

# From Metalanguage to Metapragmatics

## Exploring Non-Linguistic Language Reflection

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4/10/2019

# What Do Linguists Do?

From  
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Jürgen Spitzmüller

## Introduction

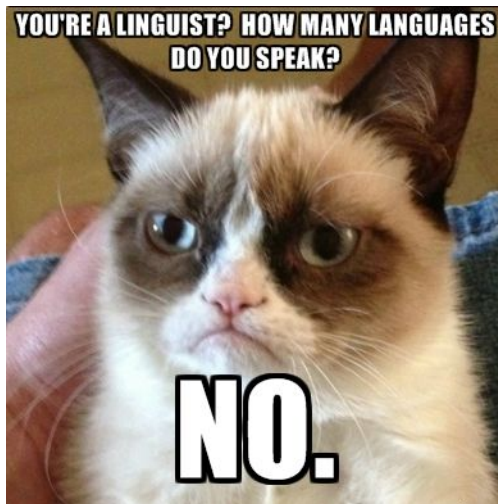
The Qualms with  
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Going *Meta*

How is Language  
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Why is Language  
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Conclusions



Source: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/9640586674685412/>

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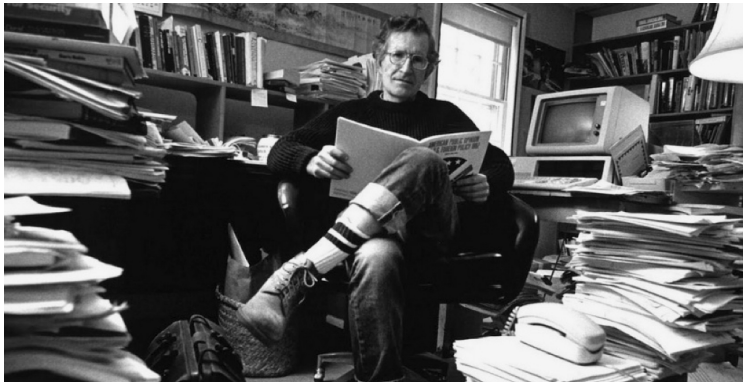
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.....  
Noam Chomsky in his Home Office

Source: <https://robinpowered.com/blog/famous-desks-december/>

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.....  
Linguist Doing Fieldwork

Source: <https://www.shh.mpg.de/1171809/2018-internship-vanuatu>

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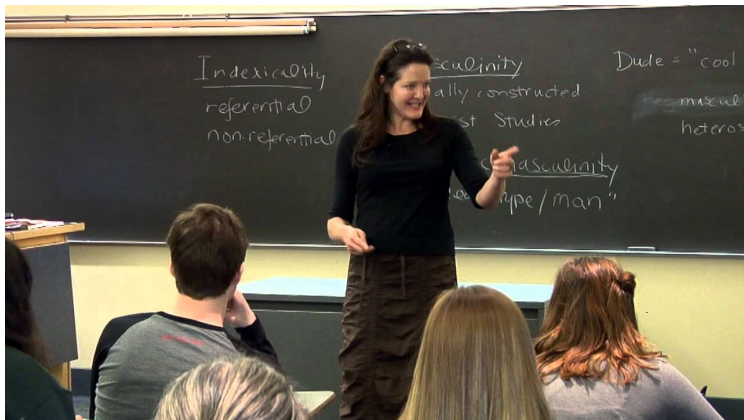
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Linguist Teaching

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wHp43Nt1hE>

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- Why is non **linguistic language reflection** an important **topic** for linguists to think about?
- Why do many **linguists seem to have problems** with the fact that non-linguists reflect on (make statements about) language?
- Which **linguistic disciplines and concepts** help to explore and explain non-linguistic language reflection?
- What does **all this meta-** mean?

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Dictionary is so yesterday. Emoji Spelling Bee is the cool new. the youth is communicating differently - they're talking Insta Stories, hashtags and puppers.

## How Social Media Affects Our Ability to Communicate



## Russian Language on the Decline Thanks to English, Says Official

AUGUST 29, 2017 | THE MOSCOW TIMES | SHARES: 551

Wyacheslav Nikonov called for an expansion of the Eurasian Union and an increase in educational programs abroad to foster the Russian language.

Continue reading...



## Children Losing Social Skills Due To Technology

These days, children are losing their ability to communicate due to always being on their cell phones.



MailOnline



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## EU moves to outlaw phrases such as 'man-made', 'manpower' and 'mankind' in favour of 'nonsense' gender-neutral terms under new PC guidelines for

# “look at language objectively”

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“The chief difficulty facing the person who comes new to the study of linguistics is that of being prepared to look at language objectively. For language is something we tend to take for granted; something with which we are familiar from childhood in a practical, unreflecting way. And, as has often been observed, it requires a particularly strong effort to look at familiar things afresh. Nor is it merely our intuitive or practical familiarity with language that stands in the way of its objective examination. There are all sorts of social and nationalistic prejudices associated with language, and many popular misconceptions fostered by the distorted version of traditional grammar that is frequently taught in the schools. To free one’s mind of these prejudices and misconceptions is indeed difficult; but it is both a necessary and a rewarding first step.”

.....  
[John Lyons. 1968.](#) *Introduction to theoretical linguistics*. Cambridge:  
Cambridge University Press. 2.

“To assert that any linguistic form is ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ *because* it is at variance with some other form taken (explicitly or implicitly) as the standard is [...] tautological. Each socially or regionally differentiated form of the language has its own standard of ‘purity’ and ‘correctness’ immanent in it. Once this is realized and accepted, the way is clear to a more satisfactory description of languages. Whether the speech of one region or of one social group should be taken as the standard for wider use (e. g. as the basis for a literary language), is a question of a different order. The linguist’s first task is to *describe* the way people actually speak (and write) their language, not to *prescribe* how they ought to speak and write. In other words linguistics (in the first instance at least) is *descriptive*, not *prescriptive* (or normative).”

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John Lyons. 1968. *Introduction to theoretical linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 43.

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“Prescriptivism [...] is the disfavoured half of a binary opposition, ‘descriptive/prescriptive’; and this binarism sets the parameters of linguistics as a discipline. The very first thing any student of linguistics learns is that ‘linguistics is descriptive not prescriptive’ – concerned, in the way of all science, with objective facts and not subjective value judgements. Prescriptivism thus represents the threatening Other, the forbidden; it is a spectre that haunts linguistics and a difference that defines linguistics.”

.....  
[Deborah Cameron. 1995. \*Verbal hygiene\*. \(Language and Politics\). London: Routledge. 5.](#)

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“[...] wie Wolken auf einem Berggipfel nur, von fern gesehen, eine bestimmte Gestalt haben, allein wie man hineintritt, sich in ein nebligtes Grau verlieren; so ist die Wirkung und der Charakter der Sprachen zwar im ganzen deutlich erkennbar, allein so wie man anfängt zu untersuchen, woran nun dieser Charakter im einzelnen hängt, entschlüpft einem der Gegenstand gleichsam unter den Händen.”

.....  
Wilhelm von Humboldt. 1981 [1810–1811]. Einleitung in das gesamte Sprachstudium. In idem: *Werke in fünf Bänden*. Vol. 5: *Kleine Schriften, Autobiographisches, Dichtungen, Briefe: Kommentare und Anmerkungen zu Band I–V, Anhang*. Andreas Flitner & Klaus Giel (eds.), 100–112. Stuttgart: Cotta. quot.: 130–131.

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“There is no such thing as good and bad (or correct and incorrect, grammatical and ungrammatical, right and wrong) in language.

[...]

All languages and dialects are of equal merit, each in its own way.”

.....  
Robert A. Hall. 1950. *Leave your language alone!* Ithaca, NY:  
Linguistica. 6.

# “accurate and reliable information”

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“Is there any source for accurate and reliable information about language, which will be more dependable and less likely to throw us into an intellectual and emotional tailspin than the ‘authorities’ that try to correct us?”

There is. For the last hundred and fifty years, a number of scholars have been working on the study of language from a scientific point of view. They are often called simply *linguists*; but, as many people use the word *linguist* to mean a polyglot – somebody who knows a lot of languages – the person who has made a scientific study of language often prefers the term *scientific linguist* or *linguistic scientist* or *linguistician*. The work they engage in is called *linguistics*. By now, linguistics has amassed a store of knowledge which is accurate and reliable enough to decide on such points as these we worry about.”

.....  
Robert A. Hall. 1950. *Leave your language alone!* Ithaca, NY:  
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# “Leave your language alone!”

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“[...] the message that linguistics has for our society at present is primarily the one that we have used as the title of this book: *LEAVE YOUR LANGUAGE ALONE!* We put it this way on purpose, to emphasize that any meddling with our language, by ourselves or others in the name of ‘correctness’, of spelling, or of nationalism, is harmful. [...] this message is both negative and positive. It is negative, in that it warns us to give up, to abandon entirely the old dogmatic, normative, theological approach of traditional grammar and of social snobbery; and to substitute the relativistic, objective approach of scientific study and analysis. It is positive, in that it tells us, once we’ve cleared the ground in this way, to go ahead and to find out for ourselves what the facts really are, to analyze and describe them as accurately as we can, and then to apply the knowledge we have obtained in that way. In both these respects, the contribution of linguistics is simply a part of the effort of all science in modern democratic society, to find out the truth and to act upon it; in this sense, the linguist, like other scientists, may take as his motto the noblest of all slogans: ‘Ya shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’”

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Robert A. Hall. 1950. *Leave your language alone!* Ithaca, NY: Linguistica.  
248–249.

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.....  
Source: <https://www.teepublic.com/t-shirt/484082-keep-calm-and-trust-the-linguist>

# Taking Non-Linguistic Language Evaluation Seriously

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- Why do people feel the need to evaluate language?
- How does non-linguistic knowledge about language look like?
- Which functions do such evaluations have?
- Which specific interests are connected to these evaluations?

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# Linguistic Exploration of Non-Linguistic Language Reflection

Most Important Disciplines

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- **Language Attitudes Research** Deals with the question which affects, emotions and dispositions people have vis-a-vis languages
  - ⇒ Background: Social Psychology
  - ⇒ See also Linguistic Profiling:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAZMIC\\_OwTw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAZMIC_OwTw)
- **Folk Linguistics:** Deals with the question how non-linguistic knowledge about language, in particular about dialects and local varieties, looks like
  - ⇒ Background: Dialectology
- **Language Ideology Research:** Deals with the question which values and beliefs concerning language people articulate in discourses
  - ⇒ Background: Linguistic Anthropology

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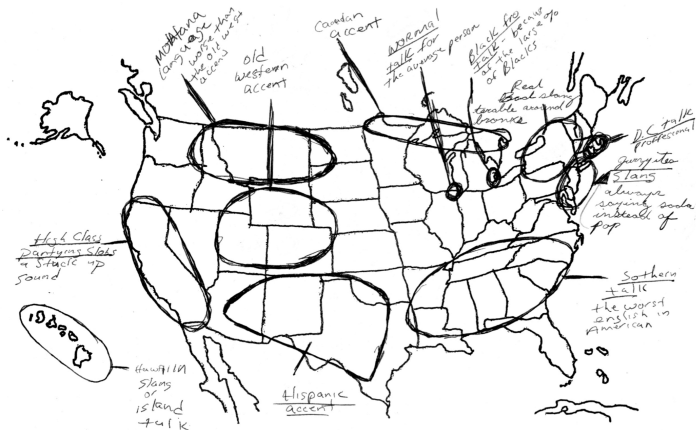
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Aus: **Dennis R. Preston. 1996.** Where the worst English is spoken. In Edgar W. Schneider (ed.), *Focus on the usa* (Varieties of English Around the World G 16), 297–360. Amsterdam: Benjamins. quot.: 307.

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“Epimenides the Cretan said that all Cretans were liars.”

.....  
Bertrand Russell. 1908. Mathematical logic as based on the theory  
of types. *American Journal of Mathematics* 30(3). 222–262. quot.: 222.

“[...] a man says: ‘I am lying [just now]’”

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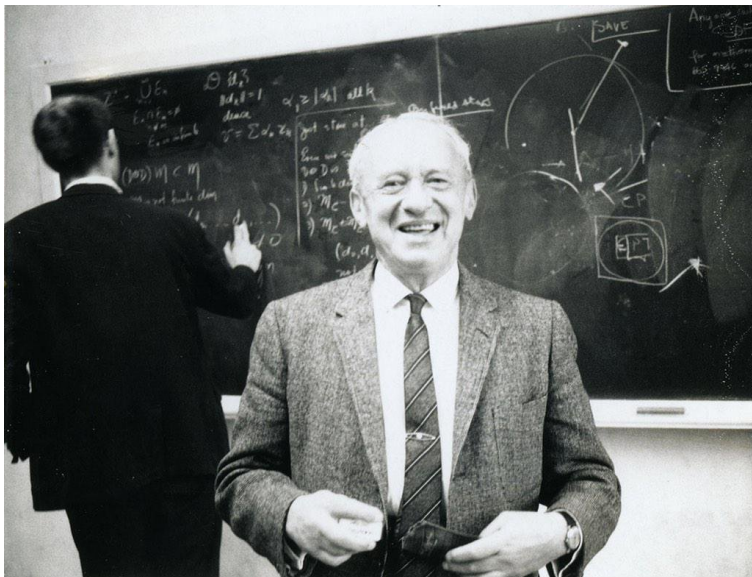
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Alfred Tarski (1901–1983)

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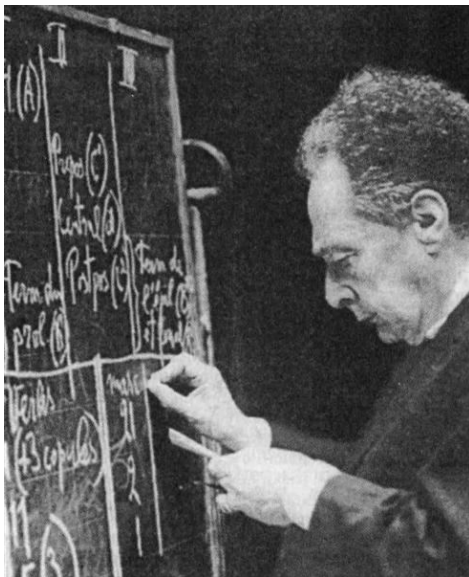
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Роман Осипович Якобсон (1896–1982)

# Jakobson's Model of Communication

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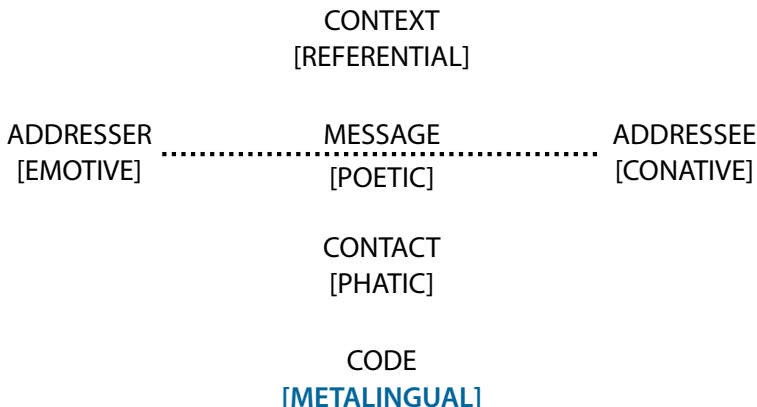
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Roman Jakobson. 1960. Closing statement: Linguistics and poetics. In Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in language*, 350–377. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. quot.: 353, 357.



"Far from being confined to the sphere of science, metalingual operations prove to be an integral part of our verbal activities. Whenever the addresser and/or the addressee need to check up whether they use the same code, speech is focused upon the CODE and thus performs a METALINGUAL (or glossing) function. 'I don't follow you-what do you mean?' asks the addressee, or in Shakespearean diction, 'What is't thou say'st?' And the addresser in anticipation of such recapturing questions inquires: 'Do you know what I mean?'"

.....  
Roman Jakobson. 1985 [1956]. Metalanguage as a linguistic problem. In Stephen Rudy (ed.), *Selected writings*. Vol. 7: *Contributions to comparative mythology*, 113–121. Berlin: de Gruyter. [Orig. Presidential Address to the Linguistic Society of America]. quot.: 117.

- The possibility to refer to itself (a message referring to another message or referring to the code used) is a crucial feature of Human language
- Not only can concrete messages refer to language (as a code system), but language itself has means to refer to concrete message contexts

.....  
See [Roman Jakobson. 1971 \[1955\]. Shifters, verbal categories, and the Russian verb. In \*Selected writings\*. Vol. 2: \*Word and language\*, 130–147. Berlin: de Gruyter. \[Orig. Harvard: Harvard University\].](#)

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# Michael Silverstein and *Metapragmatics*

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Michael Silverstein (Chicago)

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“Signs functioning metapragmatically have pragmatic phenomena [...] as their semiotic objects [...].”

.....  
**Michael Silverstein. 1993.** Metapragmatic discourse and metapragmatic function. In John A. Lucy (ed.), *Reflexive language: Reported speech and metapragmatics*, 33–58. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. quot.: 33.

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- Construction of fixed language borders (**homogenism**)
  - language purity/purism, aversion against so called *language mixing*
- **Variation** in language is often perceived as a problem
  - reduction of language to referential function
- **Standard language** is often over-generalized
- Language evaluations tend to be **conservative** and **ego-centric**

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## ■ Language

- as an **organism** (lives and can die, is under threat from external dangers and must be protected)
- as a **delimited territory** (must be protected from external intruders)
- as an **essence** (can decay, be contaminated by foreign essences, etc.)

## ■ Unwanted factors of language change as

- **viruses and illnesses** which threaten language (as an *organism*)
- **floods and other natural disasters** which threaten language (as a *territory*)
- **foreign chunks** which contaminate language (as an *essence*)

---

Cf. Jürgen Spitzmüller. 2007. Staking the claims of identity: Purism, linguistics and the media in post-1990 Germany. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 11(2). 261–285.

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Metapragmatics

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Reflection

Going *Meta*

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Why is Language  
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Conclusions

- If people evaluate language, they **evaluate associated contexts and users**
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  - Imperatives such as *Leave Your Language Alone!* are **misconceiving the social function of language evaluation**
  - As long as linguistic knowledge is limited to structural issues of language and language change, it does not give **answers to the actual questions** people have
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