

Lecture: Theoretical linguistics

Introduction:

Linguistics is defined as the scientific study of language. The word "linguistics" was first used in the middle of the 19th C to underline the difference between a modern approach to language study that was then developing and a more traditional approach of philology. Philologists were concerned with the historical development of languages whereas linguists tends to give priority to spoken languages as well as to the problems of analyzing them as they operate at a given point in time. Linguistics can be divided into two main branches; applied linguistics and theoretical linguistics which is the main concern of this paper.

I. Theoretical linguistics:

Theoretical linguistics is the branch of linguistics that inquires into the nature of language or languages without regard for practical applications. It focuses on the examination of the structure of natural languages. The aim of theoretical linguistics is the construction of a general theory of the structure of language, or of a general theoretical framework for language description.

"Briefly, theoretical linguistics studies language and languages with a view to constructing a theory of their structure and functions and without regard to any practical applications that the investigation of language and languages might have, whereas applied linguistics has as its concerns the application of the concepts and findings of linguistics to a variety of practical tasks, including language-teaching." (Lyons 1981:35).

Theoretical Linguistics is concerned with the core structural elements of language, namely phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. In addition, the field of theoretical Linguistics studies language change (historical linguistics), language in the inner world of the individual (first language acquisition with typical language development, developmental and acquired language disorders), and comparative linguistics.

Theoretical linguistics is concerned with constructing theories of language or languages, or with developing linguistic theory.

II. Linguistic theory:

"Linguistic theory" is whatever linguistic theorists choose to do (Silverstein, 1972). A good theory should exhibit at least four basic properties: 1) economy, 2) simplicity, 3) generality, 4) falsifiability. Furthermore a theory must be adequate on three levels: that of observation, of description and of explanation (Raymond Hickey).

Different levels of language have been subject to theories in the second half of the 20th century. In particular, phonology and syntax, because of their abstract and formal properties, have attracted linguists of a theoretical persuasion (Raymond Hickey).

References:

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Raymond, Hickey. *The Neat Summary of Linguistics*.