

Descriptive and experimental linguistics

In the study of language, description, or descriptive linguistics, is the work of objectively analyzing and describing how language is spoken (or how it was spoken in the past) by a group of people in a speech community. All scholarly research in linguistics is descriptive; like all other sciences, its aim is to observe the linguistic world as it is, without the bias of preconceived ideas about how it ought to be.^[1] Modern descriptive linguistics is based on a structural approach to language, as exemplified in the work of Leonard Bloomfield and others. Linguistic description is often contrasted with linguistic prescription, which is found especially in education and in publishing. Prescription seeks to define standard language forms and give advice on effective language use, and can be thought of as a presentation of the fruits of descriptive research in a learnable form, though it also draws on more subjective aspects of language aesthetics. Prescription and description are complementary, but have different priorities and sometimes are seen to be in conflict. Descriptivism is the belief that description is more significant or important to teach, study, and practice than prescription.

Accurate description of real speech is a difficult problem, and linguists have often been reduced to approximations. Almost all linguistic theory has its origin in practical problems of descriptive linguistics. Phonology (and its theoretical developments, such as the phoneme) deals with the function and interpretation of sound in language. Syntax has developed to describe the rules concerning how words relate to each other in order to form sentences. Lexicology collects "words" and their derivations and transformations: it has not given rise to much generalized theory.

An extreme "mentalist" viewpoint denies that the linguistic description of a language can be done by anyone but a competent speaker. Such speakers have internalized something called "linguistic competence", which gives them the ability to extrapolate correctly from their experience new but correct expressions, and to reject unacceptable expressions.

A linguistic description is considered descriptively adequate if it achieves one or more of the following goals of descriptive linguistics:

- A description of the phonology of the language in question.
- A description of the morphology of words belonging to that language.
- A description of the syntax of well-formed sentences of that language.
- A description of lexical derivations.
- A documentation of the vocabulary, including at least one thousand entries.
- A reproduction of a few genuine texts.