 - i. Answer the conceptual questions.
 - ii. Answer the problems.
 - iii. Answer the extended-response questions.
 - (b) After finishing, compare your answers with the information available in the lecture notes and your own notes.
 - i. If your answer is correct, do not mark it.
 - ii. If your answer is incorrect, mark it with a **blue pen**.
 - iii. Re-do only all of the questions marked in **blue**.
 - A. If your answer is correct, do not mark it.
 - B. If your answer is incorrect, copy the right answer using a **red pen**. This will serve as an indication that you have not yet understood this concept.
 - C. Save your list of items in **red** color for later. These will become important during the cumulative review.
5. When you are done with the revision, review your notes and examine your knowledge.
 - (a) Read your summary and annotations again.
 - (b) Put away all resources and take the provided examination for that lecture.
 - (c) Grade your answers using the information available in the lecture notes and your own notes.
 - i. If at least 80% of your answers are correct, you are in good shape—move on for now.
 - ii. If fewer than 80% of your answers are correct, review the material once more.
 - A. Take a two hour break so that you do not just blindly recognize the answer from short-term memory.
 - B. Study your summary and annotations on the lecture notes a third time.
 - C. Attempt the wrong answers once again until you reach 80%.
 - D. If you can't reach 80% on your own, use external help or online resources as a last resort—be careful to use sources that will guide you to help you solve the problem on your own rather than spoon-feeding you.
 - (d) Every three or so lectures, perform a cumulative review in addition to a regular one.
 - i. Review all of the material in all of the lecture notes up to that point using the methods described above. Pay especially careful attention to concepts related to the things you have marked in **blue** and **red** in the past.
 - ii. Take the cumulative examination for all of the lectures up to that point. This could take considerably longer.
 - iii. The criterion for “passing” the cumulative examination is set at 75% (i.e. 3/4) rather than 80% (4/5).
 - iv. This includes the midway cumulative review of half of the material as well as the final cumulative review of all of the material at the end of the course.
6. Repeat Steps 1-5 with each subsequent lecture.

Course of Study

The following topics serve as an approximate syllabus for what will be covered by this course. It is split into three main modules, each of which contains several appropriately-sized lectures in that topic. Many subtopics within these fields may be discussed further in the appropriate lectures for each topic. Keep in mind that this is a broad introduction to linguistics, so each topic may not be discussed in the same depth as, say, a graduate-level course. One can expect each topic to be discussed at about the same level of depth as a second- or third-year undergraduate course.

I. Theoretical Linguistics

- i. The study of language
- ii. Phonetics
- iii. Phonology
- iv. Morphology
- v. Syntax
- vi. Semantics
- vii. Pragmatics
- viii. Semiotics
- ix. Orthography
- x. Graphemics

II. Descriptive Linguistics

- i. Graphetics
- ii. Etymology
- iii. Historical linguistics
- iv. Sociolinguistics
- v. Comparative linguistics
- vi. Language acquisition

III. Applied Linguistics

- i. Rhetoric and stylistics
- ii. Machines and translation
- iii. Transcription and transliteration
- iv. Computational linguistics
- v. Unsolved problems in linguistics
- vi. Current research

Many of these topics are influenced heavily by the content discussed in The Ohio State University's *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics*, 12th edition. However, the treatment of the material in this battery of lecture packets is arguably far more in-depth than that of the university-published text. This text will serve as the primary reference for this course; as a consequence, the order of topics covered roughly follows that of the reference text.