What is Linguistics?

Linguistics is the scientific study of language, concerned with questions like:
• How do languages work? Are there rules?
• What are rules?
• What do we know when we know a language?
• What’s the range of possible human languages?
• How do people use language?
• Are there conventions about that?
• Linguistics is a scientific discipline with established theories, analytic methods, and real-world applications.

• The primary object of linguistic study is human language, not language in other extended senses.

• Linguistics is the study of language, not individual languages.
How to annoy a linguist? ... Just say:

Oh, you’re a linguist
How many languages do you speak?
Some linguists are polyglots; most aren’t.
The Linguist’s Motto:

Linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive.
Prescriptive Grammar:

- Rules against certain usages.
- Few if any rules for what is allowed.
- Condemns forms generally in use.
- Explicitly normative enterprise.
Descriptive Grammar:

- Rules characterizing what people do say.
- Goal to characterize all and only what speakers actually do.
- Caveat: Competence vs. Performance.
- Tries to do so in a way that reflects internalized generalizations, i.e. what people know about their language.
From Dear Abby, April 9, 2002

It has been nearly 10 years since these rules of basic grammar appeared in my column – and we can all use this refresher course. My pet peeve – double negatives: I don’t know nothing and We don’t go nowhere are the worst offenders.
Prescriptivist propaganda: using two negatives in a sentence to convey a negative is illogical. So you’re not supposed to say *You don’t owe me nothing* to mean ‘you are free of debts to me’. But many languages employ just this syntax, using multiple negative words to convey negation. These include even the most literate forms of some languages:

Personne n’a rien dit (French)
Nobody not-has nothing said
‘Nobody said anything.’
Anyway, language isn't logical:

- parkway vs. driveway
- maternity dress vs. paternity suit
- bathing trunks (pl) vs. bikini (sing)
- you are vs. *you is
- Aren’t I clever? vs. *I aren’t clever.
Pauleen Phillips (the original Abigail Van Buren) was not a linguist! She didn’t know much about language.
Jeanne Phillips (the current Abigail Van Buren) isn’t a linguist either, but she seems to listen to people who know something, at least when she talks about ‘baby talk’. See:

http://www.uexpress.com/dearabby/?uc_full_date=20060411
Where Did you Learn Grammar? 1

[in a room full of boys]

Would you use **he/his**, **they/their**, or **something else**?

Everyone insisted that __ answer was correct.
Where Did you Learn Grammar? 2

[in a room full of boys]

Everyone drives ___ own car to work.
Where Did you Learn Grammar? 3

[in a room full of boys]

Everyone was happy because __ passed the test.
Where Did you Learn Grammar? 4

[in a room full of boys]

Everyone left the room, didn’t ___?
Where Did you Learn Grammar? 5

[in a room full of boys]

Everyone left early. ___ seemed happy to go home.
Where Did you Learn Grammar? 6

Which example sounds natural?

F*ck yourself!

Go f*ck yourself!
Which example sounds natural?

Screw yourself!

Go screw yourself!
Which example sounds natural?

Screw you!

*Go screw you!
Who taught you this? Where did you learn it?

It wasn’t in school. It wasn’t (all) from your parents.

From exposure, you learned a system. That system is **grammar** in the linguist’s sense.
Descriptive Linguistics

• All of Language is rule-governed.

• Linguists try to describe those rules precisely.

• A set of those rules is what linguists call a grammar.

• Linguists theorize about the properties of natural grammars.
Some Linguistic Methods

- Fieldwork
- Formal analysis of patterns in data sets
- Psycholinguistic experiments
- Computational modelling
- Corpus analysis
Some Areas of Linguistics

- **Phonetics**: The study of speech sounds
- **Phonology**: The study of sound systems
- **Morphology**: The study of word structure
- **Syntax**: The study of sentence structure
- **Semantics**: The study of linguistic meaning
- **Pragmatics**: The study of language use
**Phonetics:** The study of speech sounds

Voicing: [s] versus [z]

sue ([suːw]) versus zoo ([zuːw])
Phonology: The study of sound systems

- house (sing. noun) ([haws])
- house (verb) ([hawz])
- houses (plur. noun) ([hawzəz])
Morphology: The study of word structure

• missile: ‘ICBM’
• anti-tank-missle: ‘missile targetting tanks’
• anti-aircraft-missle: ‘missile targetting aircraft’
• anti-missle-missle: ‘missile targetting ICBMs’
Morphological Rules

- Rule: Anti-X-missile is a missile targeting Xs.

- What kind of missile targets anti-missile-missiles?
  - anti-anti-missile-missile-missile

- anti-anti-anti-missile-missile-missile-missile: ‘missile targeting anti-anti-missile-missile-missiles...
Competence vs. Performance

Some sentences conform to the rules of grammar, but put extreme demands on our processing abilities.

That we lost bothers me.

That that we lost bothers me seems to upset her.

That that that we lost bothers me seems to upset her isn’t surprising.
Chomsky: Distinguish the abstract system of rules (the *competence grammar*) from the reality of language use (*performance*).
Syntax: The study of sentence structure

- I saw the woman with the telescope.
- I forgot how good beer tastes.
Semantics: The study of linguistic meaning

• We screened the candidates.
• I saw her duck.
• [huwz an fərst]
  Who’s on first?/Hu’s on first.
Pragmatics: The study of language use

Q: Is Roberts a Republican?

A: Is the Pope Catholic?
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• Historical Linguistics: How languages change over time.

• Sociolinguistics: How languages vary socially. How language is used as a social resource.

• Psycholinguistics: What goes on in people’s heads as they use language.

• Language Acquisition: How people learn language. (first language acquisition; second language acquisition)

• Computational Linguistics: Making computers process (generate/‘understand’/translate...) human languages.