Some issues on which linguists can agree

Richard Hudson

Some issues on which linguists can agree

RICHARD HUDSON

Department of Phonetics and Linguistics, University College London.

At a time when linguistic theory is becoming increasingly fragmented and decreasingly dominated by a single orthodoxy, it has been an encouraging exercise to compile a list of statements about language which are likely to be accepted by virtually all linguists, irrespective of what they think about all the many issues on which linguists disagree. The following list contains no fewer than 83 claims which have been accepted by a wide range of British linguists, and there is no reason to believe that the sample of linguists who have helped me in compiling the list is particularly biased. It seems reasonable to claim that other linguists are LIKELY to accept these statements, although I certainly cannot claim that every linguist accepts every one of them. So far as I know, no attempt has ever been made before to find out what linguists at large actually believe, although any writer of an introductory text-book hopes that he is expounding a widely held set of views. Considered as a piece of research, this investigation seems to me to have produced at least one interesting result: linguistics really is making some progress, in a cumulative way, and we are not just lurching from one 'paradigm' to another, as some of us sometimes suspect in our gloomier moments. Moreover, it raises the interesting question what other statements could be added to the list given here, which certainly is not meant to be exhaustive. I hope that other linguists with more imagination than me can bring the list into the hundreds, as should surely be possible.

I should explain the background to the compilation of the list. It has a fairly practical origin, having been suggested by the Committee for Linguistics in Education as a discussion document for two seminars concerned with the relevance of linguistics to schools.[1] Because of this I have concentrated in my selection of statements on those which seem to have some potential relevance for language teaching in schools, and in particular for first-language teaching. However, many of them are also relevant to other activities, notably second-language teaching, the treatment of speech pathology and language

---

[1] The Committee for Linguistics in Education was set up by the British Association for Applied Linguistics and the Linguistics Association of Great Britain, with the purpose of preparing for joint seminars on linguistics and schools. It has been enlarged by the addition of representatives of the National Association for the Teaching of English and of the National Association for Advisers and Inspectors of English, and a number of Inspectors and Advisors also belong to it. Further information may be obtained from the Honorary Secretary, John Rudd, 22 Ritherdon Road, London SW17 8QD.

planning. Moreover, many linguists who have seen earlier versions of the list have expressed an interest in using it as a teaching aid in their linguistics courses. It is all too easy for students to be discouraged by the seemingly unlimited ability of linguists to disagree with one another, and by the very short life of the average linguistic theory; it may raise their spirits to be given a list like the following as a set of anchor points. I hope, then, that the list will be useful to a lot of people.

The list in its present form is the result of many revisions, going back to a very short list of about twenty points which I composed with the help of another member of the committee, Mike Riddle. The most radical changes occurred in the production of the antepenultimate version, which I circulated to all the linguistics departments in British universities, plus a few in polytechnics, making a total of 29 departments. I had replies from just half of ' them (15), and in many cases the document had been circulated widely in the department for comment so the number of linguists whose views were sounded out is higher (about 30). It would be unwise to guess at the reasons why this particular sample replied, and the remaining departments and linguists approached did not, but there is no reason to think that the non-repliers would have had more reservations about the list than those who did reply. After taking account of all the comments received at this stage, I sent the revised (penultimate) version to all those who had already commented, including those who commented at earlier stages but not at the antepenultimate, and received 18 sets of comments (all minor) on the penultimate version. I have now taken all these comments into account in revising the penultimate version, so I think I can claim that at least these 18 linguists would accept all the 83 points in the list. (The one reservation I must make is about statement 2.5i, which was not in the penultimate list; however, this seems unlikely to provoke objections from most linguists.) At one stage or another in the development of the list I received comments from 46 linguists,[2] and I have been able to meet all the criticisms they made by revising the version they were commenting on. It thus seems likely that most of the 83 statements would be acceptable to all of these 46 linguists.

Finally, a note on the presentation of these statements. I have tried hard to make them comprehensible to the layman, by avoiding technical terminology, and where one statement may help the reader to understand another I have

given a cross-reference. If the wording sometimes seems pedantic and long, this is because I have had so many helpful comments from colleagues who have spotted potential ambiguities or misunderstandings; several of the readers of the more recent versions have complained that it reads like the outcome of a committee meeting, which in a sense it is. I regret the effects of this on the style, but I think it may be inevitable. I regard the document in its present form as a reference work, rather than as an attractive description of the state of the art in linguistics. Nor have I tried to draw any practical implications from these statements, for a variety of reasons. I am convinced that every one of the 83 statements has implications for some area of practical life, and I hope that it will be possible for these implications to be developed and presented in a way which will show the world that linguistics does after all have something to say of practical importance.

SOME ISSUES ON WHICH LINGUISTS CAN AGREE

I. THE LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE

(a) Linguists describe language empirically – that is, they try to make statements which are testable, and they take language as it is, rather than saying how it should be. (In other words, linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive or normative.) (see 2.1a, 2.3a, 2.4b, 3.2e).

(b) The primary object of description for linguists is the structure of language, but many linguists study this in relation to its function (notably, that of conveying meaning) and in relation to other psychological and cultural systems (see 2.1b, 2.7a).

(c) Linguists construct theories of language, in order to explain why particular languages have some of the properties that they do have. Linguists differ in the relative emphasis they put on general theory and on description of particular languages (see 2.1d).

(d) An essential tool of linguistics (both descriptive and theoretical) is a metalanguage containing technical terms denoting analytical categories and constructs. None of the traditional or everyday metalanguage is sacrosanct, though much of it is the result of earlier linguistic scholarship, but many traditional terms have in fact been adopted by linguists with approximately their established meanings (see 3.2a, 3.3e, 3.4a).

(e) The first aim of linguists is to understand the nature of language and of particular languages. Some linguists, however, are motivated by the belief that such understanding is likely to have practical social benefits, e.g. for those concerned professionally with the teaching of the mother-tongue or of second languages, or with the treatment of language disorders.

335

2. LANGUAGE, SOCIETY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

2.1. *Language*

(a) Language is amenable to objective study, with regard both to its structure and to its functions and external relations (see 1a, 3.2c).

(b) We learn our language from other individuals, so language is a property both of the individual and of the community from which he learns it. Consequently, both social and psychological approaches to its study are necessary.

(c) A language consists partly of a set of interacting general constraints, or rules, and partly of a vocabulary of lexical items. (Some linguists prefer to take a language as a set of sentences, and would apply the preceding description to the grammar of a language, rather than to the language itself.) (See 2.3d, f, 2.5a, 2.6e, 3.)

(d) There are features common to all languages (linguistic universals) which involve the organization of their grammars and also the types of patterning found in sentences (see 1c, 2.2d, 2.4a, 2.6e, f, 3).

(e) Although all speakers know at least one language, and use this knowledge ('competence') in speaking and understanding, very little of their knowledge is conscious. Knowledge of structural properties (e.g. rules of syntax) is particularly hard to report in an organized way (see 2.5).

2.2 *Languages*

(a) There is no clear or qualitative difference between so-called 'language-boundaries' and 'dialect-boundaries' (see 2.3c, d, i).

(b) There are between 4000 and 5000 languages (though no precise figure is possible because of the uncertainty referred to in (a) above). They differ widely in their number of speakers, ranging from a few individuals to hundreds of millions; and nations differ widely in the number of languages spoken natively in them, ranging from one to many hundreds.

(c) In many communities it is normal for every speaker to command two or more languages more or less fluently. Such communities exist in Britain, both in the traditional Celtic areas and in areas of high immigration (see 2.3b).

(d) There is no evidence that normal human languages differ greatly in the complexity of their rules, or that there are any languages that are 'primitive' in the size of their vocabulary (or any other part of their language), however 'primitive' their speakers may be from a cultural point of view. (The term 'normal human language' is meant to exclude on the one hand artificial languages such as Esperanto or computer languages, and on the other hand languages which are not used as the primary means of communication within any community, notably pidgin languages. Such languages may be simpler than normal human languages, though this is not necessarily so.) (See 2.1d, 3.3i.)

(e) Only a minority of languages are written, and an even smaller minority

are standardized (i.e. include a variety which is codified and widely accepted as the variety most suitable for formal writing and speech). English belongs to this small minority (see 2.3a, h, 2.4c, 3.2).

(f) The present position of English as a world language is due to historical accidents rather than to inherent superiority of the language's structure. (Similar remarks apply to other world languages, notably French, Spanish and Russian, and to the 'Classical' languages such as Greek, Latin, Arabic and Sanskrit.) (See 2.3e, 3.5e.)

2.3. *Varieties of language*

(a) Spoken language developed before written language in the history of mankind, and it also develops first in the individual speaker; moreover, many languages are never written. These factors lead most linguists to believe that in linguistic theory priority should be given to spoken language, and many linguists give further priority to the most casual varieties of spoken language, those which are least influenced by normative grammar (see 1a, 2.2a, 2.2e, 2.4e).

(b) Every society requires its members to use different varieties of language in different situations (see 2.2c, 2.3h, 3.1d).

(c) The different 'varieties' referred to in (b) may be so-called 'languages', 'dialects' or 'registers' (i.e. roughly, 'styles') (see 2.2a, 3.4c).

(d) All varieties (including the most casual speech) are 'languages', in that they have their own rules and vocabulary, and they are all subject to rules controlling their use (see 2.1c, 2.2a).

(e) The prestige of a variety derives from its social functions (i.e. from the people and situations with which it is associated) rather than from its structural properties (see 2.2f, 2.7b, 3.4b).

(f) All normal speakers are able to use more than one variety of language (see 2.2c, 2.5f).

(g) Different varieties are often associated with different social statuses, whether these are the result of birth (e.g. sex, region of origin, race) or of later experience (e.g. occupation, religion, education) (see 2.5g, 2.7b).

(h) There is no reason for considering the variety called 'Standard English' the best for use in all situations (see 2.2e).

(i) Standard English subsumes a wide range of varieties, and has no clear boundaries *vis à vis* non-standard varieties (see 2.2a).

(j) In particular, there are many different ways of pronouncing Standard English (i.e. different 'accents'), one of which is particularly prestigious in England and Wales, namely 'Received Pronunciation' ('RP') (see 3.1a, 3.2f).

2.4. *Change*

(a) The only parts of a language which are immune to change are those which it shares with all other human languages (see 2.1d, 2.6b, 3.5d).

(b) Change in a language is normally a matter of becoming different, rather than better or worse (see 1a, 2.4d).

(c) It is normal for language to change from generation to generation even when subject to the conservative influence of a standardized variety (see 2.2e, 2.6c, 3.2e).

(d) Change in the language may reflect the influence of non-standard varieties on the standard one as well as vice versa (see 2.4b, 2.6a).

(e) Language changes for different types of reason: sociolinguistic, as when one variety influences another, or communicative needs change, or institutions such as schools intervene; psycholinguistic, as when one group misperceives or misanalyses the speech of another; structural, as when disrupted patterns are restored (see 2.3a, 2.5a, 2.6a, 2.7a, 3.5c).

2.5. Acquisition

(a) When children learn to speak, they learn a language (in the sense of rules plus vocabulary) which is an increasingly good approximation to the language of their models; however, direct repetition of model utterances plays only a minor part in their speech (see 2.1c, 3, 2.4e, 3.1b, c, 3.2).

(b) In learning their language, children's main source of information about the model is the speech of older people. No explicit instruction by the latter is needed, though parents often simplify their speech when talking to children, and correct some of the children's mistakes in a haphazard way (see 2.4f).

(c) By primary school age, children are commonly taking their peers rather than their parents as their dominant linguistic models (see 2.5g, h).

(d) There are considerable differences between children in the speed at which they acquire active use of specific parts of language. Such differences may be in part due to differences in their experience of language used by older people (see 2.7a, c).

(e) A child's poor performance in formal, threatening or unfamiliar situations can not be taken as evidence of impoverished linguistic competence, but may be due to other factors such as low motivation for speaking in that situation, or unfamiliarity with the conventions for use of language in such situations (see 2.7c, 3.4c).

(f) By primary school age children already command a range of different varieties for use in different situations (see 2.3f).

(g) Some parts of the language of children are indicators of the status of being a child, and will be abandoned by the time the child reaches adulthood. Some such features are learned almost exclusively from peers, and may have been handed on in this way for many centuries (see 2.3g, 2.5c).

(h) Mere exposure to a model different from that of his peers or his parents will not in itself lead a child to change his own speech; the child must also want to accept the model as the standard for his own behaviour. Many people go on using varieties which they know are low in prestige, and which they believe are

deficient, because these varieties are the only ones which they can accept (see 2.5c, 2.6a, 2.7b).

(i) The amount of knowledge involved in mastering a language is very great, although its extent is masked from ordinary adult speakers for various reasons, such as the unconscious nature of much of the knowledge. Children normally acquire a high proportion of this knowledge before they reach school age (see 2.2d, 3.3d).

2.6. *Relations between languages and dialects*

(a) Whenever speakers of two languages or dialects are in contact with one another, the languages or dialects concerned may be expected to influence each other in proportion to the extent of the contact, the social relations between the speakers, and the practical benefits of such influence for the recipients (see 2.4c, d, 2.5h).

(b) Such influence may be profound, going well beyond the borrowing of individual lexical items (see 2.4a, 2.6g).

(c) Since languages and dialects are indicators of group membership, it is common for a community to resist and criticize such influence, and to pick out particular aspects of it for explicit complaint (see 2.4c, 2.7b).

(d) Some aspects of language are more susceptible to external influence than others. Possibly certain areas of vocabulary are the most susceptible, and the least susceptible may be inflectional morphology (i.e. variation in the form of a word to reflect its number, tense, case, etc.) (see 3.3c, 3.4a, b).

(e) Alongside the similarities among languages, there are many gross differences. Such differences are most obvious in the arbitrary relations between the pronunciation of a word and its meaning and/or its syntactic properties, which are covered partly by the vocabulary and partly by the rules of morphology (see 2.1c, d, 3.3a, 3.4d).

(f) Apparent similarities between languages may turn out on thorough investigation to conceal significant differences, and vice versa (see 2.1d).

(g) If two languages are similar in their structures this need not be because they developed historically from the same earlier language, nor need historically related languages be similar in their structures (see 2.4a, 2.6b).

2.7. *Speech as behaviour*

(a) There are many possible reasons for speaking, only one of which is the desire to communicate ideas to an addressee. Other purposes include the establishing or maintaining of relations with the addressees, and the sorting out of the speaker's own thoughts (see 1b, 2.4e, 2.5d, 3.5a).

(b) The variety of language which a speaker uses on a particular occasion serves as an indicator of the speaker's group-membership and also of the speaker's perception of the type of situation in which the speech is taking place. A speaker's choice of variety is not wholly determined, by social factors

beyond his control, but may be manipulated by him to suit his purposes (see 2.3e, g, 2.5c, h, 3.1a, c).

(c) No speaker uses speech equally fluently or effectively for all functions (i.e. for all purposes and in all situations). Skill in speaking depends in part on having the opportunity to practise speech in quite specific functions, rather than on general linguistic ability (see 2.5d, 3.2b).

(d) When people comprehend speech, they may actually need to perceive only a proportion of the total utterance, since they can fill in the gaps with what they expect to hear.

3. THE STRUCTURE OF LANGUAGE (see 2.1c, d)

3.1. *Pronunciation*

(a) Pronunciation differences are especially closely associated with social group membership differences, and consequently they are especially value-loaded (see 2.3j, 2.7b).

(b) Pronunciations which deviate from the prestige variety are generally learned from other speakers, and are not the result of 'slovenly speech habits' (see 2.5a, 3.1d).

(c) The precision with which speakers unconsciously conform to the linguistic models which they have adopted in pronunciation (as in other areas of language) goes beyond what is required for efficient communcation (e.g. for the avoidance of ambiguity) (see 2.5a, 2.7b).

(d) All speakers, in all varieties, use pronunciations in fast speech which differ considerably from those used in slow, careful speech, and other aspects of the situation, such as its formality, may have similar effects. Rapid casual speech is skilled rather than 'slovenly' (see 2.3b, 2.7d, 3.1b).

(e) The analysis of pronunciation takes account of at least the following: phonetic features of vowels and consonants, the order in which these occur, and the larger patterns which they form (syllables, words, intonation patterns, etc.).

(f) Intonation does not only reflect the speaker's attitude, but is a particularly important indicator in spoken language of an utterance's structure, and also of its contribution to the discourse (see 3.2b).

(g) Intonation is regulated by norms which vary from variety to variety. Children start to learn the intonation patterns of their community's variety in the first year of life.

3.2. *Writing*

(a) Written language reflects a linguistic analysis in terms of categories (e.g. sentence, letter) some of which are not related simply or directly to categories needed for spoken language (see 1d).

(b) The skills needed for successful reading and writing are partly distinct from those needed for speaking and listening, and the relevant linguistic

patterns are also partly different. Such skills and patterns have to be learned as part of the acquisition of literacy, so the latter involves much more than learning to spell and to recognize single words (see 2.7c, d).

(c) The English writing system is only one of many such systems, each of which is amenable to objective and systematic study. Not all writing systems are alphabetic, and not all alphabetic systems are like English in the way they relate writing to other parts of language structure (see 2.1a).

(d) Spelling is only one part of the English writing system, which also includes, e.g., punctuation, handwriting and the numerals (see 3.3c).

(e) Spelling is probably the most immutable part of English, and the part where prescriptivism is most easily accepted by linguists (see 1a, 2.4c).

(f) English spelling does not reflect RP any more directly than it does other accents, so it is no easier for RP speakers to learn (see 2.3j).

3.3. *Vocabulary*

(a) The relation between the meaning of a word and the pronunciation (or spelling) of its root is usually arbitrary (see 2.6e, 3.4d).

(b) Items of vocabulary ('lexical items') include not only single words but also idioms (combinations of words whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of the individual words) and other longer structures such as clichés (see 3.5b).

(c) The specification of a lexical item must refer to at least the following types of information: its pronunciation (and its spelling, if the language is a written one), its meaning, the syntactic and semantic contexts in which it may occur, and how inflectional morphology affects its form (at least if it is irregular in this respect) (see 2.6d, 3.2d).

(d) There is no known limit to the amount of detailed information of all such types which may be associated with a lexical item. Existing dictionaries, even large ones, only specify lexical items incompletely.

(e) The syntactic information about a lexical item may be partially given in terms of word-classes, some of which correspond closely to traditional parts of speech. However, a complete syntactic specification of a lexical item needs much more information than can be given in terms of a small set of mutually exclusive word-classes like the parts of speech (see 1d).

(f) Many of the boundaries between word-classes are unclear even when defined by linguists.

(g) Many lexical items have meanings which cannot be defined without reference to the culture of the language's speakers. Such items are an important source of information for children in learning the culture of their community.

(h) Individuals may vary greatly in the extent to which their vocabulary covers particular areas of experience, and also in the overall size of their vocabulary.

(i) It is very difficult to measure a person's vocabulary meaningfully, partly

because of the difference between active and passive vocabulary, partly because it is possible to know different amounts of detail about any given item, and partly because it is possible to know more vocabulary relevant to one area of experience than to another, so that measures based on just one kind of vocabulary do not give a sound basis for estimating the total vocabulary (see 2.2d, 3.3d, h).

3.4. *Syntax*

(a) The analysis of syntactic structure takes account of at least the following factors: the order in which words occur, how they combine to form larger units (phrases, clauses, sentences, etc), the syntactic classes to which the words belong (including those marked by inflectional morphology), and the specifically syntactic relations among the words or other units, such as the relations referred to by the labels 'subject' and 'modifier' (see 1d, 2.6d, 3.5b).

(b) Although English has little inflectional morphology, it has a complex syntax (i.e. it is not true that 'English has no grammar'). This is true of all dialects (see 2.3e, 2.6d).

(c) Syntax is particularly sensitive to register differences, so a child's use of syntactic constructions in the classroom may reflect only part of the total range of constructions that the child knows, and uses under other circumstances (see 2.3c, 2.5e).

(d) The relations between meanings and syntactic structures are less arbitrary than those between the meanings and pronunciations of single words. However, even this limited arbitrariness allows very different syntactic structures to be associated (either by different languages, or within the same language) with similar meanings, and vice versa (see 2.6e, 3.3a).

(e) Syntactic complexity is only one source of difficulty in understanding spoken or written language (see 2.7e, 3.2b).

3.5. *Meaning*

(a) The information conveyed by an utterance of a sentence on a particular occasion may cover many different types of 'meaning', relating to the conditions for the sentence's being true, the assumptions made by the speaker, the utterance's social function as a statement, a suggestion, a request, etc., and other factors (see 2.7a).

(b) Part of this information is the literal meaning of the sentence uttered, which reflects the meanings of the lexical items in it and the syntactic relations between them. Part of it, however, derives from the context in which the sentence is used (see 3.3b, 3.4a).

(c) To a greater extent than other parts of language structure, meaning may be negotiated by speakers and addressees, e.g. by defining terms or by modifying established meanings to suit special circumstances (see 2.4e).

(d) The meanings of lexical items, like other parts of language structure, change with time, and there is no reason to take the etymological meaning of a word as its true one, or indeed as part of its meaning at all (see 2.4a, f).

(e) There is no evidence that any language is any more 'logical' than any other (see 2.2f).