Introducing English Linguistics: Book Review

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Abstract

Every normal human being is born with a natural capacity for language learning and acquisition. To gain proficiency in language learning or teaching, one needs to fathom certain inputs that facilitate language learning and teaching. Books are influential resources for English language teaching and learning. Research papers can also be beneficial resources that facilitate second language teaching and learning. This paper, therefore, provides a précis of the main tenets of Meyer's *Introducing English Linguistics*, in guileless words for the assistance of our second language students, readers, and English as second language teachers and users in general. Though this content analysis review paper uses the text, *Introducing English Linguistics* as the main data, references have been made to other related information from other authors.

Subject Areas

Linguistics, Education

Keywords

1. Introduction

Presently, English language teaching continues to be as vigorous and multifaceted today, as it was yesterday [1]. Although Mandarin Chinese may have more speakers, no language is spoken in more parts of the world than the English language [2]. The universal nature of English language is so intense that there are more non-native speakers of the language than there are native speakers [2]. All over the world, English language is seen playing countless roles in many countries. In Ghana, for example, it is interesting to note that English is not only re-

ferred to as the national language, but interchangeably referred to as the official language [3]. Though there are many local languages in this extremely multilingual West African state (*i.e.* Ghana), English, the second language, plays a lot of instrumental functions. It is the language of government, the law, the media, education, and business. Because of the significance of English language, it has been extensively studied and taught [2]. Again, many books have been written in this language. One of the books that highlight some of the vital topics of Applied Linguistics is Meyer's *Introducing English Linguistics*. So, a review of such a book on Applied Linguistics by second language teachers will provide enlightenment of some demanding topics to second language learners and users. Consequently, the paper is structured into five parts: the introduction, the contents, the thesis, the chapters, and conclusion.

2. The Contents

The book is divided into seven chapters, with each chapter focusing on a particular aspect of Applied Linguistics. The arrangement of the chapters (uncharacteristically of most English language books), has been done in a top-down discussion with chapter one focusing on *the study of language*. Chapters two, three, and four deal with *the development of English*, *the social context of English*, and *the structure of English texts*, respectively. The last three chapters (*i.e.* chapters five, six, and seven) discuss *English syntax, English words: structure and meaning*, and *the sounds of English*, correspondingly.

3. The Thesis

The thesis of the book is well-stated. The intention of the author for publishing the book is to provide adequate information about introduction to the study of English language in a top-down approach, instead of the conventional bottom-up discussion [2]. That is, instead of commencing with the phoneme (the smallest unit of language), and graduating to the largest unit (the text), the arrangement of the book originates at the level of the text (modes of language and linguistic structure) and moves to the smaller units of language [2]. This is quite unusual of most Applied Linguistics books. However, that is what the author wants his readers to know, believe and understand. The rationale behind his strategy is that most of the times, smaller units of language are not treated in isolation. That is, the total comprehension of these smaller units of language is highly dependent on larger linguistic units. Accordingly, the author has segmented the book into two main sections. Section one deals with general characteristics of English, and section two focuses on the grammatical characteristics of English language (from sentences to speech sounds) [2].

4. The Chapters

4.1. The Study of Language

Chapter one, the study of language, provides a summary of how linguists ap-

proach the study of language. The chapter portrays language as the basic tenet of communication. The main sub-themes in this chapter are *language as part of a semiotic system*, *the modes of language*, *studying linguistic structure*, *language and ideology*, and *theorizing about language*.

Concerning language as a semiotic system, the chapter establishes that language as a system of communication has its origin in semiotics. In a classical literature, meaning in semiotic systems is expressed by signs, which have a particular form, called a signifier, and some meaning that the signifier conveys, called signified [4]. Thus, one hallmark of the linguistic sign is its arbitrary nature [4]. Language and gestures work so closely together, and that can lead one to conclude that they are part of the same semiotic system [2]. In consonance with the classical typology, chapter one mentions speech, writing, and signing as the three main modes of language. In linguistics, speech is primary while writing is secondary. This is so because speech is more appropriate mode for a contract in many contexts. Again, the author discusses linguistic structure in chapter one. The chapter notes that rules are studied under the rubrics of grammar. Thus, the chapter deepens one's understanding of descriptive and prescriptive grammar rules. The author uses this chapter to summarize rules of grammar at various levels of Phonetics, Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, and Semantics. By citing various examples, the author uses this chapter to explain Noam Chomsky's linguistic competence deeper.

Chapter one, again, presents language and ideology, citing classical and contemporary philosophical underpinnings. For example, the chapter notes that English has metamorphosed from a language that exhibited grammatical gender to one that exhibits natural gender. The chapter ends with *theorizing about language*. Here, the chapter points out the ideological differences that exist among linguists. These differences have led to different language theories. For example, Noam Chomsky, who revolutionized linguistics in the 1950s with his book, *Syntactic Structures*, is the principal proponent of competence-based theories of language. Another theorist is B. F. Skinner, who propounded *Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour*. One functional theorist, Halliday, also believes that language exists to fulfill the communication requirements of its users.

4.2. The Development of English

Chapter two focuses on *the development of English*. The chapter has five thematic areas of *the current state of the English language*, *genetic classification of languages*, *typological classifications of languages*, *why languages change*, and *the nature of language change*. About the current state of the English language, the chapter presents information about the number of people who speak and use English as against the major languages of the world. The chapter also presents an idea about how calculating the number of speakers of a language is intricate by the many complications one comes across in distinguishing a language from a dialect. The chapter argues that in theory, it is the concept of mutual intelligibil-

ity that distinguishes a language from a dialect. For example, if one speaks Northern American English, and another person speaks Southern American English, the two individuals will be able to comprehend each other. Therefore, in enumerating the speakers of English language [5], speakers of English dialects such as pidgin and creoles have been included to arrive at about 430 million speakers of English as a native language.

The next section of the chapter describes the two major methods of categorizing languages—the genetic and typological systems. The genetic system of categorization groups languages into family trees and traces their historical growth through the procedure of linguistic reconstruction. The family-tree concept of language growth offers a progressive outlook of how languages change over time. Here, the chapter traces the development of English from old English to Middle English to early modern English. Typological classification of languages, according to the chapter, focuses a lot on language resemblances than variances and segments languages in a way that is united with the idea of language universals. Here, the chapter mentions typological classifications based on morphology and typological classification based on syntax. Chapter two concludes with a debate on language change as against language evolution. That is, whether it is reasonable to accept that developmental variations in biology correspond to those in language, and with a consideration of supplementary theories that have been put forward to elucidate how and why language transforms. Specific issues discussed in the concluding part of chapter two are internal and external influences on language change, and language death. On language death, the chapter cites Latin as an example of a dead language since it no longer has native speakers and exists only in written texts.

4.3. The Social Context of English

Chapter three, *the social context of English*, discusses how the social context of a language, impacts human communication. The chapter has six thematic areas of *grammatical vs. pragmatic meaning*, *sentence vs. utterance*, *speech act theory*, *the cooperative principle*, *politeness*, and *speaker variables*.

The chapter commences with a discussion about the need to differentiate grammatical meaning from pragmatic meaning. Grammatical meaning is the meaning related to linguistic competence, and pragmatic meaning is the one derived from our interactions in specific social contexts. The discussion in chapter three is basically focused on pragmatic meaning. So, the chapter separates a sentence from an utterance, the basic component on which the study of pragmatic meaning is grounded. Chapter three, also, discusses the way statements are utilized and organized in human communication, starting with the speech act theory, a concept that reinforces the belief that what humans essentially anticipate their utterances to mean is frequently not obviously implied in the words that they express or inscribe. A classical definition explains speech acts as the various "acts": locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary that we execute every time we

speak or write [6]. As locutionary is "saying or proclaiming" an utterance, illocutionary is "doing or executing" the utterance said. Perlocutionary is the effect or the force behind an utterance produced.

On the cooperative principle, the chapter re-echoes the proposition of Grice about how conversation involves a certain level of cooperation among communicants [7]. The chapter also provides a summary and description of Grice's maxims—quantity, quality, relation, and manner [7]. The last section of the chapter discusses Brown and Levinson's politeness [8]. The subthemes of this section are *power relationships and social distance*, *levels of impoliteness*, *face-threatening acts*, *and tact*; and *other kinds of politeness* (*i.e.* additional motivating factors such as *thank you*, *thanks*, and *thank you very much*).

4.4. The Structure of English Text

Chapter four presents four thematic areas of *register or genre*, *spoken and written registers*, *unity of structure*, *unity of texture*. The chapter, thus, emphases different types of context, the linguistic content, and how these contexts and contents influence language structure and usage. When language speakers or writers form a text, the linguistic resources that they use are determined by a number of factors. Some of these factors include: how words are arranged in a sentence, how words in a sentence are written and pronounced, and the meanings of structures used in a discourse. For example, in a typical casual oral conversation, the participants will take turns in making inputs to the discourse. At each point in time, the participants will observe conventions such as speaking, listening, and gesturing.

Additionally, the chapter stresses Lee's definition of register or genre [9]. Thus, a register is characterized by "lexico-grammatical and discoursal-semantic patterns" linked with linguistic patterns, and a genre is characterized as texts that can be classified into "culturally-recognisable categories" [9]. The chapter, again, notes that *spoken and written registers* are traditionally diverse since much speech (especially impulsive discourses) are not pre-planned than writing which is heavily planned.

4.5. English Syntax

Chapter five presents information on English Syntax. The thematic areas of the chapter are: *formal vs. notional definitions*; *the linear and hierarchical structuring of constituents*; *form and function*; *word classes and phrases*; *and clauses*, *sentences*, *and clause functions*. Thus, the chapter is dedicated to the area of Applied Linguistics that looks at words, and how they are segmented and arranged into sentences, clauses, and phrases. The features of the various word classes have also been discussed in this chapter. For example, English language usually puts adjectives before nouns (e.g. a nice car), rather than after them (car nice a). This feature of English syntax differentiates most Germanic languages from Italic languages, which normally place adjectives after the nouns that they modify

(*i.e.* Italian casa bella "*house beautiful*"). Another example the chapter provides is the use of two different tree diagrams to explain the verb phrase [10] [11]. Apart from this, the chapter has provided examples on main and subordinate clauses, and various clause functions aside the subject and the predicate.

4.6. English Words: Structure and Meaning

Chapter six focuses on the inner structure of words and the ways that linguists and lexicographers (dictionary producers) have studied their meaning. The chapter has four thematic areas. These are *varying definitions of meaning*, *the morpheme*, *lexical semantics*, and *deixis*. The chapter begins with a debate of the innumerable ways that linguists have advanced the study of meaning. Here, the chapter reiterates the two meanings—grammatical and pragmatic—discussed in chapter three, and indicates that the distinction between the two meanings has been captured by, correspondingly, the notions of denotation and connotation. So, denotational meaning of a word relates to the dictionary sense of that word, while the connotational meaning has to do with the associations a word suggests. The chapter then progresses with an explanation of the morpheme, the minimum component of meaning, and how several kinds of morphemes are put together to create words. The chapter, thus, provides information on the classical categorization of morphemes according to free and bound, and inflectional and derivational morphemes. The concluding themes of the chapter describe two general ways of characterizing the meaning of words: lexical semantics and deixis. Lexical semantics has to do with the complete meaning of words. Deixis concerns the capacity of words not only to have meaning but to "point". This is referred to as the pointing function of words. Here, the chapter provides information and examples on referential deixis [12], spatial deixis, and temporal deixis.

4.7. The Sounds of English

This chapter provides a summary of the sound system of English language. The chapter specifically focuses on two issues of *speech segments* and *suprasegmentals*. The speech segment section commences with a discussion of the minimum component of sound, the phoneme, and progresses to a description of the phonetic alphabet and how it varies from the English alphabet. The phonetic symbols for English consonants and vowels are then projected and segmented according to three principles: voicing (*i.e.* whether the vocal cords vibrate or not), place of articulation (*i.e.* the part in the mouth where the sound is produced), and manner of articulation (*i.e.* how the airstream moves in the mouth in the process of articulation). The suprasegmental section of the chapter discusses syllabification in terms of onset, nucleus, and coda. Other issues such as phonotactics, stress, and intonation have been discussed in chapter seven.

5. Conclusion

This book review paper focused on Meyer's (2009) *Introducing English Linguis-*

tics. The subject-by-subject content analysis approach we used enabled us to critique all the seven chapters of the book one after the other. Since the paper provides a synopsis of the text in plain language for second language learners, users and teachers, we perceive it as a contribution to knowledge. One observation we made was that the author consulted several linguistic corpora in writing the book. These include *The British National Corpus* (*BNC*), *The International Corpus of English* (*ICE*), *The British Component of the International Corpus of English* (*ICE-GB*), *The New Zealand Component of the International Corpus of English* (*ICE-NZ*), *The American Component of the International Corpus of English* (*ICE-USA*), *The Cambridge International Corpus* (*CIC*), *Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English* (*MICASE*), *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English* (*SBCSAE*), and *The London-Lund Corpus*. The list of the linguistic corpora used and of the corpora is attached to the book as an appendix. Additionally, the book has a glossary of key linguistic registers which can serve as easy reference for language teachers and learners. Though the author was creative by using the unfamiliar top-down approach in discussing the contents of the book, we think he should have separated chapter six, *English words: Structure and meaning*, into two units of Word Classes and Semantics of English. If this segmentation had been done, it would have given the author an avenue to have exhausted all the features, functions and semantic roles of the various items under Word Classes and Semantics of English, aptly.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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