

## Understanding linguistic conceptions and products

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Assuming that the adage “We understand what we know” is true in the sense that we have to have concepts for reference to be clear on what the subject is about, young students are likely to be at a disadvantage compared with their teachers when modern linguistics is the subject of discussion. Three things matter in language study – the background conception and the basic concepts, historical context (language’s development, verbal and scholarly heritage, and related problems) and methodology (principles of analysis and concrete methods). Educated young scholars of the 1960s, who found formalisation in structural and transformational linguistics extreme, clandestinely appreciated the insight of traditionalists into the delicacy of meaning and the restricting power of language, while expecting some trend orientated toward semantics. Functional linguistics (Halliday, 1973, 1976, 1978) satisfied these expectations with its conceptual basis and the integrity of form and meaning in the hierarchically interrelated units, while applied aspects of linguistics were helpful (Fisiak, 1981).

Parallel and newer trends, such as the philosophy of mind (Matthews, 2007), logical positivism in linguistics (Russell, 1965), pragmatics (Verschueren, 1999) and cognitive linguistics (Lee, 2001) have been appreciated for novelty but not always for applicability, integrity and comprehensiveness (Drazdauskiene, 2011, 2014). Neither an overall concept nor understanding in depth of these trends in linguistics is available to young students. Even one single trend may cause problems of understanding. However, university programmes envisage term and graduation papers in which a lack of theoretical understanding may be detrimental. Indeed, in the 1980s in Eastern Europe, some students wrote papers while assuming that language is our natural property and that a linguistic paper requires merely saying something about language. They would compile quotes from different sources, arrange them some way and when asked whether they read a concrete book to have a clear notion of the conception, sometimes happened to answer, “I’ve Xeroxed it.”

To show what understanding such an approach to written papers at university means, we have to bear in mind that Aristotle defined his concepts at every step. The generation of the 1920s minded Aristotle and the generation of the 1940s was taught to read and internalise all the references they came across in the papers at the initial stage of their studies. They were also instructed to use strictly the terminology of a chosen linguistic trend, which made the framework of their reference consistent and ensured shared understanding. Today, when I read online the following:

Relational diversity affects ease of processing even for opaque English compounds.

Recent research has indicated that understanding compound words involves an attempt at semantic composition of the constituent words, and that this meaning construction process involves an attempt to identify a relation linking the constituents.

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understanding baffles me.

Two English linguists (Henry Cecil Wyld, 1926, and Sir Randolph Quirk, 1974) have emphasised the study of the mother tongue, for good reasons: fair knowledge of the language of study is the principal lever that renders reliable results through understanding. When educational rigour has become undemocratic, when major authors are not lavish on the methods and students need a tool, language knowledge had been and has remained the primary guarantee of understanding and academic achievement.

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