



Linguistics as a Scientific Study of Language

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Linguistics as a Scientific Study of Language

In recent years, one of the fastest expanding fields of the study has been general linguistics – the scientific study of language. It tries to answer the basic questions: What is Language? and How does language work? Linguistic science has developed very rapidly in the last fifty years. Hundreds of books on the subject have been published. Courses in linguistic science are very common in colleges and universities. Students of language and literature are now required to take a variety of courses in linguistics. Even students in such fields as sociology, education and anthropology are advised to take courses in linguistics because of the interrelationship that exists among these areas of study. Linguistic science has also influenced foreign language textbooks. No language book is considered to be of any value if it is not based on some of the findings of modern linguistics. In addition, no language teacher can escape linguistic science if he is expected to do his job effectively and on scientific basis.

General linguistics means the scientific study of language. As with other branches of knowledge and scientific study, linguistics must be studied in two ways:

1. In relation to other sciences outside itself, and
2. In the different branches within itself.

Moreover, linguistics performs two tasks:

1. It is concerned with the study of particular languages as ends in themselves, in order to be able to produce complete and accurate descriptions of them.
2. It also studies languages as means to a further end, in order to be able to obtain information about the nature of language in general.

Linguistics as a Science

Language is considered worthy of learned attention as a regular body of facts and theory is built up around it. As an empirical science, linguistics operates with publicly verified data obtained by means of observation and experiment. The aim of following a scientific procedure in studying language is to present an analysis in such a way that every part of it can be tested and verified not only by the linguist himself, but also by anyone else who chooses to refer to it or to make a description of his own based on the same principles. What is required in this respect is empirical evidence and sound justifications to support one's findings or theories. The purpose of linguistics is to examine the material and to make general statements about its various elements that relate to regular rules. It is also an empirical and practical science, since the material it deals with can be observed with the senses. For example, speech can be heard, the movement of the speech organs can be seen and felt or with the aid of instruments; and writing can be seen and read. Note: Linguistics may be said to be at the centre of all other branches of knowledge as being the study of the tool (language) that they most use to talk about their subject matters.

The Scientific Procedure followed in Studying Any Science including Linguistics

A scientific study is one that is based on:

- a) The systematic investigation of the data conducted with reference to some general theory of language structure.
- b) Direct object observations. Observation of events prior to the setting up of a hypothesis which is then carefully investigated via systematic description or experimentation and a theory developed. This is a standard procedure in linguistics as in other sciences.

c) A scientific study is also concerned with the formulation of sound theoretical principles and clear and consistent terminology.

d) In order to be acceptable, a theory must be:

- **Exhaustive**, i.e., one which accounts for all the facts (adequate treatment of all the relevant material which should be complete).
- **Economical**, i.e., one which is as simple and straightforward as possible. In other words, a shorter statement or analysis employing fewer terms is to be preferred to one which is longer or more involved.
- **Consistent**, i.e., one in which there are no internal contradictions. The material should show agreement between its different parts. As a result of applying these criteria, i.e., the steps of the scientific procedure, a linguist is expected to achieve the greatest possible degree of objectivity in his description. This objectivity, to some extent, gives linguistics the status of a science and leads us to expect that modern linguistic studies will provide particularly accurate information about language structure.