Preface: how to use this book

The present book is obviously not the first introduction to linguistics for students of English. It complements and competes with a number of related titles, some published in Britain and the United States for international audiences, and some published in Germany with the needs of a more local readership in mind. Some of what this book presents is, of course, new and original material not found elsewhere; a fair amount, however, is just the basic stuff which undergraduates in English have to master if they want to understand the complexities of the structure and the use of the (foreign) language they have decided to focus on in their studies.

Nevertheless, the author has a clear justification for publishing just this book at just this time. It is the unified perspective it is written from – a perspective which he hopes will be useful and productive for the intended audience.

A first factor which motivates the present project is an external political one. Currently, in Germany, Austria and Europe as a whole, higher education is being profoundly transformed, the most conspicuous outward sign of reform being the restructuring of entry-level undergraduate courses in the B. A. framework. The present book is a response to this in that it aims to meet bachelor students' needs **without diluting and lowering academic standards**.

Secondly, the book aims to present linguistics not as such, or out of context, but **specifically for students of English,** i. e. students wishing to make productive use of what they learn about language and linguistics in other areas of their academic courses (cultural studies, literature) and in their later professional careers in language teaching, the media, public relations or similar areas of language- and culture-related professional activity.

Thirdly, the book is not designed as a manual of information to be learned and reproduced, but as an invitation to explore the fascinating complexity which the English language, and languages in general, display both in their structure and in their use. The focus is thus on **learner autonomy as an essential first step towards independent research.**

As readers will see, each of the following 14 units has the following structure:

1. Orientation
2. Demonstration/discussion
3. Problems and challenges
4. Practice

The reader's careful attention is invited for the first. The reader's own initiative, activity and creativity are vital prerequisites to the success of the other three. To help readers with basic concepts and terminology, the book contains a comprehensive glossary at the end. If you experience difficulties with some of the exercises, or if you want to check your results, you can consult the web-page accompanying the book at www.bachelor-wissen.de, which gives you the solutions. This site also contains useful additional material and sound samples.

The book will no doubt serve many practical purposes – as a class text, in helping students prepare for their exams, or as a reference work consulted occasionally. Beyond that, however, I hope that readers will retain a few essential insights even after they have forgotten about the inevitable detail, such as the lesser-used symbols of the phonetic alphabet, or some technical definition of a grammatical concept, or the specifically New Zealand realisations of the short front vowel phonemes. These include:

- a fascination with the intricate structural complexity of the English language, and – by implication – that uniquely human endowment, the language faculty;
- an appreciation of the diversity of a global language, of the many varieties of English that have arisen in response to the expressive, social and cultural needs of an extremely heterogeneous community of speakers; and – not least –
- a theoretically grounded understanding of the true role of language in society.

The importance of the part played by language in fostering human community and society cannot be over-estimated. And yet public debates about language issues are still too often informed by half-truths and myths – propagated by educators, politicians, cultural critics. What the trained linguist can bring to this debate is two scientific virtues: a respect for empirical data and a commitment to rational argument. In the public discourse on the shape of English and the role the language plays in the world today, this is still a much needed contribution.

I would not like to close this preface without a few heartfelt words of gratitude – to Dr. Birgit Waibel, English Department of the University of Freiburg, for invaluable help in the final stages of the project, in preparing diagrams, the solutions to the exercises and the web-page accompanying the book, to Luminița Trașcă, also of Freiburg, for patient and competent proof-reading, and to Jürgen Freudl, Narr Publishers, who was a stern taskmaster when it came to deadlines and a constructively critical reader of a previous version of the present book. Anastasia Cobet and Udo Baumann helped update the references and weblinks for the second and third editions.

Freiburg, September 2015 *Christian Mair*

Introduction – linguistic and other approaches to language

Orientation

1.1

What is linguistics?

Any book introducing undergraduate students to a new academic field, its terminology and investigative methods must start by answering the defining question, which in our case is simply: "What is linguistics?"

To say that "linguistics is the rational and systematic scientific study of language, usually based in institutions of higher learning such as colleges or universities" seems a fairly helpful first approximation. Of course, in offering an answer to this first question, I have raised two more. First, it is not at all clear what we mean by "language" in an academic-linguistic context. The every-day English word *language* has multiple meanings (as do its equivalents in other languages), as can easily be demonstrated by comparing its meaning in the following two sentences (see Exercise 1 below for further examples):

> The language of the British press has changed considerably over the past few decades.
> Language is what distinguishes human beings from apes.

In the first example, the word *language* denotes a particular functional variety of one specific language, in this case English, whereas in the second it could be glossed as the "ability to learn and use any of a large number of human languages."

A subfield of the humanities, a social science, an experimental natural science?

Secondly, while its home in universities as one academic discipline among others is secure, the precise status of linguistics as a science is contested territory (as we shall see in many places throughout this book). Is linguistics part of the humanities, close to literary and cultural studies, with which it shares an interest in the phenomenon of style for example? Is it an empirical social science, using quantitative and qualitative methods to study the communicative networks among people which ultimately constitute society? Is it an experimental science like psychology, studying the role of language in human cognition, or the place of language-acquisition in the development of the human personality? Or is it a natural science, in that it helps us to understand the complex physiology of the human speech apparatus, or the neurological basis of language both in the healthy person and in those suffering from various kinds of language disorder or language loss?

Linguistics for students of English

This incomplete list of possible orientations in linguistics opens up many vistas which the present introduction will not explore. Its aims are more practi-

cal and limited. The first is to equip readers with the terminology and methods necessary to describe present-day English, the language they have made the focus of their studies, both in its structure and in its use. The second aim is to introduce students to the major theoretical positions and trends in the field, so as to give them the basis for independent further work. And not least the book aims to show where a knowledge of linguistics can be made productive outside the field, for example in the teaching and learning of foreign languages, or for developing a more sophisticated grasp of language-related issues in literary and cultural studies.

Linguistics – the prehistory of the field

But how did the burgeoning discipline of linguistics arise historically? In answering this question, we cannot help but be struck by an apparent paradox. We find signs of people's keen interest in linguistic issues for practically the whole recorded history of humanity, but dispassionate scientific objectivity in the study of language, the scholarly study of language for its own sake, or – for short – linguistics as an academic discipline, are historically very recent pursuits.

One marvel which seems to have caused people to wonder in many places and at different times in history is the fact that human beings live in a world of many languages, which is obviously impractical. A well-known non-scholarly answer to this puzzle is contained in the *Old Testament* of the Bible (Genesis 11), where multilingualism is explained as God's punishment for the human pride manifested in the attempt to build the enormous Tower of Babel.

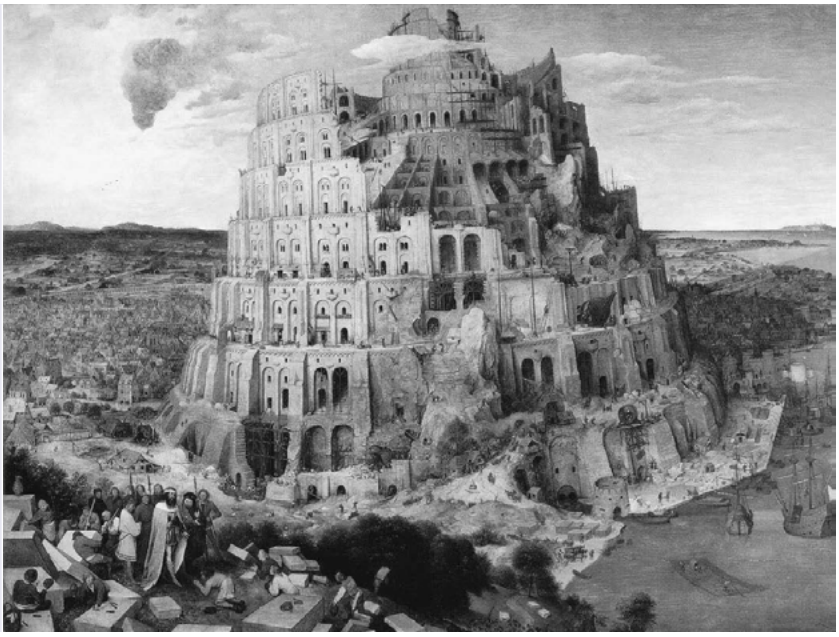

Fig. 1.1 Pieter Breughel the Elder, "Tower of Babel" (1563), Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

Within one and the same language community, people are keenly aware of sometimes very slight differences in pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary. In a British context, for example, "aitch-dropping," technically speaking the dropping of initial /h/ in stressed syllables, is a strong social marker. If someone says *'eavy metal music* instead of *heavy metal music*, the contrast is trivial, and any confusion about the intended meaning is unlikely. However, this detail of pronunciation will instantly mark out the speaker as either educated, standard or middle-class (if *heavy* is pronounced with *h*) or uneducated, non-standard or working-class (if the aitches are dropped). Of course, the general public, including literary writers, are aware of this, so that aitch-dropping becomes available as an efficient device for literary characterisation, as it does, for example, in the case of Uriah Heep (from Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*), who deceptively styles himself as *'umble* (← *humble*) all the time. The motif is taken up by the rock band of the same name, whose best-known album is also called *Very 'eavy, very 'umble*.

Linguistics and philosophy

Among those fascinated by aspects of language long before the emergence of linguistics as a specialised discipline have been major philosophers. The classical Greek thinker Plato (428/27 BC – 348/47 BC), for example, seems to have thought a lot about the question of whether the name (i. e. the sound of a word) has any natural or logical correspondence to the person, thing, quality, activity or process it refers to, or whether this relation is arbitrary.

If we think of verbs such as German *zischen* or English *hiss*, we might tend to give credence to the former view – the sound of the words seems to be motivated by the sound in the real world. If we think about a sound sequence such as /i:gl/, we will tend to favour the latter as this sound sequence corresponds to *Igel* "hedgehog" in German and *eagle* "Adler" in English, and it is difficult to see any connection whatsoever between either animal and the words used to refer to them. In the typical fashion of a dialogical Platonic argument, the philosopher develops a compromise position: Kratylos argues that names are motivated; Hermogenes claims that they are arbitrary; Socrates moderates between the two.

"Onomatopoeia" – the imitation of natural sounds

Modern linguists are less circumspect and tend to agree that Hermogenes' position is the appropriate one. First, there are far more words for which the relation between sound and meaning is arbitrary than there are "onomatopoetic" forms in which the sound of the words appears to imitate some natural sound. Secondly, even those words which seem to be imitations of actual natural sounds turn out to be highly arbitrary and language-specific on closer inspection. Note, for example, that the initial letter <z> in German *zischen*, which corresponds to the sounds /ts/, would be a forbidden combination in English (see Exercise 5 below for further discussion).

Linguistics and language teaching

Apart from philosophical concerns about language, there have also been practical ones. Language teaching, for example, has a history to look back on which is at least as old as the philosophical debate about language. In fact,

two of the seven Classical "liberal arts," which formed the core curriculum of higher education well into the Early Modern period, are language-related, namely grammar (which in the old understanding included the study of pronunciation) and rhetoric.

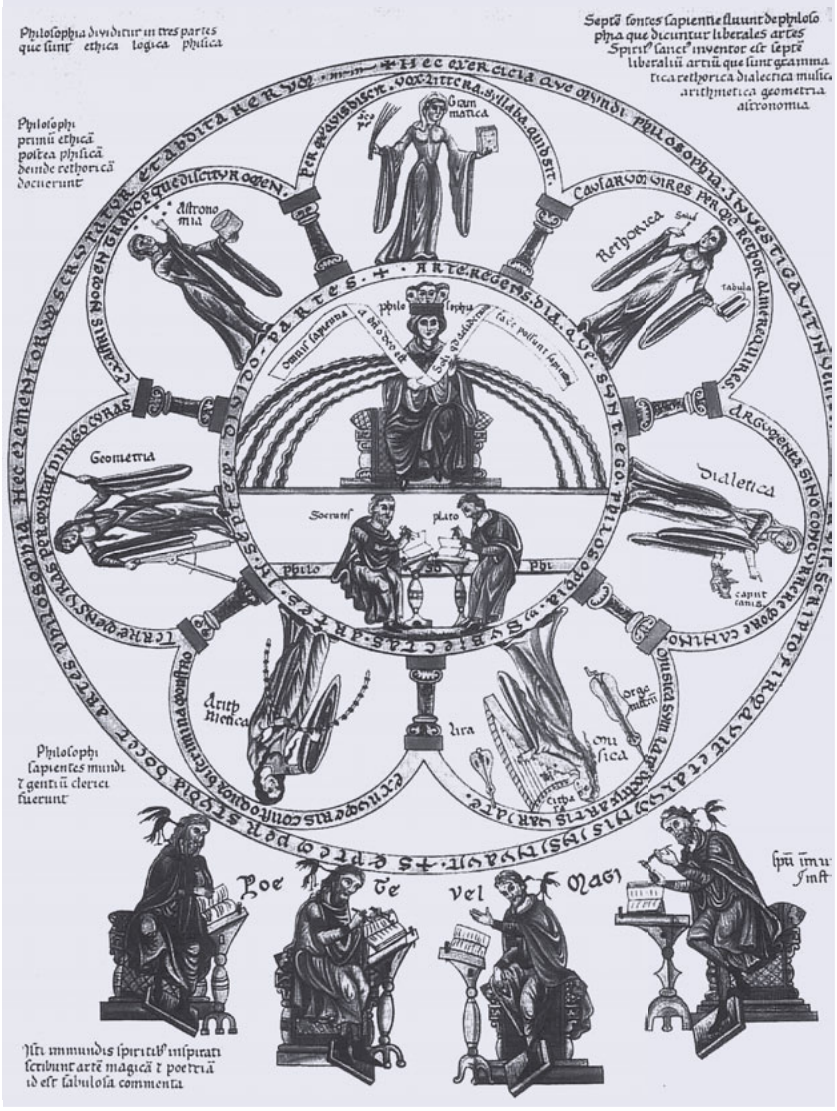

Fig. 1.2
The "seven liberal arts," with *Grammatica* and *Rhetorica* on the top and top-right (from: Herrad of Landsberg, "Hortus deliciarum" [1180])

For a long time, the foreign languages which were studied and taught most were Latin, Greek and Hebrew, the three "sacred" languages of the Bible. From the 16th and 17th centuries onwards more and more of the modern European languages started developing coherent traditions of producing teaching and refer-

ence materials, such as dictionaries and grammar books. Some of the works which have come down to us over the ages clearly reveal a lot of linguistic insight, but as a whole this tradition does not amount to more than a precursor of the scholarly "linguistic" perspective on language. Figure 1.3 presents the title page of one such practical grammar of English, which was presumably produced for the benefit of German immigrants to British North America.


GRAMMATICA ANGLICANA
CONCENTRATA,
Oder
Kurtz-gefaßte
Englische Grammatica.
Worinnen
Die zur Erlernung dieser Sprache
hinlänglich-nöthige
Grund-Sätze
Auf eine sehr deutliche und leichte Art
abgehandelt sind.
Philadelphia, gedruckt und zu finden bey Gotthard Armbrüster.

Fig. 1.3
Grammatica Anglicana concentrata, oder Kurtz-gefaßte englische Grammatica. Worinnen die zur Erlernung dieser Sprache hinlänglich-nöthige Grund-Sätze Auf eine sehr deutliche und leichte Art abgehandelt sind (Philadelphia 1748), title page

Another precursor of academic linguistics is the tradition of textual criticism which first flowered during the Renaissance, when scholars looked at ancient texts from classical antiquity very closely in order to determine their authentic versions, which had often been corrupted in centuries of transmission. Very often, such a comparison of extant manuscript versions was a necessary step to prepare the first printed editions of these texts. This pursuit soon became known as **philology** (from the ancient Greek for "love of the word" or "love of language"). Originally, philology comprised the study of language and literature. Today the term is preserved in expressions such as "Englische Philologie," one of the traditional German designations of English Studies. In a modern linguistic context, the term *philology* refers to the specialist study of language history, especially in the context of editing texts.

Linguistics and textual criticism

Finally, the fact that Europeans conquered and colonised ever growing portions of the world meant that many new and exotic languages were encountered, translated from and into, documented and taught. Arabic, Chinese, Persian and the ancient and modern languages of India thus became of interest to Europeans. This meant that, slowly but surely, a critical mass of knowledge about languages accumulated which led to the birth of linguistics as an academic discipline of study toward the end of the 18th century.

In this early phase, language scholars' orientation was strongly historical. Building on an insight first formulated in 1786 by William Jones (1746–1794), who worked as a judge on behalf of the British East India Company in Calcutta, subsequent generations of scholars traced the history of the various members of what was later to be referred to as the Indo-European family of languages in order to reconstruct their common origin (proto-Indo-European or *Ursprache*)

The birth of linguistics as an academic discipline

and their mutual relationship. In particular, Jones' seminal insight had been to note systematic correspondences between Sanskrit, an ancient language of the Indian subcontinent, and Ancient Greek which made it plausible to trace both back to a common historical source (see Unit 12 for further information on historical relationships among the Indo-European languages, esp. Fig. 12.1).

Fig. 1.4 William Jones (1746–1794), pioneer of historical-comparative (Indo-European) linguistics

What was found out in the course of the 19th century still holds in its essence today. The Celtic languages spoken in the very West of Europe, the Germanic, Romance, Slavic languages, some languages of the Baltic region (Latvian, Lithuanian), Albanian, Greek, Persian and some of the major languages of the Indian subcontinent such as Hindi or Punjabi all go back to a common ancestor. Before the emergence of historical-comparative linguistics, people indulged in bizarre speculations on historical relationships between languages and peoples on the basis of a few pairs of words which sounded similar. Today, we have a rigid methodology to assess the value of such claims, and people who will still argue for direct links between the civilisations of ancient Asia and ancient America just because a few place names, names for gods or foodstuffs happen to sound similar are fortunately not taken seriously any more – a modest triumph of science over speculation.

Diachronic and synchronic approaches to the study of language

One practitioner of historical-comparative linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), based at the University of Geneva in Switzerland, was instrumental in bringing about a re-orientation of approach which has dominated the field to the present day. He pointed out that the **diachronic** study of language (i. e. the study of its development through time) did not make it possible to understand how languages worked at any given point of time. The most trivial argument to prove this is, of course, that we can speak and write a language perfectly without knowing anything at all about its history. For example, it does not bother us in the least that the word *nice* meant "difficult" a few centuries ago, as is shown by the following extract from Daniel Defoe's well-known novel *Moll Flanders*:

> I was really with child [= pregnant].
> This was a perplexing thing because of the Difficulty which was before me, where I should get leave to Lye Inn; it being one of the nicest things in the World at that time of Day, for a Woman that was a Stranger, and had no Friends, to be entertain'd in that Circumstance without Security, which by the way I had not, neither could I procure any. (Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*. 1722: ch. 32)

The context here makes clear that the situation is far from *nice* in the present sense of "pleasant." At the time, the word meant "difficult, tricky." Looking around hard enough, we can find some old-fashioned or fossilised usages of *nice* which remind us of this older use even today, for example, a *nice distinction* (i. e. a difficult or pedantic distinction).

De Saussure proposed that the most appropriate approach to the scholarly study of language should be a **synchronic** one, with a focus on how a language