A framework for the study of linguistics

Albert Weideman
University of the Free State

© 2011 AJ Weideman
CONTENTS

Foreword

Chapter 1  What is linguistics?
Fields of study, academic disciplines, and their foundations
The definition of a discipline
The relationship between linguistics and other disciplines
The relationship of linguistics to our future professional needs
The definition of linguistics
The data of linguistic enquiry
An encyclopaedic view of the field

Chapter 2  Formal approaches to the description of English: Syntax
The study of form
Transformational-generative grammar
Systemic functional grammar

Chapter 3  Sociolinguistic approaches: Introduction
Beyond the sentence
Beyond formal linguistics
An adjustment of focus
Communicative competence
Types of discourse
‘Text’ as linguistic unit

Chapter 4  Text linguistics
Standards of textuality
Types of cohesion
Texts and the idea of lingual economy: a first look
Some limitations of cohesion as concept
Possible solutions
Chapter 5  The analysis of discourse in English

Text linguistics, conversation analysis and discourse analysis
Frames, scripts, scenarios and schemata
Discourse function
Unconventional patterns in discourse

Chapter 6  Conversation analysis and the maintenance of talk

Social anticipations in the lingual aspect
The idea of lingual economy
A system for lingual sharing
Turn-taking and conversation
An orientation to norms for conversation
A broadening of the concept of objective factual lingual unit
A minimum unit for conversation
Opening and closing conversations
The overall organization of conversation
The maintenance of conversation
Conclusion

Chapter 7  A complex systems approach and language

An emerging new paradigm in linguistics
Elementary and complex linguistic concepts
A complex systems approach
Complex systems and applied linguistics
Language learning in the classroom
A critical assessment

Chapter 8  Linguistic primitives as framework for linguistics

Paradigm differences in linguistics
Linguistics cannot function without a philosophical base
Linguistic primitives
The historical and the systematic

BIBLIOGRAPHY
Foreword

How do undergraduate students make sense of their initial encounters with a discipline? How do they collaboratively, with lecturers and peers, actually achieve an introduction to a certain field? How do they then proceed to become intrigued with its analyses and findings? In my experience, the haphazard way in which they initially encounter academic disciplines – more often than not in bits and pieces, in unrelated and incoherent formats - merely contributes to the difficulties they experience in coming to a reasonable understanding of a discipline. Surely bewilderment is not what we want for them? What we actually want to achieve is to enable them not only to understand, but also to go beyond that, in acquiring the ability to interpret what is happening in a certain field.

Such interpretation has two sides. First, it needs an idea of how all of the various subdisciplines within a field cohere. In the case of linguistics, it means seeing the connections between phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, discourse and text analysis, to name a few. Second, to interpret the developments within a field competently, one needs a sense of its history. Mainstream work within a discipline undergoes several paradigm shifts within the working life of a single academic. How to evaluate and assess the relative merits of such paradigm shifts is a necessary task in any responsible approach to linguistics, or in any other field, for that matter. The alternative is for academics to fall victim to every new perspective or style of analysis, or to remain firmly in the grip of the paradigm in which they were trained. Surely neither is a satisfactory or responsible way of engaging with a discipline?

This book has grown out of my experience, over 40 years, of making sense of linguistics within a certain framework. My engagement with the field has for most of this time been from the perspective of a deliberately foundational, philosophical framework. Its first premise is that we would not have had a discipline of linguistics if its field of study was not circumscribed by the lingual mode of experience. Its further premise is almost beguilingly simple: nothing is absolute, and everything is connected with everything else. Though unique, the lingual dimension is therefore not absolute, but connected with all other aspects of reality. The conceptual elaboration of this framework has, furthermore, given me a sense that linguistics is not many disciplines, but one, however much we wish to divide it up into formal (‘theoretical’) and sociolinguistic camps. Indeed, in many recent approaches to linguistic analysis – systemic functional grammar, cognitive linguistics and a complex systems approach – we find attempts to articulate a sense of wholeness within the discipline.

The trouble is: these newer approaches often utilise older styles of analysis. In a complex systems approach, for example, thick ethnographic description and conversation analysis may form the building blocks of the new paradigm, that make
possible and lead to further interpretation within it. To teach only a complex systems approach to linguistics without dealing with older styles of analysis is to risk ignorance of less recent styles without which the new cannot exist.

We therefore need both historical and systematic sense. That is what a framework such as the one utilised here seeks to provide. In an earlier book, *Beyond expression: A systematic study of the foundations of linguistics* (Weideman, 2009), I have tried to articulate the systematic and historical dimensions of linguistics in an academically responsible way. That book, however, was written for an audience that is already well versed in the field. It may therefore be less accessible to newcomers. Given the primary audience this book is aimed at, second and third year students of English on courses of study that are already packed to the brim with all manner of other offerings, I have been forced not only to write in a more accessible style, but also to make a fairly ruthless selection of the topics and paradigms that should be included in such an introductory textbook. That selection may easily be contested, and I would be the first to agree that it is partial, being sensitive in the first instance to our own institutional context and expertise.

The main point that this book tries to make, however, is that it is possible to entertain a vision that linguistics is a single, whole discipline. That is a perspective that is well worth adopting, since it looks to a discipline that is intelligible because it is whole, despite being rich in its paradigmatic variety and in entertaining different systematic emphases. It is also a view that is worth nurturing because it looks to the future. It brings a sense of understanding to linguistics that makes doing it academically sustainable, and likely to be useful beyond the shifts in perspective that today’s emerging young linguists will no doubt experience in their academic lifetimes. The framework for linguistics described in this book is an invitation to those entering the discipline to become intrigued by things lingual. Without that single-minded focus it is hard to imagine entry into the ranks of those who professionally call themselves linguists.

Albert Weideman
Bloemfontein

January 2010