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The study of language (3rd edition)

By George Yule


An introduction to language and linguistics

Edited by Ralph W. Fasold and Jeff Connor-Linton


Reviewed by Steve Nicolle
SIL International

Cambridge University Press has produced two excellent general introductions to linguistics. In this review, I will summarize the salient features of each and then compare them.

Overview of Yule

*The Study of Language* by Yule is a “thoroughly revised and updated” third edition of his classic introduction to linguistics, that was one of the books which influenced me to take up linguistics (the first edition appeared in 1985 and the second in 1996).

The 20 chapters (listed below) cover the main topics usually covered in an undergraduate degree course in linguistics, including gesture and sign languages:

1. The origins of language
2. Animals and human language
3. The development of writing
4. The sounds of language
5. The sound patterns of language
6. Words and word-formation processes
7. Morphology
8. Phrases and sentences: grammar
The chapters are all very brief; morphology is covered in 11 pages, and syntax (including deep and surface structure, tree diagrams, phrase structure rules, lexical rules, complement phrases, and transformational rules) is covered in 14 pages. In such a short space, Yule can do little more than scratch the surface of each topic, but the main points are usually conveyed clearly (although the co-operative principle and implicatures are dealt with in the chapter on discourse analysis, not pragmatics).

In addition to a list of further readings, each chapter ends with study questions (with suggested answers provided in an appendix at the end of the book), research tasks (more involved questions relating to the material covered in the chapter), and discussion topics/projects (which involve new data not previously presented in the chapter). These activities are often quite theoretical and require care and close reading of the chapter to answer correctly. The following research task from the syntax chapter is representative:

Using these simple phrase structure rules for Scottish Gaelic, identify (with *) the two ungrammatical sentences below and draw tree diagrams for the two grammatical sentences.

\[
\begin{align*}
S & \rightarrow V \text{ NP NP} \\
\text{Art} & \rightarrow \text{an} \\
\text{NP} & \rightarrow \{\text{Art N (Adj), PN}\} \\
\text{N} & \rightarrow \{\text{cu, gille}\} \\
\text{Adj} & \rightarrow \{\text{beag, mor}\} \\
\text{PN} & \rightarrow \{\text{Calum, Tearlach}\} \\
V & \rightarrow \{\text{bhail, chunnaic}\}
\end{align*}
\]

1. Calum chunnaic an gille.
2. Bhual an beag cu Tearlach.
3. Bhual an gille mor an cu.
4. Chunnaic Tearlach an gille.

The solutions to the research tasks, plus some related additional readings, are provided in the companion website at [http://www.cambridge.org/9780521543200](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521543200), click “Resources”, then click the PDF document “Study guide for Research Tasks” (accessed Jan. 23, 2013). The website is not password protected, so can be accessed by anyone. The website also contains PowerPoint slides with illustrative materials from the book, for the benefit of teachers.
Overview of Fasold and Connor-Linton

An Introduction to Language and Linguistics edited by Fasold and Connor-Linton (henceforth FCL), is about twice the length and twice the price of Yule. The back cover states “each chapter has been written by an expert who teaches courses on that topic.”

The chapters cover the main topics in linguistics, plus a more recent addition, computational linguistics. Where Yule has separate short chapters, FCL tends to combine topics into longer chapters. For example, chapter 1 ‘The sounds of language’ (41 pages) covers both phonetics and phonology, and chapter 4 ‘Meaning’ (32 pages) covers both semantics and pragmatics (with an emphasis on semantics). The complete list of chapters and authors is as follows:

Introduction, Ralph W. Fasold and Jeff Connor-Linton
1. The sounds of language, Elizabeth Zsiga
2. Words and their parts, Donna Lardiere
3. The structure of sentences, David Lightfoot and Ralph Fasold
4. Meaning, Paul Portner
5. Discourse, Deborah Schiffrin
6. Child language acquisition, Kendall A. King
7. Language and the brain, Michael Ullman
8. Language change, Shaligram Shukla and Jeff Connor-Linton
9. Dialect variation, Natalie Schilling-Estes
10. Language and culture, Deborah Tannen
11. The politics of language, Ralph W. Fasold
12. Writing, Jeff Connor-Linton
13. Second language acquisition, Alison Mackey
14. Computational linguistics, Inderjeet Mani

FCL is a new book, not a revision, and so the chapters are up-to-date and, at times, controversial. For example, Deborah Tannen in ‘Language and culture’ suggests, “language and culture are better thought of as a single entity: languaculture” (343). Similarly, ‘The structure of sentences’ gets straight into minimalism (projection and merger, binding theory), and functional syntax is discussed in 3 pages. But rather than viewing functional syntax as an alternative to formal syntax, Lightfoot and Fasold take the approach that they are complementary, as they usually address different phenomena. The tone is conciliatory (which is nice, but perhaps unrealistic): “Even where functional syntax and formal syntax give substantially different analyses, a complementary analysis using insights from each could be developed” (129). Each chapter contains a number ‘boxes’, which present case studies, data sets, or interesting linguistic trivia.

In good pedagogical fashion, each chapter begins with a one-page key terms/preview section, and goals and ends with a summary, exercises, and suggestions for further reading. The exercises tend to be more practical and less theoretical than those in Yule, but are sometimes quite strange. For example, ‘The structure of sentences’ has exercises involving “Hindlish” (English words, Hindi word order), “Enghili” (English words, Swahili morphosyntax), and “Thailish” (you get the idea). The first exercise in ‘Dialect variation’ (by Natalie Schilling-Estes) is on Appalachian English; readers are presented with pairs of sentences and asked to “decide which sentence in
each pair sounds better with an *a*-prefix. For example, in the first sentence pair, does it sound better to say, *A-building is hard work* or *He was a-building a house*?” This may work if the reader is familiar with Appalachian English, but will be confusing otherwise.

Cambridge University Press has produced a companion website for the book (http://www.cambridge.org/fasold/). The site contains PowerPoint slides of figures and tables from the book, additional exercises and readings, sound files (for example, for the chapter on dialect variation), and links to related websites. Solutions to the exercises are also provided on the website but these are password protected (lecturers can obtain the password on request).

**Glossaries**

Both books contain a glossary of linguistic terms. Yule has 379 entries and FCL has 625 entries (from ‘abjad’ to ‘zero derivation’). FCL usually provides more detail than Yule; two examples will illustrate this:

**Morpheme**

Yule: A minimal unit of meaning or grammatical function.

FCL: The smallest meaningful unit of language. Words are made up of one or more morphemes, e.g. the word *roses* is made up of two morphemes – the lexeme *rose* plus the plural suffix (realized in this case by the allomorph [əz]).

**Pronoun**

Yule: A word such as *it* or *them* used in place of a noun phrase.

FCL: A type of noun phrase with little intrinsic meaning, used to refer to an already-known entity, and required by the Binding Theory *not* to refer to the subject of its own clause.

**Evaluations**

Of the two books, FCL is the more detailed and (especially with the additional web content and password protected solutions) is more suited for use as a textbook in an introductory linguistics course than for self study. Yule is more suited to self-study or to be read alongside more detailed textbooks.

Yule conveys a strong message that language is fascinating and that the study of language is enjoyable, and so it would be an excellent book to give to someone who is thinking of studying linguistics or to someone who has a general interest in language (including children). FCL also leaves the reader with a strong sense that the authors love linguistics and want others to share their enthusiasm (a good example is Box 14.4 in the chapter on computational linguistics by Inderjeet Mani, titled ‘Fun with corpus-based discovery’). Both books show that linguistics can be exciting, without trivializing issues.
Notes

1 I was unable to obtain a password in order to ascertain whether the solutions cover all of the exercises in the book and to evaluate how helpful they are. The response from Cambridge University Press to my request for a password stated that solutions are only given to lecturers teaching the course and not to students, self-studiers, and researchers.

2 Thanks to David and Julie Rowbory for suggesting this.