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Linguistics in the Department of English and American Studies at the Europa-University Flensburg

🔊 Listen

There is an area of the study of English that most incoming students – in contrast to the areas of literature or cultural studies – are relatively unaware of from their English lessons in school: **linguistics**. Linguistics is the scientific study of language in general, or of a specific language such as English. If there is a fundamental question specific to English Linguistics it can be rendered as follows: How can we systematically capture the complex structure of the English language and adequately describe its many manifestations?

One of the difficulties in beginning the linguistic branch of the study of English is quite possibly the fact that through our constant everyday dealings with language, we have come to take it absolutely for granted, rarely thinking about its functioning as long as things are running smoothly. It is only when the power goes out that we tend to notice how much our lives depend on electricity. As a little thought experiment, imagine if one day there were a total "language outage": What would that mean?

Linguistics thus attempts to raise to consciousness what a native speaker competently using a language unconsciously "knows", has mastered and is capable of doing with that language. How are the sounds of English formed? Which sound combinations are featured as words in the vocabulary of the language, and which rules are followed in the creation of new words? How does one ultimately combine words into acceptable sentences and these into longer texts in order to communicate with other speakers? And how does successful communication work, at the end of which the participants have achieved as far as possible what they wanted from each other?

These and many other questions are addressed by the different subfields of linguistics. Thus English **phonetics/phonology** describes the sound system of the English language. **Syntax** examines the rules for the formation of English sentences. **Lexicology** deals generally with vocabulary, whereby the emphasis is either on **morphology** (the study of word formation) or **semantics** (the study of meaning). **Pragmatics** explores how speakers use their knowledge of the language in context-sensitive ways to achieve their aims. **Discourse analysis** and **text linguistics** describe the structural patterns of whole conversations or longer texts. And because the English language has not only a long and eventful history but has also experienced worldwide spread and differentiation into the most varied social, regional and national dialects, **historical linguistics**, as well as **sociolinguistics** and **dialectology**, are also important fields of study. An interdisciplinary connection to the teaching of English and language teaching research arises in the area of first and second language acquisition, an area addressed by **psycholinguistics**. Moreover, language teaching and learning – as both first and foreign language – might well be considered the most important fields of **applied linguistics**. – The introductory course *Introduction to Language and Linguistics*, taken in the second semester of the bachelor program, serves as an orientation to the entire subject area of English linguistics.

One practical side effect of the linguistic study of the various aspects and components of English is often the improvement of one's own competence in the foreign language – for which reason practical seminars (*Übungen*) in *Grammar* and *Pronunciation* belong specifically to the introductory module for practical English in the first and second semesters. And once one has found one's feet and deepened one's understanding of an exemplary topic in a seminar course (*Proseminar*) in the third semester, English linguistics can prove to be a fascinating field of study. Special areas of research in English linguistics here in Flensburg include comparative semantics, cognitive-linguistic research into metaphor, as well as applied linguistic research in the area of *Classroom Discourse Analysis*.

Through such studies we have the chance to gain not only knowledge about the way language and communication function, but also illuminative insights into human thought, which is primarily expressed in the form of language. And with further insights into the characteristics of various speech communities, linguistics proves itself to be a comparative cultural science as well.

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