Language is at the heart of all things human. We use it when we’re talking, thinking, reading, writing and listening. It’s part of the social structure of our communities; it forges the emotional bond between parent and child; it’s the vehicle for literature and poetry. Language is not just a part of us; language defines us. All normal human beings have at least one language, and it is difficult to imagine much significant social, intellectual or artistic activity taking place without the opportunities for communication offered by language.

**Language Matters**

**How many languages are there in the world today?**

That’s not an easy question, since little is known about the linguistic situation in many parts of the world. The most complete compilation to date can be found at www.ethnologue.com, which lists 6,912 languages.

But this is not the whole story. Many languages have only two or three hundred speakers (or fewer), and many others are in grave danger of demise as indigenous peoples throughout the world lose their traditional cultures and homelands. We discuss this in more detail in Chapter 8. In the meantime, you can find out more by reading *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World’s Language* by Daniel Nettles and Suzanne Romaine (Oxford University Press, 2000), or by visiting www.terralingua.org.

**Linguistics** is the study of how language works – how it is used, how it is acquired, how it changes over time, how it is represented in the brain, and so on. It is concerned not only with the properties of the world’s languages (all 6,912 of them), but also with the abilities and adaptations that have made it possible for our species to create and use language in the first place.
Modern *homo sapiens* (our species) made their appearance 100,000 to 200,000 years ago, by many estimates. Early humans were anatomically like us – they had large brains and vocal tracts capable of producing speech. Archaeological evidence (such as tools, carvings and cave paintings) suggests that they also had the type of intellect that could support language.

Hundreds of thousands of years of evolution created a special capacity for language in humans that is not found in any other species. The evidence is literally inside us. For example, our speech organs (the lungs, larynx, tongue, teeth, lips, soft palate and nasal passages) were – and still are – primarily concerned with breathing and eating. However, they have also all become highly specialised for use in language. Their structure and shape is unique to our species, as is the highly developed network of neural pathways that exercises control over them during speech production (see Table 1.1).

### Table 1.1 Dual functions of the speech organs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organ</th>
<th>Survival function</th>
<th>Speech function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lungs</td>
<td>to exchange carbon dioxide and oxygen</td>
<td>to supply air for speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocal cords</td>
<td>to create seal over passage to lungs</td>
<td>to produce vibrations for speech sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tongue</td>
<td>to move food to teeth and back into throat</td>
<td>to articulate vowels and consonants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teeth</td>
<td>to break up food</td>
<td>to provide place of articulation for consonants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lips</td>
<td>to seal oral cavity</td>
<td>to articulate vowels and consonants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nose</td>
<td>to assist in breathing</td>
<td>to provide nasal resonance during speech</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Human beings are also especially equipped for the perception of speech. Newborns respond differently to human voices than to other types of sounds, and six-month-old infants are able to perceive subtle differences among sounds in languages that they have never heard before (this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 10).

Of course, language is much more than just speech sounds and does not even have to be oral. In sign languages, meaning is conveyed via gestures, body posture and facial expressions rather than through sounds. Moreover, much of what makes language special can be neither heard nor seen – it involves the way in which the human mind goes about forming words, building sentences and interpreting meaning.

### Language Matters

**Sign language**

There are many misconceptions about sign languages, the most prevalent being that they are just a way to ‘spell out’ an oral language. Although ‘finger spelling’ of words from an oral language is sometimes used (to indicate names or technical terms, for instance), sign languages are independent systems of communication, with their own vocabulary and grammatical rules. That’s
What, precisely, is language? What does it mean to know a language? To answer these questions, it is first necessary to understand the resources that a language makes available to its native speakers, those who have acquired it as children in a natural setting (normally, a home rather than a classroom).

The breadth and diversity of human thought and experience place great demands on language. Because there are always new things to say, new experiences to report, and new challenges to confront, language has to be creative, giving us the freedom to produce and understand new words and sentences as the need arises.

The creativity of language goes hand in hand with a second defining characteristic – the presence of systematic constraints that establish the boundaries within which innovation can occur. We can be innovative in our use of language, but there are rules to the game – and those rules are an integral part of our knowledge of language. As a preliminary illustration of this, consider the process that creates verbs from nouns in English as shown in Table 1.2. (For now, you can think of verbs as words that name actions and nouns as words that name things.)

**Table 1.2 Nouns used as verbs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun use</th>
<th>Verb use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pull the boat onto the beach</td>
<td>beach the boat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keep the aeroplane on the ground</td>
<td>ground the aeroplane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tie a knot in the string</td>
<td>knot the string</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>put the wine in bottles</td>
<td>bottle the wine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>catch the fish with a spear</td>
<td>spear the fish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clean the floor with a mop</td>
<td>mop the floor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the sentences in (1) show, there is a great deal of freedom to innovate in the formation of such verbs.
(1)  
   a. I wristed the ball over the net.
   b. He would try to stiff-upper-lip it through.
   c. She Houdini’d her way out of the locked closet.

However, there are also limits on this freedom. For instance, a new verb is rarely coined if a word with the intended meaning already exists. Although we say jail the robber to mean ‘put the robber in jail’, we do not say prison the robber to mean ‘put the robber in prison’. This is because the well-established verb imprison already has the meaning that the new form would have.

There are also special constraints on the meaning and use of particular subclasses of these verbs. One such constraint involves verbs that are created from time expressions such as summer, holiday and so on.

(2)  
   b. Harry wintered in Mexico.
   c. Bob holidayed in France.
   d. Harry and Julia honeymooned in Hawai’i.

Although the sentences in (2) are all natural-sounding, not all time expressions can be used in this way. (Throughout this book an asterisk is used to indicate that an utterance is unacceptable.)

(3) a. *Jerome midnighted in the streets.
   b. *Andrea nooned at the restaurant.
   c. *Philip one o’clocked at the airport.

These examples show that when a verb is created from a time expression, it must be given a very specific interpretation – roughly paraphrasable as ‘to be somewhere for the period of time X’. Thus, to summer in London is ‘to be in London for the summer’, to holiday in France is ‘to be in France for the holidays’, and so on. Since noon and midnight express points in time rather than extended periods of time, they cannot be used to create new verbs of this type.¹

Moreover, there are constraints on what verbs that are derived from nouns can mean. For instance, winter in Hawaii can only mean ‘spend the winter in Hawaii, ‘not make it snow in Hawaii’ or ‘stay in Hawaii until winter begins’. Without such constraints, creativity would run amok, undermining rather than enhancing communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Matters</th>
<th>Disagreeing about language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People sometimes object to innovation in language, apparently believing that nothing new should be permitted. The following ‘letter to the editor’ is a case in point:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was shocked and appalled to read in yesterday’s newspaper the following phrase: Nash’s knee injury impacted his ability to score. As anyone with a modicum of education or who owns a dictionary will tell you, impact is a noun. You have used it as a verb. This is clearly nonsensical and provides further evidence of the crumbling of our public education system and the decline of language in general. If your editorial offices are not in the possession of a suitable dictionary, I would be happy to provide one for you.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages change, and so do dictionaries – the fourth edition of The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Houghton Mifflin, 2000) lists impact as a verb, and so does the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (Cambridge University Press, 2008). Both are available online.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some other examples

Systematic rule-governed creativity is the hallmark of all aspects of language. For instance, consider the way in which sounds are combined to form words. Certain patterns of sounds, like the novel forms in (4), have the ‘look’ of English words – we recognise that they could become part of the language and be used as names for new products or scientific phenomena, for example.

(4) a. prasp
b. fliib
c. traf

In contrast, the forms in (5) contain combinations of sounds that English just does not permit. As a result, they simply do not have the shape of English words.

(5) a. *psapr
b. *bfli
c. *ftra

Still other constraints determine how new words can be created from already existing forms with the help of special endings. Imagine, for example, that the word soleme entered the English language (used perhaps for a newly discovered atomic particle). As a speaker of English, you would then automatically know that something with the properties of a soleme could be called solemic. You would also know that to make something solemic is to solemicise it, and you would call this process solemicisation. Further, you would know that the c is pronounced as s in solemicise but as k in solemic. Without hesitation, you would also recognise that solemicise is pronounced with the stress on the second syllable. (You would say soLEmicise, not SOlemicise or solemiCISE.)

Nowhere is the ability to deal with novel utterances more obvious than in the production and comprehension of sentences. Apart from a few fixed expressions and greetings (What’s up?, How’re things?, No way), much of what you say, hear, and read in the course of a day consists of sentences that are new to you. In conversations, lectures, newscasts and textbooks, you are regularly exposed to novel combinations of words, unfamiliar ideas, and new information. Consider, for instance, the paragraph that you are currently reading. While each sentence is no doubt perfectly comprehensible to you, it is extremely unlikely that you have ever seen any of them before.

Not all new sentences are acceptable, however. For example, the words in (6) are all familiar, but they are simply not arranged in the right way to make a sentence of English.

(6) *Frightened dog this the cat that chased mouse a.
   (Cf. This dog frightened the cat that chased a mouse.)

As with other aspects of language, the ability to form and interpret sentences is subject to systematic limitations.

1.3 Grammar and linguistic competence

As we have just seen, speakers of a language are able to produce and understand an unlimited number of utterances, including many that are novel and unfamiliar. At the same time,
they are able to recognise that certain utterances are not acceptable and simply do not belong in their language. This knowledge, which is often called linguistic competence, constitutes the central subject matter of linguistics and of this book.

In investigating linguistic competence, linguists focus on the mental system that allows human beings to form and interpret the sounds, words and sentences of their language. Linguists call this system a grammar and often break it down into the components in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3 The components of a grammar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phonetics</td>
<td>the articulation and perception of speech sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonology</td>
<td>the patterning of speech sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morphology</td>
<td>word formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntax</td>
<td>sentence formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semantics</td>
<td>the interpretation of words and sentences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see from Table 1.3, the term grammar is used in a special way within linguistics. A linguist’s grammar is not a book and it is not concerned with just the form of words and sentences. Rather, it is an intricate system of knowledge that encompasses sound and meaning as well as form and structure. It contains the machinery needed to link a thought in the brain to movements of the tongue and lips, and vice versa – which, in the end, is what language is all about.

The study of grammar lies at the core of our attempts to understand what language is and what it means to know a language. Five simple points should help clarify why the investigation of grammatical systems is so important to contemporary linguistic analysis.

### 1.3.1 Generality: all languages have a grammar

One of the most fundamental claims of modern linguistic analysis is that all languages have a grammar. It could not be any other way. If a language is spoken, it must have a phonetic and phonological system; since it has words and sentences, it must also have a morphology and a syntax; and since these words and sentences have systematic meanings, there must obviously be semantic principles as well. In other words, each spoken language must have an intricate system of knowledge that encompasses sound and meaning as well as form and structure.

It is not unusual to hear the remark that some language – say, Acadian French, Cree or Swahili – has no grammar. (This is especially common in the case of languages that are not written or are not taught in schools and universities.) Unfamiliar languages sometimes appear to an untrained observer to have no grammar simply because their grammatical systems are different from those of more frequently studied languages. In Walbiri (an indigenous language of Australia), for example, the relative ordering of words is so free that the English sentence *The two dogs now see several kangaroos* could be translated by the equivalent of any of the following sentences.

(7)  

a. Dogs two now see kangaroos several.

b. See now dogs two kangaroos several.
Although Walbiri may not restrict the order of words in the way English does, its grammar imposes other types of requirements. For example, Walbiri speakers must place the ending *lu* on the word for ‘dogs’ to indicate that it names the animals that do the seeing rather than the animals that are seen. In English, by contrast, this information is conveyed by placing *two dogs* in front of the verb and *several kangaroos* after it.

Rather than showing that Walbiri has no grammar, such differences simply demonstrate that it has a grammar that is unlike the grammar of English in certain respects. This point holds across the board: although no two languages have exactly the same grammar, there are no languages without a grammar.

A similar point can be made about different varieties of the same language. Scouse, Glaswegian, Newfoundland English, Australian English and Hawaiian English each have pronunciations, vocabulary items and sentence patterns that may appear unusual to outsiders. But this does not mean that they have no grammar; it just means that their grammars differ from that of more familiar varieties of English in particular ways.

### Parity: all grammars are equal

Contrary to popular belief, there is no such thing as a ‘primitive’ language, even in places untouched by modern science and technology. Indeed, some of the most complex linguistic phenomena we know about are found in societies that have neither writing nor electricity.

Moreover, there is no such thing as a ‘good grammar’ or a ‘bad grammar’. In fact, all grammars do essentially the same thing: they tell speakers how to form and interpret the words and sentences of their language. The form and meaning of those words and sentences vary from language to language and even from community to community, of course, but there is no such thing as a language that doesn’t work for its speakers.

Linguists sometimes clash over this point with people who are upset about the use of ‘non-standard’ varieties of English that permit sentences such as *I seen that*, *They was there*, *I just arrived*, *you just arrived*, *s/he just arrived*, and so on. The exception is the verb *be*, which has two forms – *was* and *were*: *I was there*, *you were there*, *s/he was there*.

Regularisation has taken care of this anomaly in at least two varieties of English. In Yorkshire English (and indeed in many other northern and Midlands dialects spoken in England), only *were* is used: *I were there*, *you were there*, *s/he were there*.

In America, in Appalachian English (West Virginia and parts of various nearby states), things have gone the other way, so that only *was* has been retained: *I was there*, *you was there*, *s/he was there*.

Note: For more on this see the British Library website (www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/sounds/regional-voices/grammatical-variation/).
He didn't do nothing, He ain't here and so forth. Depending on where you live and who you talk to, speaking in this way can have negative consequences: it may be harder to win a scholarship, to get a job, to be accepted in certain social circles and so forth. This is an undeniable fact about the social side of language and we'll return to it in Chapter 14. From a purely linguistic point of view, however, there is absolutely nothing wrong with grammars that permit such structures. They work for their speakers, and they deserve to be studied in the same objective fashion as the varieties of English spoken by the rich and educated.

The bottom line for linguistics is that the analysis of language must reflect the way it is actually used, not someone's idealised vision of how it should be used. The linguist Steven Pinker offers the following illustration to make the same point:

Imagine that you are watching a nature documentary. The video shows the usual gorgeous footage of animals in their natural habitats. But the voiceover reports some troubling facts. Dolphins do not execute their swimming strokes properly. White-crowned sparrows carelessly debase their calls. Chickadees’ nests are incorrectly constructed, pandas hold bamboo in the wrong paw, the song of the humpback whale contains several well-known errors, and the monkey’s cries have been in a state of chaos and degeneration for hundreds of years. Your reaction would probably be, What on earth could it mean for the song of the humpback whale to contain an ‘error’? Isn’t the song of the humpback whale whatever the humpback whale decides to sing? . . .

As Pinker goes on to observe, language is like the song of the humpback whale. The way to determine whether a particular sentence is permissible is to find people who speak the language and observe how they use it.

In sum, linguists don’t even think of trying to rate languages as good or bad, simple or complex. Rather, they investigate language in much the same way that other scientists study snails or stars – with a view to simply finding out how it works. This same point is sometimes made by noting that linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive. Its goal is to describe and explain the facts of languages, not to change them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Matters</th>
<th>Don’t end that sentence with a preposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| One of the better-known prescriptive rules of English is ‘Don’t end a sentence with a preposition.’ (In other words, say ‘To whom were you talking?’ , not ‘Who were you talking to?’) The problem with this rule is simply that people don’t speak English that way. Prepositions often occur at the end of a sentence, and trying to prevent this from happening leads to all sorts of unnatural-sounding constructions, as Winston Churchill famously illustrated when he said, tongue in cheek, ‘This is something up with which I will not put.’

Here’s an extreme case of prepositions at the end of a sentence. A young girl, unhappy with the book that her father has brought upstairs for her bedtime story, was observed to say:

‘What did you bring the book I didn’t want to be read to out of up for?’ There are five prepositions at the end of this sentence – an extreme case admittedly, but it’s still English! |

1.3.3 Universality: grammars are alike in basic ways

In considering how grammars can differ from each other, it is easy to lose sight of something even more intriguing and important – the existence of principles and properties shared by all human languages.
For example, all languages use a small set of contrastive sounds that help distinguish words from each other (like the *t* and *d* sounds that allow us to recognise *to* and *do* as different words). There are differences in precisely which sounds particular languages use, but there are also fundamental similarities. For instance, all languages have more consonant sounds (*p*, *t*, *d* etc.) than vowel sounds (*a*, *e*, *i*); any language that has a *b* sound almost certainly has a *p* sound as well; and all languages have a vowel that sounds like the ‘ah’ in *father*. (For more on this, see Chapter 10.)

There are also universal constraints on how words can be put together to form sentences. For example, no language can use the second of the sentences in (8) for a situation in which *he* refers to Ned.

(8)  
   a. Ned lost his wallet.  
   b. He lost Ned’s wallet.

Moreover, even when languages do differ from each other, there are often constraints on how much variation is possible. For example, some languages (like English) place question words at the beginning of the sentence

(9) What did Mary donate to the library?

Other languages, like Mandarin, make no such changes.

(10) Mali juan shenme gei tushuguan?  
     Mary donate what to library

But no language uniformly places question words at the end of the sentence in its basic word order.

In other cases, variation is constrained by strong tendencies rather than absolute prohibitions. Take three-word sentences such as *Australians like cricket*, for instance. There are six logically possible orders for such sentences.

(11)  
   a. Australians like cricket.  
   b. Australians cricket like.  
   c. Like Australians cricket.  
   d. Like cricket Australians.  
   e. Cricket like Australians.  
   f. Cricket Australians like.

All other things being equal, we would expect to find each order employed in about one-sixth of the world’s languages. In fact, though, more than 95 per cent of the world’s languages adopt one of the first three orders for basic statements (and the vast majority of those use one or the other of the first two orders). Only a handful of languages use any of the last three orders as basic.

These are not isolated examples. As later chapters will show, languages – like the people who use them – are fundamentally alike in important ways.

1.3.4 Mutability: grammars change over time

The features of language that are not universal and fixed are subject to change over time. Indeed, within these limits, the grammars of all languages are constantly changing. Some
of these changes are relatively minor and occur very quickly (for example, the addition of new words such as blog, morphing, Internet, e-business, podcast and cyberspace to the vocabulary of English). Other changes have a more dramatic effect on the overall form of the language and typically take place over a long period of time. One such change involves the manner in which we negate sentences in English. Prior to 1200, English formed negative constructions by placing ne before the verb and a variant of not after it.

(12) a. Ic ne seye not. (‘I don’t say.’)
    b. He ne speketh nawt. (‘He does not speak.’)

By 1400 or thereabouts, ne was used infrequently and not (or nawt) typically occurred by itself after the verb.

(13) a. I seye not the wordes.
    b. We saw nawt the knyghtes.

It was not until several centuries later that English adopted its current practice of allowing not to occur after only certain types of verbs (such as do, have, will, and so on).

(14) a. I will not say the words. (versus *I will say not the words.)
    b. He did not see the knights. (versus *He saw not the knights.)

These changes illustrate the extent to which grammars can be modified over time. The structures exemplified in (13) are archaic by today’s standards and those in (12) sound completely foreign to speakers of modern English.

Through the centuries, individuals and organisations who believe that certain varieties of language are better than others have frequently expressed concern over what they perceive to be the deterioration of their language. The belief that change was putting the language in peril was particularly strong during the eighteenth century. In 1712, for example, Jonathan Swift (the author of Gulliver’s Travels) wrote a famous pamphlet entitled A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue which he addressed to the Lord High Treasurer, Robert the Earl of Oxford and Mortimer. He wrote:

My lord, I do here, in the name of all the learned and polite persons of the nation, complain to your lordship, as First Minister, that our language is extremely imperfect; that its daily improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily corruptions; that the pretenders to polish and refine it, have chiefly multiplied abuses and absurdities; and, that in many instances, it offends against every part of grammar.

One of the many imperfections that troubled Swift was the ‘perpetual disposition to shorten our words by retrenching the vowels’ (and indeed entire syllables) as in the abbreviation of reputation to rep or the use of contracted forms of verbs such as can’t for cannot and he’s for he is, although he had no objection to Tis for It is.

Half a century later, in 1762, concerned about ‘growing abuses’ which even ‘some of our best writers’ were guilty of, Bishop Robert Lowth wrote A Short Introduction to English Grammar, a manual that is generally recognised as the first proper grammar of the English language. His aim was to prescribe rules of correct usage. In the preface to the book, while recognising the development and enrichment that the language had enjoyed over the preceding 200-year period, Lowth complained that English ‘hath made no advances in Grammatical Accuracy’ during this period of progress. His grammar was intended to remedy that by prescribing correct usage.
A quick glance at Lowth’s grammar is instructive in the light of the discussion of regularisation above. Lowth observes that there is a class of irregular verbs whose past tense is formed by changing the vowel or diphthong of the present form whilst the perfect participle and passive are both formed by adding the ending –\text{en}, as well as, for the most part, changing the stem vowel or diphthong. (See Table 1.4.)

Table 1.4 Irregular verbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Perfect participle or passive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fall</td>
<td>fell</td>
<td>fallen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shake</td>
<td>shook</td>
<td>shaken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>get</td>
<td>gat or got</td>
<td>gotten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brake</td>
<td>brake or broke</td>
<td>broken</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lowth then commented: ‘The regular form of the participle ending -\text{ed} in these places is “improper”’. He lamented the fact that even people who ought to have known better were guilty of this ‘improper’ usage. He had no qualms about rebuking even the great poet John Milton for writing \textit{shak’d} (instead of \textit{shook}):

\begin{center}
Wert thou some Starr which from the ruin’d roofe  
Of shak’d Olympus by mischance didst fall;  
\textit{(John Milton, On The Death Of A Fair Infant Dying Of A Cough)}
\end{center}

Standard English still uses \textit{shook} rather than \textit{shaked} as the past tense of \textit{shake}, as Lowth prescribed. Does that mean that Lowth’s criticism stemmed the tide of change, of ‘improper’ usage? Far from it. The use of \textit{gat} and \textit{brake} as past tense forms of \textit{get} and \textit{break} respectively is now obsolete. The participle \textit{gotten} has also been supplanted by the past tense form \textit{got}; we say ‘I’ve got’ rather than ‘I’ve gotten’ – except in American English where ‘I’ve gotten’ is preserved. (See Chapter 14, section 14.2.1.)

Similar concerns about change have been expressed about the state of English in other English-speaking countries and in other historical periods. Thus, in 1857, members of the Canadian Institute in Toronto heard a speech describing Canadian English as ‘a corrupt dialect growing up amongst our population’. The speaker objected to the use of words such as \textit{lot} (for ‘a division of land’), \textit{boss} (for ‘master’), \textit{store} (for ‘shop’), \textit{fix} (for ‘mend’) and \textit{guess} (for ‘think’, as in \textit{I guess I’ll go}). Judging by current usage, he objected in vain.

Language Matters | Verbs again

A thousand years ago, more than three hundred English verbs formed their past tense by making an internal change (\textit{drive/drove}, \textit{eat/ate} etc.) rather than by adding a suffix (\textit{walk/walked}, \textit{dance/danced}). Today, there are about half as many verbs that do this. The past tense of \textit{heave} used to be \textit{hove}; now it is \textit{heaved}. The past tense of \textit{thrive} used to be \textit{throve}; now it is \textit{thrived}. The past tense of \textit{chide} (‘scold’) used to be \textit{bid}; now it is \textit{chided}. And so on. These past tense forms have all been changed to comply with the more regular -\text{ed} pattern.

Then why aren’t all verbs regular? One factor involves frequency: more frequent forms tend to resist regularisation. That’s why the most enduring irregular past tense forms in English (\textit{was} and/or \textit{were} for \textit{be}, \textit{had} for \textit{have}, \textit{went} for \textit{go}, \textit{came} for \textit{come}, and so on) involve high-frequency verbs. To find out more, read \textit{Words and Rules} by Steven Pinker (New York: Basic Books, 1999).
In our day, purists still lament the perceived erosion of linguistic standards. Innumerable newspaper columns, internet blogs, official reports and books are published each year that lambast linguistic decline. They blame it not only for falling educational standards but also, in some cases, for general cultural decadence. See, for example, John Simon’s *Paradigms Lost: Reflections on Literacy and Its Decline* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1980) for an American perspective and John Honey’s *The Language Trap: English in Education* (Oxford: Blackwell Synergy, 1984) which is written from a British standpoint.

Linguists reject the view that languages attain a state of perfection at some point in their history and that subsequent changes lead to deterioration and corruption. As noted above, there are simply no grounds for claiming that one language or variety of language is somehow superior to another.

### Inaccessibility: grammatical knowledge is subconscious

Knowledge of a grammar differs in important ways from knowledge of arithmetic, traffic rules and other subjects that are taught at home or in school: it is largely subconscious and not accessible to introspection (that is, you can’t figure out how it works just by thinking about it). As an example of this, consider your pronunciation of the past tense ending written as *ed* in the following words.

(15)  
\[a. \text{hunted}
\[b. \text{slipped}
\[c. \text{buzzed}

---

**Language Matters**  | **The decline and corruption of the English language**
--- | ---

Many GCSE English students did not realise that phrases such as ‘get off of’ and ‘she was stood’ were grammatically incorrect.

It comes amid fears that the use of social networking websites and mobile phone text messaging is undermining children’s literacy skills.

Ministers have also complained many young people spend too much time playing video games and watching TV instead of reading books.

In the latest study, Cambridge Assessment, one of the country’s biggest examination boards, surveyed more than 2,000 teenagers in 26 English secondary schools.

They were presented with various phrases – and asked to mark out those employing non-standard English.

Only 41 per cent realised that an adjective had been used in place of an adverb in the phrase ‘come quick’.

Fewer than six in ten pupils correctly identified ‘off of’, ‘she was stood’ and ‘this man showed us’ as ungrammatical.

Around a quarter of GCSE students failed to spot errors in the phrases ‘it wasn’t me who done it’, ‘couldn’t hardly move’, ‘Tom had gotten cold’ and ‘three mile’.

You probably didn’t notice it before, but the *ed* ending has a different pronunciation in each of these words. Whereas you say *id* in *hunted*, you say *t* in *slipped* and *d* in *buzzed*. Moreover, if you heard the new verb *flib*, you would form the past tense as *flibbed* and pronounce the ending as *d*. If you are a native speaker of English, you acquired the grammatical subsystem regulating this aspect of speech when you were a child and it now exists subconsciously in your mind, allowing you to automatically make the relevant contrasts.

The same is true for virtually everything else about language. Once we go beyond the most obvious things (such as whether words like *the* and *a* come before or after a noun), there is not much that the average person can say about how language works. For example, try explaining to someone who is not a native speaker of English why we can say *I went to school* but not *I went to supermarket*. Or try to figure out for yourself how the word *or* works. Matters are seemingly straightforward in a sentence such as the following, which means something like ‘Either Mary drank tea, or she drank coffee – I don’t know which.’

(16) Mary drank tea or coffee.

But *or* has a different interpretation in the next sentence.

(17) Mary didn’t drink tea or coffee.

Now it seems to mean ‘and’ – ‘Mary didn’t drink tea and she didn’t drink coffee,’ not ‘Mary didn’t drink tea or she didn’t drink coffee – I don’t know which.’

Things change again when we turn the sentence into a question.

(18) Didn’t Mary drink tea or coffee?

Here, it is relatively easy to get either the ‘or’ interpretation’ or the ‘and’ interpretation,’ so you could answer ‘Yes, either she drank tea or she drank coffee – I don’t remember which.’ Or you could answer ‘No, she drank neither – she didn’t drink tea, and she didn’t drink coffee.’

But being able to interpret these sentences is not the same thing as knowing *why* they have the particular meanings that they do. Speakers of a language know what sounds right and what doesn’t sound right, but they are usually not sure how they know.

Because most of what we know about our language is subconscious, the analysis of human linguistic systems requires considerable effort and ingenuity. As is the case in all science, information about facts that can be observed (the pronunciation of words, the interpretation of sentences, and so on) must be used to draw inferences about the sometimes invisible mechanisms (atoms, cells, or grammars, as the case may be) that are ultimately responsible for these phenomena. A good deal of this book is concerned with the findings of this research and with what they tell us about the nature and use of human language and about how it is represented in the mind.

■ Note

1 Not all nouns naming periods of time can be converted into verbs, however. Thus, for reasons that are not understood, the nouns *autumn* and *week* do not make very good verbs.

*They autumned/weeked in the Maritimes.
Summing up

Human language is characterised by **creativity**. Speakers of a language have access to a **grammar**, a mental system that allows them to form and interpret both familiar and novel utterances. The grammar governs the articulation, perception and patterning of speech sounds, the formation of words and sentences, and the interpretation of utterances. All languages have grammars that are equal in their expressive capacity, and all speakers of a language have (subconscious) knowledge of its grammar. The existence of such linguistic systems in humans is the product of unique anatomical and cognitive specialisation not found in other species.

**Recommended reading**


**Exercises**

1. The following sentences contain verbs created from nouns in accordance with the process described in section 1.2 of this chapter. Describe the meaning of each of these new verbs.

   (a) We tecno’d the night away.
   (b) He dog-teamed his way across the Arctic.
   (c) We MG’d to Perth.
   (d) They Concorded to London.
   (e) She Robinson Crusoed in the Galapagos.
   (f) We Greyhounded to Toronto.
   (g) We’ll have to Ajax the sink.
   (h) Chris Windolened the windows.
   (i) You should Clairol your hair.
   (j) Let’s carton the eggs.
   (k) He Maradonna’d the ball into the net.

2. Using the examples in the preceding exercise as a model, create five new verbs from nouns. Build a sentence around each of these new verbs to show its meaning.

3. Which of the following forms are possible words of English? Solicit the help of an acquaintance and see if you agree on your judgements.

   (a) mbood
   (b) frall
   (c) coofp
   (d) ktleem
   (e) sproke
   (f) flube
   (g) wordms
   (h) bsarn
4. Imagine that you are an advertising executive and that your job involves inventing new names for products. Create four new forms that are possible words of English and four that are not.

5. Part of linguistic competence involves the ability to recognise whether novel utterances are acceptable. Consider the following sentences and determine which are possible sentences in English. For each unacceptable sentence, change the sentence to make it acceptable, and compare the two.

(a) Jason’s mother left himself with nothing to eat.
(b) Miriam is eager to talk to.
(c) This is the man who I took a picture of.
(d) Colin made Jane a sandwich.
(e) Is the dog sleeping the bone again?
(f) Brian prepared Zena a cake.
(g) Max cleaned the garden up.
(h) Max cleaned up the garden.
(i) Max cleaned up it.
(j) I desire you to leave.
(k) That you likes liver surprises me.

6. Consider the following sentences, each of which is acceptable to some speakers of English. Try to identify the prescriptive rules that are violated in each case.

(a) He don’t know about the race.
(b) You was out when I called.
(c) There’s twenty horses registered in the show.
(d) Did you send one yet?
(e) That window’s broke, so be careful.
(f) Jim and me are gonna go campin’ this weekend.
(g) Who did you come with?
(h) I seen the parade last week.
(i) He been lost in the woods for ten days.
(j) Julie ain’t got none.
(k) My car needs cleaned ‘cos of all the rain’.
(l) Somebody left their book on the train.
(m) Murray hurt hisself in the rugby scrum.
(n) She very kind.
(o) Before God did owt else e ad summat er say. (John 1.1, Gospels in Scouse. Translated by Dick Williams and Frank Shaw. London: White Lion Publishers, 1977)

7. An interesting feature of the variety of English spoken in Hawaii involves the form of the ‘possessive pronoun’ that shows up in the following context:

That belongs to me. It’s *mines*.

Make a list of other possessive pronoun forms in standard English by filling in the spaces below.

That belongs to you. It’s _____.
That belongs to him. It’s _____.
That belongs to her. It’s _____.
That belongs to us. It’s _____.
That belongs to them. It’s _____.

What process in language change appears to be responsible for the form *mines*?