

A student-friendly guide through the maze of linguistics

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Abstract:

Published in the university series 'UTB Basics', Annette Becker and Markus Bieswanger's Introduction to English Linguistics does a fine job as a basic textbook for undergraduate students studying linguistics. The volume gives a systematic overview of the major fields of linguistics from phonology to sociolinguistics, discussing fundamental linguistic theories with clarity and ease. Numerous examples, figures and exercises contribute to its student-friendliness and help fulfil the authors' promise to provide a textbook for undergraduates with no prior knowledge of linguistics. Hence its suitability as a reference book both for teachers of introductory courses and for undergraduates preparing for an exam in linguistics.

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Annette Becker, Markus Bieswanger: Introduction to English Linguistics. Tübingen/Basel: A. Francke Verlag, 2006. 229 Seiten, zahlr. Abb., Paperback, Uni-Taschenbücher GmbH Stuttgart | ISBN: 3825227529 14.90 EUR

Many introductory textbooks claim to make linguistic theories easy to grasp, yet few manage to live up to their promise. Becker and Bieswanger's textbook is a notable exception: it stands out with its obvious student-friendliness. As the authors acknowledge, "this book is meant as a starting point that introduces beginners to the core branches and central concepts of the field" (S. VIII). This is not an easy task; to compress major linguistic theories into easily accessible bits of information is to run the risk of oversimplification. Still, the textbook manages to tackle in some detail theories as complex and diverse in nature as the X Bar Schema or suprasegmental phonology, and even gives an overview of the history of English from Roman times to its current position as a global lingua franca.

Introduction to English Linguistics consists of eight chapters, each of which is preceded by a table of contents and a brief summary of the main topics presented in the chapter. Exercises and a bibliography with a short evaluative annotation follow. A final chapter with an answer key and an eight-page index complete the book.

The opening chapter introduces the reader to the subject matter of linguistic research and the core branches of linguistics, giving credit to the most prominent linguistic schools and scholars of the 20th century and their contribution to the general discipline of linguistics. After this brief introduction, the authors delineate the four main periods in the history of English in chapter 2, "A Brief History of English", paying special attention to the colonial spread of English since the 17th century and its current status as a global language. The major characteristics of English vocabulary, morphology and syntax in each period are examined next and are related to internal and external factors of language change and key historical events. Chapter 3, entitled "Phonetics and Phonology", takes up the issue of sound production and presents the human speech organs and the classification of consonants and vowels according to IPA standards. A section on segmental phonology draws a clear distinction between phonemes as meaning-distinguishing units and allophones as their phonetic realizations and concludes with a discussion on the structure of the syllable and some aspects of connected speech.

Both chapter 4 and chapter 5 examine the relationship between grammar and morpho-syntactic units like morphemes, words, phrases and sentences. In chapter 4, entitled "Morphology", the reader is presented with the common classification of morphemes into free and

bound morphemes and the types of morphological processes in which bound morphemes participate. Furthermore, word-formation phenomena like derivation and compounding are discussed in greater detail and supported by examples from the English and German lexicon. The most comprehensive chapter in this textbook, "Syntax" focuses on the categorization of syntactic elements and their inflectional properties within phrases and sentences. By means of various tests and examples, the authors elucidate the differences between words, sentences, clauses and phrases. Furthermore, the reader is familiarized with Chomsky's minimalist program and learns about the X Bar Schema and related syntactic operations like the Merge and the Move Operations, which are dealt with at greater length in the following sections of the chapter. The last section concludes the discussion with the meaning relations between predicates and arguments.

Meaning relationships among words and the nature of word meaning are presented in the next chapter, entitled "Semantics". This chapter examines pairs of semantic concepts like connotation/denotation, sense/reference and intension/extension in turn, proceeding with structural ambiguity and sentence interpretations. Finally, it briefly touches upon the prototype theory of semantic categorization. Chapter 7, "Pragmatics", extends the analysis of meaning in context and meaning in interaction to consider major pragmatic notions like the three types of deixis, together with Grice's Cooperative Principle and the speech act theory.

The last chapter in the textbook takes up the issue of sociolinguistics. Here, the reader learns about the geographical and social differentiation of language and is familiarized with sociolinguistic terms like variety, dialect and accent. The authors also consider the social and geographical differentiation of language and conclude the chapter with a discussion on gender-specific language use and the non-sexist language reform.

Overall, Introduction to English Linguistics has a number of points of merit. The chapter organisation is easy to follow; chapters are concise and feature a selection of exercises and bibliographical entries. Each bibliographical entry itself is annotated with a short playful comment on the entry's content, significance and readability, which undergraduates may find inviting for further reading. The eight-page index at the end of the book, which lists both names and important concepts in linguistics, is also valuable. Still, most striking about this book is its excellent visual appeal. Key terms are given in bold letters, examples in italics, tables and figures are visualized in blue textboxes and important points are often highlighted in dark blue. Thus, the risk of inexperienced readers losing themselves in the jungle of long passages of opaque theory is greatly minimized, which accounts for the main appeal of this book.

Of course, like every other introductory textbook, Introduction to English Linguistics has its shortcomings. A minor point is that, contrary to the authors' promise not to "attempt to cover all details of a growing and increasingly fragmented discipline" (S. VIII), the book tries to condense as much information as possible within its 229 pages, with the result that it sometimes runs the risk of providing mere lists of theories and notions with little explanation. A further

point of criticism concerns the uneven distribution of topics within a few chapters. In particular, there is little justification for devoting fifteen pages of "Syntax" to the X Bar Schema and the Merge and Move Operations, especially given that the target audience is at a beginner level. Another disparity can be observed in Chapter 8, "Sociolinguistics", where gender varieties are paid much greater attention than regional or social varieties of language.

Nonetheless, Introduction to English Linguistics is without doubt a well-written and useful introductory work, which is perfectly accessible for students at an undergraduate level. The real value of this textbook lies in its clarity, visual appeal and general student-friendliness.