



Linguistic Society of America

# Linguistics: Language in the Humanities and Language in Science

Since the field of modern Linguistics first emerged as a research discipline in the early part of the 20th century, it has made many significant and lasting contributions to our understanding of how language works, illuminating the unique aspects of language as a behavior reserved to human beings. By applying scientific research methods to the analysis of language, linguists have exposed the critical components that enable us to better understand the most basic aspects of what it means to be human. The mission of linguistics, as defined by the Linguistic Society of America, includes three goals:

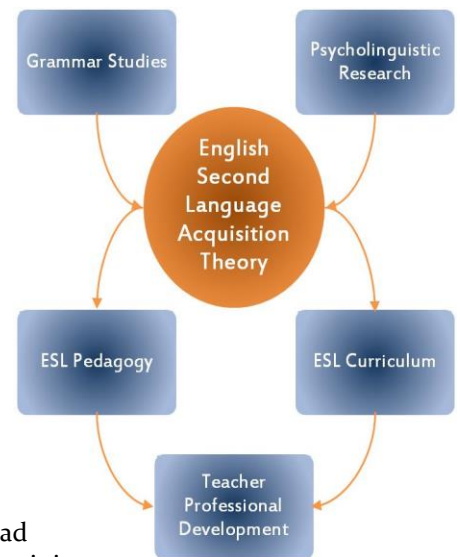
- ✚ Promote the systematic study of language,
- ✚ Mark the vital functions language performs in society, and
- ✚ Document the relevance of linguistic research to promoting American interests.

## The Scope of Linguistics Research

Linguistic research is conducted in two intersecting approaches. In basic research, focused on describing languages and building theoretical models of language, linguists seek to understand how languages work as mental processes. In applied research, linguists focus attention on the influences language has in society, including its relevance to economic issues, social and political dialogue, education, and its cultural identification.



structure of English grammar, the patterns of its sound system in relation to its writing system, and historical study into how its vocabulary arose. All of this research makes its way into the instructional techniques and curriculum used by teachers of English language learners, most of whom will have had some specialized training in linguistics.



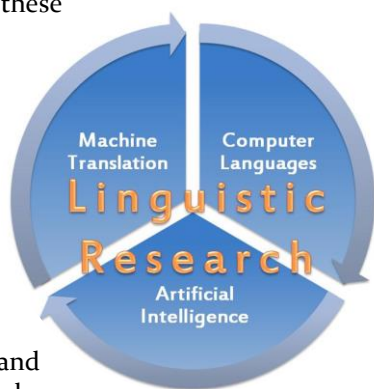
## Educational Impact of Linguistics

As with any science, theoretical work in linguistics creates the knowledge base and inspirational impetus for constructing successful applications. For example, curricula used to promote the learning of English by the growing numbers of immigrant children in American schools is critically informed by applied linguistic research in how English is acquired as a second language. Language acquisition principles and practice, in turn, are informed by basic research linguists have conducted into the

## Economic Impact of Linguistics

Linguistics research has played a pivotal role in contributing to the nation's well being, including by bringing direction and insight into the fields of information and computer science. The businesses that have driven the success of the computer industry in our country have benefitted enormously from the contribution of basic linguistic research. For example, the insight of linguistics into the systematic nature of language has informed the creation of computer languages. The increasing sophistication of computer languages in emulating human mental capabilities can be seen in applications such as machine translation and artificial intelligence programs.

Linguists contribute importantly to the interdisciplinary research teams creating these computer-based tools. Their contribution ranges from providing individual language descriptions, to describing the grammatical patterns that distinguish different languages, to shedding light into how the brain comprehends and produces language. The close association of linguistics with the information technology (IT) industry today is marked by the fact that IT is one of the principal employers of linguistically trained individuals.



involvement in our linguistic treasure. For instance, the state of North Carolina followed up on an initial idea to promote its linguistic diversity by producing a state-wide media campaign. Subsequently, the televised broadcasts were supplemented through an on-going series of locally organized cultural events.

The preparatory work to this venture was situated in years



of ground level descriptive and dialectal research by linguists into the American Indian, African-American, and regional languages and dialects in the state. Following its launch, the project has continued to be a sustaining source of North Carolinians' awareness, sensitivity, and pride in their language diversity.

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## Social Impact of Linguistics

Linguistic research has also had meaningful and direct impact on American people in their day to day lives. For instance, basic linguistic research into the role of language in communication led individual linguists to study the communication of deaf people. This basis investigation ultimately led to the realization that the sign languages used by deaf people constitute structurally sound languages, exhibiting the same linguistic features as any spoken language.

Similarly, basic research of linguists working with American dialects has shown the structural integrity of such dialects and has led to the general lessening of negative attitude and bias toward these forms of English, albeit with a recognition that English does have an idealized standard variety of expression that all speakers need to control.

Practical application of this research is also finding expression in large-scale efforts to build interest and

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## The Cultural Impact of Linguistics

Language forms an important base for a people's conception of themselves and it pervades cultural institutions in many aspects. Language asserts itself, for instance, in our legal and political systems, in the operation of mass media, in religious practice, and in the arts. Our appreciation for how language operates in culture generally is enhanced by the comparative study of cultures, the entrance point to those studies being accessed through language.

With many languages and cultures teetering on the verge of extinction today, linguists play a critically important role in assuring the preservation of the full treasure of human knowledge through their documentation of endangered languages.

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## Government Financial Support for Linguistics

Much of the support for consequential ground laying work in linguistics comes from governmental agencies. The early work of linguistics that led to advances in computer technology was supported by the Department of Defense and later by both defense and intelligence agencies. The State Department and the Smithsonian Institution supported much early research in describing languages. Some of this effort has since passed to the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Educational applications of linguistics are primarily supported today through the Department of Education, though certain vocational education programs with language components may also be funded through the Department of Labor. The social and biological applications of linguistics, including those focused on language acquisition and cognitive linguistics are supported through some of these same agencies, but in addition through the National Institutes of Health.