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Review of 'Linguistics: Why It Matters' by Geoffrey K. Pullum

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Introduction

Linguistics studies language, a complex yet universal human system of communication. Language is not only a fundamental tool for expression and communication, but it also shapes human perceptions, behavior, and even societies. This gives linguistics a complex and interdisciplinary role in the fields of social psychology, cultural studies, media environment, law and legal studies, social anthropology, pedagogy, education and multilingual education, and translation, argumentation, and theology. Linguistics embraces several foundational and applied studies, including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, stylistics, pragmatics, anthropology, cognitive science, natural language processing, speech technology, and machine learning in data science. The linguistic system of any given language is composed of many seemingly unrelated parts, but the core of all of those parts is the desire of a social animal to communicate with other social animals in its own society or culture. The university curriculum in linguistics, therefore, has to embrace all aspects of this communication system.

Linguistics is the natural science concerned with language in the same way as physics is the natural science concerned with the inanimate physical world, and biology is the natural science concerned with life and living organisms. There is a strong parallel between the history of linguistics and the history of science at large. The primary concern of early astronomers was to describe the relationships of the stars and planets in the heavens so that they could predict and explain significant cosmological phenomena. Science has always been a blend of theoretical inquiry and applied discovery, and its relation to technology is deeper than is often realized. It is rather ironic that there is a discussion trying to convince the linguistics community of the crucial importance of new technologies when, in fact, linguistics has been influencing the successes and directions of modern technology for decades.

Overview of 'Linguistics: Why It Matters' by Geoffrey K. Pullum

Linguistics is a concise introduction of nearly 150 pages to why we believe linguistics is a subject deserving of respect and, therefore, a useful object of public dissemination. Though written for a lay audience, there are repeated suggestions for incorporating a curatorial worldview into syllabi that call for a brief, engaging, or easily digestible source, whereby linguists might creditably introduce their discipline to undergraduates. Chapters are necessarily fronted with intellectual history, surveying ideas about the value of linguistics



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throughout the ages, yet, thus rooted, are free to roam from the heady heights of abstract theory down to the gritty codicology of copy editing.

The introduction declares a rationale: linguistics is among the most important and intriguing fields to be engaged with because the structure of language is fundamental to our ability to understand anything about our world, our societies, our brains, and one another. It is stated that the epistemic value of linguistics lies in the provided path from data to a body of analytically derived facts by means of which a model can be derived from which predictions may be substantiated or refuted, thus squeezing as much as possible out of available data and leading us closer to the grain of human nature. As it is asserted, linguistics may be a theoretical science in goal, but in practice, we are all empirical linguists. Such pragmatics is entirely in keeping with an exoteric theme, for the reception of which its paratextual dimensions of jargon avoidance, kindly typography, and case-study-centered exposition further recommend it to imaginative projection onto a sizeable interested general public.

A five-chapter outline loosely based on a handful of misconceptions regarding linguistics as a generally inconsequential hobby by a peculiar community is employed. Conceptual opponents to linguistics and the reasons for their distrust and derision are delineated in increasing concentricity about academic updates, in a space that grows in detail from the rough family resemblance of humanities criticism in general evolutionarily toward the special disdain of the antitechnology faction, and finally down to the more precise lifelong battles that delight textbook authors of epistemology who have experience teaching linguistics as succeeding in casting doubt on the very possibility of what they are doing as a field. The following chapters then return the analytic dispatch against foundational distrust that has been grounded back out from the rough impressionism of public reception to delineate the way each of twenty-seven objections—ranging from logistical and activist-central worries like now saving endangered languages to simply settling arguments with one's children—are addressed by linguists to quantify the damage vouchsafed for lack of knowledge in these areas. The final chapter concludes a public educational book by aiming to bring to late-night TV hosts some thoughts on the effects of AI technology and what led to them in less direct fulfillment of the initial mission for which the inquiry was first approved. This ambivalence provides the lens through which we should understand this journal inquiry, in which I am interested in the formative frame of mind that landed a book onto bestseller tables in airports and away from the specialist shelves.

The significance of linguistics can be judged by looking at the things that are recognized as its cornerstones. It is about the nature and knowledge of grammar, and it is about the existence and nature of language universals and the parameters that govern them. It



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investigates the nature of the diversity of human languages; it tries to say what is in common with all of them and what differs. For instance, the author discusses the content and structure of grammar – in other words, of rules that relate sounds to meanings. He addresses the matter of sounds and sound combinations. Special chapters are devoted to questions of human knowledge that impinge on the speakers' behavior. One cognitive system that humans have is mental hardware with a ready-made capability to construct the grammar of one or more languages. Information like that can thus provide us with insights pertaining to this cognitive ability we have.

The syntax is the part that deals with sentence structure, and in the main portion of his writing, the author discusses syntax's structural and semantic aspects. Speech sounds and speech sound combinations are the subject matter to be investigated through phonetics. In addition to the auditory work, phoneticians are concerned with the physiological and anatomical properties of speech production and reception. In studies of language meaning, special attention is paid to what is called literal meaning. Semantics typically looks at the sentence as the minimal unit of meaning, but pragmatics focuses on how meaning is used in interaction. The author's expositions highlighted above are interesting in a number of ways. Since language is so important to our daily lives, he explores knowledge about language to provide us with a closer look at how language – and, I might add, the human mind and cognition – works. He is able to explain concepts at just the right level of depth, illuminating many interesting facets. His basics on how we develop language acquisition, for example, start with an account of a British child named Thomas who, though born hearing-impaired, underwent a fully articulate acquisition of English Sign Language.

Stylistically, the book is interestingly and engagingly written and is to be admired. I consider his writing on these basic concepts of linguistics and the manner in which he tackles these important points to be quite powerful arguments for gerundives. When I saw the chapter headings, my first thought was: 'Oh, boy... this is going to be yet another one of those introductory linguistics books that's noncommittal to the point of uselessness.' After beginning the book, however, I found that the discussion of these 'basics' is, in fact, one of the book's definite strengths. He discusses everything from phonetics to universals to semantics in a very engaging manner. His detailed analysis of syntax is one of the more lucid discussions of the topic that I have encountered, and I think that he should be commended for his discussion of the basics. This, of course, begs the question of why the rest of the book seems to stop with refutations of the theories of Panini and Chomsky, but that is another point entirely. In any event, I am impressed with the presentation of the basic concepts of linguistics. It is my belief that one cannot truly appreciate linguistics without grasping the



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concepts of physiology, universals, and grammar that are discussed. These issues are discussed well.

Hile's 'Linguistics: Why It Matters' was well-received due to Pullum's clear and engaging writing style and his ability to challenge the reader to see linguistics differently, and critics also exist. His treatment of linguistic theories and debates as passing fads has been derided, with one reader complaining that he "dismisses very large, expanding, and vibrant enterprises in linguistics with a wave of his hand and then goes on to discuss what should replace it without ever examining why the dismissed approach is rejected, and the currently mainstream approach has gained momentum." Critics appreciated his ease in extracting humor from the subject but often found him guilty of simplifying complex issues by cutting them down to size for public consumption, while one save suggested he sometimes stooped to condescension.

Only a few felt that Pullum's focus was misplaced, pointing to the fact that his commitment to democratizing linguistic accessibility had prompted him to bypass the theoretical undergrowth in favor of practical applications of linguistic theory. While one praised Pullum's attempt to bridge the gap between public and professional linguistics, he argued that certain "thinking points in a liberal education" 'for example, the Gödel theorems or Heisenberg's position-projection paradox' 'are almost bound to have highly practical implications for the conduct of an intellectual life and the structure of human thought while having virtually nothing at all to say about the material, pragmatic, and social questions that are the focus of Pullum's later chapters.' Another expresses the fear that public advocacy could "spell doom for a discipline." In other words, rigor is often a casualty of enthusiastic advocacy, usually at the hands of a watered-down, audience-friendly version of the truth.

Including an emphasis on the applications (and necessary presence) of linguistics, as I steadily built in the previous section on the statement of the problem, would put a necessary deal of emphasis upon what both have mentioned in their reviews, i.e., the relevance of each field to the practicalities and, therefore, the purpose of a number of professions that would not otherwise exist. One of the main contributions of linguistics is to language teachers. Schools, educational departments, and universities employ linguists at every turn of a student's life. Our findings change how, when, and in what order reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary, and grammar are taught in language educational curricula. The methodologies by which second languages are learned are largely derived from the field of applied linguistics.

Another application of linguistics is in the area of technology. Technological advances continue to benefit from the knowledge of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and the sociolinguistics of every language we have studied, in



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actual use, from both the speech and text points of view. Lacunae, in our findings, are clearly indicated by translation practices across the planet and throughout history. How we perceive and analyze and why we think foreigners behave a certain way, based on their own words, which are then analyzed for intelligence purposes, is the basis for the field of Natural Language Processing. Natural Language Processing is a subfield of linguistics applied to Artificial Intelligence. Our research in the social sciences aids this field in the framing of a number of different projects.

Conclusion

Why It Matters, written by Geoffrey K. Pullum, is an excellent introduction to the study of language and a forceful argument for the discipline's continued importance in the contemporary world. Reputable linguist Pullum skilfully dispels myths about the field, demonstrating its importance for comprehending human nature, culture, and society beyond its academic value.

As the book progresses, Pullum discusses how linguistics has impacted disciplines, including political theory, anthropology, cognitive science, and artificial intelligence. He refutes common misconceptions about language, such as "proper" or "ideal" languages. He makes a compelling case that linguistic diversity is inherent to and vital to the diversity of human experience.

Pullum's witty and entertaining prose simplifies challenging language ideas without making them sound simplistic. In his defense of language learning, he goes beyond simple curiosity to highlight the far-reaching effects on fields as diverse as education, technology, and social comprehension. Anyone who uses language in any way, consciously or unconsciously, is included in his rallying cry, not only linguists.

A solid and convincing book, Linguistics: Why It Matters, demonstrates how crucial linguistics is to our worldview. Anyone interested in the inner workings of language and why it merits more excellent study will find plenty to ponder in Pullum's insightful book, which will reawaken an admiration for the complexity and significance of language.