Preface

For over a century, linguists have been trying to explain linguistics to other people who they believe should be interested in their subject matter. After all, everyone speaks at least one language and most people have fairly strong views about their own language. The most distinguished scholars in every generation have written general books about language and linguistics targeted at educated laypeople and at scholars in adjacent disciplines, and some of these books have become classics, at least among linguists. The first great American linguist, William Dwight Whitney, published *The Life and Growth of Language: An Outline of Linguistic Science*, in 1875. In the dozen years between 1921 and 1933, the three best known English-speaking linguists in the world (Edward Sapir in 1921, Otto Jespersen in 1922, and Leonard Bloomfield in 1933) all wrote books under the title *Language*. All were very successful and continued to be reprinted for many years. In our own time, Noam Chomsky, certainly the most famous of theoretical linguists, has tried to make his ideas on language more accessible in such less technical books as *Language and Mind* (1968) and *Reflections on Language* (1975). And more recently, Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (1995) stayed on the best-seller list for many months.

Despite these efforts, linguistics has not made many inroads into educated public discourse. Although linguists in the last hundred years have uncovered a great deal about human language and how it is acquired and used, the advances and discoveries are still mostly unknown outside a small group of practitioners. Many reasons have been given for this gap between academic and public thinking about language, the most commonly cited reasons being: that people have strong and sometimes erroneous views about language and have little interest in being disabused of their false beliefs; or that people are too close to language to be able to see that it has interesting and complex properties. Whatever the reason, the gap remains and is getting larger the more we learn about language.

The Handbook of Linguistics is a general introductory volume designed to address this gap in knowledge about language. Presupposing no prior knowledge

of linguistics, it is intended for people who would like to know what linguistics and its subdisciplines are about. The book was designed to be as nontechnical as possible, while at the same time serving as a repository for what is known about language as we enter the twenty-first century.

If *The Handbook of Linguistics* is to be regarded as authoritative, this will be in large part because of the identity of the authors of the chapters. We have recruited globally recognized leading figures to write each of the chapters. While the culture of academia is such that academic authors find it tremendously difficult to write anything for anyone other than their colleagues, our central editorial goal has been to avoid this pitfall. Our emphasis on the reader's perspective sets *The Handbook of Linguistics* apart from other similar projects.

The place of the field of linguistics in academia has been debated since its inception. When we look at universities, we may find a linguistics department in either the social sciences or the humanities. When we look at the American government agencies that fund university research, we find that the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, and the National Institutes of Health all routinely award grants for research in linguistics. So where does linguistics belong? The answer is not in where linguistics is placed administratively, but rather in how linguists think. Here the answer is quite clear: linguists by and large view themselves as scientists and they view their field as a science, the scientific study of language. This has been true since the nineteenth century, when Max Mueller could entitle a book published in 1869 *The Science of Language* and the first chapter of that book "The science of language one of the physical sciences."

The fact that linguistics is today defined as the scientific study of language carries with it the implicit claim that a science of language is possible, and this alone takes many by surprise. For surely, they say, language, like all human activity, is beyond the scope of true science. Linguists believe that their field is a science because they share the goals of scientific inquiry, which is objective (or more properly intersubjectively accessible) understanding. Once we accept that general view of science as a kind of inquiry, then it should be possible to have a science of anything, so long as it is possible to achieve intersubjectively accessible understanding of that thing. There are, of course, those who deny the possibility of such scientific understanding of anything, but we will not broach that topic here.

We now know that the possibility of scientific understanding depends largely on the complexity and regularity of the object of study. Physics has been so successful because the physical world is, relatively speaking, highly regular and not terribly complex. Human sciences, by contrast, have been much less successful and much slower to produce results, largely because human behavior is so complex and not nearly so regular as is the physical or even the biological world. Language, though, contrasts with other aspects of human behavior precisely in its regularity, what has been called its rule-governed nature. It is precisely this property of language and language-related behavior that has

allowed for fairly great progress in our understanding of this delimited area of human behavior. Furthermore, the fact that language is the defining property of humans, that it is shared across all human communities and is manifested in no other species, means that by learning about language we will inevitably also learn about human nature.

Each chapter in this book is designed to describe to the general reader the state of our knowledge at the beginning of the twenty-first century of one aspect of human language. The authors of each chapter have devoted most of their adult lives to the study of this one aspect of language. Together, we believe, these chapters provide a broad yet detailed picture of what is known about language as we move into the new millennium. The chapters are each meant to be free-standing. A reader who is interested in how children acquire language, for example, should be able to turn to chapter 19 and read it profitably without having to turn first to other chapters for assistance. But the physical nature of a book entails that there be an order of presentation. We begin with general overview chapters that consider the origins of language as species-specific behavior and describe the raw material with which linguists work (languages of the world and writing systems), frame the discipline within its historical context, and look at how linguists acquire new data from previously undescribed languages (field linguistics). The book then turns to the traditional subdisciplines of linguistics. Here we have followed most linguistics books in starting from the bottom, grounding language first in the physical world of sound (phonetics) and moving up through the organization of sound in language (phonology), to the combination of sounds into words (morphology), and the combination of words into sentences (syntax). Meaning (semantics) usually comes next, on the grounds that it operates on words and sentences. These areas are traditionally said to form the core of linguistics, because they deal with the most formally structured aspects of language. Within the last few decades, however, linguists have come to realize that we cannot understand the most formally structured aspects of language without also understanding the way language is used to convey information (pragmatics) in conversation (discourse) and in literature, and the way language interacts with other aspects of society (sociolinguistics).

Fifty years ago, many of our chapters would have been absent from a book of this sort for the simple but dramatic reason that these fields of inquiry did not exist: language acquisition, multilingualism, sign language, neurolinguistics, computational linguistics, and all of the areas of applied linguistics to which we have devoted separate chapters (the one area of applied linguistics that did exist fifty years ago was language teaching).

The chapters are of a uniform length, approximately 10,000 words each, or about 25 printed pages. This length is substantial enough for a major essay, while being short enough so as not to overwhelm the reader. Applied linguistics is divided into several distinct areas that would be of interest to students and others who want to know what practical applications linguistics has. Because each of the applied linguistics chapters covers a more specialized area,

these chapters are somewhat shorter than the rest (approximately 4,000 words each, or about 10 printed pages).

We have tried not to emphasize ideology, but rather to divide things up by empirical criteria having to do with the sorts of phenomena that a given field of inquiry covers. We have thought long and hard about whether some of the major areas, especially syntax and phonology, should be broken down further, with a chapter each on distinct theoretical approaches. Our final decision was not to subdivide by theoretical approaches, based on a belief that the reader's perspective is paramount in books like this: readers of a companion do not want to know what the latest controversy is about or who disagrees with whom or who said what when. Rather, they want to have a reasonable idea of what linguistics or some subarea of linguistics can tell them. The authors have been able to do so without going into the latest controversies, though these controversies may occupy the linguists' everyday lives. The one area to which we have devoted more than one chapter is syntax, but this reflects the dominance of syntactic research in linguistics over the last half century.

We do not see this handbook as an introductory textbook, which would, for example, have questions or exercises at the end of each chapter. There are already enough introductory linguistics texts. We see it rather as an authoritative volume on what linguists know about language at the start of the twenty-first century. Each chapter covers the central questions and goals of a particular subdiscipline, what is generally accepted as known in that area, and how it relates to other areas.

When we embarked on this editorial enterprise, we expected to enjoy the interaction with many of our most distinguished colleagues that the preparation of this book would entail, which is so much easier now in the age of electronic correspondence. What we did not realize was how much we would learn from these colleagues about language and linguistics, simply from reading their work and discussing it with them. We thank all of the authors for this wonderful opportunity and we hope that the readers, too, will share in the same great pleasure.

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