This is an engaging introduction to the study of language for undergraduate or beginning graduate students, aimed especially at those who would like to continue further linguistic study. It introduces students to analytical thinking about language but goes beyond existing texts to show what it means to think like a scientist about language, through the exploration of data and interactive problem sets. A key feature of this text is its flexibility. With its focus on foundational areas of linguistics and scientific analysis, it can be used in a variety of course types, with instructors using it alongside other information or texts as appropriate for their own courses of study. The text can also serve as a supplementary text in other related fields (speech and hearing sciences, psychology, education, computer science, anthropology, and others) to help learners in these areas better understand how linguists think about and work with language data. No prerequisites are necessary. While each chapter often references content from the others, the three central chapters, on sound, structure, and meaning, may be used in any order.

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Thinking like a Linguist
An Introduction to the Science of Language

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>xi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xiii</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introducing Language Analysis</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What You Learn in This Chapter</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What Is Language?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why Language Is</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What Language Is</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Languages Are Cookies</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Modules of Language</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unconscious Knowledge of Language</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Competence vs. Performance</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being a Linguist and Doing Linguistics</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data that Linguists Gather</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Synthesis and Analysis</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Describing Non-Native Grammars</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scientific Study</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scientific Method: Step by Step</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Let’s Practice!</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More to Discover</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More to Consider</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Analyzing Sound: Phonetics and Phonology</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What You Learn in This Chapter</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phonetics Overview</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acoustic Phonetics</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Waves</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speech Sound Waves</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spectrograms</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>vii</td>
<td>Major Class Features</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii</td>
<td>Place Features</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii</td>
<td>Laryngeal Features</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii</td>
<td>Manner Features</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii</td>
<td>Let's Practice!</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii</td>
<td>More to Discover</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii</td>
<td>More to Consider</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii</td>
<td>References</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3 Analyzing Structure: Morphology and Syntax

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>What You Learn in This Chapter</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Morphology Overview</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Types of Words</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Types of Affixes</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Typology: Analytic to Synthetic</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mid-Chapter Summary: Morphology</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Syntax Overview</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Grammatical Functions</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Basic Word Orders and Word Order Variation Rules</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Questions: A Case Study</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Underlying Representation (UR) and Surface Representation (SR)</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Verbs and Their Requirements</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Syntactic Knowledge about Other Lexical Categories</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Structure of the Clause</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Identifying Phrasal Categories (Constituency)</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hierarchical Structure: Evidence from Ambiguity</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Recursion</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Word Order Variations</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Let’s Practice!</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>More to Discover</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>More to Consider</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>References</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4 Analyzing Meaning: Semantics and Pragmatics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>What You Learn in This Chapter</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Semantics Overview</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Feature Theory</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Prototype Theory</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contents

Formal (Compositional) Semantics 157
Lexical Meaning 162
  Commonsense Meanings 162
  Word Relationships 163
Grammatical Meaning Connected to Grammatical Categories 172
Nouns and Their Meaning Categories 172
  Noun Classifiers and Gender 174
  Pronoun Semantics 175
Verbs and Their Meaning Categories 176
Modality and Evidentiality 180
(Non-)Compositionality 182
Mid-Chapter Summary: Semantics 188
Pragmatics Overview 189
Speech Acts 191
  Performatives 191
  Direct and Indirect Speech Acts 193
(Im-)Politeness 197
Politeness and Intimacy 199
Politeness Maxims 200
Crosslinguistic Politeness 201
  Compliments 201
Being (Un-)Cooperative in Conversation 202
  The Cooperative Principle 202
  Gricean Maxims 203
  Implicature 204
  Other Kinds of Implicature 206
  M-Implicature 206
  Q-Implicature 207
Conclusion 207
Let's Practice! 208
More to Consider 209
More to Discover 209
References 211

5 Analyzing Language: Putting It All Together 213
What You Learn in This Chapter 213
Introduction 213
Linguistic Analysis at the Intersections 214
  Sounds and Structure: Morphophonology 214
  Sounds and Meaning: Intonation 217
  Structure and Meaning 219
### Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scientific Tools</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound Tools</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure and Meaning Tools</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privilege and Responsibility</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Science and Formalism</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Index 231
Thinking like a Linguist grows out of the teaching of a course called Linguistic Analysis we offer for linguistics majors and minors that guides them to think analytically using linguistic data. It introduces students to analytical thinking about language, as any introductory text does, but goes beyond existing texts to show what it means to think like a scientist about language through the exploration of data and interactive problem sets.

The development of this text has come from our own and others’ desire for a text that better matches what we try to accomplish in a course that is committed to helping students understand what it means to be a linguist and to practice the skills, understand the approaches, and gain the fundamental knowledge that allows them to pursue further study in the field. Unlike many introductory courses and texts that try not only to introduce students to the core components of the field but also to see how they interact with other related disciplines, topics, and careers, this text is more narrowly focused on the scientific methodology needed in order to do linguistics.

The book offers foundational knowledge of linguistics. The traditional areas of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics are combined into three central chapters on sound, structure, and meaning. The focus is on problem-solving, conducting analysis, and employing scientific methodology, as well as learning just enough terminology and metalanguage for access to further study and a shared vocabulary. This organization allows us to make the approach less English-centric than that of many other texts, since the traditional separation between the central areas of study is typically informed by Indo-European language study, and to home in on the phenomena rather than simply adopting the typical steps of description and explanation found in many introductory texts.

The book is intended to be an introduction to linguistics for the undergraduate or beginning graduate student, and it is especially targeted at those students who would like to continue further linguistic study. The flexibility of the text is a key feature. Because it is focused on foundational areas of linguistics and scientific analysis, it may be used in a variety of types of courses, with instructors supplementing other information or texts as appropriate for their own courses of study. This text can also serve as a supplementary text in other related fields (speech and hearing sciences, psychology, education, computer science, anthropology, and others) to teach students in these disciplines to better understand how linguists think about and work with language data. No prerequisites are necessary. While
each chapter often references content from the others, the three central chapters on sound, structure, and meaning can be used in any order.

There are ample opportunities for students to engage in the kind of problem-solving that we want them to be able to do. Students will not only fully explore the methodology of linguistic problem-solving but also gain a real understanding of and appreciation for a critical approach to language study. Many other texts make use of the methodology and expect students to use a scientific approach but do not detail how students should go about that, nor allow them ample opportunity to practice the methodology. This feature is unique to our text and is highlighted through the use of intertextual problems and exercises.

The book’s unique exercise integration includes three types, called Practice (with pointers in the text → to the appropriate practice exercise at the end of the chapter), Discover, and Consider. Practice questions allow students to practice using tools such as phonetic transcription, breaking words into morphemes, identifying lexical or phrasal categories, identifying semantic features, or labeling maxims of conversation. These are at the end of each chapter, but indicators (with an →) suggest where the reader should pause reading and practice doing. In addition to the Let’s Practice exercises at the end of the chapter, there are More to Discover and More to Consider exercises. The Discover exercises guide students to do just that – to discover linguistic patterns of sound, structure, or meaning. Some of these ask students to “conduct some research” or “go online to find out about.” Such research should be done thoughtfully, with attention to where the information is coming from. Where possible, students should use peer-reviewed sources. An abbreviated list of some good online resources includes The Linguist List, Language Log, Speech Accent Archive, and The World Atlas of Language Structures Online. The Consider exercises prompt students to delve into open questions. These, too, are included within the text of each chapter, and additional ones are found at the end of each chapter. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 each contain three Spotlight boxes focused on psycholinguistics, on sociolinguistics, and on historical linguistics, connecting material from each chapter to these important related areas of linguistics study.
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First and foremost, we thank our students, past and present. Their questions, their comments, their intuitions, their energy, and their enthusiasm make us better teachers and better scholars.

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We are grateful to be at Western Washington University, where the relationship between good teaching and good scholarship is recognized and where scholarly teaching is celebrated.

We look forward to your feedback, readers!