

Brief Review

Linguistics – “Study of Language” in Forensic

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ABSTRACT

Language is a system of communication. In this broad sense, human language is a code that communicates meaning, as do other types of communication systems such as animal sounds and movements, traffic control signs and lights, human gestures and body language, and even computer source code and others. Human language is a system of communication that combines sounds with meanings to produce what people know and use as natural language. The goal of the linguist is to understand units of language, their possible rule-governed combinations, and the conditions for how language is used, as well as the norms of correct and appropriate language for a given speech community. Although the linguistic study of language is well established, linguistics is something new for many jurors, judges, attorneys and other forensic specialists. Forensic linguistics is not a new field, but over the past few years it has become more structured and better defined within the academic and forensic communities. An understanding of language, linguistics, and the field of forensic linguistics will develop a more informed understanding of recent advances in the theory and method of forensic Linguistics.

Keywords: Language, Linguistic, Forensic, Forensic linguistic, Communication, Speech

INTRODUCTION

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. Language is the association of the combination of sounds, words, and sentences to conventional meanings used and understood by a community of speakers.[1] Scientific means the “investigation (of language) by means of controlled and empirically verifiable observations and with reference to some general theory of language structure.”^{1,2,3} Linguistics is a social science because its primary focus is on language as a human behavior, although some of its descriptive and analytical methods reflect those of mathematics and the natural sciences.^{1,3}

As stated above Forensic linguistics is not a new field, with its many years of history and is a recent and rapidly growing area of modern applied linguistics. Linguists who did much of the ground-breaking work in forensic linguistics are often heard to say that what they do is linguistics that happens to be in a forensic context, and

that a forensic linguist must first be a good linguist.^{1,2,4}

LINGUISTICS -FLASHBACK

The earliest known study of language dates back to around 400 BC in India when Panini began a grammatical tradition based on the linguistic observation and description of Sanskrit in the sacred Indian texts known as the Vedas.^{1,2,4} The Greeks developed a grammar based on the language of their literature. The Romans adapted the Greek grammar to Latin, which in turn was used through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as the paradigm to account for the languages of Europe.^{1,5}

By the 17th century, European scholars realized that fitting languages into the structure of Greek and Latin made it difficult to capture accurately the characteristics of their own languages as well as of languages discovered in explorations of the New World. This brought them back to Panini. Their new contact with non-European languages and their rediscovery of Sanskrit and the Indian

tradition of grammatical description made them see the grammars of Greek and Latin as inadequate for their new descriptive needs. The resulting freedom from the limitations of language-specific grammatical categories opened the door for the development of present-day scientific linguistics.^{1,2,4,5,6}

During the 18th and 19th centuries, scholars focused on the Indo-European languages as well as on other language families. In the late 19th and early to mid 20th centuries, scholars from Germany, France, Holland, Denmark, Russia, Japan and China saw the need to examine the system of a language at a given point in time as a contextual reference point for understanding change. This provided a new descriptive and theoretical basis for comparative studies, thus expanding the scope of linguistic inquiry and motivating the study of other languages and dialects of Europe and the languages of Asia. At the same time, American anthropologists and linguists began to focus their attention, first, on American Indian languages, then on Sanskrit, African, other Indo-European, Semitic and English languages.^{1,4,7,8}

LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

Linguistics is about understanding the system of language. The aims of linguistic science are theoretical insofar as linguists discover the underlying rules and patterns of language and then describe them in the languages of the world.^{1,8} Linguists look for language characteristics that are present in all languages (universals), as well as features found only in certain language families or individual languages.¹

The goals of linguistics are also practical insofar as linguists attempt to use this knowledge for the good of speakers and languages, for example, language teaching, forensic applications and others. It is also important to point out that linguistics is descriptive not prescriptive, that is, its goal is to understand and describe language and languages, not prescribe rules for correct and appropriate usage.^{1,9}

The focus of linguistic study is on what a person internalizes during the relatively short period of time it takes to acquire a first language. Speakers simultaneously acquire the forms of a language (its structures) along

with the uses for the language (its functions). While this division between form and function is made for the convenience of analysis, the two cannot be separated, and together they constitute the language that is acquired. In the process of second-language acquisition, one is sometimes able to see the consequence of learning forms alone in students who learn the sounds, words, and sentences of a language without really acquiring the ability to use that language in a context outside the classroom.^{1,8,10,11} After finishing high school foreign language classes, can one actually speak the language?

APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Applied linguistics is broadly defined as the application of linguistic knowledge and principles to human needs. The British Association for Applied Linguistics defines it this way:^{1,4,6}

Applied linguistics is both an approach to understanding language issues in the real world, drawing on theory and empirical analysis, [and] an interdisciplinary area of study, in which linguistics is combined with issues, methods and perspectives drawn from other disciplines.

The relationship between general linguistics and applied linguistics and between scientific theory and practice, is not always easy to understand. On the one hand, theorists see their work as unfettered by practical application and therefore objective, unbiased, and adequate. Applied linguists, on the other hand, consider more the reasons for observing language, gathering and analyzing linguistic data, synthesizing findings, drawing conclusion, and finally offering opinions. Of course, theory development is an important objective of linguistic analysis, but linguistic theory, data, and facts can also be used to understand real world issues and solve puzzles associated with human behaviors like language. This is a productive way to view the close relationship between linguistics and applied linguistics and it provides a sound scientific basis for the development of both theory and practice in disciplines such as forensic linguistics.^{1,3,7,12}

AREAS OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Although applied linguistics first related only to the study of how languages were taught and acquired, the field has broadened to include many endeavors outside

education.^{1,8,9} No fewer than 25 scientific commissions are supported by the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée :Adult language learning,^{1,3} Child language,^{1,2} Communications in the professions, Contrastive linguistics and error analysis, Discourse analysis, Educational technology and language learning,^{1,10} Foreign language teaching methodology and teacher education, Forensic linguistics,¹ Immersion education,^{1,6,7,11} Interpreting and translating,¹ Language and ecology,¹ Language education in multilingual settings,¹ Language and gender,¹ Sociolinguistics,¹ Language and the media etc.^{1,3,8}

LINGUISTICS IN RELATION TO FORENSIC – FORENSIC LINGUISTICS

The single most effective advancement in the study of forensic linguistics during the past decade was the 1994 initiation at the University of Birmingham of Forensic Linguistics: The International Journal of Speech, Language and the Law and the founding of the International Association of Forensic Linguistics. This journal demonstrates that forensic linguistics is a well established area of applied linguistics. However, when a field such as forensic linguistics goes through the process of defining itself, there are certain instances of ambiguity related to what is or is not part of the discipline. The classification of areas in forensic linguistics evolves as the field develops.^{1,5,9,11}

It usually follows existing classifications in the structure and function of language as a basis for cataloging actual and potential subject areas. In some instances, forensic studies make use of a broad array of analytical tools from overlapping subfields of linguistics, making tidy classification decisions difficult. Areas directly related to Forensic Linguistics include Document Examination, Software Forensics, Semiotics which is the study of communication and language as systems of signs and symbols. Such systems are called codes and language is an example of a code with both verbal and nonverbal signs, Plagiarism Detection. Areas inaptly associated with Forensic Linguistics include Psycholinguistics (is a field that integrates the study of psychology, linguistics and cognitive science), Literary Forensics also called “text analysis,” “is a recently created activity involving a kind

of literary profiling similar to the psycholinguistic assessment of a writer’s emotional or mental status^{1,4,6,7,8,10,11,12}.

The range, number and quality of studies in forensic linguistics, especially those of the last 8 to 10 years, demonstrate strong interest and increasing activity in the field and make a bibliography-based definition of linguistics qua forensic science a practical possibility^{1,7}.

CONCLUSION

The ability of speakers and writers to use language does not usually correspond to much of an understanding of the inner workings of the linguistic system that they possess and so easily apply. The use of language driven as it is by unconscious knowledge is analogous to how one does many things, such as driving a car without understanding its internal electromechanical systems. Yet, someone needs to understand them: a mechanic must know, evaluate, and maintain the car’s under-the-hood systems to keep it running; a doctor knows enough about under-the-skin systems to keep one alive and so understanding of languages the expert linguists must be able to successfully answer the question “What is language?”

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