

REVIEW

***Essentials of Linguistics* by Catherine Anderson**

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Essentials of Linguistics is a groundbreaking text. It is the first open educational resource (OER) dedicated to preparing undergraduate students to pursue the scientific study of language. This freely available, redistributable textbook is published under a Creative Commons license and presents a brief multimodal introduction to the major subfields of linguistics, combining written text with embedded hyperlinks to short video lectures by the author. The book's eleven chapters cover phonetics (Chapters 2 and 3), phonology (Chapter 4), morphology (Chapters 6 and 7), syntax (Chapters 8 and 9), and semantics (Chapter 10), as well as more applied issues like first- and second-language acquisition (Chapter 5) and indigenous language preservation (Chapter 11).

Chapter 1 introduces the scientific pursuit of linguistics, addresses two definitions of "grammar," and challenges pervasive language myths by defining the capabilities of human languages. This chapter provides relevant and highly creative practice problems, although restructuring the content to include a more explicit discussion of Hockett's (1963) design principles would improve it. In addition, it remains unclear through the chapter whether "Mental Grammar" refers to Universal Grammar or to the multi-layer view of language (i.e., from the phoneme to the morpheme to the phrase, etc.).

Chapter 2 introduces acoustic and articulatory phonetics and focuses a great deal on the positions of the vocal folds, identifying and describing the articulators (though without distinguishing active and passive counterparts), and remarking on the variety of English accents (though emphasis is placed on European and North American accents). Chapter 3 differentiates broad and narrow transcriptions, provides the phonemic inventory for Canadian English, and defines central nomenclature related to voice onset time (VOT), regressive and progressive assimilation, and phonetic processes. An extremely limited discussion of suprasegmental features is undertaken; however, the true highlights of this chapter are found in the great attention paid to the differences in transcribing careful and casual speech and in the literary transcription exercises.

Chapter 4 builds upon the preceding chapters by illustrating the contrastive nature of the phoneme in minimal pairs before defining distributional criteria more generally

and engaging in a discussion of phonological feature matrices, natural classes, and phonological rewrite rules. Chapter 5 considers the manner in which phonemes are acquired (or not) by L1 and L2 speakers, and this is really the only chapter where data from a wide variety of languages is presented.

Chapter 6 begins with the standard preliminaries of defining a “word” in relation to morphemes and allomorphs before diving into a discussion of inflectional and derivational morphology. Hereafter, however, the chapter examines important but less commonly addressed topics. One subsection specifically concerns salient features of inflectional morphology in Inuktitut, Plains Cree, and Ojibwe, namely the tripartite distinctions in number, the role of the animacy hierarchy, and the differentiation of pronouns according to inclusivity/exclusivity and place deixis. Chapter 7, on the other hand, identifies word classes in English and attempts to establish the (overwhelmingly syntactic) distributional criteria that define them. The final section of this chapter cursorily introduces the neurological implications of two types of aphasia and fMRI-based research that highlights speakers’ ability to categorize words into semantically related categories.

Chapters 8 and 9, both of which focus on syntax, present the strongest introduction found in this textbook. This subfield is investigated through X’ Theory and begins with a remarkably clear discussion of nomenclature and exemplification of the most commonly used constituency tests. Later, the reader is introduced to subcategorization, grammatical roles, and two specific syntactic topics (Wh-Movement and Do-Support). Hereafter, readers are encouraged to understand the syntax-semantics interface primarily through structural and lexical ambiguity and the realization of thematic relations (defined instead as thematic roles in the text, perhaps itself a result of the author’s apparent Generative leaning). Finally, another brief foray into neurological associations is undertaken with a heavy emphasis upon L2 language acquisition.

Chapter 10 introduces semantics and focuses primarily on Prototype Theory (cf. Rosch 1973) by prompting the reader to assign categories to particular lexical items and subsequently by constructing a feature matrix to distinguish one item from another.

Chapter 11 focuses on indigenous languages and the legacies of residential schools in Canada. It begins with a quote from 1883 that illustrates the Canadian government’s complicity in removing members of the First Nations from their traditional homesteads and imposing upon them the English or French language. After this point, the discourse shifts from the macro to the micro by depicting the major sociolinguistic issues concerning the (dis)use of the Mohawk language and culture.

One of this textbook’s greatest strengths is that it pairs open-access printed descriptions with online multimedia created specifically to reinforce the topics discussed. Another strength is that every chapter begins with clear objectives and concludes with exercises and a summary. Additionally, the textbook ends with an exam and keys to every exercise.

However, there are a few areas where this otherwise exciting OER could be improved in later editions. First, some consolidation of chapters would result in greater clarity for the reader. For instance, the second and third chapters could be naturally reduced to a single chapter on phonetics and expanded to include at least a limited discussion of auditory phonetics, a topic not mentioned in the text (cf. Johnson 2012). Second, greater use of cross-linguistic data could be employed to more clearly illustrate and reinforce the contrasts described in the text (e.g., coarticulated consonants and lexical tone). Third, the final chapter intends to discuss indigenous languages but focuses only upon a single language (Mohawk), hereby missing the opportunity to discuss more broadly the great diversity of First Nations languages (cf. Cook and Flynn 2008). Moreover, greater emphasis upon Canadian English (cf. Gold and McAlpine 2010) and Canadian French (cf. Plourde and Georgeault 2008) would help the author reach her goal of foregrounding national language issues. Fourth, the inclusion of entirely separate chapters on neurolinguistics and historical linguistics would allow the author to explain these topics in greater depth instead of using interspersed references throughout the book (e.g., on the justification of English orthography). Lastly, there is no glossary for student consultation and review, nor is there an index of topics and/or languages for rapid access. Nevertheless, this textbook is a groundbreaking first of its kind and opens the door to more widespread OERs in linguistics and the social sciences generally.

References

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