1.6: Why Study Language

What good is the scientific study of language? Why does anyone do it? Why should you care about it? These are the sorts of questions you have a right to ask about any university course. The answer to the last question depends a lot, of course, on how you happened to end up in a course using this book in the first place and on what your interests and long-term goals are. Language is a part of everyone's life, but it is more central to some people than to others. But I happen to believe that a scientific look at language should be a part of the basic curriculum, like mathematics and history are.

Second-language Learning

Many of you have already studied one or more languages other than your first, and more of you will later on. A few of you may teach a foreign language. In either case, you are not likely to find the learning process an easy one. Some of the difficulties faced by second-language learners have to do with differences between their first and second languages, differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and usage. You do not have to know linguistics to learn a second language; after all, people all over the world who have never heard of linguistics do this successfully all the time. However, knowing what pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and usage are; how they can differ between languages; and how people seem to learn them (as first- or second-language learners) can help you be aware of and understand your problems and possibly correct some of them. A second-language teacher needs to be able to focus on problem areas, for example, by giving lots of practice or by simplifying other aspects of the language being learned. It is difficult, if not impossible, both to understand the source of the problem and to come up with ways of addressing it without understanding the nature of the material being learned, that is, what linguists and other language scientists study.

First-language Learning

Some students, when beginning a linguistics course, believe it will help them improve their knowledge of their first language. In fact this is *not* something you can expect from a linguistics course. You already know the great majority of the words, the grammatical patterns, and the usage conventions that you will need to survive. Of course you can improve; you can learn new words and expressions, become more proficient with the grammatical patterns that are part of formal language, and get better at using language to accomplish your goals. Most of the improvement should come naturally as you are exposed to the complex language of academia and the workplace. But you will also face evaluations of your language by other people — teachers, colleagues, supervisors, even family and friends — throughout your life. You will be in a better position to make use of this criticism and advice if you understand what sort of problem is involved (if there really is a problem) and how it fits into the larger scheme of things. This is where linguistics can help.

Another way in which most people encounter first-language learning is in raising children. Of course you don't have to know linguistics to know how to "teach" a baby a language; babies aren't really taught language anyway. But knowing what it is that babies learn when they learn a language can make the process more enjoyable. You'll be able to better appreciate what an amazing process learning a language is, why so many people are fascinated with how this process happens, how your baby does the same kinds of things that others do and, at the same time, how your baby's learning steps are unique.

You may end up in a job that involves first-language learning more directly, as a teacher of your first language to native speakers. In this capacity, part of your job will probably be to make sure your students are competent in the standard dialect of the language. As we saw in the section on what linguists study and the section on prescription, sorting out what belongs to the standard is not a trivial matter, and a knowledge of what linguistic conventions are seems essential. As I've already said, there is a lot of confusion and controversy about what should be emphasized or even taught at all. You will also need to teach your students what counts as appropriate and effective language. Again linguistics and other language sciences can help; some language scientists devote their efforts to figuring out what makes different expressions appropriate in different situations, while others are concerned with how words and expressions are interpreted by hearers and readers.

Or you might work as a speech therapist, dealing with people with speech disabilities of one kind or another. Here the relevance of the scientific study of language is obvious; you first need to know what the norms of a language are before you can hope to address the ways in which your clients or patients deviate from these norms.

Cognition

Language is probably the best window we have on the workings of the human mind. Language gives us the extraordinary ability to describe the contents of our thoughts, an ability that no other animal has. Of course there are many unconscious aspects to

cognition that we cannot talk about, but these properties are apparently also reflected in what we say. The units of language — elements of form, words, grammatical patterns, conventions of usage — are in some sense also units of cognition. The implication is that the study of what all languages share is also the study of what it is to be human, something that is certainly an important topic for any educated person.

Linguistics and Tolerance

What we can learn about the human mind by studying how languages *differ* from one another is more controversial. Linguists and other cognitive scientists disagree on how deeply the nature of a person's first language influences how the person thinks and views the world around them. I'll have more to say on this topic at various points throughout the book. But language is such an important part of our lives that learning about the languages of other people, including how those languages differ from ours, is in a very real sense learning about those people. As with any other aspect of culture, lack of knowledge can lead to intolerance. It is easy to believe that other languages are inferior in one way or another to ours, to think that some languages, especially the languages of relatively small ethnic groups in the Third World, are more primitive than others. So the realization that a language like Tzeltal, Lingala, Amharic, or Inuktitut has a set of grammatical categories and communicative options not even found in English is an eye-opening experience. Looking more closely at languages, and in particular at languages that might seem exotic to us, can make us more tolerant.

Finally, language is what we use to influence the beliefs of one another. This happens in everyday conversation, as we argue about who forgot to put the mayonnaise jar back in the refrigerator or what the results of the latest election mean. It happens in advertising, as companies do their best to get us to buy their toothpaste, shoes, and cars. It happens in education, as educators provide us with what they say are truths and try to convince us that knowing how to speak Spanish or how to do a t-test will be useful to us later in life. It happens in politics, as politicians and political activists try to get us to vote for them or to support their program. None of this is new, but the enormous quantity of information that is now available to most of us *is* new, and most of this information is designed to change our beliefs in some way. Obviously an educated person needs to be able to navigate their way through all of this, to sort out the nonsense, to see how bias and ideology are behind what is being claimed, to be a critical reader and listener, to make informed decisions. I don't believe that any of this is possible without understanding the role that language plays in knowledge, belief, and persuasion.