

LINGUISTS,¹ PROCRUSTES AND LINGUISTIC TERMINOLOGY

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It is the task of this article to set out a general picture of the field of linguistics and to claim that a basic problem linguists confront in the conduct of their work is reflected in their choices and uses of linguistic terminology.² As background, the field, as a field, is introduced in a discussion which includes my views on its relevance and value as a discipline, both internationally and in Zimbabwe. I then move on to explore what I see as two central tasks within the discipline: first, that of choosing and defining linguistic terminology, and, second, that of categorizing language data within the defined terminology. I also sketch some of the consequences of these decisions, exemplifying with specific reference to a grammatical category in Shona which is most often labelled 'possessive'. The article closes with a brief discussion of some of the uses to which linguistic terminology is put and a description of some of the ways in which the field seems to be developing.

The discipline of linguistics may centre on the study of language in general, on the study of a specific language, or of a specific variety of language, or on a combination of these topics. The discipline usually demands that linguists make 'linguistically significant generalizations' about language, a task which usually involves generalizing from relatively concrete details of specific instances of speech or writing.³ Claims made within the

¹ Technically, linguists study the structures and functions of language. Although it is desirable, it is not necessary to be a polyglot in order to 'be' a linguist. It is interesting to note that even some dictionaries (for example, the third edition of the *Oxford Paperback Dictionary* (Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1988)) encode the popular, rather than the technical, sense of the term.

² What follows is an admittedly subjective view of the field's problems and prospects, and I take full responsibility for them. At the same time, a number of people have contributed to the thoughts presented here, both directly (as in the case of Mr K. G. Mkanganwi who read an earlier draft of this article and made a number of constructive suggestions) and indirectly. In addition to those linguists and others who have influenced the direction and scope of my thinking through their published work, such as J. R. Firth, R. A. Ladd, D. Bolinger, W. Chafe, C. Fillmore, J. J. Gumperz, A. Kaplan and K. Popper, to name a few, there are those who have also influenced them in person. These include Prof. B. Annan, Prof. J. Haskins, Prof. L. Moshi, Dr H. Chimhundu, Dr R. Salkie, Dr J. Tsonope, Ms M. Chiswanda, Mr C. Hove, Ms C. Mparutsa, Mr N. Chipere, Ms J. Thondhlana and those students at the University of Zimbabwe who have undergone coursework in my 'Introduction to the Study of the Structure of Language' and 'Psycholinguistics' courses.

³ My use of the word 'speech' in this article includes 'signing', a visual representation of language used in the sign languages which have developed in deaf communities.

discipline, therefore, tend to be seen by many as being quite abstract and theoretical. One result of this is that linguistics is not usually among the most popular areas of study in Arts faculties, where it is most often housed, and, in fact, for some students, it exists only to serve as a default option after applications to other, more popular, departments have failed.

The field is a relatively young one, having developed out of nineteenth-century philology, and linguistics 'proper' has gradually come into being, initially via anthropology, since the 1920s and 1930s. It is often defined as 'the scientific study of language',⁴ but the scientific traditions from which it comes, and to which it contributes, are far from being monolithic. That is, there is no single scientific tradition which could be said to be the one that linguists follow, and, indeed, there are those who would claim that it is not possible to study language 'scientifically'.

Contrary to popular belief both in Zimbabwe and abroad, linguists are not the ones who promote 'proper speech', and many speak only one language well, their mother tongue. Instead, linguists try to describe and, in many cases, explain language structures and the various uses to which these language structures are put. In the course of this work, it is important that linguists remain objective, and that they avoid making social judgements about such matters as the relative 'correctness' or 'purity' of the many varieties of language they encounter. Many linguists view, and then study, language either as a system of structures or as an instrument of communication. Some, however, take a middle view and find their research to be most productive as they work within frameworks that permit them to explore both what language is and how it is used as people communicate (or fail to communicate) with one another.

Because language is so central to the conduct, expression and communication of human experience, activity and creativity, systematic studies of it can creep into other fields, such as communication, literary criticism, philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, neurology, and even computer programming and artificial intelligence. In addition, there are emergent and explicitly interdisciplinary fields, such as cognition and literacy, which are based largely on observations and analyses which have been made by linguists. The many branches, or areas of specialization, in linguistics include phonetics and phonology (studies of speech sounds and language sound systems); morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics (all dealing with various aspects of the forms, functions and/or meanings of linguistic units); psycholinguistics (the study of language and the individual); sociolinguistics (the study of language and social groups); historical and comparative linguistics (studies of the histories of languages

⁴ D. Crystal, *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (Oxford, Blackwell, 3rd edn., 1991).

and of ways to compare them); and discourse analysis and text linguistics (or studies of spoken and written uses of language).

There are a number of approaches to the study of language structures in general and even to the study of those of a particular language. In these researches, more often than not, linguists explore the forms and the workings of these units only after the contexts in which they have actually occurred have been stripped away. A familiar example of this tendency is also found in many dictionaries, where the meanings of words have been abstracted away from instances of use in the real world and recaptured in definitions (which, traditionally, are invented by lexicographers who use a set of principles to guide them in this task) that can be applied to a wide range of real-world contexts.

One can see this tendency to analyse the isolated structures of language taken to an extreme by glancing, for example, at one of the goals that generative syntax has set for itself. This is to construct a context-free grammar of human language, to develop a highly abstract theory which describes and explains the workings of the syntactic, or grammatical, structures of human language. Within theories coming out of this view, linguists try to represent what it is that human beings know when they know a human language, and they are only tangentially — if at all — concerned about how people use this knowledge in their day-to-day lives.

It may even happen, and it often does, that linguists draw their examples of linguistic units out of the blue — out of the competence they have in the language they are working with and from the heights (or depths) of their imagination. In other words, in at least these studies, the focus is placed almost entirely on the analysis of the linguistic units under description. As a consequence of this narrow focus, the people who use these units and the situations in which people use them often seem to have been erased, a feature of analysis that can lead to the mistaken impression that the work done in the field is impractical and perhaps even irrelevant to what happens in actual situations.

A common goal of linguistic analysis is to develop descriptions and explanations that fit 'native-speaker intuitions'⁵ about the workings of the language under study. Another goal in many studies of linguistic structure is to create — or to expose — systematicity from the masses of spoken and written language which are so readily available in real-world contexts. The first of these goals is often obscured, at least at first glance, since, in striving to describe various parts of a system, one is forced into writing about them at very high levels of generality. These, in turn, especially for the untrained, add to the impression that linguistic descriptions are made

⁵ Even if these 'native-speaker intuitions' refer only to the intuitions of the linguist doing the analysis.

up of incomprehensible abstractions which have little or no potential relevance or application to instances of actual talk or writing in the real world.

Within one type of scientifically acceptable analytical framework, a linguist may create systematicity through a rigorous classification of data, those pieces of language that have been identified as being relevant and appropriate to the analysis. In such a case, equally rigorous discussions which support the description at hand are also required. Within another, the linguist is not only responsible for a well-supported description, but he or she is also responsible for well-justified explanations of the data and, particularly, for explaining their interrelationships in terms of the system as a whole. The work focuses, then (whether this is acknowledged or not) on developing and using academically acceptable methodologies for exploring academically acceptable data.

The rigour that is generally associated with the field, in fact, arises out of the insistence of many linguists that their work is modelled after that of scholars in the natural sciences. In descriptions of the systematicity seen in the chaos of naturally occurring speech events, facts are created from data, just as facts are created from data in the natural sciences: through positing, or hypothesizing, a number of categories and a number of levels of analysis within a particular theoretical framework.

'Categories', as the term is used here, refer to abstractions that are analogous to boxes, or files, in which things that are similar in one way or another are stored. When a linguist categorizes linguistic units, she or he does essentially the same thing that is done in the real world when a thing is named, say, a 'bush' to distinguish it from, say, a 'tree'. 'Levels of analysis', on the other hand, cut across categories and are created by the narrow focus placed on one or another aspect of the data being studied. Here, the levels referred to are the formal level (listing the essential and optional sub-units of a particular unit, possible orderings of these elements, the effects each has on others, and so on); the functional level (specifying how a unit works and what it is used as); and the meaning, or semantic, level (specifying which concepts a unit refers to).

In short, when linguists attempt a description of language structures, the tools of their trade, their terms, are the names they give to ideas which help them to better understand what they are studying. These terms, in turn, name the categories and levels of their analyses. In order to understand various elements and aspects of the language more deeply, linguists use these categories and levels to try to tease apart things that people usually lock together and do not think about when they talk and listen, or when they use their language through other media such as writing.

In current linguistic descriptions and analyses, particularly in the

United States, theory plays an explicitly central role. That is, selected products of language use — data — are studied, and either hypotheses are made about them that could eventually be built up into a theory, or they are used to help the scholar understand more deeply the theory within which he or she is already working. In its strongest form, what this ultimately means is that without a theory,⁶ one cannot *do* linguistics. At international conferences in linguistics, for instance, it is not unusual to hear debates on the relative merits of various theories, and, in fact, one may even hear an argument which includes something like, 'Why do you say that's a problem? It's not a problem for *my* theory!' Narrow focus, isolation, specialization and fragmentation can and do occur in the field, and, on almost every aspect of the study of language, there is a wide range of underlying assumptions, opinions and beliefs which feed the theories and perspectives at hand — and there is an equally wide range of types of evidence which are used to support these theories and perspectives.

In Zimbabwe there is probably no less chaos, isolation, specialization and fragmentation in the field as anywhere else. And in Zimbabwe, too, there are the same additional constraints that linguists elsewhere face to one degree or another and in one way or another. It is common for linguists to have problems because they do not have access to relevant resources or to other kinds of support, for example, or only have access to equipment that does not do what needs to be done. Moreover, most linguists lack adequate time, funding and manpower assistance to conduct a large percentage of the research that needs to be done, partly because there is always too much language to explore, only a small portion of which would be relevant to a particular study *if* one had the time and assistance to discover which portion was the relevant one needed.

Despite these enormous constraints, however, the field is developing in a number of directions in Zimbabwe, particularly through the efforts of the University of Zimbabwe's Department of Linguistics and its Department of African Languages and Literature. Undergraduate and graduate programmes under the aegis of each of these departments are rapidly growing, for example, and each is involved in ongoing research in a number of areas which are immediately relevant not only to the nation but to the field of linguistics as well. The study of the languages spoken within the borders of the country is expanding rapidly, for example, and, among other things, long-hoped-for work is being done in child language acquisition, monolingual lexicography, second-language acquisition, morphology, syntax, literacy, translation, dialect studies, text analyses, comparative language studies and studies in cross-cultural communication.

In view of the energizing developments which are occurring,

⁶ Or, at the very least, without having a theoretical perspective.

particularly here in Zimbabwe, it is clear that linguistics is not merely an irrelevant, chaotic and purely 'academic' field that a sane person should choose to avoid. Admittedly, there are elements of chaos and 'academic irrelevance' interspersed among those works designed for immediate practical application, but, on another level, there is also order and discipline. In fact, linguistics may well be one of the best academic fields one could choose if one wanted to learn about the discipline of academic analysis as it has been traditionally practised in the West. Since pieces of speech or writing are not seen as being systematic until they have been looked at analytically, as I hope I am showing here, analyses must be constructed in highly conventionalized ways that express that systematicity. One is trained, through the discipline of linguistics, to develop conventionalized styles of academic argumentation, for example, as well as to approach information comprehensively and systematically, paying attention to details, organizing information in useful ways, recognizing data that support (or refute) a particular analysis, and in accepting with tolerance — and, sometimes, even actively seeking — exceptions to one's most deeply held opinions. One is trained, too, towards acquiring what Gronvik has referred to as 'a healthy disrespect of our own competence'.⁷

Although the value of the work done by linguists is not always obvious to those not immersed in the discipline, their work can be, and often is, used in bettering the human condition. Some linguists, for example, have focused their research so that they are able to detect signals of deceit in certain contexts.⁸ This information can be shared with others so that it becomes more difficult for people to trick or mislead others, at least in the typical ways that are used in the contexts explored. Others tackle other real-world problems such as how communication can misfire merely through conflicting, but unnoticed, styles of language use.⁹ They work towards exposing the structural language patterns that, when people are not aware of them, can give rise to misunderstandings and mistaken ideas about motives and meanings between, say, men and women, or between members of different social or cultural groups. Then, too, the work that linguists do which describes the structures and uses of language in its

⁷ O. Gronvik, 'Collection and registration of spoken and written material', in H. Chimhundu (ed.), *Report on the African Languages Lexical Project Planning and Training Workshop* (Harare, Univ. of Zimbabwe, Dept. of African Languages and Literature, 1992), 24.

⁸ See, for example, H. Hollein, *The Acoustics of Crime: The New Science of Forensic Phonetics* (New York, Plenum Press, 1990).

⁹ See, for example, D. Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1990); T. Kochman, *Black and White Styles in Conflict* (Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983); A. E. Tyler, A. A. Jefferies and C. E. Davies 'The effect of discourse structuring devices on listener perceptions of coherence in non-native university teachers' spoken discourse', *World Englishes* (1988), VII, ii, 101–10.

many variations contributes significantly to language development and language planning guidelines and policies. In the 1930s and 1940s, for example, many people all around the world, including people in Southern Africa, acquired orthographies for their languages largely through the descriptive efforts of linguists. There is also linguistic input to curriculum designs in schools, and to speech and reading therapy programmes, and the work of linguists is coming to be of vital importance towards informing therapy programs designed to help aphasic patients regain what speech they can after brain damage arising from injury, strokes or tumours makes it difficult, if not impossible, for them to produce or understand language. In yet other areas, one finds that, without linguistic analyses, computer programmes and models of artificial intelligence would have developed in very different ways than they have, and that other fields of inquiry, such as philosophy, psychology, literary criticism and sociology, have been deeply influenced by the work of a number of linguists. Finally, linguists' work contributes, in a relatively direct way, to the materials used in formal second-language teaching and to teaching materials that describe the structures of people's mother tongues. In fact, most language teaching materials now contain at least indirect reference to the insights and analyses of linguists, in addition to the prescriptions grammarians make which are said to lead to 'proper' speech or writing.

One can say with confidence, then, that there is value in continuing to do linguistics and in continuing to train linguists in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. I believe, however, that doing linguistics without continuing to develop the field in ways that will increase its relevance to the lives of real people in the real world sidesteps a wide range of responsibilities and opportunities, and that, unless linguists face the basic problems which arise out of the nature of their work, this type of development will become more and more difficult.

This article was partially motivated by a comment made during a conversation between two colleagues, both linguists, in which what was being referred to as the 'copula'¹⁰ in Shona was being discussed. In the course of the conversation, one of the participants exclaimed, 'But it's *not* a copula; it's a *focusing* device.' Here, each of the participants had a different way of seeing how the same phenomenon fits into 'the grammar of Shona'. Each of the two names fits in a way, but neither is a fully adequate descriptor of the unit under discussion. For a number of reasons, not all of them to do with linguistic analysis, the conflicting views on 'God's truth about Shona' which were distilled in and frozen by the two

¹⁰ A copula links a subject and a complement in a clause or sentence. It is one of the functions of {BE} in English, as in 'Man is the only animal that laughs'. Examples in Shona include *Ndiani?* 'Who is it?' and *Mwoyo muti* (in which the syllable *mu-* carries a high tone) 'The heart is a tree'.

choices of terminology clashed in ways that left both participants feeling uncomfortable and unable to communicate any further on a subject they both cared deeply about.

This incident crystallizes a basic problem faced by linguists. Although they are highly skilled scholars, trained to be accurate, comprehensive and precise about this extraordinary tool human beings have and use for communicating with one another, and despite a focus on accuracy, completeness and precision, they describe languages differently, often in ways that lead not only to miscommunication but even, in some cases, to that kind of silence which says, 'I don't want to hear what you have to say.' It seems to me that, in view of this, a few basic questions could be addressed. Among them are these: 'What is meant by a given linguistic term?' and 'What effects do the uses of these terms have on the speakers of the language which is being described, on the language itself, and on the linguist doing the analysis?' These questions, and others along the same line, point to another problem inherent in the field. This is that linguistics is, as Firth put it, 'language turned back on itself'.¹¹ Together, the nature of what linguists study — language — and the means by which it is studied — terminologically arrived-at categories and levels — have certain consequences. One of these is that the categories and levels named by linguistic terminology actually create the very structures that are described as if they were physically present in the language being analysed. One could claim that these *are* present in one way or another or to some degree or another, but the linguist — who is, after all, merely a person — has no way of really knowing the truth of the matter. In any event, the facts that emerge when perspectives and theories are combined with the data selected for analysis cannot be precisely equal to truth, though they may come close to it occasionally. If analyses comprised truth itself and exposed all there is to know about what has been analysed, then the work of linguists would have ended decades ago. Moreover, there would be no room for the argumentation which is so characteristic of, and central to, the field. That there are stronger and weaker answers but no single 'right' answer to a given question is, in my view, part of the attractiveness and value of the field.

At the same time, however, the claim is often made that scientists do seek 'right' answers to their questions. Clearly, there is no point in adhering to scientific theories which, when applied, would create bridges that fell under their own weight or aeroplanes that could not get off the ground, or, for that matter, structural descriptions of languages that obscured, rather than deepened, the analyst's understanding of them.

¹¹ J. R. Firth, *Papers in Linguistics, 1934-1955* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1957). In a sense, philosophy, which could be described as 'thinking turned back on itself', and even the study of literature, face a similar problem.

It is also claimed that a given analysis is either scientific or it is not scientific. However, I would suggest that the matter is somewhat more complex than that. For example, the result of scientific analysis in linguistics — structural description — is somewhat different from structural description in, say, geology, although scholars in both fields claim to follow scientific tradition. First, the nature of the objects studied and described in each field are of different types. In the study of language, the objects under study are pieces of language which have actually been observed or have been imagined to be possible. These data can be treated as if they were real and permanent in some way that people can perceive or observe, but they are actually evanescent, particularly when compared with rocks. When something is said, it is said and gone; only echoes — if anything — remain, and then only briefly. Even when language is written down or tape-recorded and read or listened to, it soon passes, in subtle and relatively unexplored ways. For that matter, even recorded language can be seen as being relatively temporary because readers and listeners are active in interpreting the language they see and hear. The interactions between recorded language and interpreter pass quickly, and, with each interaction, the reader or listener makes a new set of connections with the recorded language. A piece of recorded material, then, must have at least as many interpretations as it has numbers of readings or observations.

On the other hand, print and other recordings of language can also give a relative degree of permanence, especially when these are compared with talking. One can go back to them time and again, and, through them, one can focus on one's own and others' thoughts for as long as one's powers of concentration, patience and tolerance of isolation permit one to do so. But even this relative permanence is different in degree from that of a rock, for the recording exists only as a frozen example of language use that actually existed at some time in the past. Since people use language creatively, language constantly changes and its variations are infinite in ways that are relatively easy to observe. The nature of the object under study in linguistics, then, is in flux, in constant and perceptible motion; when the motions of a language have stopped, as in fact they did at some point with Latin, all one can note about it is that the language has somehow died and that now it can be studied in a similar way to a geological specimen.

A second difference, one which is, again, a difference in degree rather than in kind, has to do with the tools which are used for analysis in the two fields. Geologists have not only their eyes, their ears, their brains and their sense of touch to work with, but they also have various devices for measuring and gauging, as well as various chemicals and other objectifying tools to assist them in their analyses. On the other hand, while linguists have access to, and often use, statistics and other means of quantifying —

'measuring' — data,¹² they have as their primary tools the outputs of the interaction of their eyes, their ears and their brains: that which is encoded in and communicated through their terminology. While scholars in both fields rely on technical terminology which has been conventionalized for naming their respective sets of categories and levels of analysis, in linguistics, this conventionalization is relatively more fragmented, and, in that field, there can be a number of equally respectable technical meanings attached to a single term, depending upon theoretical and other aspects of the context of its use.

A third, and perhaps the most important, difference is that the very self of a linguist is tied up in language, the object of analysis, in a way that is difficult to imagine when one makes an academic study of things that are relatively external to human beings themselves. A geologist's ego and sense of identity may be tied up in his or her analysis of a rock, for example; but I would find it surprising to encounter a person whose ego and sense of identity is tied up with the rock itself in precisely the same ways as it is tied up with a language under analysis, whether that language is one the analyst speaks competently or not, since even choosing which language, or variety of language, to study seems to me to have a great deal to do with the self as well. One cumulative effect of these relative differences is that a geologist can make his or her analysis, write it down and publish it, and, to a great extent, the information he or she reports is what lives on.

To a much greater extent, then, linguists, in writing about language, are forced to carry relatively large parts of their cultural background, their social views and values, and their underlying assumptions, beliefs and opinions with them as they write and publish. Who and what a linguist is, then, is an integral part of the analysis itself, and it seems to me that this cannot be erased, even with the most ferocious attempts to create objective and scientific analyses of the data that the linguist selects from the infinite number of choices available. Who and what a linguist is, in turn, is, in large part, reflected in his or her choices of linguistic terms and the uses to which these terms are put.

Choosing linguistic terminology arises out of the need to define and name the categories and levels of analysis required in structural descriptions of language. The act of defining the concepts that are reflected through words, including linguistic terms, has a long, respectable and productive history within Western academic traditions. Many new insights which have led to deeper understandings about a great many things have

¹² Recent developments in the ways in which computers are being used to sort and catalogue data are helpful in that they permit linguists to work with larger quantities of data within reasonable periods of time. Phoneticians have highly sophisticated and delicate equipment with which to work which assists them in their studies of the physical properties of speech signals. The primary problem, however, remains intact.

come — and continue to come — from careful definition, and it plays a crucial role in category-building. In defining, one makes relatively broad generalizations about what something is (or what it does, or what it means), often together with generalizations about what it is not. Accuracy, unambiguous precision and consistency are all important goals of this activity. In linguistic category-building appropriately named definitions are applied to real or imagined pieces of language. These are part of what gives life to the field, since it is only through exposing these categories to the rigorous criticism that is another part of the field that understandings can be deepened and linguistics itself can grow and develop.

Within these traditions, there is the tendency to view the very act of defining as being extremely important, even central to the work. Interestingly, the centrality of this activity is even encoded in one of the more undeservedly obscure Greek myths. The myth centres on a figure named Procrustes, who was a giant, or a brigand or an innkeeper, depending on the version of the myth one reads. Whatever his profession and however he got them, he would have guests. His hospitality (or whatever it was), however, often conflicted with his obsessive need for orderliness. If a guest were too long or too wide for the bed to which he was assigned, Procrustes would lop off whatever portions of his body hung over the edges of the bed. Conversely, if the guest had the misfortune of being too short for the bed, he would be stretched. Bed-fitting guests were what were important to Procrustes, then, and his narrow focus on controlling circumstances so that his guests would fit their beds seems to have obliterated every other consideration.

A desire for order is also found in the linguist's quest for discovering or creating adequate categories of analysis. Just as Procrustes' guests did not always fit their beds, linguistic data do not always fit the 'beds' to which one assigns them. Within the tradition encoded by the Procrustes myth, one can even develop, through some degree or another of attachment to one's theories and perspectives, one's own ways of lopping off and stretching.

One reason why linguists' categories sometimes do not fit the data very well can be that the categories are inadequate for one reason or another. This can come about, for example, when the theoretical framework contains mistaken, perhaps unnoticed, assumptions, or when there is a misfit between the category itself and the theory. Another emerges from the nature of the language data themselves. Because they are used by real people in real contexts, it is a difficult task to cut them up into clearly defined categories which have firm boundaries that do not 'leak'. That is, for every category one might construct, there will be some data that will be prototypical, or core, representatives of that category, and others that will be peripheral, or even questionable, members of it.

An analogy from the set of colour terms in English might clarify the type of problem one faces with this. As an English speaker, one would have no problem in classifying the colours of the 'blue one sees in (unpolluted) skies', for example. For English speakers, these colours are prototypically 'blue', and they fit easily into the 'blue' category, no matter how much they vary in tone or shade. But what does one do with a colour like turquoise, the colour seen in the stone that carries its name? Should it be classified under 'blue', or is it better classified under 'green'? Or does one create a new category for it, 'blue-green' or 'green-blue', to include only its shades and tones? Whatever the decision is, it will affect the entire system of colours that has been created through the categories the observer has built.

The problem found in the relatively concrete task of colour assignment is the sort of thing which is also found as linguistic structures are classified or categorized; and, as colours are classified differently in different cultures, so categorizations of linguistic structures are classified differently within different theoretical frameworks. These, in turn, have been heavily influenced by the social and academic cultures within which the linguist has been trained and even by his or her personal strengths and weaknesses. The difference is that classifying colours into categories is a relatively trivial, and possibly even an uninteresting, mental activity, but determining what one's categories are and how they are to be applied to language — the kinds of categorization conducted in describing languages — is a vital and central part of linguistic work. On the one hand, linguistic terms that help create linguistic categories can be useful tools which can free linguists to see new phenomena which deepen their understanding of language and which help them to share their ideas with others. On the other, the very same terms can become tyrants which can cage and narrow one's thoughts and imagination and which can prevent one from seeing others' — and even one's own — observations clearly.

The category 'language', for example, is often contrasted with the category 'dialect'. The distinguishing characteristic between them is usually described by the phrase 'mutual intelligibility', which is said to exist in the latter, but not in the former. Thus, Zezuru and Karanga, for example, are sets of dialects within the same language, Shona, because the speakers of these varieties understand one another, and English is a separate language because Shona and English are 'mutually unintelligible'. But, one must ask — if one is to be precise — What does 'intelligible' mean? Are all aspects of the various dialects of a language always 'mutually intelligible'? And, what about those many cases in bilingual communities, where the 'mutual intelligibility' criterion distinguishes nothing? Further, one might also ask, to what uses could these categories be put? Does such a classification help deepen an understanding of what it is that people share when they

are being intelligible — when they communicate with one another? If so, then one must also ask 'How?' and 'In which ways?'

Many linguists use a number of distinctions in linguistic analysis almost automatically to identify and distinguish between different categories — very often without explicit definition — in lectures, articles and books. There is a tendency to use 'derivation' and 'inflection', for example, as if all linguists agree on what their essential, as well as their distinguishing, characteristics are. The same holds true for most uses of the contrasts between the technical terms 'noun' and 'verb', 'verb' and 'adjective', 'intonation language' and 'tone language', 'tense' and 'aspect', 'active' and 'passive', and, in fact, between 'word' and 'phrase'. With each of these pairs, and with many others, there are many pieces of relevant data that do not fit either category very well, and, worse still, some that more or less comfortably fit both. This should not be possible if these categories were rigid and firm — as they should be if they are accurately and precisely defined.

Some of the consequences of categorizing and naming the resulting categories with linguistic terminology can be seen most clearly, perhaps, when the terminology that has traditionally been used to describe, say, a language such as English is also used to describe another language, such as Shona. The term 'possessive', for example, has traditionally been used to describe a set of grammatical markers in English that express a certain set of grammatical relationships between noun phrases (or units of structure that can function as subjects or objects in phrases or sentences). These include: *-s* (as in 'Mary's book'), and the sets of pronouns which include *our* (as in 'our ideas') and *ours* (as in 'this house is ours'). In the context of English usage, these markers very often signal relationships having to do with the meanings 'possessing' or 'owning'; one might even say that 'possessing' and 'owning' are core meanings of this particular set of markers in English. When one 'possesses' or 'owns' something in English, one 'has' it, and the idea of 'having' is quite distinct, in that language, from 'doing' or 'being', and even from 'being with (something)', something that is not true for all languages.

Within a number of frameworks, 'possessive' is also used to describe the set of Shona grammatical markers that I will represent here as *zve-*, although it is actually realized in phrases through a number of different forms. Each of the following phrases contains a 'possessive' marker, which is marked by bold type: *vana vevanhu*, 'the children of the people'; *basa revarimi*, 'the work of farmers'; *musangano wegore*, 'annual meeting' (lit. 'The meeting of the year'); *zvezhizha*, '[things] associated with the rainy season'. In the first three examples, the noun phrase which names what is 'possessed' is followed by a version of *zve-* which agrees grammatically with it, while, in the fourth, what is 'possessed' is not made explicit. In all

four cases, this 'possessive' marker is followed by a form that refers to the 'possessor'. In another type of example, one can look at *zvokuti*, 'with the result that ...' (lit. '[things] associated with saying [that]'), in which it is extremely difficult to imagine what might possibly be 'possessing' what.

The notion of actual 'possession', particularly in the 'ownership' sense, does not seem to be one of the core meanings which is conveyed by these markers in most contexts. Rather, the sense of 'belonging to' could be said to be more appropriate in most of these examples, something similar to the meaning of 'of' in the English phrases 'the king of the realm' and 'the hair of the dog'. It could also be said that these markers signify something even closer in meaning to 'being associated with', something that, when translated into English, is often made equivalent to 'having', because that is the closest comfortable way of expressing the concept in English. Yet, 'being associated with' and 'possessing' have very different connotations. That is, the power relations being made explicit in each word are quite distinct; the equality of the participants in a possessive relationship, particularly one in the ownership sense of possession, is, given even the most neutral interpretation, less equal.

In fact, 'possession' in the 'ownership' sense, might more appropriately be applied to some of the uses of the prefix markers *nya-* 'proprietor, owner', as in *nyabani*, 'proprietor of the field', and the *muzvina-* marker, as in *muzvinapurazi*, 'owner of a large farm'. But even these carry an 'association' sense in many contexts, such as in *nyakurohwa*, 'one associated with having been hit', *nyakufa*, 'one associated with having died', and *nyamhanza*, 'one associated with being bald'.¹³ To be unambiguously clear that ownership, rather than some other type of connection or relationship is being expressed, a lexical item such as *mwene*, 'owner' seems to be used.

These observations suggest that it could be enlightening to describe a grammatical category for Shona which marks 'association' rather than 'possession'. Such an analysis could lead to a deeper understanding of at least one aspect of the language, particularly in the context of a number of other observations about the grammar of Shona. For instance, the unit which expresses what would be translated into English as 'have' is less a verb-like element that parallels English 'have' (although, in translations, it most often comes out as 'have') than it is a phrase marker, more precisely translated into English as '[be] with', as in *Vane vana vatatu*, 'They have three children' (lit. 'They+[are]+with children three').¹⁴ Referring to, and

¹³ I thank Ms M. Chiswanda for bringing these examples to my attention. It is interesting to note in passing that another type of gloss, one which is less English-like, could be 'one belonging to (or being part of) — hittedness, deadness, baldness'.

¹⁴ I thank Mr K. G. Mkanganwi for clarifying how to represent the literal gloss in this example.

thinking of, *zue-* as 'possessive', however, makes such connections more difficult to make, particularly when, at the same time, translation into English encourages a conceptualization of *-ne* as 'have'.

One might even argue that, in using 'possessive' to name this category of markers in Shona, one is bringing connotations and denotations to the description of the language that, until the moment of description, did not exist in the language itself. These denotations and connotations — which come from both the out-there real world of English language use and the in-there world of English linguistic terminology — may not fit the semantic facts of Shona as comfortably as one might wish.

One could also argue that using the term 'possessive' to describe both Shona and English is problematical on the formal level as well; that is, using 'possessive' to describe what, in English, includes such forms as *our*, *your* and *their*, and, in Shona, includes *yedu* ('our', as in *imba yedu*, 'our house'), *zvako* ('your', as in *zvinhu zvako*, 'your [sing.] things'), and *wavo* ('their', as in *mwana wavo*, 'their child'). These examples, and others like them, suggest that the English and Shona sets are made up very differently. Of particular note is that the English possessive morphemes refer exclusively to the possessor. In English, there is 'our house' or 'our houses' or 'our horses' with no change in the possessive marker itself. But, in the Shona construction, there is explicit reference, not only to the 'possessor', via the marker that immediately follows the 'possessive' marker, but also to what is 'possessed' through the agreement marking of the 'possessive' marker itself, as can be seen when the English phrases above are glossed in Shona: *imba yedu*, 'our house', *dzimba dzedu*, 'our houses' and *mabhiza edu*, 'our horses'. Since the two sets of forms are constructed differently for each of the two languages and each set works in its own ways, it is difficult to argue, at least on the surface of things, that they are language-specific realizations of the same grammatical category. The category name they share, however, suggests that they are.

At the same time, to be fair, one needs to ask if this is really as problematic as has been suggested above. Looking at it from another perspective, there is a category which contains Shona forms that can be described as being related, and which — for historical reasons — has been named 'possessive'. This term is familiar to linguists who encounter it in descriptions of this set of markers in Shona. Moreover, the forms in each set have patterns which are more or less predictable and they function to relate linguistic units in certain describable ways; that is, they function to link two noun phrases in quite similar ways that are distinct from other ways in which linguistic structures can be linked. Since, in terms of linguistic description, the category itself is 'real' enough, does it matter what it is actually called? The easiest answer to that question, of course, is that it depends upon the cultural background, the social views

and values, and the underlying assumptions, beliefs and opinions of the linguist.

On the one hand, it may matter partly because it is not a particularly precise or accurate term at either the formal or semantic levels. The rigour of the field requires attention to preciseness and accuracy. Moreover, it could also be noted that a semantically-based term is being used to describe a category that is usually described in terms of form or function, thereby bringing up the matter of consistency, which is yet another aspect of the rigour of the discipline. Viewed in this way, a better category name, for consistency's sake, might be selected to reflect that the name is one that applies to forms or one that applies to functions. It could also be said that it matters because 'possessive' may not resonate with the meanings *zve-* brings to phrases and sentences. If a semantically-based name must be used, then it could legitimately be asked, 'Why not choose one that reflects a translation of a core meaning of the markers included under *zve-*?'¹⁵ It may well accord with the native-speaker intuitions of bilingual Shona/English linguists, who are not only proficient users of English in all contexts but have also taken their linguistic training in English. But, at the same time, one could also ask questions like, 'Does it accord with the intuitions of others who know the language?', 'If not, does that fact matter?', 'If it does matter, in which ways does it matter?', and, finally, 'If it doesn't matter, then *why* doesn't it?'

On the other hand, one could make the observation that linguists are trained to know better than most people that words do not equal the things to which they refer. From the first introductory course in linguistics encountered almost everywhere, linguists are trained to 'know' that words are arbitrary names of concepts that are conventionalized, socially-agreed-upon labels for the things that people choose or need to label. The name linguists have given the category, then, could be seen as being considerably less important than the unity of the elements subsumed under it. The term 'possessive' is, after all, merely an inheritance from grammatical descriptions of the genitive, or possessive, case in Latin, and it probably fits even English less well than it did Latin. Moreover, meanings connected with 'owning' are among those attached to 'possess' and its derivatives through using phrases in English which contain these markers in real-world contexts.

¹⁵ One could even construct a hypothesis, which would need to be tested, that memorizing strange terms like 'possessive' in the context of structural categories made up of units like *zve-* may even be part of what may discourage students from getting involved in the study of language. Very often, descriptive linguistic terminology, rather than other terminology which might 'resonate' more effectively with secondary school pupils, is used by writers of school grammar books. A field that names *zve-* 'possessive' could easily be seen as being irrelevant to 'real language', despite the fact that, with linguistic training, one can discover new ways of respecting and appreciating the complexities and subtleties of it, and of connecting studies of it more fully with contexts in the real world.

One could argue that these uses are different from the narrowly-focused ones that occur when language is being 'turned back on itself' in the technical world of linguistic description. From this perspective, in fact, 'possessive' is possessive as long as linguists agree that it is. What remains to be made clear, however, is what it is that linguists are agreeing *about*.

Some of the terms used to name categories in linguistics refer to formal properties, some refer to functional properties and some to semantic properties. The various names chosen to describe these very different kinds of property do not appear to have been conventionalized according to any discoverable underlying principle. That is, one does not generally use names which refer to forms in naming the formal units of linguistic structure, or terms with only functional implications to name functions, and so forth. The only clear generalization about naming choices that can be made is that, historically, there has been a tendency to use more terms which carry semantic and functional definitions, such as the famous 'A noun is the name of a person, place or thing', than others. In fact, it could be said that recently coined truncated descriptors — non-words — such as NP (noun phrase), VP (verb phrase), ADV (adverb; adverbial) may arise out of a need to name linguistic categories strictly, and unambiguously, on the basis of structure. This may even be a source of their common use in the field. They help linguists avoid the use of real words which have picked up all kinds of connotations both within and outside the field. In addition, they help linguists avoid the very basic (and very thorny) problem of teasing form and function — that is, structure — away from meaning.

One could also say that there is a problem when a selected term does not ring true, when it lacks the resonance that would draw a person into a deeper understanding what he or she is studying. The language one uses forms part of one's identity, and if it becomes dried up and distant in one's own or someone else's descriptions of it, because it is phrased in ways which cannot connect a person with what he or she knows, then how can those descriptions be relevant in any meaningful way? While that part of the linguist that follows scientific tradition might say that aesthetic matters, such as resonance, are irrelevant to the discipline — and that precision, accuracy and consistency are the important considerations to keep in mind as terminology is being chosen or used — another part recalls that it may not be possible for linguistic terms to reflect any or all of these latter things either.

Carter and Kahari¹⁶ and Myers,¹⁷ recognizing the uncomfortable fit of the term 'possessive' on the Shona grammatical category it names, have

¹⁶ H. Carter and G. Kahari, *Shona Language Course* (Madison, Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1981).

¹⁷ S. P. Myers, *Tone and the Structure of Words in Shona* (Boston, Univ. of Massachusetts, Ph.D. diss., 1987).

instead used the term 'associative' in their descriptions of the language. Others continue to refer to this set of forms as 'possessive', and they, too, have good reasons for doing so. Under the latter view, the category of possessive markers signals a specific type of grammatical relationship between two noun phrases that is different in kind from other grammatical ways of relating these, and other kinds of, phrases. Looked at from this perspective, 'possessive' is a correct name in that it exposes a significant similarity among the languages that share this particular means of modifying or specifying nominal elements, an important observation that would be obscured by calling it something else.

With respect to naming and defining our categories, then, one may find oneself on the horns of a dilemma. If one chooses to use precise, accurate and/or consistent terms to name the categories of description for a particular language, one creates and uses a large number of language-specific terms and extends or narrows the meanings of the plethora of terms that already exist. Included among the consequences of this choice is that focus is placed on the uniqueness of each language being described, and the similarities among human languages is thereby obscured. In addition, terminology is added to an already overburdened and highly individualistic linguistic lexicon, with the result that the already daunting task for beginning students of linguistics is made even more confusing and difficult, as is the conduct and writing up of one's own research. If, on the other hand, one chooses to use terms and meanings from a relatively small set of prescribed terms and meanings — so that, for example, the similarities among languages can be highlighted on one level of abstraction or another — this not only enhances the Procrustes effect, but also restricts one's freedom as an observer and thinker. If observations are constrained by terminology, so are insights about significant variations which could deepen understanding about language that are relevant to a specific language and, at least potentially, to others as well. The horns of this terminological dilemma are made even sharper by the centrality, the importance, that linguistic terms continue to have because of the nature of the work conducted within the field.

The ways in which linguists define and name their categories and levels of analysis, however, is only part of the problem reflected by linguistic terminology. Another part of the problem is how these terms can be used after they have been defined and named. Just as Procrustes is relevant to definition and to the relative importance attached to it, each of the four factors discussed below also helps to perpetuate his relevance to the field.

One of the factors seems to me to arise out of individualism and the claims often made about the objectivity of linguistic work. It occurs once one has chosen and defined one's terms and has decided to communicate

these uses to others. One could call this factor the 'assumacy factor'. When terms acquire meaning within an analysis, the analyst assumes that this very meaning is communicated effectively to others who read or hear what he or she is writing or saying. The problem with this assumption is that each person has gradually acquired his or her own set of meanings for any given linguistic term, each within his or her own cultural and academic context. A linguist at the University of Chicago, for example, might 'know' what the term 'function' means in a way that is very different from what a linguist at Oxford University 'knows' about the meaning of that very same term. This can even happen between two linguists who have worked in offices that are in the very same corridor of the very same university for thirty years. Each may explicitly define what he or she means by the term, but each reader or listener will also, by the very act of interpretation, at least subconsciously contribute to the meaning of that definition through the very human process of linking it with what he or she already knows.

A second factor is what could be referred to as the 'obscurity factor'. Nearly everyone has encountered researchers with Ph.D.s, who, like many medical doctors, are fonder of preserving the mystique of their knowledge than of making it available to those they serve — their students, their audiences and their readers. This is a difficulty faced in most of academia but it is particularly hazardous in the field of linguistics, where terminology and the uses to which it is put form such an integral part of the work. At least some of what is written or said in linguistics is *not* unambiguously clear. And sometimes linguistic texts and treatises are encountered that seem to set out to be as abstruse and obscure as possible, as in, for example, some of the published work which develops the field's more formal theories. Some of these can be expressed in such formidable and impenetrable ways that only the most specialized of scholars can work their way through them.¹⁸

A third factor could be called the 'pressure factor'. Scholars are under enormous pressure to publish. In linguistics, as in all fields, it can sometimes happen that terms are applied to data, particularly to data in relatively unexplored languages, in ways that are primarily designed to support the particular theory one is attempting to justify. These data, when combined with the meanings of the terminology used in the context of that theory, create facts which can then be used as grist for those theoretical mills that

¹⁸ This, of course, is not to say that this work has no value; to claim so would suggest an unsupported and unjustifiable view. People who can do these things should do them, especially since studies of artificial intelligence and natural-language processing programmes for computers depend so heavily upon them. At the same time, however, there is a danger in believing that performing such highly specialized analyses is the only way one can be a 'real' linguist.

have the ultimate effect of strengthening an academic curriculum vitae. Since, as has been pointed out to me in another context, a person can get evidence for anything from almost anything, this can conceivably lead to a proliferation of published materials that add more weight than light to the field, adding weight especially to those traditions that perpetuate a less than complete understanding of the languages — and of the people who speak them — which are being used in these ways.

A fourth factor, and the final one to be touched on here, is what could be called the 'certainty factor'. It can be very difficult to keep analyses in their proper place. What sometimes happens — and the moments are exciting ones — is that a discovery is made that leads one to the thought that now one understands 'what is really going on!' with a certain type of structure that one has been studying for some time. Something systematic, indeed, might have been discovered, and it is difficult to remember at such times that the systematicity that people have the capacity to discover and to express in words belongs to the analysis, and that 'God's truth' about the structure and about the language itself remains as it was. Linguistic training, in fact, with its emphasis on objectivity and rigour, should, although it sometimes seems to fail in this, equip linguists with ways that diminish a potential for arrogance about their abilities and perspectives.

Each of these factors not only enhances the Procrustes effect but also help make the field an uninviting, unapproachable, and even an uninteresting one for many people, including people whose insights, experience and values would otherwise bring to the field new perspectives which could affect it in constructive ways.

Within the linguistic traditions that have developed and become known so far, linguists have become highly skilled in certain methodologies that expose certain types of insights about language. They are particularly well trained through the discipline of the field, for example, to address such questions as 'What . . . *precisely*?', 'How?' and even, sometimes, 'Why?' They are also very well equipped to explore possible causes and effects, to make comparisons and contrasts of one kind or another, and to describe part/whole relations, particularly in terms of hierarchical arrangements. There are, no doubt, other types of insights that have not yet been imagined but which, when discovered and made public, will advance and deepen current knowledge about human language and about different human languages.

With the advent of computers and tools of communication such as e-mail and fax, come factors from outside the field that are radically changing the conduct of work in the field. As better communication is achieved, and as access to relevant information broadens, a variety of boldly asserted and non-traditional perspectives will affect the development of the field

from the inside as well. These factors, in turn, will affect how linguists look at language and at their responsibilities as linguists in a world which is increasing the number of ways in which people can communicate, and miscommunicate, with each other through language.

From the point of view of an outsider who has had the opportunity to work in Zimbabwe, there is evidence, in fact, that this is precisely what is beginning to happen. Both formal and informal linkages are beginning to develop, for example, through which locally-determined needs and goals are beginning to be addressed in locally-determined ways. Communication which, traditionally, has been largely unidirectional is approaching a balance that would have been unimaginable even five or ten years ago. It may even happen that, in time, some of the factors encoded in the Procrustes myth will somehow become less relevant, without a concomitant erosion of rigorous discipline, something which will not only bring benefit to the field of linguistics but also to other spheres of experience where language is used to bring new insights and deeper understanding to the people who use it.

On the one hand, the problems to be faced in the field are still almost insurmountable, not only here in Zimbabwe but elsewhere. Narrow focus, isolation, specialization and fragmentation all continue to bring with them varying degrees of exclusion together with additional, and valuable, knowledge. Large numbers of linguists still do not talk very much with one another about their work — perhaps out of fear that their ideas and observations will be stolen or that they will be laughed at or rejected — and an enormous number of terms and uses of terms continue to proliferate in ways which, although they are usually intended to communicate meanings precisely, accurately and consistently, do not achieve these purposes as effectively as they might.

On the other hand, the fact that the problems are only 'almost' insurmountable reinforces my optimism about the prospects of linguistics. Recent developments, including the expansion of locally-based research and teaching, and a deeper recognition of the need for better communication — which is sometimes actually achieved — supports this optimism.