Descriptive, explanatory, and fundamental linguistic theories

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Abstract: Linguistic theories provide the foundation for understanding language structure, acquisition, and use. This article explores the three primary linguistic theories: descriptive, explanatory, and fundamental linguistics. It outlines their definitions, applications, and interrelations, providing a comprehensive overview of how these theories contribute to our understanding of language. By analyzing contemporary research and theoretical frameworks, this study highlights the importance of each approach in linguistic inquiry.

Keywords: descriptive research, theoretical research, description, explanation, descriptive theories, explanatory theories, language structure, linguistic description

Introduction

Linguists frequently differentiate between research that is considered descriptive and research that is classified as theoretical. Likewise, they sometimes describe certain studies as lacking a theoretical framework. In this chapter, I argue that the distinction between theory and description is often misunderstood. First, there is no such thing as a purely atheoretical description. Second, while contrasting theory and description is misleading, it is meaningful to distinguish between description and explanation. I further argue that both descriptive and explanatory theories are necessary. Descriptive theories focus on what languages are like and what tools are needed for accurate linguistic descriptions, while explanatory theories explore why languages have the structures they do (Matthew S . Dryer, 2006).

The distinction between descriptive and explanatory theories is often overlooked in linguistics due to historical factors. American structuralism prioritized description over explanation, believing it was sufficient. In contrast, generative grammar, especially in Chomsky's work since the 1970s, aimed to be both descriptive and explanatory. Chomsky's theory of innateness suggests that if language is shaped by inherent linguistic knowledge, a single theory can explain both what languages are like and why they have certain characteristics (Dryer, 2006).

Many linguists, even those who reject Chomsky's view on language innateness, still accept his idea that one theory can serve both descriptive and explanatory roles. Functionalist linguists, for instance, explain language structure differently but often

leave description to formal linguists, blurring the distinction between these theories. This chapter examines the implications of rejecting Chomsky's view and argues that Dixon's (1997) "basic linguistic theory" is a suitable framework for linguistic description.

This paper is intended for linguists with a functionalist perspective, including those working in typology and descriptive linguistics. It explores the type of theoretical framework needed for linguistic description within a functionalist approach. The paper argues that, from this perspective, external functional principles-factors beyond grammar itself-are essential in explaining why languages have the structures they do.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative analysis of key linguistic theories, drawing from primary and secondary literature. Key texts and studies from the fields of descriptive, explanatory, and fundamental linguistics were analyzed to draw connections and contrasts between the theories. The study categorizes linguistic theories into descriptive, explanatory, and fundamental frameworks and evaluates their impact on linguistic research and application.

Result

The analysis reveals distinct yet interconnected roles for descriptive, explanatory, and fundamental linguistic theories:

Descriptive Theories: These theories focus on empirical observation and classification of language data. Structural linguistics, as proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure, exemplifies this approach by analyzing language as a system of signs with defined relationships. Modern corpus linguistics continues this tradition, using computational methods to document language patterns.

Explanatory Theories: These theories seek to uncover the cognitive, neurological, and social mechanisms underlying language use. Noam Chomsky's generative grammar illustrates this approach by proposing an innate linguistic capacity, while sociolinguistic theories examine how social context influences language variation.

Fundamental Theories: These theories attempt to establish overarching linguistic principles that unify different branches of the field. Universal Grammar, a key concept in generative linguistics, proposes a set of innate grammatical structures common to all languages. Cognitive linguistics further expands on this by linking language to broader cognitive functions such as perception and categorization.

Despite their differences, these theoretical perspectives often complement one another. Descriptive studies provide the data needed for explanatory models, while fundamental theories help refine linguistic frameworks by identifying universal principles.

Over the past 25 years, linguistic description has become more standardized, unlike the diverse approaches seen between 1965 and 1975, which included traditional grammar, structuralism, tagmemics, and transformational-generative grammar. After 1975, this variety declined, mainly due to changes in Chomskyan generative grammar, which shifted focus from transformational rules to constraints. This new approach was less effective for describing entire languages, making fundamental structural aspects less central in generative theory.

Another reason for the decline in diverse approaches to language description in the 1970s was the diminishing influence of structuralism. While structuralism had lost prominence in theoretical discussions by the early 1960s, it remained widely used among linguists focused on descriptive work. However, as structuralist-trained scholars began to retire, younger linguists, even those primarily interested in description, were less familiar with structuralist methods, leading to its gradual disappearance.

The rise of linguistic typology contributed to the decline of diverse theoretical approaches, as it provided an alternative to generative grammar and gained popularity among descriptive linguists. Typology helped linguists better understand languages and influenced the way descriptive grammars were written, shifting focus away from traditional and structuralist frameworks. Its informal nature and practical relevance made typology highly impactful on language description.

Typology's connection to traditional grammar is evident in Greenberg's (1963) work on word order universals. In the 1970s, typological research expanded to include features like ergativity. A major development was the revival of ubject" and "object" as key concepts, influenced by relational grammar (Perlmutter 1983; Perlmutter & Rosen 1984) and Keenan & Comrie's (1977) accessibility hierarchy.

Discussion

The interplay between descriptive, explanatory, and fundamental linguistic theories enriches our understanding of language. Descriptive studies provide the data necessary for explanatory models, while fundamental insights lay the groundwork for both. The integration of these theories can lead to a more holistic view of linguistic phenomena, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration among linguists, cognitive scientists, and psychologists.

Comparison of Theories

When comparing the three linguistic theories, several key distinctions emerge.

First, there is a difference between empirical and theoretical approaches. Descriptive linguistics is primarily empirical, concentrating on real-world language data and how language is used in practice. In contrast, both explanatory and fundamental linguistics adopt more theoretical perspectives, aiming to uncover the underlying principles and structures that govern language.

Second, the focus of the theories varies. Descriptive linguistics emphasizes language use in context, examining how language operates in different social settings. Explanatory linguistics, on the other hand, prioritizes cognitive processes, investigating how mental mechanisms influence language comprehension and production. Fundamental linguistics serves as a bridge between these two approaches by exploring the structures that support both language use and cognitive understanding.

Lastly, each theory connects with various other disciplines. Descriptive linguistics intersects with sociology, as it often considers the social factors influencing language variation. Explanatory linguistics engages with psychology, focusing on cognitive processes involved in language acquisition and use. Fundamental linguistics connects with philosophy and logic, delving into the abstract principles that underpin language structure.

Contrast of Theories

The theories also differ significantly in their methodological approaches. Descriptive linguistics employs data-driven methods, gathering empirical evidence from real-world language use. In contrast, explanatory linguistics frequently utilizes experimental designs to test specific hypotheses about language processing and cognitive mechanisms. Fundamental linguistics, meanwhile, relies on formal and logical methodologies to analyze the structural aspects of language.

The expected outcomes of each theory further highlight their differences. Descriptive linguistics aims to provide a comprehensive account of language variation, documenting how language is used across different contexts. Explanatory linguistics seeks to elucidate the cognitive mechanisms that enable language understanding and production. Finally, fundamental linguistics aims to articulate the underlying rules and structures that govern language as a system.

These comparisons and contrasts illustrate the distinct yet complementary roles that descriptive, explanatory, and fundamental linguistic theories play in our understanding of language.

Conclusion

Descriptive, explanatory, and fundamental linguistic theories each contribute uniquely to the field of linguistics. While descriptive approaches document language as it is used, explanatory theories seek to understand the mechanisms behind linguistic behavior, and fundamental theories establish guiding principles for linguistic analysis. Together, these theoretical frameworks provide a holistic approach to language study. Future research should integrate interdisciplinary insights from cognitive science, artificial intelligence, and sociolinguistics to refine and expand our understanding of linguistic theory.

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