

# The Language of Language

## A Linguistics Course for Starters

(Third Edition)

**Madalena Cruz-Ferreira**  
**Sunita Anne Abraham**

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Third Edition

If you've ever wondered why we need concepts like *noun* and *verb* or *word* and *phrase* when discussing language, this book is for you. Deliberately selective in its approach and assuming no prior knowledge of linguistics, *The Language of Language* explores the nature of language and linguists' agreed-upon ways of talking about the object of their inquiry. Our focus is on modes of thinking rather than topic coverage. Our goal is to encourage informed thinking about (why) language matters, so that you can continue puzzling about language issues long after you've worked your way through this book and its companion website.

Now in its third edition, at just over 300 pages and priced to make you want to own it, the book is packed with over 100 commented activities, examples of language play, and fun food for thought, designed to whet your appetite for linguistics and language studies.

The companion website contains more activities for self-study or for the classroom, and instructors' resources which include teaching slides and class handouts, at <http://lang101.com/>

### Contents outline

1. Language and linguistics
2. Language and languages
3. The grammar of words: words and word parts
4. The grammar of words: word building
5. Speech sounds
6. The grammar of sounds
7. The grammar of sentences: slots and phrases
8. The grammar of sentences: slots and functions
9. The meaning of meaning
10. Meaning in action
11. Language in use
12. Language and speakers

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Paperback: ISBN: 1456458639; ISBN-13: 978-1456458638

Pages: xv+301 Price: U.S. \$ 20.00

### Reviews

*The Language of Language provides a careful selection of important topics in linguistic inquiry and gives a clear overview of each. And, what must have been a difficult feat indeed, the ideas are presented in a way that is always interesting and frequently amusing. ... It is the ideal course book to choose in countries where either one finds several varieties of English spoken or where students are learning English as a second or foreign language, as is true in much of Asia.*

Dr Gloria Poedjosoedarmo, Independent Scholar, Singapore

*[My course] is given in the very first semester, aiming at giving the students a strong base in understanding how language works. Using this book through an active learning process for the second time, I found that the book could become a very strong foundation for them to learn other linguistics subjects. In the following semesters, the students could see clearly why they have to learn those materials [...]. The content of the book is enriched with examples that are familiar with our students' context. This makes it possible for me to explore the content and to relate it to their context. I have been teaching the subject to different groups of students at different institutions using different books. This is the first time I could make this theoretical subject grounded.*

Dr Soepriyatna, Sampoerna School of Education, Indonesia

*This text offers a clear explanation of the core concepts of linguistics and would be an appropriate choice as a text for an introductory linguistics class. The volume provides a solid base on which the student can build by taking more advanced courses in linguistics.*

Dr Amy Thompson, Michigan State University

*I find the approach taken by the authors quite refreshing. It is different from other introductory textbooks because the aim of the book, as stated in the preface, is not to be comprehensive but to encourage "informed thinking about issues relating to language and structure ... and the kinds of activities that linguists busy themselves with". The authors have presented the chapter on semantics, for instance, in an interesting and entertaining way that is at once quite challenging to the linguistics students.*

Dr Hajar Abdul Rahim, Universiti Sains Malaya

*Informative, current, thought-provoking, and reader-friendly. I would encourage my students to buy this book as the language is accessible, and difficult concepts are clearly explained and exemplified. The chapter on discourse is much more comprehensive than in other books as it takes into account current ideas in the study of discourse. It also attempts to establish the important link between real-world knowledge and linguistic knowledge."*

Dr Shakila Manan, Universiti Sains Malaya

*The book's main strengths are its attempts to avoid unnecessary detail and provide only what the authors consider essential, without filling up the book with more advanced information. I very much like the book's use of discovery as a method for teaching phonetics. It's what most of us try to do in class, but I've almost never seen an introductory linguistics book that makes the pedagogy explicit.*

Associate Professor John M. Levis, Iowa State University

## About the Authors

**Madalena Cruz-Ferreira** hails from Portugal, and received her PhD from the University of Manchester, UK. She is an independent scholar, with authored and edited publications on multilingualism, child language, phonology, intonation and the language of science. Her blog, *Being Multilingual*, is featured at AILA (International Association of Applied Linguistics), ASHA (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association), The Linguist List, OEP (Observatoire Européen du Plurilinguisme), Teaching English (British Council-BBC), TES (Times Educational Supplement) and TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages).

**Sunita Anne Abraham** was born in Penang, Malaysia, and holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK. She is an Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore, a Fellow of the NUS Teaching Academy, and the proud recipient of a dozen teaching awards, including two *Outstanding University Educator* awards. She serves on several international editorial boards, including the *Journal of Second Language Writing* and the *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. Her research and teaching interests include genre analysis, discourse structure, the language of persuasion, and the relationship between reading, writing and thinking.

# Preface

***Read this \*before\* starting the book!***

## **What this book is about**

Spoken language is the *prime human tool* for expressing meaning – *human* because spoken language seems to be a feature unique to humankind; *prime* because speech has been around a lot longer than writing, which was invented as a way of representing speech; and a *tool* because language serves to link meaning with expression. How language does this is one of the key questions answered in this book.

Given our shared capacity for language, it's hardly surprising that language represents a topic of interest to many of us. We talk about language using everyday words in everyday situations. But, as with any other discipline, linguistics has its own conventions for talking about the object of its inquiry, so that findings and insights can be shared clearly, concisely, and without ambiguity. The language of language explored in this book refers to linguistics, the science of language, and linguists' agreed-upon ways of talking about the object of their investigation. What's interesting about linguistics is that language is both the object of exploration and the vehicle for expressing discoveries about it, much as the brain is both the object of investigation and the vehicle for studying itself, in the brain sciences.

## **Our approach**

Our main purpose in this book is to explore the nature of language, both as a social phenomenon and a human cognitive ability. Our goal is to encourage informed thinking about issues relating to language structure and use, by discussing as broad a sample as possible, in a book of this size, of the kinds of activities that linguists busy themselves with. We do not aim to give comprehensive coverage of any aspect of any language. In other words, we draw on deliberately restricted sets of data to exemplify and query the core analytical tools, methods and purposes current in linguistic thinking, on the

assumption that familiarity with these should enable further independent investigation of language.

Here are a few examples of our selective approach. In our exploration of word patterns, we do not deal with irregular morphology, focusing only on regular patterns. In our discussion of speech sounds, we analyse only 17 of the 40-odd phonemes proposed in standard descriptions of English phonology, to highlight sound properties common to several other languages. Our selective approach is also evident in our overviews of “big issues” like language variation, language contact and spread, language and the brain, and child language acquisition in Chapters 2 and 12. If you’d like to delve deeper into these issues, we refer you to the **further reading** and **references** at the end of each chapter. Here again, we’ve opted for two or three readings per chapter rather than half a dozen, on the assumption that you can generate further reading for yourself by looking up the references in the recommended readings, or that your instructor will assign further readings, as needed.

## The origins and outline of the book

The first edition of this book consisted of Madalena’s lecture notes for a 12-week introductory module on language and linguistics, taught at university level. Designed as foundational reading for undergraduates taking their first course in linguistics, the first edition assumed no acquaintance with the concepts or modes of thinking in linguistics.

This third edition similarly assumes no familiarity with linguistics. And, although it is an expanded and revised version of previous editions, it still aims at brevity. We wanted a handy-sized book that could be carried around easily, not a 600-page tome. We also wanted a book that wouldn’t dent your budget. Coloured images, interactive exercises, sound and video files can be accessed through our companion website. Our aim, as mentioned earlier, is not to “cover topics”, but to provide a flavour of what it is that linguists do, in their investigation of language.

The book contains 12 chapters. We open with a brief characterisation of the key features of language and linguistics, before moving on to consider the relationship between language and languages in Chapter 2. Given that the investigation of language as universal human ability must proceed through exploration of individual languages, this chapter considers the twin issues of variation *across* and *within* languages.

The intermediate chapters of the book are organised in pairs, focusing on linguistic patterning at the level of words (Chapters 3-4), sounds (Chapters 5-6), and sentences (Chapters 7-8). Chapter 3 offers a principled basis for

distinguishing different word classes, while Chapter 4 discusses word parts and the rule-governed nature of word formation. In Chapter 5, we consider two alternative ways of classifying speech sounds, before moving to an exploration of the sound systems perceived by users of particular languages, in Chapter 6. In chapters 7 and 8, we address linguistic patterning at the level of sentences, from the complementary perspectives of form and function, respectively.

Having looked at word, sound and sentence patterns, we turn in Chapters 9 and 10 to matters of meaning (linguistic meaning and meaning in action, respectively), before moving on to discourse, in Chapter 11. Here, we look at language as it is used by speakers in a meaningful and coherent fashion. We conclude our exploration of (the language of) language in Chapter 12 by focusing on the relationship between language and its human users (the natives, the multilinguals, the children acquiring language), as well as issues of language loss and language death.

## **Using this book**

Our purpose in writing this book is twofold. Our fundamental aim is to acquaint you with the way in which linguists investigate the prime human tool for expressing meaning – language. But our main objective is to encourage informed thinking about issues relating to language structure and use. Because we assume that you are just beginning your investigation of language, we provide both the definitions of technical terms and the reasons why these terms are needed, as they are introduced. All new terms appear in bold in the text, and are gathered together in the book's index. These terms represent the concepts you should be familiar with, once you've worked your way through a chapter.

We have deliberately chosen not to include a glossary, since genuine knowledge involves understanding the relationship between key ideas. The goal here is for you to understand why these constructs are needed, and how they interact with one another to form a network of concepts that allow linguists to analyse language in the simplest possible way. The **index** provides a useful tool in this regard, by cross-referencing subjects, and listing the pages on which key terms are introduced and discussed. Another useful tool is the summary of **technical notation and terms** used in the book, including how to use them appropriately.

As you work your way through each chapter, start with the **chapter preview**. We've adopted a question-driven approach in chapter previews because questions demand answers. Each preview highlights the **key questions** explored in the chapter, providing a road-map of the investigative

journey undertaken in that chapter. Each also serves a review function. Having read a chapter, you should be able to answer the questions in the chapter preview in a meaningful fashion.

To invite you to think deeper about the issues discussed in each chapter, we've included a **food for thought** section at the end of every chapter. Each chapter is also interspersed with a variety of **activities** that encourage you to learn by doing, or to thoughtfully apply the analytical tools introduced to solve one or more linguistic puzzles. These activities typically have a range of plausible answers, underscoring the fact that there can be alternative solutions to a puzzle. The objective of these activities is to foster rigorous analytical thinking about questions of language form and language use. Where sensible, we have provided **commentary on these activities**, at the back of the book. If you'd like more hands-on practice analysing linguistic data of various kinds, you can attempt the online exercises we've created for you, at the companion website to this book.

Scattered around the book, you will also find examples of **language play** included in some of the activities. Our aim here was to provide you with a fun way of doing linguistics. If you can play with language, on the one hand, and work out the general principles underlying what we do when we play with language, on the other, then you're effectively doing what linguists do. Also, although our data are taken principally from English (the language shared by all users of this book), we encourage you to consider statements made about English in light of other languages that you are familiar with, throughout the book.

Most textbooks, we feel, attempt to teach too much. We've taken a more selective path, emphasising thought processes, or what it means to think and behave like a linguist – making observations, constructing analyses, and evaluating alternative analyses. Having provided these resources, we would consider our job only half-done if this book failed to stir your curiosity about language matters and why language matters, beyond the brief exploration we are able to offer here. Whether we are joking with friends, devising quantum analyses of the cosmos, building multinational corporations or rearing children, language plays a central role in all our lives. It is our sincere hope that you will continue to puzzle over this integral aspect of our humanity, long after you've closed the covers of this book.

Madalena Cruz-Ferreira  
Sunita Anne Abraham  
Singapore, December 2010

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