
A large number of books dealing with modern linguistics and linguistic theory are available that provide students with technical knowledge on the subject. These books usually treat the most controversial issues of the different theories and provide various accounts of what has been previously said in the literature. They normally fail to focus on the most general aspects of the discipline or on the assumptions shared by the majority of linguists, which is the innermost goal of *Investigating Language* by Ronald Wardhaugh.

Wardhaugh maintains that when reflecting upon language, we all ask ourselves general questions. In fact, most striking ideas in linguistics have arisen from asking new and interesting questions about language. And this is precisely the starting point of this book. It is these common doubts about the problematic issue of language that he concentrates on throughout his work. Indeed, seven out of the eight chapters of Wardhaugh’s contribution are presented as questions which the author aims at guiding us into answering.

The problems analysed here range from the very general matters of the first chapter about the different ways to talk about interesting topics about animal talk, our “wiredness” for language, the relationship between mind and language, together with the more specific reflections on the actual use of language or the process of learning. The final chapter intends to supply a series of constraints for the description of language, following mainly the approach of generative grammar.

Also included are a useful glossary of the language terms used, a welcome section for further reading containing specific bibliography for each chapter and a rather timely reference section. It is also worth noting that at the end of most sections in every chapter an extensive guide for further investigation is provided. This presents problems or questions in the section itself or supports the reader’s previously attested knowledge.

In chapter one, Wardhaugh presents a historical account of the interest given to language in several periods, focusing on the Greek and Latin traditions on the assumption that many of the current descriptions of contemporary languages are phrased in terms derived from the classical tradition. He also reviews the marked tendency to prescriptivism, common for years. In fact, for a lot of people the study of language has reduced to the study of correctness. Wardhaugh obviously favours a different type of approach, based on the use of relevant data stated in the form of a hypothesis. For him, a linguistic theory must offer a general survey of language events rather than a description of particular linguistic occurrences. At the same time, it is his assumption that linguistics should be concerned with speech rather than writing, speaking being universal and a previous step.

From here onwards, the author aims to investigate many of the special characteristics that appear to prove that language is almost for certain a unique phenomenon. For doing this, he takes a broader approach than that of Chomsky who focuses mainly on the structural characteristics of language to show its uniqueness.

Thus, in chapter two, which again makes use of a question in the title, the much problematized subject of language and animal communication is introduced. Wardhaugh examines the capacities of different animals in order to demonstrate that language is human specific and to prove that language use involves a set of abilities not found in other species. After examining the sounds and types of communication used by birds, bees, dolphins and apes, he comes to the conclusion that man is the only possible talking animal. He also wonders whether animals could display abilities to learn a language if they were given the chance. In spite of the incredible results obtained by some of the apes, he concludes that all their learning occurred in a non-spontaneous way, i.e. in very controlled situations keyed to very specific tasks. Finally, he attests that the animal system of communication fails to present the features of interchangeability, specialization, productivity, discretion, placement, traditional transmission, duality of patterning, reflectiveness and prevarication, which are later developed in full detail.

In chapter three, Wardhaugh, phonetically biased at first, explains not only how sound is produced but also how it is perceived by our ear. His explanation emphasizes the fact that humans have a unique communication system since only humans use the vocal-auditory channel in that way, and it is
only them that have vast auditory memories. He also mentions that humans do not use all the possibilities offered by the vocal track and not all sound can be heard and distinguished by our auditory system. Finally, an obvious reference to the brain is not left out, for mental processes, which interpret what is heard or said, are involved in the production and perception of sounds. In this way, language is essentially said to be a mental activity.

The mind being the key to the possibilities of language, Wardhaugh devotes a whole chapter (chapter four) to its importance and role. In this chapter it is maintained that the internal structure of the brain is so difficult to investigate that the probable constraints in the brain cannot be easily studied. Therefore, a certain degree of unreliability must be allowed for in the conclusions on this point. On the understanding that linguistics is heavily involved in psychological matters, the author delves into the concepts of behaviour and mind in an attempt to show the differences between the behaviouristic model and the mentalistic orientation, which he prefers. The chapter also covers the issue of the important role of memory in language use, especially as a means of information retrieval. This raises questions on how words are stored, how they are searched and how they are eventually retrieved. Finally, a few pages tackle human perceptual mechanisms together with the actual moment of the production of speech, where a considerable amount of self-monitoring occurs. As a conclusion, he posits that language is still the best means of continuing the explorations on the unknown human mind.

After this chapter, Wardhaugh ponders on human language itself, particularly once speech is actually produced. A series of chapters will now follow on subjects such as language variability, the real use of language or the process of learning language usage.

In chapter five, he makes the reader reflect upon variability both across and within different languages. Variation is shown in the way people use sounds, words and grammatical structures as well as in the choices they make. His exposition is mainly centered on changes within the same language. Thus, he deals with the difference between language and dialect providing relevant bibliography on the topic and a review of the most important theories. The attention is later shifted to social variation, which appears in all kinds of society. Other types of variation such as those concerning age, sex, ethnicity, rhetorical or stylistic usages are also mentioned and accounted for. At the end he introduces the subject of the relationship between different languages and an interesting account is given of the development of historical linguistics and particularly of the comparative method developed in the 19th century. Terms such as proto-language or reconstruction are also defined in an attempt to open up a way of exploring the past which can be useful for learning about language. A short comment is added at the very end of the chapter to assert that the inevitability of language change and variation “must be a price we must pay to remain viable as a species” (p. 167).

The important question of what the function of language may be is surveyed in chapter six, where the author calls into question the tendency linguists have to ignore the functional aspect of language in their effort to set out its formal characteristics rather than its uses. The social function of language is not overlooked, and the wide variety of pragmatic purposes of the language are here listed and explained. He also underlines the importance of the background and the context where language exchanges take place. Other functions of languages as classified by various linguists are presented in a clear and systematic way. The last section of this chapter deals with the possibility of being used by language. The interesting hypothesis of linguistic determinism is not favoured by the author, who maintains that human thought processes or behaviour are not determined by language structure.

One of the old interests concerning language has always been the process of learning, especially child language acquisition. This issued he deals with in chapter seven. The writer goes through some of the works written on this topic, which has revealed itself most interesting and controversial in recent years. He concludes that language acquisition is undoubtedly an unstoppable life-long process whose peak of intensity takes place before the age of four. Obviously this leads him to elaborate about the innateness of language ability and he revisits the diametrically opposed ideas of behaviourists and nativists. Finally, he sketches the process of learning how to use language in different contexts. Although there is no theory about how children acquire such a skill, he provides evidence from various sources to explain that the use of language by children can be influenced by certain kinds of environment.

ATLANTIS XVIII (1-2) 1996
After presenting us with the thought-provoking material of the first seven chapters, he abandons his initial question strategy and devotes the final chapter, chapter eight, to the description of language. Here he offers an outline of how language is described in the Transformational and Government and Binding models of Generative Grammar. He notes that although language theory must be given within a universalizing framework, an account of a language must also recognize variation and language change over time.

In my view, the ideas presented in Investigating Language are a bit vague and loosely organized at times, and the allocation of sections within the chapters is not always very logical and consequent. However, the accessibility, clarity, illustrative approach and well-selected everyday metaphors to explain complex things together with the good reference section and the revision of different theories from the early traditions make this book highly recommendable not only to undergraduate students of linguists but also to any one willing to apprehend some non-technical ideas about the fascinating activity of language. Overall, the book is a delight to read, even though much of the material will not be new for the researchers in the field. [EMMA LEZCANO GONZÁLEZ, University of Coruña]