

ISMLA NEWSLETTER

Independent Schools' Modern Languages Association

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of magnitude for a child trying to match her own grammatical rules to those of the surrounding speech community.

The rules of language are properties of the mind. Linguists go on to ask what consequences can be drawn for other inquiries into the mind and for inquiries into the brain. We try to find answers to the following questions: How are grammatical rules deployed when speaking and understanding language? Where is the seat of language in the brain? How are the symbolic computations that correspond to grammatical rules implemented by neurons in the brain? These questions feed into yet others: What is the architecture of the mind? Is the mind a collection of highly specialized computing devices or an all-purpose information processor? Finally, with a solid understanding of the structure of language in the background, we can try to address the question of what distinguishes our minds from those of our closest living relative, the chimp. Linguists cannot help but be struck by the importance that language has for the life of our species, marvel at the intricacies of its rules, and be fascinated by puzzle of how children can acquire these intricate systems before they can tie their shoelaces.

Dr Klaus Abels, Programme Director of the BA in Linguistics, UCL

Discovering language: an interview with Professor Dick Hudson of the UKLO

I came across linguistics whilst reading Spanish philology at university. For a module on historical linguistics I analysed the natural process of language evolution and the inexorable imprints left behind in the Iberian Peninsula by the legacy of the Roman Empire, the invasion of the Moors in 711, the Reconquista and more. I recall what a refreshing experience it was to study how Spanish phonemes, lexis and syntax had evolved from Latin to Castilian, including its most contemporary forms, as it differed greatly from more classical literary analysis.

*Linguistics is a field which is too often absent from secondary Modern Languages teaching. Aside from the Linguistic Olympiad, there are few initiatives aiming to spark interest in pupils. I am therefore grateful to **Professor Dick Hudson** for kindly introducing us to*

this unknown realm.

When thinking about linguistics, the first words that come to mind are an array of obscure terminology. There seem to be so many areas and sub-genres to linguistics.

Well, yes, but that's just because language can be looked at from so many different angles. We can ask how it's stored and processed in the brain (neurolinguistics), how it varies from group to group (sociolinguistics), how we manipulate it mentally (psycholinguistics), how we learn it (developmental linguistics), how we can apply it to language teaching and learning (applied linguistics), and so on and on. I'd like to add a key item to your list: structural linguistics, the study of language structure. That's where you find another collection of branches of the subject: phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics. Actually, we haven't got a name for this collection, except 'core linguistics'. That's the kind of work I prefer, and I see it as the core around which all the other departments are arranged. You can't do any of them without using structural concepts from core linguistics, for the simple reason that language is a structure, so whatever you say about its use or growth, you're always talking about structures.

What is linguistics? Is it 'the scientific study of language'?

Yes, 'the scientific study of language' is a good answer. But when you talk about 'scientific' and 'dissecting' and 'rules' it sounds a bit dry; it could be as unexciting as a chemical experiment where you know the outcome in advance or dissecting a dead worm. And in the wrong hands, linguistics can be unexciting. But in the right hands it comes to life and you realise that what you're dissecting is your own mind, or (more generally) the human mind. After all, when you're studying (say) grammar, you're actually studying the contents of a human mind; and if it's



your own language's grammar, it's your own mind that you're studying. On the other hand, the methods are 'scientific' in the sense that we try to build clear theories that fit the facts. There's nothing quite as satisfying (to some of us) as a good theoretical explanation for some familiar but puzzling facts.

What drives you to study linguistics?

Personally, I've been fascinated by language ever since I was a teenager. I started with etymology, the study of relations between words. For example, did you know that the word "treacle" is related to "fierce"? In the middle ages, an antidote to the poison of a fierce snake was (in Latin) "theriaka", so when treacle was used as a cure-all in the sixteenth century it was called "theriakula" ('little theriak') which turned into our "treacle".

I was fortunate enough to be taught grammar well, and by the time I was in the Sixth Form I was hooked on the structure of language, with its beautiful patterns and categories and rules. Inevitably, I specialised in languages at A-level and that took me to a BA in Languages, but in the late 1950s linguistics was just coming into our universities (what luck!), so I took every course I could find: phonetics, general linguistics, history of French and German... At the end, I was hooked for life. A family connection led me to do a PhD on the grammar of a language of the Sudan, including a year in the field which was the most intellectually exciting year of my life. It was all about discovering connections, like sitting down at a giant jigsaw puzzle and finding bits that fit together, often in a very unexpected way.

Why should linguistics be part of the curriculum in secondary schools?

Since language is the main tool that we have for understanding, learning and communicating, we really ought to understand how this tool works and be able to reflect on our own language and other people's. We have two language crises in our schools: in English teaching we allow enormous numbers of children to leave school without being literate and, in foreign-language teaching, we're becoming increasingly monoglot at a time when the rest of the world is more and more polyglot. These crises are happening, in part, because our schools are not teaching about language as they should.

To what extent can linguistics research affect language teachers?

It totally affects them. If your mission is to teach a language, then you have some

content to teach. It doesn't matter whether you're an English teacher or a French teacher; in either case, there is some linguistic content that you know and that you want to pass on to your students. For language learners, the more they know about how language works, the easier they will learn new language - again, whether this is more academic versions of their own language, or a foreign language. One of the most important principles underlying the teaching of languages in school should be that the particular language you learn there doesn't matter much: what matters is that you're learning how to learn a new language.

Which specific skills do students learn when studying linguistics at university, beyond analytical and critical thinking?

Analytical and critical thinking are important and you certainly learn them when doing linguistics. But you learn other more specific skills - how to classify and transcribe sounds in phonetics, how to draw a sentence's structure or a word's structure in grammar, how to notate and think about a sentence's meaning in semantics, and how to handle complex data in practically every branch of the subject. In some of the more interactional areas (pragmatics or sociolinguistics) you learn to think about how we use language as a tool for negotiating social relationships, in the more physical areas (neurolinguistics, phonetics) you learn how to 'read' a brain-scan or a sagittal section (a diagram showing the position of the vocal organs inside the skull) or a spectroscope (showing the acoustic properties of a sound) and in all the core areas you learn one or more notation for showing complex relations between words, their meanings and their parts. In some areas you learn quantitative skills such as statistics. These all develop general skills which can be applied outside linguistics.

Does it necessarily require a scientific interest or background?

No, not necessarily. But if you really dislike science, linguistics may help you to love it. In the Linguistics Olympiad, one of the things we boast about is that it attracts girls and boys in about equal numbers - which is extraordinary, when you think how girls tend to dominate in languages. Boys like it because it appeals to their scientific brain - the brain that enjoys clarity and structure. But girls like it too, even though it's 'scientific', because they enjoy language. There's actually no good reason for anyone not to be interested in science, so when people are switched off it's probably just a matter of inherited social attitudes and teaching

methods. Linguistics gives you a chance to rethink all that.

Apart from education, what other industry sectors can linguistics lead to?

Linguistics is an excellent basis for many different careers because of the important transferable skills I've mentioned. Our graduates end up in banking, publishing and advertising, for instance. But for more specifically language-related jobs, of course, linguistics is essential. One particularly important employer of linguistics graduates is the IT sector, where language processing is a real growth industry that employs some of the brightest graduates. Think of your mobile phone, with its predictive texting (invented by linguists) and its voice recognition software (invented by phoneticians) - not to mention Google Translate, and the software that Google uses for recognising "dogs" as an example of "dog".

Which would you say are the top 3 linguistics courses in the UK and why?

To be honest, I've never heard of a really bad linguistics department. Incidentally, I'm not one who believes that good teaching necessarily comes from good research, so don't assume that a top-ranking research department will offer better teaching than one that does less research.

Which introductory books/interesting blogs would you recommend to anyone wanting to learn more about linguistics?

I've tried to answer that question for competitors in the Linguistics Olympiad at <http://www.uklo.org/for-competitors>

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I am sure you will agree that Dick's passion for his subject is contagious. What about starting a lesson by solving a linguistic problem? Pupils do love it! The following link offers plenty of inspiring ideas for you to try: <http://www.uklo.org/breakthrough-workout>

Virginie Dall'Acqua, Mander Portman Woodward

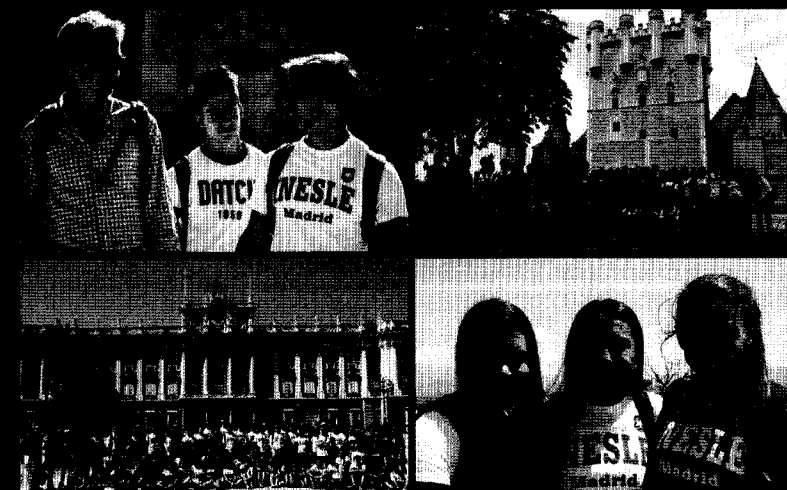
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