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# Introduction to the first edition: the stuff that surrounds us

Last night, I was trying to relax in front of the television. My daughter, who was doing a magazine crossword puzzle, kept interrupting me by calling out clues that she couldn't solve. Pretty soon the television was off and we were both hunched over the crossword puzzle, a dictionary and a thesaurus at the ready. The evening ended up in yet another arm-wrestling match with language.

Language has been a large part of my life. Teaching it and writing about it have provided me with a decent living. Just as importantly, it has given me countless hours of fascination. It has entertained, puzzled and at times irritated me. I am intrigued by language, and I have spent my professional life trying to make sense of it. In this book, I hope to share the intrigue, and, in the process, to inform and entertain you.

Some time ago, I bought a magazine called *Wallpaper*, a self-styled design and lifestyle magazine. I was hooked by the catchy subtitle – *the stuff that surrounds us*. If I had to give a single-sentence answer to the question 'What is this thing called language?' my response would be 'It's the stuff that surrounds us!' However, just as fish are unaware of water (until they're removed from it), we are rarely aware of the language that surrounds us. And that, in a nutshell, is the aim of this book: to raise awareness of language.

This book is intended for students, teachers and teachers-in-preparation who do not have specialist training in **linguistics** or language analysis. As it assumes no specialist knowledge of theoretical or applied linguistics, it should appeal to anyone with an interest in language. As our lives are ruled by language, I hope this means that it will appeal to everyone, not just students and laypeople, but also those who have a professional interest in the subject.

While the book aims to be academically rigorous, it also reflects a personal and somewhat idiosyncratic view of language. Woven through it are stories and anecdotes to illustrate the points I wish to make. I have also drawn on an extensive repertoire of spoken and written language samples collected over many years in a wide range of contexts

and environments. These, I hope, will breathe life into what can sometimes be seen as a rather dry subject. (Language itself is never dry, but the way it is presented sometimes leaves a little to be desired.)

The first chapter is a general one, providing an overall introduction and orientation to the subject. It is followed by three chapters that present the three subsystems of language: the system of sounds, the system of words, and the system of grammar.

The rest of the book looks at the ways in which the three systems are used to do things with spoken and written language: to obtain goods and services, to socialize, to amuse, to entertain and to instruct. We shall look at how language is acquired, how it is used to create humour, and how it reflects gender differences. We shall also look at the new modes of communication that have emerged as a by-product of the technological revolution.

This book is an exercise in **language awareness**, which was defined over 20 years ago as ‘a person’s sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life’ (Donmall, 1985: 7). Van Lier, a prominent proponent of language awareness, characterizes it as ‘an understanding of the human faculty of language and its role in thinking, learning and social life’ (van Lier, 1995: xi).

Van Lier (1995: 10) summarizes his approach to language awareness by making four important points:

- Language is central to what it is to be human.
- Usually we are aware of language only in a subsidiary sense, but we bring it into focal awareness when there are problems, or when we need to reach higher levels of knowledge or skill.
- Language awareness can be of great importance in many aspects of life, including political, educational and social contexts.
- Language awareness opens up new possibilities for language education in schools and avoids the extremes of prescribed correctness and utter neglect.

One of my high-school teachers once said to me ‘If you don’t know where you’re going, how will you know when you get there?’ Obviously, there are some trips where it’s crucial to know where you’re going. Others however, are voyages of discovery. In fact, some of the greatest discoveries have been made by explorers who thought they were going in one direction and ended up some place else. As I embark on the writing of this book, my destination is a vague and distant prospect. I have a general idea of where I want to go, but may well end up some place else. In any case, I trust that you will embark with me, that

you will find it an enjoyable trip, that you learn something new along the way, and that you agree, on disembarking, that the ride was worth the effort.

In the next chapter, I will begin to probe a little deeper into some of the issues and themes that have been foregrounded in this introduction. The title of the chapter echoes that of the book, namely *What Is This Thing called Language?* While it will take the rest of the book to provide anything like an adequate answer to the question, we will at least make a start in Chapter 1.

[Note: Words appearing in **bold** are defined, elaborated upon, and exemplified in the glossary at the end of the book.]

# Introduction to the second edition: a personal account

In the introduction to the first edition, I made the point that, while I intended this book to be a general introduction to language, I also intended it as a personal account. No so long ago, the intrusion of an authorial voice into what was ostensibly a piece of academic writing was unacceptable.

These days, however, things are different. The evolution of naturalistic inquiry and qualitative research, and the emergence of new research genres such as autoethnography, have placed researchers, along with their experiences and personal voice at the centre of the research enterprise. First person 'I' has replaced the impersonal 'one', and the use of active voice rather than the agentless passive allows in the narrative a place for the actors as well as their actions.

One reviewer of the first edition of this book, noted that 'the tone and 'authorial voice' is sometimes conspicuously personal and anecdotal'. While maintaining the personal voice, I have, in the second edition, tried to provide the reader with a smoother ride. In this edition, I have reworked and updated existing content, and, where appropriate, have sought to illustrate my points with examples from languages other than English. New content has been added in the following areas: language and culture, language variation, second-language acquisition and bilingualism, and the impact of globalization on language use. Existing content has been broadened and additional texts and references as well as discourse samples have also been included.

Intended as an introductory text, the book covers the key topics and concepts that constitute our current understanding of language. Coverage must necessarily be brief. A comprehensive and detailed treatment of each topic is therefore beyond the scope of the volume, and indeed was not my aim. Whole books have been devoted to topics that are dealt with relatively briefly here. My intention, as already stated, is to provide an overview of the terrain, a bird's-eye view, as it were. For readers interested in more detailed coverage of particular topics, I have provided an annotated list of further reading at the end of each chapter.

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