Introduction

The harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language . . . Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1981[1958])

Language gives form to thought. Thought itself is hidden, internal, intangible, whereas language seems to be external, physical, exposed for all the world to see and hear. But is it really? Certainly the noises we make when we communicate using spoken language are "external" in that they are physical modifications of the mind–external environment in the form of complex sound waves moving through air. But the noises themselves are not the essence of our language. We often think in language without overt expression. When we write, we say we are writing "in a language," even though the medium is visible marks (or pixels) rather than noises. Signed languages used by the deaf are still languages, though they don't rely on sounds at all. The forms of language are certainly not random, like the sound of water tumbling over rocks in a stream. Regardless of the form it takes, language is governed by complex underlying patterns. If there were no consistent patterns, people would not be able to communicate with one another, and, after all, language is all about communication. It is the harmony between underlying patterns and external expression that is the essence of language.

So where do these patterns that constitute a language exist? Some would argue that they exist in the minds of individuals. But if they are purely mind-internal and individual, how can two individuals ever "understand" one another? Somehow the linguistic patterns in one person's mind must match, more or less closely, the patterns in another person's mind in order for communication between minds to take place. Therefore, others would argue, the patterns that give structure to the noises and other gestures people make when they communicate in a language exist "out there" in a community. In this view, being born into a community exposes an individual to patterns of communication that automatically and unconsciously become part of that person's way of being, like the culture-specific ways in which people walk, eat, or dress. The fact is that any human with common mental,

emotional, and physical capacities and needs, participating in a community with other humans, develops patterned communicative behavior of the sort we call "language" in all parts of the known universe.

Imagine for a moment a community of ten people living on a remote island, each person being a native speaker of a different language, and none of them having any knowledge of any of the languages spoken by the other nine. What do you think would happen over time? Would they all just retreat from one another, and never communicate? Hardly likely, given the social nature of human beings. Would they each just speak their own language, and expect everyone else to understand? That doesn't seem like a very efficient solution either. Would they all somehow agree to learn one of the languages, and use that one all the time? Or is there some other possibility? I expect that eventually certain patterns would begin to emerge in the communicative behavior of the inhabitants of this hypothetical community. Such patterns may be a combination of gestures, grunts, and words from the ten native languages, but they would be uniquely adapted to the situations in which the people in this community find themselves. Recurring situations would call for recurring communicative acts – requests for goods, offers of assistance, expressions of facts, emotions, etc. Eventually, a new and unique system of communicative habit patterns would develop, especially suited to the needs of that particular community. Children born into the community would naturally begin using that system, and eventually lose all concept of their parents' original native languages, though the language of the community would bear traces of all ten original languages.

Of course, such a pristine situation for the development of a new language never exists in reality. However, this thought experiment does represent reasonably well some of the forces that shape real languages: a need to communicate in a specific historical, geographic, and social context, plus the physical and cognitive equipment it takes to cultivate a system that we can call a human language. Thus, the conditions that give rise to language are both external and internal to individual minds. The individual habit patterns that arise become part of the shared ways of being and cultural heritage of a community.

1 What is "English"?

This question is actually harder to answer than it may seem at first. I've just characterized a language as unconscious habit patterns that arise naturally in human communities. At the beginning of the third millennium of the Common Era (CE), there are literally thousands of communities around the world in which community members speak "English." Are all the sets of communicative habit patterns that have arisen in all of these communities really "the same"? Not by any

means. In fact even the patterns employed by one individual speaker vary considerably from time to time and place to place. This variation is multiplied when compounded among all the members of a community, and then compounded again from one community to the next. In fact, a language is never *one thing*. For this reason, it is impossible to "capture" any language within the pages of a book. A language is a constantly changing and infinitely variable symbolic system. Trying to describe it explicitly is like trying to describe a river. Every river rises and falls with the seasons, and its path changes from year to year. Sometimes it may be calm and gentle, while other times raging and violent. A large river has tributaries and rivulets that contribute to its character. Sometimes it is hard to tell whether a particular rivulet is part of the "mainstream" or not. Nevertheless, in spite of all this variation and change, you know when you've come to the bank of a river. You have a general idea where you are going if you are floating down a river, and you can probably map a river's course in a general way that remains stable in its broad outlines over time.

Like a river, a language varies dramatically and is constantly changing. However, there are certain generalizations that do seem to hold constant over most of the speech varieties that have been called English at any given point in time and space. In this book, I will attempt to describe and explain a good portion of these generalizations. I will use several terms to refer to the subject matter of this book. The most general term is simply *English*. When I use this term, I am referring to generalizations that seem to hold across most, if not all, the symbolic systems known as "English" around the world in about 2010 CE. Of course, as the author of this text, I have not investigated all of these varieties myself, and so some of the claims and examples may be controversial. However, I have tried to base all claims on empirical evidence from naturally occurring "English" discourse.

Sometimes I will use the term "Old English" to refer to the major language spoken in the southern British Isles before the Norman Conquest in 1066 CE (see Chapter 1), and "Middle English" to refer to the language spoken and written in the same area between 1066 and the time of William Shakespeare, about 1500 CE. "Modern English" technically refers to the language of Shakespeare's plays and all later varieties. However, from the time of Shakespeare on, English began to be carried around the world by British sailors, armies, missionaries, and settlers, and so became vastly more fragmented than it had ever been in its earlier stages. It is therefore even more difficult to characterize "Modern English" in any coherent way than it is to characterize Old English or Middle English (though those varieties are challenging enough). For this reason, I'll sometimes use the terms "Englishes" or "Modern Englishes" to refer to the many varieties known as "English" at the time this book is being written.

Sometimes I will use the terms "spoken English" or "written English" when contrasting features that vary depending on the medium. As a linguist, my

preference is to consider spoken language to be primary, and written language to be secondary. For this reason, spoken or VERNACULAR forms may sometimes appear in this book. These may include unconventional spellings, like *gonna*, or *wassup*, to non-standard morphological and syntactic constructions, like *He just bees himself*, or *I'm all, like, "thanks a lot."* When such forms are used in examples, they are meant to illustrate important points about the functions, history, or development of English.

Sometimes the term "Contemporary Standard English" (or CSE) will be used to refer to an international "Standard" English that is prevalent at the beginning of the third millennium. This would comprise the written standards of Great Britain, the USA, Canada, and other countries around the world in which English is the acknowledged majority language. Of course, these countries are independent speech communities themselves, and as such have their own standard written and spoken varieties, just as communities within these countries have their own standards. Certainly, however, most of the variation in English occurs in countries where English is not the MOTHER TONGUE (i.e., the first language) of most of the population, yet serves as a *LINGUA FRANCA*, or language of wider communication, among speech communities that have different mother tongues. This would include notably South Asia, and the ANGLOPHONE countries of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Each of these countries, and regions within them, have their own variety of English. For example, Standard Filipino English is very different from Standard Indian English, and both are different in their own ways from international CSE, as represented in internationally marketed dictionaries and pedagogical grammars. In countries where English is neither the majority language nor a *lingua franca*, such as Korea, Japan, and Mexico, people have their own ways of speaking, teaching, and writing English. In this book, I will try to be as honest as possible about variation when it exists, but will focus on the commonalities among all of these varieties commonly known as "English."

2 What is a linguistic perspective?

There are many possible perspectives one might take toward the shared habit patterns that make up a language. When a language has been written for a long time, such as Chinese, Kurdish, Korean, Arabic, Xibe, Italian, Tamil, English, and hundreds of others, traditions develop that tend to influence the perspective people take toward their language. Usually such traditions arise among an educated, literate few who have a strong sense of history, respectability, and correctness. Just as there are venerated traditions in art, so there are venerated traditions in grammar and other aspects of language usage. Since the literate few usually control educational systems, these venerated traditions lead to deeply ingrained

ideas concerning what is "proper" usage, and what language varieties are "better" than others. This is sometimes called a "prescriptive" perspective on language, because it consists of prescriptions of how one ought and ought not to speak.

Yet, most people in the world do not think very much about the "proper" way to speak their language at all. They simply use it. By about the age of six years, most people are perfectly fluent native speakers of one or more languages. They apparently effortlessly learn the categories and patterns that constitute the grammar of their language entirely subconsciously. Speakers simply concentrate on their need to communicate with others – and the language of their social environment becomes the most readily available and natural tool for doing this. From this perspective, different people speak differently simply because they exist in different social environments, with no sense that one environment is inherently "better" than any other. Judgments about what is correct and incorrect only arise when communication breaks down. For example, people who must communicate across environments, such as those who want to sell goods in many different communities, must adjust their speech to the patterns of their clients or risk losing business because of miscommunication. We may call this approach a "pragmatic" perspective on language.

In this book, we will be taking a "linguistic perspective" on the grammar of English. A linguistic perspective does not deny the value of knowing the prescriptive norms of a speech community, especially communities with long literary traditions. After all, the "standard" variety of a language is a legitimate variety, and anyone who wishes to interact effectively in the community who uses that variety must be aware of its peculiarities and norms. At the same time, a linguistic perspective affirms the essentially pragmatic, or "functional," nature of language – namely, that language is a means to an end for most people. Communication is unquestionably the major intended result of language in use. For this reason, it makes sense that the structures of language can be described and insightfully *understood* in terms of the essential property of language as a tool for communication.

A linguistic perspective recognizes that language consists of elements of form, such as words, phrases, and clauses, that people employ to "mean," "express," "represent," or "refer to" concepts they wish to communicate with others. Although linguists often imply that the linguistic forms themselves express concepts, this must be taken as a shorthand way of saying that speakers *use* linguistic forms (among other tools) to accomplish acts of expressing, referring, representing, etc. (Brown and Yule 1983:27ff). For example, a WORD is a linguistic element. Its form is just a complex gesture, either vocal or via some other medium, that produces an effect in the external environment. What makes the form a *word* rather than just a random "noise" is that it is produced intentionally in order to express some idea. When used by a skilled speaker, words can combine into larger structures, such as

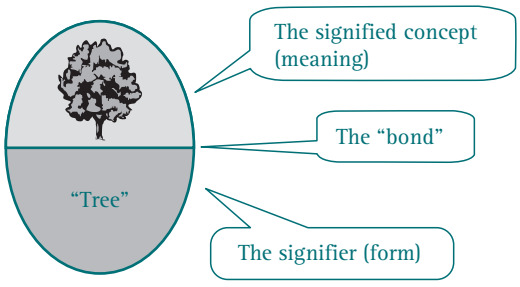

Figure 1 The form–meaning composite

PHRASES, CLAUSES, SENTENCES, and DISCOURSES, including conversations, speeches, arguments, textbooks, and other highly complex communicative acts. While the forms of language may aid in the formulation of concepts, or may constrain the concepts that can be expressed, the forms themselves are logically distinct from the concepts that might be communicated.

Langacker (1987), building on Saussure (1915), describes linguistic units as consisting of form–meaning composites. The upper half of the diagram in Figure 1 represents the meanings, concepts, or ideas expressed in language, while the bottom half represents the linguistic forms. The line across the center represents the relationship, or the BOND between the two. Various terms can be used to refer to the components of this composite. Terms associated with the top half include "meaning," "semantics," "signified," "function," "conceptual domain," and "content." Terms associated with the bottom half include "structure," "form," "sign," "signifier," and "symbol." The idea is that every symbolic act consists of some external *form* that represents or stands for some internal (or "underlying") *concept*.

As a typographical convention, in this book I will use all capital letters when referring to meanings, and lower case letters when referring to forms. For example, TREE refers to the meaning of the English word *tree*, whereas *tree* refers to the word itself.

In ancient times, philosophers who thought about language often considered words to be inherently connected to their meanings. Of course, the language of the philosopher (Sanskrit, Greek, or Latin) most closely represented the "true" meanings of words. In more recent times, linguists have tended to emphasize the ARBITRARINESS of linguistic form. That is to say, there is no necessary connection between the form of a symbol and its meaning. The noise spelled *tree* in English certainly has no inherent connection to the range of concepts that it can express. Indeed, even in closely related languages, such as German and French, very different noises (spelled *baum* and *arbre* respectively) express essentially the same range of concepts. Even more recently, linguists are beginning to notice that linguistic signs are arbitrary to a certain extent, but that they are also MOTIVATED by factors such as understandability, ICONICITY (including SOUND SYMBOLISM), and economy.[1] It seems that somewhere there is a balance to be struck between arbitrariness and motivation of the bond between form and meaning.

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While the notion of the form–meaning composite is most easily described using an example such as *tree*, a linguistic perspective considers all linguistic units to be form–meaning composites. This also includes meaningful parts of words (BOUND MORPHEMES) and syntactic constructions (see Chapter 4 on morphology and Chapters 7 and 8 on syntax). Everything a speaker knows about his or her language can be thought of as an IDEALIZED form linked to a range of plausible intended meanings.

Linguists assume that the bond between a sign and a signified concept is intentional. That is, language users *intend* to establish a link between form and meaning – they consciously *want* their utterances to be understood. From this it follows that the forms used to represent concepts will be structured so as to make the link obvious, within limits of cognition and memory. This is not to deny the possibility that certain aspects of language may actually have no relation to the concepts expressed or may even serve to *conceal* concepts. However, we make it a working assumption that in general language users want and expect linguistic forms to represent concepts to be communicated. Therefore, the bond between form and meaning is *motivated by* (i.e., makes sense in terms of) the desire of speakers to make their messages understandable.

In any symbolic system, there must be consistency in the relationship between the symbols and categories or dimensions in the symbolized realm. We do not live in a "Humpty Dumpty world" where words mean anything we want them to mean (Carroll 1872). In order to communicate with others, we have to count on the probability that words and other structures in our language mean approximately the same thing to other people as they do to us. Ideal symbolic systems (e.g., computer "languages") maximize this principle by establishing a direct, invariant coding relationship between every form and its meaning or meanings. However, real languages are not ideal symbolic systems in this sense. They exist in an environment where variation and change are normal. New functions appear every day in the form of new situations, concepts, and perspectives that speakers wish to express. Vocal and auditory limitations cause inexact articulation and incomplete perception of utterances. These and many other factors lead to variation in the form of language, even in the speech of a single individual. The bond between form and meaning in real language is neither rigid nor random; it is direct enough to allow communication, but flexible enough to allow for creativity, variation, and change.

A linguistic perspective, then, views any language as a large set of form–meaning composites employed by a community of speakers to accomplish communicative work. As we will see in the course of this book, this perspective provides a consistent way, not just of describing, but also of *understanding* the various structures and patterns that make up the language. I hope to convince the reader that English is not simply a list of rules to be memorized. It is a dynamic, ever-changing, and complex tool kit used to express the kinds of ideas human beings need to express in their day-to-day lives. As with any tool kit, the forms (the tools) that make up a language "make

sense" in terms of their functions, though they are not precisely determined (or mathematically "predicted") by those functions.

Viewing language as a tool kit has profound consequences for all kinds of applications. Whether you are planning to contribute to linguistic theory, document one of the many unwritten languages of the world, prepare educational materials, translate or interpret between languages, teach, or learn to speak a second language, you will profit greatly from a perspective that considers language as a tool for communication.

Conceptual categories

Every language categorizes the universe in its own unique way. This truism is obvious to anyone who has tried to learn a second language. In fact, one could go a step further and say that each individual person categorizes the universe in a unique way. A good part of the art of human communication involves figuring out how our individual categorization scheme compares with the schemes of people we are trying to communicate with, whether we are speaking the "same language" or not. For example, when learning Korean, speakers of English are likely to be perplexed when they find that Korean has at least two pronouns that correspond to each first and second person subject pronoun of English. Here are the two systems compared:

(1)

English Subject pronouns

	Singular	Plural
1st person	I	we
2nd person	you	you

(2)

Korean Subject pronouns:

	Singular	Plural
1st person	저 [ʧɔ] or 나 [na]	저희 [ʧɔhi] or 우리 [uri]
2nd person	당신 [taŋʃɪn] or 너[nɔ]	당신들 [taŋʃɪndɯl] or 너희들 [nɔhidɯl]

It turns out that Korean pronouns are *categorized* differently than English pronouns are. There is an additional distinction in these Korean pronouns that just isn't made categorically in English. This is the distinction between formal and informal speech. Here is a better chart of the Korean pronouns:

(3)

	Korean Subject pronouns			
	Formal		Informal	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
1st person	저 [ʧɔ]	저희 [ʧɔhi]	나 [na]	우리 [uri]
2nd person	당신 [taŋʃɪn]	당신들 [taŋʃɪndɯl]	너[nɔ]	너희들 [nɔhidɯl]

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English speakers trying to learn Korean tend to have a very difficult time remembering when to use one or the other of the two possibilities for each of these pronouns. This is because for English speakers, the distinction between formal and informal speech is not ingrained in their cognitive habit patterns. Now, this isn't to say that English speakers can't *understand* the difference between formal and informal speech, or even that they can't make a distinction that is similar to the Korean use of informal and formal pronouns when speaking or writing English. It's just that this distinction is not a deeply ingrained *conceptual category* for English speakers. They must adjust their mental framework in order to speak Korean at all fluently. Such mismatches between conceptual categories in different languages are common in vocabulary, grammar, and patterns of conversation.

The word "category" is a very useful and common word in linguistics. We can define the term CONCEPTUAL CATEGORY in a technical way to describe some specific element of meaning that speakers of a language pay special attention to grammatically. This will help us understand how languages differ in the ways they express ideas, and therefore help us understand many of the problems that second language learners of Modern English have in assimilating English grammatical patterns.

In order to be a conceptual category a particular element of meaning must underlie some structural pattern. It does not need to be a perfectly consistent or regular pattern, but there needs to be a pattern. For example PAST TENSE is an element of meaning that speakers may express when they use any English verb. There is an expectation that verbs in English can be "tweaked" morphologically (often with the ending *-ed*) if the event being described occurred prior to the time the verb is uttered. The particular pattern for expressing past tense varies considerably from verb to verb, but every verb has a past tense form.[2] New verbs that come into the language also must be assigned a past tense form. This is evidence that a recurring pattern exists, and therefore past tense is a conceptual category in English.

In order to clarify the notion of conceptual category, it may help to contrast conceptual categories with other possible meaning elements that are never categories in any language, and with some that are categories in some languages, but not others. For example, I do not believe there is any language in the world that includes an expectation that verbs should be grammatically marked for the altitude above sea level of the event described by the verb. Such a language is conceivable, because this meaning element can probably be expressed in any language: *We slept at 2000 meters* or *they ordered rice and dal at sea level*. However, I doubt whether any language has a recurring grammatical pattern (prefixes, suffixes, a set of AUXILIARIES, etc.) that regularly shapes clauses for this precise parameter of meaning.

In addition to elements of meaning that are not conceptual categories in any language, there are also elements of meaning that are categories in some languages but not in others. Formal vs. informal speech, as illustrated in (3) above, is one example. Another is "location downriver." This is not a conceptual category that is relevant to the grammar of English, though in many languages in the riverene areas of South America it is. The reason that location downriver is not a category that is relevant to English grammar is that there is no regular expectation that clauses involve *grammatical* indication that an action happens "downriver" from the place of speaking. Certainly English speakers *may* specify that an action occurs "downriver" by enriching the clause with additional material, e.g., *He went fishing downriver*. However, without the adverb *downriver* in this example, no assertion is made as to where the event occurred: *He went fishing*. The event described by this clause could have happened anywhere, including downriver from the place of utterance or any other conceivable reference point. In Yagua (a language spoken in the rainforest region of Peru), however, there is a set of about ten verb suffixes that orient the location of the event to the location of the other events in the discourse, including one that means "downriver" (glossed DR in the following example):

(4) Naada-rããyãã-*mu*-yada 'They two danced around downriver.'
they.2-dance.around-DR-past

If none of the suffixes in this set are used, the implication is that the event happened in a neutral location, normally at the same place as the other events in the particular discourse. Therefore, we want to say that *location* describes a set (or PARADIGM) of conceptual categories in Yagua, similar to the way *tense* describes a set of conceptual categories, past and non-past, in English.

The important ideas to keep in mind at this point are:

- A conceptual category exists when there is an *expectation of patterned behavior* – a recurring relationship between variation in form and variation in meaning.
- The conceptual categories of one language do not necessarily match the conceptual categories of even closely related languages. Sometimes one language will have a conceptual category or paradigm of conceptual categories that is totally missing in another language. Other times, conceptual categories may be similar in two languages, but they may be different enough that communication is impaired if the categorial system of one language is imposed on the other.

The expression of conceptual categories

There are three broad EXPRESSION TYPES, or ways of expressing conceptual categories in all languages. These can be described as LEXICAL EXPRESSION, MORPHOLOGICAL EXPRESSION, and SYNTACTIC (or ANALYTIC) EXPRESSION. Each of these expression