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Christian Mair

English Linguistics

An Introduction

4th edition

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Idee und Konzept der Reihe: **Johannes Kabatek**, Professor für Romanische Philologie mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der iberoromanischen Sprachen an der Universität Zürich.

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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 new and original material not found elsewhere; a fair amount is just the basic stuff that 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. It is the unified perspective it is written from – a perspective which he hopes will be useful and productive for the intended audience. A factor that motivated the first edition of the present book was an external political one, the profound transformation in European higher education that started in 1999, was implemented in the following decade and has come to be known as the "Bologna Process." In Germany, Austria and many other European countries, this led to the creation of numerous new BA programmes – a reform that obviously required re-thinking of curricula. The present book was 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 an end in itself, 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.meta.narr.de/9783823384489/Zusatzmaterial.zip, which gives you the solutions. This site also contains some useful additional materials.

The book will no doubt serve many practical purposes – as a class text, 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 vowels. 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 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 academic 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 a much needed contribution.

I would not like to close this preface without re-expressing my thanks to a number of people involved in the previous three editions of this book, in particular Jürgen Freudl (with Narr Publishers at the time of the first edition, dedicated editor and much needed and appreciated enforcer of deadlines) and my former Freiburg team members Dr. Birgit Waibel, Dr. Udo Rohe, Anastasia Cobet and Luminiţa Traşcă, and adding to this an equally heartfelt “Thank you!” to Rafaela Tosin, who helped in the preparation of the fourth edition, and to Kathrin Heyng (at Narr Verlag), who saw the typescript through the production process professionally and with a sharp eye for detail.

Freiburg, October 2021
Christian Mair

Introduction – linguistic and other approaches to language

1.1 Orientation

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?

In an introduction to linguistics it is worth noting that the way we answer this question partly depends on the language we conduct the debate in. The English word *science*, for example, has a much narrower range than German *Wissenschaft*. While *science* is largely confined to the natural sciences and a small number of other fields

using statistical and mathematical procedures of analysis, the German term is also regularly used to describe disciplines such as *Literaturwissenschaft*, *Geschichtswissenschaft*, *Musikwissenschaft* and *Kulturwissenschaft*, which in English would not be considered sciences, but part of the humanities. Thus, the German word *Sprachwissenschaft* is very inclusive in its meaning and therefore a good translation for the English term *linguistics*; its literal equivalent, *language science,* is much narrower than German *Sprachwissenschaft*, implying a way of studying language that is inspired by the rigorous methodological procedures of the exact sciences.

Linguistics for students of English

This incomplete list of possible orientations in linguistics opens up many vistas that the present introduction will not explore. Its aims are more practical 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 pre-history 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 that 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 (see ►Figure 1.1).

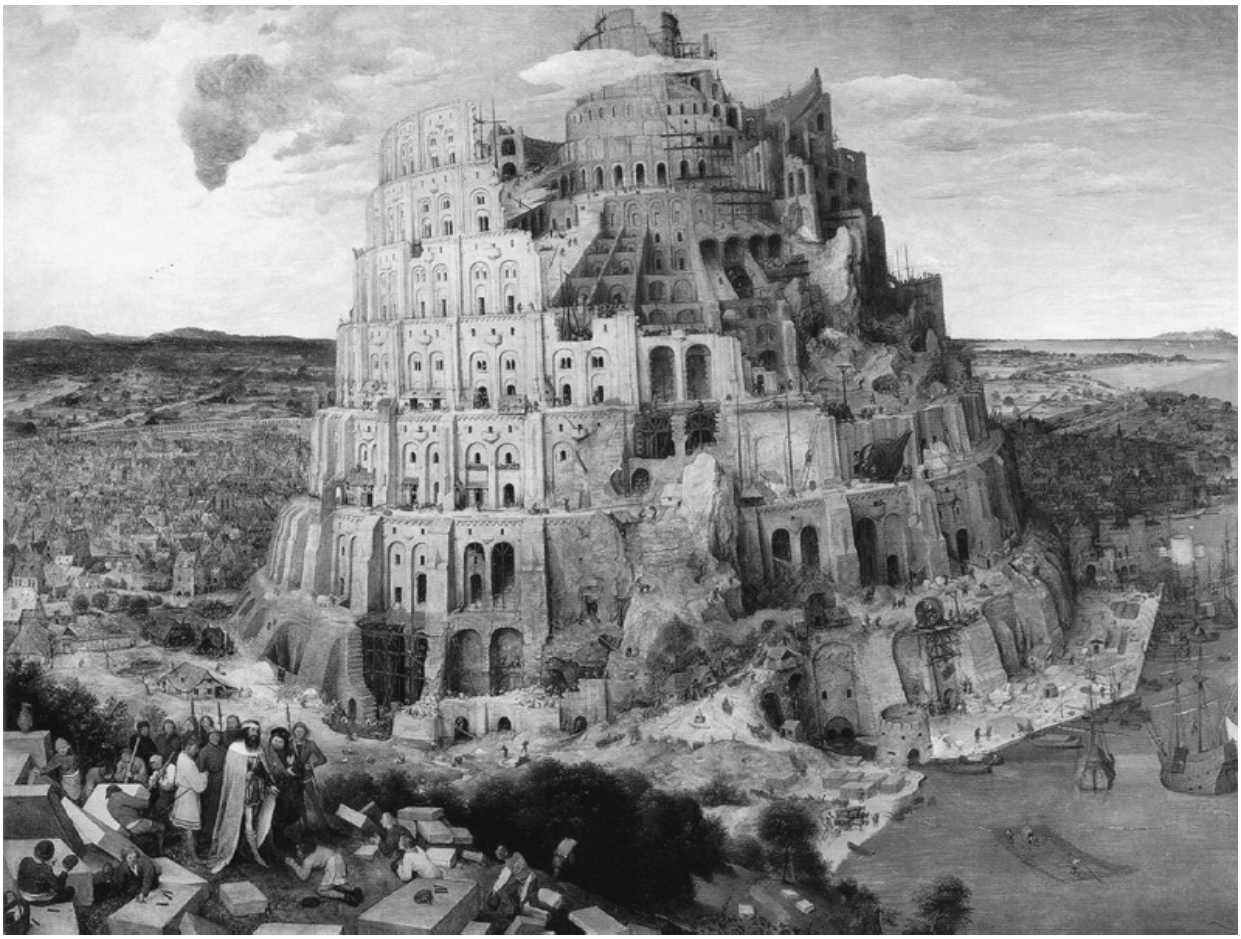


Fig. 1.1 Pieter Breughel the Elder, “Tower of Babel” (1563), Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

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 styles himself as *'umble* (← *humble*) all the time. The motif is taken up by the rock band of the same name, whose first album is called *Very 'eavy, very 'umble*.

Fig. 1.2 *Very 'eavy*: Cover of LP record

Among those fascinated by 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, thought a lot about the question of whether the form and shape of a word have any natural or logical correspondence to the person, thing, quality, activity or process it refers to, or whether this relation is arbitrary.

Linguistics and philosophy

If we think of verbs such as German *zischen* or English *hiss*, we might conclude that the former view is plausible – 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/, there is clearly no such correspondence between the form and the denoted concept. By convention, this sound sequence corresponds to *Igel* "hedgehog" for those who speak German and to an entirely different animal, *eagle* "Adler," for those who speak English. More importantly, there is nothing about either of the two animals that makes this particular word a natural choice to name 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.

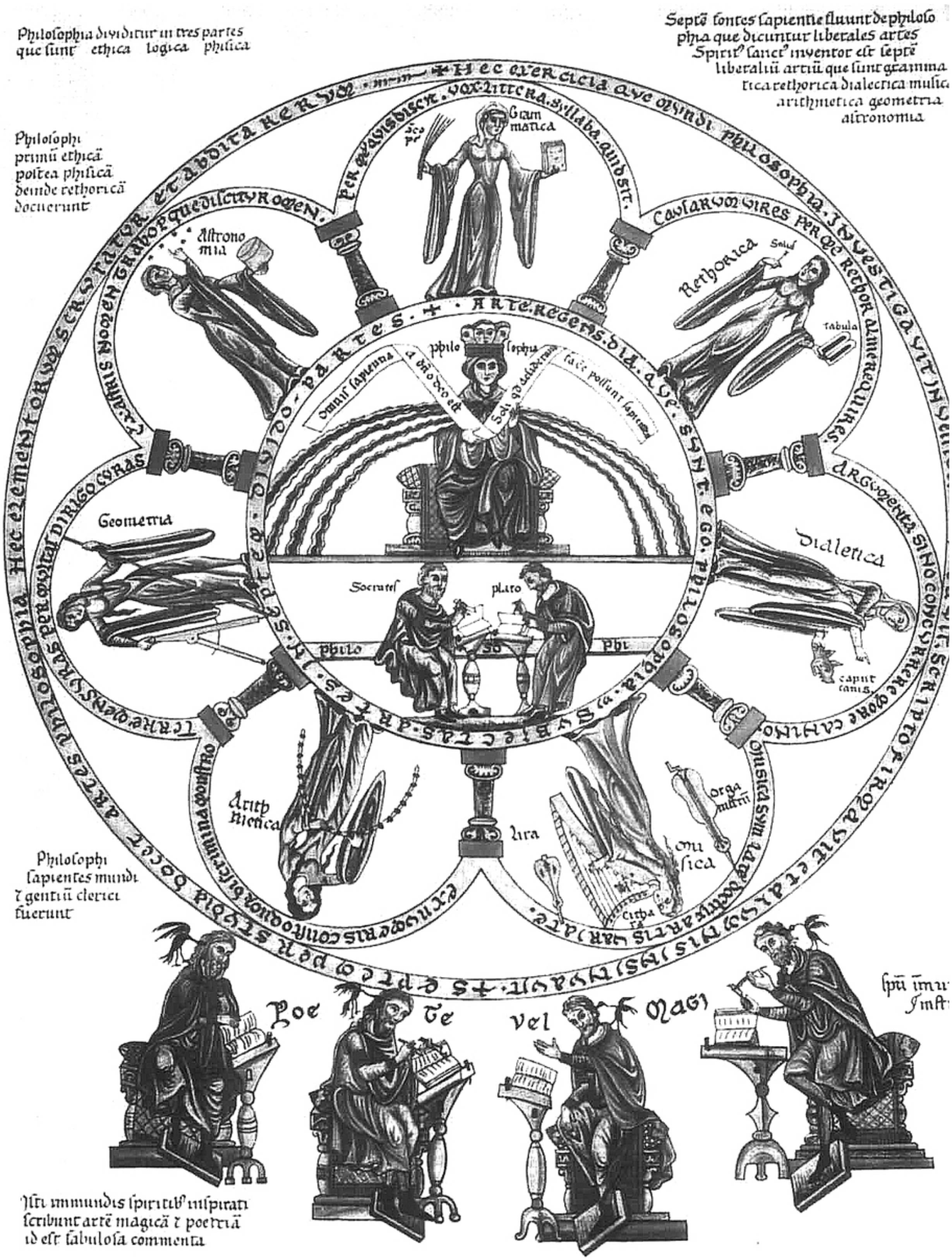
"Onomatopoeia" – the imitation of natural sounds

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 that 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 (see ►Figure 1.3).



Philosophia dividitur in tres partes que sunt ethica logica phisica
Septē fontes sapientie fluunt de philosophia que dicuntur liberales artes
Spiritus Sanctus inventor est septē liberaliū artiū que sunt grammatica rethorica dialectica musica arithmetica geometria astronomia
Philosophi primū ethicā postea phisicā deinde rethoricā docuerunt
Philosophi sapientes mundi & gentiū clerici fuerunt
Isti immundis spiritibus inspirati scribunt artē magicā & poetriā id est fabulosa commenta
Grammatica
Rethorica
Dialectica
Musica
Arithmetica
Geometria
Astronomia
Philosophia
Socrates
plato
Philo So Phi
Lira
Citha
organistrū
Tabula
caput canis
Poe te vel Magi

Fig. 1.3 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 that were studied and taught most in our part of the world were Latin, Greek and Hebrew, the three sacred languages of the Bible. From the 16th and 17th centuries onwards, teaching and reference materials, such as dictionaries and grammar books, started being developed for more and more of the modern European languages. Some of the pedagogical works that 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 1.4 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. 1.4 *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

Linguistics and textual criticism

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 different manuscript versions was a necessary step to prepare the first printed editions of these texts. This pursuit was 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.

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 toward the end of the 18th century.

The birth of linguistics as an academic discipline

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*) and their mutual relationship. In particular, Jones’ seminal insight was 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 discussion of the historical

relationships among the Indo-European languages, esp. ►Figure 12.1).

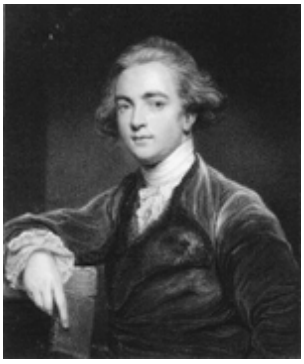


Fig. 1.5 William Jones (1746–1794), pioneer of historical-comparative (Indo-European) linguistics

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 that happened to sound 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 food-stuffs 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) produced interesting insights of many kinds, but these never explained how a particular language worked as a system of choices for its speakers at a particular time (the **synchronic** perspective).

To illustrate this with an example: if I tell you that the word *nice* originally meant "foolish" or "ignorant" when it was first used in English around 800 years ago, I am telling you a truth that you can find recorded in any good **etymological dictionary** (i.e. a dictionary that traces the history of a word in the language back to the oldest attested forms or to other languages from which it was borrowed). Obviously, the original meaning and the present one are so different that one cannot have changed into the other overnight. There must have been many intermediate steps. One such step is illustrated in the following extract from a classic novel written in the first half of the 18th century, Daniel Defoe's *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, a single mother preparing to give birth in a strange city, makes clear that the situation is far from *nice* in the present sense of "pleasant." Rather, the idea is that the situation is tricky or difficult to handle. You may find these language-historical facts boring and irrelevant. You

may find them to have some practical use, because they help you understand older texts better. Or you may even find them fascinating because such complex changes of word-meaning raise interesting issues relating to human psychology and cognition. What, for example, is the connection between ignorance and the quality of being pleasant? Is it that simple minds are conventionally regarded as harmless, non-threatening and therefore “nice” company?

Whatever your views may be, one thing is certain, however. No amount of historical information on the changing meanings of *nice* in the past will help you learn how to use this adjective in the present. Here, we are faced with other problems – for example understanding the difference in meaning and style between *how nice of you* and *how kind of you* in native-speaker usage or explaining why we can say *how unkind of you*, but not *how unnice of you* (even though negation of *nice* easily works if we use another strategy: *that was not nice of you*!).

In practice the move from the diachronic approach to the synchronic one often meant that the focus of interest shifted from the oldest stages of the language (in the case of English the Old English period lasting from c. 500 to c. 1100) to the contemporary language, but this does not necessarily have to be the case. We can study Old English from a synchronic perspective, for example, by showing how it worked as a structured system at a given point in time, let’s say the well-documented period immediately before the Norman Conquest in 1066. Alternatively, we can take a diachronic approach to present-day English, for example by focussing on those processes of historical change that are