

## HOW LINGUISTS PRACTISE THEIR SCIENCE

A language, any natural human language, has four major components, namely, phonology (the structure of sounds and their organisation), morphology (the structure of words as constituted by small units of meaning), syntax (the internal structure of sentences and the relationship among the parts contained therein) and semantics (the structure of meaning). Collectively, the four components are referred to as the grammar of the language in question. Therefore when, for instance, we talk of the grammar of the Pokomo language, we mean the complex system that is made up of Pokomo phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics.

A linguist may study any of these components or an aspect of one of them. The study will involve collecting data from a speaker or a group of speakers of the language, organizing them and analysing them using an appropriate theory. Instead of studying a component of a language, a part thereof or the entire grammar of a language, a linguist may choose one aspect of a component and study it across a number of languages. For example, one could choose some characteristic of vowels and study how that characteristic manifests itself in a group of languages as such as Maasai, Kalenjin, Dholuo, Acholi, Lango and Shiluk. All the six languages belong to a language family called Nilotic languages. Whereas the six are independent languages, they have a lot of similarities given that they have a common ancestor. Their similarities and differences can be studied within a single academic project.

It is not uncommon in academia for two experts in a discipline to pull together their expertise and energies in studying a phenomenon or phenomena in their discipline. This practice is also witnessed in linguistics. Any of the scenarios of the language study by individual linguists that we have described above can be jointly executed by two or more linguists. In other words, a component of a language, an aspect of the component, the whole grammar of a language or a particular language characteristic obtaining across related languages may be studied by two or more linguists working as a group of researchers.

Besides studying the four components of grammar that I have indicated above, linguists also study the intersections or interfaces between language and disciplines. They study, for example, the interface between linguistics and sociology. This subfield of linguistics is called sociolinguistics. The interfaces between linguistics and psychology, neurology, cognition, criminology and mathematics are referred to, respectively, as psycholinguistics, neuro-linguistics, cognitive linguistics, forensic linguistics and mathematical linguistics.

We talk to different people differently according to how we relate with them. We do not talk to our spouses the way we talk to our colleagues. At the workplace, we do not talk to our bosses the way we talk to our juniors. No lawyer except, of course, if they have a certain degree of mental disturbance, would tell a friend, "I suggest we meet for a drink on the fourth day of the month of August in the year of Our Lord 2015". Or, "I was waiting for my wife (or husband) at or near the Hilton Hotel at or around ten o'clock this morning". They restrict that clumsy but professionally necessary syntax to legal documents, charge sheets and law school lecture theatres. Such professionally restricted language varieties are called registers and they are studied within socio-linguistics.

It is not possible or even desirable to describe here all the subfields of linguistics. Suffice to say that the discipline is so broad that linguists only specialize in one or two areas of the discipline. Anybody who has gone through a good linguistics programme in a university will have been taught and tested in phonetics (the study of articulation, physical properties and perception of the sounds of human languages), phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics and, perhaps, applied linguistics, historical and comparative linguistics, and sociolinguistics. Besides these common branches of linguistics there are many others that, depending on where one trained, he/she may not have studied or may not have studied in depth.

It is not usual to find a linguist who has kept abreast with theories in several branches in linguistics. They are just too many and dealing with different aspects of linguistics. Academic journals and university-level textbooks keep on churning out new theories as linguists extend the frontiers of their knowledge of the human language. The theories are continuously introduced into the linguistic space, challenged, revised or pushed out, reintroduced with new vigour and newer ones introduced.