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**Chapter Three**  
**Linguistic Theory**  
**From the Handbook of Educational Linguistics**

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# Linguistic Theory

## Linguistic Theory and Education

The links between education and language are fundamental and obvious:

1. Language is the main medium of education.
2. Literacy is one of the foundations of education.
3. Verbal intelligence is one of the most-used predictors of educational success.
4. Foreign or second languages are traditionally an important part of the school curriculum.
5. Education has a profound effect on language.

## Linguistic Theory

Linguists generally contrast theory and description:

**Description** comprises the details of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and so on of particular languages.

**Theory** covers more general ideas about how language works and about how we might study it.

It is helpful to divide theory into two areas, *ideas* and *models*. The *idea* that language is constantly changing with the various models of how and why it changes.

In contrast, *models* exist at the frontiers of research, so they attract controversy and they are complicated and hard to explain. Among linguists, it is the models rather than the ideas that are the live issues that deserve attention and debate, which may give the impression that linguistic theory has nothing to offer except models.

## Why Education Needs Linguistic Theory

In UK, teachers and educational managers have adopted the very useful term “Knowledge about Language” (KAL) as the name for explicit knowledge of facts and principles informed by the ideas of linguistics. Pupils should be taught (KAL) as they need it for different reasons in different subject areas.

**But** why is(KAL) important to deserve a serious place in curriculum? There are two main reasons for teaching (KAL):

1.A deeper understanding of language deserves a place in any liberal curriculum because of its long-term intellectual benefits.

2.KAL improves the language skills of writing, reading, speaking, and listening.

According to Chomsky, language is an ‘organ’ that grows unaided so that teaching is irrelevant to the growth of the mother tongue. however, this ‘nativist’ view is highly controversial and is challenged directly by a large number of linguists who believe that language is mostly learned from experience of usage rather than inherited genetically.

If schools took this idea seriously, foreign languages would be closely linked to the mother tongue, using the same ideas and technical metalanguage; this idea of a unified approach to language has been started in the UK for several decades under the title ‘language awareness’, a term which deliberately implies explicit knowledge tied to metalanguage. In this view, learners should be aware of how language works. This raises the same question as with first-language teaching: Does explicit teaching improve performance? The research evidence seems to have swung in favor of explicit teaching, what is sometimes called ‘focus on forms’ and whatever the explanation, the benefits of explicit attention to forms are clear.

It is important for teachers to understand how the use of language helps children to learn. For example, how talking about new ideas from geography helps children to integrate them into their existing knowledge. One influential theory, called **Language Across the Curriculum**, considers “students’ language, especially their informal talk and writing, as the key learning resource in the classroom”.

Finally, two ‘new’ curriculum subjects which have recently appeared in the UK curriculum: **citizenship and thinking**. Citizenship in the UK secondary curriculum covers three topics: **social and moral responsibility**, **community involvement**, and **political literacy**; it is easy to find links to linguistic theory in all these themes. The following are some of the more obvious linguistic topics which could arise in citizenship classes: bias in language, linguistic

markers of communities, bilingualism, language and ideology; these are all important and relevant topics and need the theoretical support of linguistics.

Linguists have been arguing for some time that linguistics is particularly well suited as a vehicle for teaching thinking skills, and in particular scientific thinking. There are many advantages of language as an area of inquiry:

1. The vast amounts of data are easily available either by introspection or by observation, so children can easily formulate and test hypotheses about their language system.
2. Language is an important tool for thinking, so children can explore thought processes such as classification and reasoning via language that they use for expressing processes.

### **Some important Linguistic Ideas**

**Description or Prescription** Linguistics is a descriptive discipline that documents and analyzes variations in language—such as differences across dialects, regions, and social groups—without judging them as "right" or "wrong." descriptive linguistics examines the social aspects of language, including how certain dialects face prejudice due to lower social status. Linguists observe and document such social biases and use this knowledge to challenge discrimination— for example, by analyzing sexist language to reveal how it reinforces gender inequality and to promote change

Conversely, some prescriptive initiatives aim for social reform, such as advocating for gender-inclusive terms like “The policeman or fireman arrived” Use: The police officer or firefighter arrived or “Welcome, ladies and gentlemen.” Use: "Welcome, everyone, folks, or distinguished guests. “to combat bias and promote inclusivity. **Variation or Uniformity** language is inherently dynamic and varies due to geographical, social, historical, and situational factors. In contrast to this natural diversity, some people advocate for linguistic uniformity, believing in a single "correct" form of a language. An effective education system, however, should embrace linguistic variation rather than enforce rigid rules. It should teach students about the diversity of dialects, styles, and registers, fostering a broad understanding of language in use.

## **Form or Function**

Form refers to a word's structural elements—its spelling, pronunciation, and grammatical category. Function, conversely, is the communicative purpose or grammatical role the word serves within a sentence or interaction. True proficiency and comprehension arise when learners develop an equal understanding of how words are structured and how they operate in various contexts.

## **Synchrony or Diachrony**

Synchrony refers to the study of language at a particular moment in time, without reference to its historical development. Diachrony, by contrast, focuses on how language changes over time, including the historical evolution and origins of words. For example, from a synchronic perspective, the words *solicitor* and *solicit* appear unrelated in meaning in present-day English: *solicitor* refers to a legal professional, while *solicit* means to request. However, from a diachronic perspective, *solicitor* is historically derived from *solicit* and originally meant “one who solicits,” revealing a meaningful connection that has since faded.

## **Texts or systems**

Texts refer to the actual spoken and written language that speakers produce, whereas systems denote the underlying grammatical rules and lexical knowledge that enable the production of those texts. In linguistic terms, this distinction corresponds to performance (what is said or written) and competence (a speaker's knowledge of the language system Lexemes or Inflections

## **Lexemes or Inflections**

A lexeme can be defined as the abstract base form of a word that represents its central meaning, while inflection refers to the different grammatical forms a lexeme can take to express categories.

## **Sounds or Letters**

Sounds are the spoken units of language, known as phonemes, while letters are the written symbols, or graphemes, used to represent those sounds. A

single sequence of letters may correspond to different sounds; for example, “th” is pronounced differently in thin and then.

### **Words or Meanings**

Words are the linguistic forms we use, such as the noun fox, while meanings are the concepts or ideas those words represent, such as the animal that fox denotes. Linguists clarify this distinction using typographical conventions: italics indicate words as forms (e.g., fox), whereas quotation marks indicate meanings or concepts (e.g., “fox” referring to the animal).

### **Punctuation or grammatical structure**

Grammatical structure refers to the arrangement of words and phrases to create meaningful sentences, while punctuation consists of visual symbols, such as periods and commas. A common confusion arises when punctuation is mistaken for grammar, as sentence simply as a sequence of words ending with a full stop. In fact, a sentence is a grammatical unit that requires an internal structure, typically including a subject and a verb.

### **Some Linguistic Models**

#### **1. Generative Linguistics (Noam Chomsky):**

- Focuses on universal grammar and the detailed analysis of small language units while drawing broad generalizations across languages. It views language as an innate mental faculty rather than primarily learned. Its emphasis on theory over pedagogy means it has limited application in education.

#### **2. Systemic Functional Linguistics (Michael Halliday):**

- Highly relevant to education, this model examines how language functions in social contexts, considering genre, register, and coherence. It generally avoids in-depth grammatical analysis. Despite its educational influence, some scholars question its theoretical rigor

#### **3. Cognitive Linguistics (Various Scholars):**

- Sees language as part of general human cognition and argues that linguistic knowledge develops gradually through experience. Although it has not yet had a major impact on education, it holds potential for teaching and learning application.