Week 3

practical sessions

Workshop – How to study linguistics?
Part III

REQUIRED TEXT

Read the following text carefully (FINCH, Geoffrey (1998): How to study Linguistics, London: Macmillan) and answer the reflective log questions as stated below.

Beginning Linguistics

If you are just starting your studies in linguistics the first piece of advice I have may seem rather odd. It is this: beware of all books on linguistics. And that includes the one you are now reading. A healthy scepticism is not a bad thing. Most books on linguistics raise expectations of understanding which they cannot fulfil. This is not entirely their fault, of course. There is an undeniable technical and theoretical base to the subject, and negotiating through this whilst still remaining reasonably coherent is not easy. But in spite of all the technical terminology, linguistics is not a science. It’s a pity that the subject doesn’t have a different name. We tend to think of disciplines ending in ‘ics’, statistics, mathematics, physics, as having a precise scientific core consisting of unchallengeable facts. Linguistics is not like that. Neither, of course, strictly speaking, are mathematics, statistics, or physics. Indeed, many scientists, nowadays, would question this view of science. Nevertheless, it’s important to bear in mind that the subject matter of linguistics, language, is made up. Words do not grow out of the ground, they haven’t evolved like matter from the interaction of natural elements. And whilst there is much to suggest that the structures and processes which enable language to develop are inborn, there is still a very important sense in which language is human-made. It is our possession in a way that nothing else is. And the process of making up, or inventing, never stops.

It’s as well to remember this when government bodies go on, as they periodically do, about ‘bad’ English and the importance of maintaining standards. The question we should be asking is ‘whose language is it anyway?’. Language is one of the few truly democratic forces left to us. It may be used as an instrument of oppression, when one nation colonises or annexes another, but it has an unerring ability to turn on its handler. We have only to look at how international varieties of English are flourishing around the world in former colonies, from the Indian sub-continent to the Caribbean, to see the democratising influences of the language. And even in England, although it is sometimes argued that the combined forces of the media and public schools are producing a uniform pronunciation, the truth is that conservative speech...
patterns are themselves subtly changing under the influence of newly emergent accents. [...] However, language is not chaotic. There are rules governing linguistic behaviour just as there are everything else in life. They may not be the rules which people might wish to impose on us, but they are rules nonetheless. It is these rules which linguists are concerned with studying.

The second piece of advice I wish to give therefore is – learn to think linguistically. [...] And as always, the best starting point is your own experience. Before plunging into the mysteries of phonology (the sound system) or syntax (word order), it’s a good idea to reflect on what you use language for and how much you already know about some of the linguistic processes involved. Only in this way can you put some of the ideas you will come across later into a workable and relevant context. I propose, therefore, that we begin by considering language as an experiential phenomenon, in other words, as something we encounter as an intrinsic and essential ingredient of our everyday lives, and from that develop a way of describing the kinds of knowledge which linguists seek to explore.

STUDENT’S REFLECTIVE LOG QUESTIONS (RLQ)

These logs express your individual’s response to the previous reading, will serve as a written record of your individual thinking, and will be used as a basis for group discussion. Please remember that you are expected to keep all completed reflective log assignments throughout the year for documentation of your own learning process.

RLQ 1 – Using Finch (1998) Chapter 1 excerpt as a guide, what do you think are some issues to consider or questions you might ask yourself when starting your studies in linguistics?
RLQ 2 – Reflect on the usefulness of the two pieces of advice identified in the reading in your own learning process. Include your reasons for being interested or not in following them.
RLQ 3 – Create your own self-portrait that includes a brief description of your language background and your own views about what language is, how it works and what you use it for.
Now, read the following text carefully (downloadable from http://www.wmich.edu/languages/academics/linguistics/what.html) and discuss your thoughts, feelings and reactions to it:

The study of linguistics permits a person to better understand the world around her or him, as this world is constantly being filtered through and organized by language. How do you talk to yourself? To others? How do you organize your day? How do you conceive of your existence and that of others? When you see something interesting or shocking, when you try to remember a fact or setting, express anger or love, you do this through the medium of language. When you read, sing, study, write, chat or daydream, language is at the heart of your experience. The study of linguistics is not just an investigation into words or sounds, but it is the heart of humanity.

The study of **linguistics also offers several practical benefits**. Teachers of English or other languages can better understand their subject matter; people communicating with others – of their culture or another – can become more effective and persuasive; counsellors and mediators can learn the value of such hidden things as affect or intonation; businessmen and women can better grasp the role language plays in their contacts and communications; historians and politicians can see the role played by language and by people’ views of language in past and current events; etc. Understanding that language is a powerful force – and gaining the intellectual tools to go beneath the surface of daily observation – might well build better international friendships and help communities and individuals understand and respect one another more fully.

Finally, **linguistics is fun and will make you a more rounded person** with interesting things to say at parties. Have you ever wondered why sentences such as, “the friend I came to the party with” are incorrect (according to your high school English teacher, at least)? Are you confused by the subjunctive of Spanish or French or by the use of the dative or accusative in German? Do you wonder why so many people learn English, but why so few English speakers learn other languages? All of these are questions that make linguists’ hearts stir and, although we might not always have the answers, we definitely enjoy trying to find them.
RLQ 5 – Compare the way you use your first language as related to the way your friends use their first languages. In what ways are your and their linguistic backgrounds different or similar (a linguistic background includes information on the context in which you learned each language you know – at home, in school (including where you studied and the amount of time), living where the language is spoken, etc.)? Then, discuss your issues or concerns regarding language use.