1   Introduction

This book is a critique of the academic discipline of linguistics.

Some subjects taught in university departments have existed as recognized disciplines for centuries, but "linguistics" is new. I had never heard the word when I became an undergraduate; many educated adults who are not professional academics are unfamiliar with it today. The detailed history of linguistics as a university subject is known to me only in the British context, but I believe Britain is not unrepresentative. When I graduated in Oriental Studies from Cambridge University in 1965, ours was the first year to be given the option of sitting a finals paper in "general linguistics" (I took that option). Students of "Modern and Mediaeval Languages" (that is, European languages) may have had the option earlier, but I think only a year or two earlier. Whatever else it is, linguistics is not a discipline that has earned a place in the map of learning through recognition by many generations of thoughtful and educated people of its intellectual standing.

Language has of course been studied for a very long time – as long, probably, as Mankind has had resources to spare for intellectual pursuits after the practical needs of food and shelter were provided for. In Europe, throughout the Middle Ages and long afterwards schooling was centred largely on the classics. The motive for learning about the Ancient Greeks and Romans was that they founded the civilization to which modern Europeans are heirs, so that study of their history, institutions, and ideas held lessons of potential value to subjects of modern European states; but those lessons had to be absorbed through the medium of languages which are so complex that language study alone acounted for a high proportion of all the effort put into classical studies. In recent centuries modern European languages, too, came to be seen as valid subjects for degree-level study. For a long while it was assumed that only languages of literate societies could be worth learning about, but by the late nineteenth century Western researchers were finding intellectual value in examination of unwritten Asian, African, and Native American languages, which were often studied as an aspect of anthropology. There is nothing new about studying languages.

"Linguistics", though, is a discipline which claims to study *language in general*, rather than particular languages or families of languages; and that is a new development.

The germ of the modern discipline of linguistics is commonly identified with a series of courses given by Ferdinand de Saussure at the University of Geneva between the years 1908 and 1911, which his students compiled after his death into a book published in 1916 under the title *Course in General Linguistics*. But while Saussure may have introduced the concept of "general linguistics" as a subject in its own right, the practical development of such a subject got under way only considerably later. In the academic world, new disciplines become recognized through the creation of professorial chairs, university departments, and degree titles. In Britain the first professor of general linguistics was J.R. Firth in 1944, but for some time he was a one-off case, working in a very unusual, specialist academic environment (London University's School of Oriental and African Studies). It was in the 1960s – that decade when the world was crazily haring after

innovation in every aspect of life – that the subject really took off, with new departments and degree schemes popping up in one university after another. (At first, the term used was Saussure's "general linguistics", in order to make an explicit contrast with the study of particular languages; later, as the new subject became widely established, the "general" was dropped and the subject was simply called linguistics.) At the oldest university in the English-speaking world, Oxford, I was told that I myself was the first person in its long history to be given a job with "linguistics" in the title, when I was elected to a college research fellowship in that subject in 1969. (More than one of my senior colleagues were puzzled to know what might lie behind this novel academic terminology.) Soon, perhaps half the universities in Britain were offering degrees in linguistics.

Fifty years later, it is plain to those with eyes to see that the subject has lost its way. An academic discipline which was founded a century ago, and took off in numbers and popularity half a century ago, ought presumably by now to be offering us worthwhile new insights into its subject-matter. We are not getting that from linguistics.

Many observers are vaguely aware of this failure, without pinning down where the problem lies. The heart of the problem is that linguistics sees itself as a science – the soundbite which it has used since the 1960s to define itself is "the scientific study of language". That is a delusion. Human language is not the kind of thing that can be studied by the methods of science.

"Science" was originally a very general word, deriving from Latin *scientia*, "knowledge", but at least since the nineteenth century it has had a better-defined, more specific application. The man who showed us what distinguishes the sciences from other areas of intellectual activity was Sir Karl Popper, initially through a 1934 book translated into English in 1959 as *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. For Popper, the hallmark of the sciences is that they propose general theories which make themselves vulnerable to refutation, by yielding testable predictions about empirical observations which anyone is free to make. A scientific theory cannot be proved true, but it can be disproved if some of its predictions are falsified. (Popper was particularly keen to contrast genuine sciences in this sense with bodies of discourse which he regarded as pseudosciences – his examples were the Marxist theory of history, and Freudian psychoanalysis – which he saw as not admitting any possibility of refutation, since their exponents would in practice reinterpret any apparently adverse evidence in a way that turned it into a confirmation of the theories' predictions.)

In other words, a true science draws a boundary round some set of imaginable future observations, and says "you may observe things falling within this boundary, but you will never observe anything outside it – if you do, the theory is wrong and must be given up". The narrower the boundary, relative to the total universe of imaginable possibilities, the more contentful and better the theory. A good theory is highly "falsifiable" – to be falsifiable sounds like a bad thing, but in science it is a good thing: a theory which is potentially falsifiable (but which has not been falsified) tells us something, an unfalsifiable theory is empty. Thus, a theory of gravity which predicted "An object released near the Earth will fall towards its centre" would be an acceptable scientific theory, though a fairly weak one: it rules out the possibility of the object hanging motionless in mid-air, or moving in some other direction. A theory which predicted " … will fall towards its centre at a constant positive rate of acceleration" would be better: it excludes everything excluded by the earlier theory, and also excludes downward motion at a fixed speed, or at a speed which changes irregularly. A theory predicting that the released body will "move in

accordance with its intrinsic nature" (which is rather like what some Ancient Greeks believed about motion) would not rank as a scientific theory at all, because we are not told what kinds of movement would refute it. (Unless we are told more, we would have to look at how the body actually does move in order to know what motions accord with its intrinsic nature.)

Popper's criterion for distinguishing science from non-science is not the be-all and end-all. As always, matters are more complicated. For instance, Popper's departmental colleague Imre Lakatos pointed out (Lakatos 1970) that scientific theories in practice are not (and should not be) abandoned at the first whiff of counter-evidence, because it will not be clear whether the surprising observation exposes a fault in the theory itself or arises from some interfering factor. What we have to assess is not a single theory in isolation, but an evolving sequence of theories resulting from successive modifications in response to evidence: do the theories evolve in a direction that gives them increasing content, or do they become ever emptier? As Lakatos put it, are they "progressive" or "degenerating" research programmes? But in broad outline Popper's idea about the difference between sciences and non-scientific subjects is accepted by everyone who recognizes science as a significant factor in the progress of civilization.

The trouble with applying this idea to the study of language is that human language behaviour is a very open-ended activity. As with some other aspects of human life, as fast as one tries to draw boundaries round sets of "things that can happen", to contrast them with other imaginable "things that can't happen", we find that human behaviour breaks through the boundaries. The planets in their orbits obey the same fairly simple laws of motion year in, year out, enabling astronomers successfully to predict things like eclipses over long periods of time – they can often match records of eclipses centuries past with "retrodictions" of when the laws say eclipses should have occurred. Human life has none of that changeless quality. The life of a 21st-century Englishman would in various respects be incomprehensible to an inhabitant of the Victorian age, and only by studying history can we understand many aspects of the lives of our ancestors.

Germans divide academic subjects into *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* – literally, natural studies versus spiritual studies. The Newtonian laws of motion are a natural study, but human language behaviour is clearly a product of the human spirit (even though, in English, "spirit" and "spiritual" have religious or spooky connotations which are not present in the German word). No-one suggests that scientific knowledge is the only valid knowledge there is. Subjects like history, or ethics, are very significant fields of enquiry, but they are *Geisteswissenschaften*: they are not domains where one can usefully posit refutable scientific theories. History has trends, and we can gain insight into past times by reading a good historian's analysis of historical trends, but history does not have scientific laws. The study of human language, necessarily, must be more like history than like physics.

I said that no-one sees the sciences as having a monopoly on valid knowledge, but that is not strictly true. The 1960s, which saw the discipline of linguistics take off, was the tail-end of a period when intellectual life in general had been heavily influenced by doctrines such as logical positivism, which did come close to asserting that any statement is either scientific or it is meaningless. Few philosophers are impressed by logical positivism today. But the claim of linguistics to be scientific is this discipline's *raison d'être*, so it cannot be given up. Often the claim is maintained very explicitly. Consider for instance the preface included in successive editions of a standard modern linguistics textbook (my copy is the third edition, O'Grady et al. 1997 – the book is currently up to its sixth edition). William O'Grady and Michael Dobrovolsky begin their preface by writing:

Thanks to the application of rigorous analysis to familiar subject matter, linguistics provides students with an ideal introduction to the kind of thinking we call "scientific". Such thinking proceeds from an appreciation of problems arising from bodies of data, to hypotheses that attempt to account for those problems, to the careful testing and extension of these hypotheses.

Words like "rigorous", "hypotheses", "testing" make it very obvious that linguistics is claimed to fall on the "science" side of the "science"/"arts" divide.

That claim is mistaken. Linguistics is not a science. I am not sure that it ought to rank as a "subject" at all, in the sense of a body of knowledge coherent and reliable enough to justify teaching it to undergraduates and awarding them degrees in it. But if it is a subject, linguistics is certainly not a scientific subject.

The word for the attitude which insists that studies of humane, cultural matters can and should be theorized as if they were natural sciences is *scientism*. The term was introduced from French into English (in this sense, at least) by the social philosopher Friedrich Hayek, who (after emphasizing his admiration for scientific method when applied within its proper domain) wrote

> we shall, wherever we are concerned, not with the general spirit of disinterested inquiry but with slavish imitation of the method and language of Science, speak of "scientism" or the "scientistic" prejudice. … in the sense in which we shall use these terms, they describe, of course, an attitude which is decidedly unscientific in the true sense of the word, since it involves a mechanical and uncritical application of habits of thought to fields different from those in which they have been formed. The scientistic as distinguished from the scientific view is not an unprejudiced but a very prejudiced approach which, before it has considered its subject, claims to know what is the most appropriate way of investigating it. (Hayek 1955: 15–16)

Linguistics has always been soaked in what Hayek called scientism. So much so, that we might have a better understanding of the nature of human language nowadays, if "linguistics" as an independent discipline had not been created.

Indeed, although the evolution of academic linguistics since the 1960s has laid increasing emphasis on the claimed "scientific" status of the discipline, in practice it has become *less* scientific than it originally was. For anyone who wants to learn in detail about a language or languages other than the commonly-studied Western European ones, a knowledge of phonetics is very useful, and when linguistics first got going, phonetics formed a large part of it. Western European languages exploit only a small part of the total spectrum of sounds which human mouths are capable of making and which are used in languages of other parts of the world. In Britain, at least, people who studied language as a general phenomenon used standardly to be given phonetics courses which not only taught them theoretically about the full range of speech-sounds, but also included practical training in recognizing exotic speech-sounds and in producing them accurately. Plenty of that went on decades before linguistics degrees had been invented, and I was still given such training as an undergraduate in the 1960s. We know that this approach worked: there is experimental evidence (Ladefoged 1967: 133ff.) showing that linguists who have not

undergone this kind of training are unable to identify speech sounds with the same degree of precision. Understanding how the human vocal organs act to produce various kinds of speech-sound, and how those sounds are embodied as different patterns of air-pressure waves, is a thoroughly scientific subject. But, as linguistics won greater recognition as a freestanding discipline, it came to treat phonetics as not truly included within its purview. Phonetics is a practical, empirical subject, and linguisticians wanted to focus on grand theories at a considerable remove from the detailed realities of individual human beings speaking and listening to speech. John Ohala (2005) has discussed how language facts which have straightforward explanations in terms of the physical anatomy of the vocal organs are nowadays treated by linguisticians in terms of abstract theoretical concepts having no basis in phonetic reality. Today, a degree syllabus in linguistics will typically contain only a smattering of phonetics, and no practical ear-training at all.

Incidentally, a point of terminology. I have used the word "linguistician" to label someone who pursues the subject I am criticizing. When linguistics was new, that word was commonly used. An older generation of academics, who tended to feel that the established language subjects already covered the ground pretty adequately without leaving a gap large enough to require the creation of a new one, used the term "linguist" for practitioners of those established subjects, and assumed that if the new subject was called linguistics its practitioners must be linguisticians. Those who pursued the new subject tended to reject that term, and insist that they too should be called linguists. "Linguist" was henceforth to be a word with two meanings: on one hand someone who is skilled in or knowledgeable about some particular language or languages, and on the other hand someone who studies general linguistics. The newcomers on the whole won that argument, and it is a while now since I heard anyone use the word "linguistician". But in the context of the present book, which is pitting the claims of traditional language scholarship against those of general linguistics, it will be convenient to have separate words for followers of the separate approaches. Accordingly, people who pursue linguistics will here be called linguisticians.

One benefit of the scientific method, in domains where it applies, is the humility it enforces on practitioners. Someone who goes off on a flight of theoretical fancy will soon be brought down to earth if his theory is wrong, when some of its predictions turn out to be mistaken. This enforced humility is a valuable counter-weight to the pomposity which is a besetting sin of the academic profession, whose members spend their working lives lecturing to young people and assessing their work. Humanities subjects, though, lack the concept of "crucial experiment". Historical generalizations, for instance, may be assessed as plausible and convincingly-argued or as fanciful and overblown, but this is a matter of judgement and discretion, depending on the wisdom of those making the assessment. Unless a generalization rests on basic facts that are simply mis-stated (Queen Anne did not die in 1704, she died in 1714), no-one can ever say "This historical theory has been refuted, end of story". The danger this creates is that scholars might feel free to make names for themselves by dreaming up theories in an irresponsible fashion, reckless about whether there is good reason to accept the theories. Long-established humanities subjects have depended on cultivating the kind of wisdom that enables people to distinguish reasonable ideas from implausible puffery. Linguistics has never cultivated this sort of wisdom. One of the very worst features of academic linguistics is its irresponsibility. It makes reckless assertions, not really caring whether or not they are true.

For instance, for many decades it has been an accepted truism of the subject that "all languages are equally complex". Students of my generation often made their first acquaintance with the subject via Charles Hockett's 1958 textbook *A Course in Modern Linguistics*. According to Hockett, if a language is relatively complex in one aspect of its structure, this will be balanced out by relative simplicity in some other aspect; overall complexity of different languages is equal, because "all languages have about equally complex jobs to do" (Hockett 1958: 180–1). Similar statements go back to the earliest days of academic linguistics. Henry Sweet (who was the real man behind Eliza Doolittle's teacher "Professor Higgins" in the musical *My Fair Lady*) wrote in 1899 that "If a language is very regular and simple in one department, we may expect it to be irregular and complex in another". The same point has been repeated again and again in the literature of linguistics. According to Robert Dixon (1997: 118) "It is a finding of modern linguistics that all languages are roughly equal in terms of overall complexity". He is echoed by Benjamin Fortson (2010: 4): "A central finding of linguistics has been that all languages … are equally complex in their structure." (A "finding", no less – it sounds pretty scientific.) None of these writers, Sweet, Hockett, Dixon, or Fortson, quoted anything that one could call serious evidence to support this large claim, and so far as I know nobody else ever did so, but it became a received truth of linguistics. Undergraduates who took just one or a few linguistics courses as part of their degree syllabus were very likely to be taught about the equal complexity of all human languages.

This doctrine always seemed to me a politically correct fiction rather than a considered factual generalization. The phrase "politically correct" only made its appearance in the 1980s, but linguisticians throughout the twentieth century had been keen to promote the obscure languages and cultures of undeveloped tribal societies as being fully as entitled to consideration as the great written languages of Western civilization. Worthy of respect they may be – that is an ethical rather than factual issue; but for many linguisticians it seemed a short step from saying that languages are all worthy of respect to saying that they are equally structurally complex, which is a factual claim. Linguisticians wanted the claim to be true, so they announced that it was, and taught generations of students to repeat this in their essays and exam scripts. The idea was treated as an uncontroversial axiom.

I found this so questionable that in 2007, together with a colleague based in Leipzig, I organized a meeting in that city to examine the equal-complexity doctrine. One man who came to Leipzig objected to the doctrine on the ground that there is no satisfactory way to compare languages in terms of their overall complexity – he thought it was meaningless to say either that languages are, or that they are not, equally complex, which is a reasonable line to take. Most speakers, though, did believe that comparisons are possible, and they urged that some languages are indeed more complex than others. (Incidentally, the more complex languages by no means coincide with the more technically advanced cultures; if anything, the correlation goes the other way.)

We published a selection of the solidest and most interesting papers from the Leipzig meeting in book form, and in due course our book was reviewed by *Language*, the world's premier learned journal of linguistics (see Sampson, Gil, and Trudgill 2009, reviewed by Faarlund 2010). The central point made by the reviewer was that we were "pushing at an open door": few linguisticians were likely to disagree with our view that languages differ in complexity. And indeed, over the following years, discussion of the differential complexity of languages became a routine element of linguistic discourse. According to Ray Jackendoff and Eva Wittenberg (2014: 66), languages "obviously" differ in syntactic complexity. Numerous academic conferences and books were dedicated to

particular aspects of this idea. To date I have seen no publications arguing that the idea is mistaken.

It is pleasing, of course, to discover that others agree with one's own point of view. But in another way this episode was shocking. Apparently, for many decades, linguisticians all over the world had routinely been teaching a doctrine which, once it was openly challenged, few or none of them turned out actually to believe in. (It still is being taught. At the time of writing, an educational organization called the Centre for Languages, Linguistics, and Area Studies, an offshoot of the British Higher Education Academy, is continuing to publicize a list of "83 points on which linguists seem to agree and which are important for education". One of the 83 points is a cautiously-worded restatement of the equal-complexity doctrine.)

One might perhaps feel that this doesn't really matter too much. After all, an arts subject like linguistics is not comparable to subjects like medicine or engineering, where teaching false facts could lead to patients dying or bridges collapsing.

But it does matter. It is true that most humanities students are not acquiring bodies of knowledge which, as graduates, they are going to apply to practical problems, as doctors or engineers do. But what they are doing (or should be doing) is learning to practise the skills involved in absorbing and making sense of complex bodies of information, and using these to produce reasonable answers to questions which are too subtle and debatable to have unique "right answers". This has traditionally been seen as a main justification of university-level teaching of the humanities, and these skills are fundamental to many of the roles which holders of BA degrees commonly go on to fill. Undergraduates study mediaeval history, or analytic philosophy – or perhaps linguistics – in order to hone habits of critical thought which, as graduates, they may apply to the similarly intractable domains of public administration, or political journalism, or business management. (Or indeed to the role of citizen and voter – what is voting, if not making a reasonable choice in the face of overwhelmingly complex arguments for and against rival parties?) Being taught to parrot ideas which your teachers have been parroting for decades, but in which they have so little solid belief that they abandon them at the first breath of challenge, is the worst imaginable training for exercising these graduate-level skills.

What's more, the equal-complexity doctrine has been repeated in so many textbooks because it looks like a humanly significant finding. Language is one of the most – perhaps *the* most – distinctive property of our species. People want to know how language works, because it might shed light on our human nature. If languages of all human groups were indeed measurably equal in complexity, that might seem to open up whole avenues towards a new understanding of what kind of creatures we are. Since languages differ in so many respects, what mechanisms achieve identity in this particular respect? Might it depend on genetics? Or on properties of the communication task which languages execute? Or what? Someone who spends some time pondering that question, and then hears that it is a non-question because linguisticians only *said* languages are equal in complexity, they did not seriously *believe* it, might feel that "irresponsible" is a mild adjective to apply to this academic subject.

I have voiced some harsh criticisms of academic linguistics here, and I shall continue to do so as this book develops. But before going further, let me make two important provisos.

In the first place, I certainly do not believe that linguistics is uniquely valueless as a subject. My impression is that several of the disciplines which students can take degrees in

nowadays but which were not recognized as separate subjects sixty or seventy years ago may be fairly rubbishy. For that matter, there is a lot going on in some older-established subjects which is hard to take seriously. Some of the writing I have read emanating from university departments of English Literature in recent decades, for instance, is astonishingly empty or, if it appears to mean anything at all, then utterly question-begging (cf. Sampson 1989). And, if the reader suspects I am discussing a provincial problem specific to Britain or to the English-speaking world, it is worth adding that blatant scientism in the humanities – writing that is peppered with equations and pieces of scientific terminology that look impressive to outsiders but in reality mean nothing whatever – has been taken to far worse extremes in France than, I believe, in any English-speaking country. (See Sokal and Bricmont 1999.) But linguistics, particularly as practised in English-speaking countries, is a subject I know, so it is a subject I am entitled to criticize in detail.

Also, very importantly, I certainly do not want to suggest that all the academic work going on nowadays within Departments of Linguistics is worthless. By no means: there is plenty of good work going on, discovering and recording facts about language which are true and well worth knowing.

On the other hand, I am not sure that any of this worthwhile work could not have occurred just as readily within previously-existing academic units, if Departments of Linguistics had never been created. (After all, two of the "bibles" of pre-1960s linguistics, books by Edward Sapir and by Leonard Bloomfield both with the title *Language*, were written respectively by a director of anthropology for a national museum, and a professor of Germanic philology.) The boundaries between disciplines are fairly artificial, so that a lot of what is studied in any one university department might equally well be studied in some other department. But what the creation of linguistics departments and linguistics degrees has done is to reorient our perceptions of language as a topic of study, in terms of which aspects of the study are central and which peripheral. And as I see it, it is the aspects of language study that academic linguistics has taught us to see as central which are most misguided. Here and there in a typical university linguistics department there will be scholars who are busy developing bodies of knowledge and thinking which genuinely rank among the valuable achievements of 21st-century scholarship. But an undergraduate degree-syllabus in Linguistics will not contain much of that material. It will focus largely on the aspects which I criticize in this book, because those are the aspects which the novel discipline treats as central.

Institutionalizing an academic subject creates a powerful pressure to believe and to teach that the subject has abundant content. The famous mathematician G. H. Hardy wrote that "It is one of the first duties of a professor … in any subject, to exaggerate a little … the importance of his subject" (Hardy 1940: 66). That was true when Hardy was writing during the Second World War, but it is far more true in the 21st-century world of university league tables and research assessment. Members of any academic unit, as a matter of survival, have to convince the world (and hence, first, convince themselves) that whatever corner of the map of learning they are responsible for is a large and important terrain. Thus creating departments and chairs of general linguistics, alongside long-established departments and chairs of particular languages, brings into being a cadre of people with a professional need to believe that apart from what can be said about individual languages, dialects, language-families, and so forth, there is also a great deal to be said about human language in general, and what is to be said about language in general is important rather than trivial.

But the truth is that while there is indeed an enormous amount to be said about any

particular language, about language in general there is less to be said than present-day linguisticians believe. Less is not nothing; but the result of elevating general linguistics into an independent discipline has been to foster a belief that the languages of the world have far more in common than they really do, and a tendency to overlook or make little of the respects in which individual languages are unique cultural constructs. I do not say that no 21st-century linguisticians are resisting that tendency – one notable exception to it is the German grammarian Martin Haspelmath (see e.g. Haspelmath 2015); but exceptions are rare. Linguistics trains those who study it to see what is in reality a rich panoply of deep intellectual diversity as little more than a set of minor variations on a familiar European theme.

And this matters, because language is so crucial an element of what makes us human that promulgating a distorted model of the nature of human language leads to a distorted idea of human nature itself. Creating a new subject of general linguistics was far from a harmless academic error.

By this point, readers may be itching to say "You are an academic yourself – what are you doing running your own subject down in this way?"

Well, I suppose a scholar who came to see his subject as empty or damaging might have a public duty to say so, though it is asking a lot to expect anyone to condemn his bread and butter. But as it happens, that is not my situation. Normally in academic prose one avoids writing about oneself, but in this case I probably should say a little, to avoid the imputation of hypocrisy.

As an undergraduate I studied a traditional language-literature-and-history degree syllabus (in my case the language was Chinese), but I have mentioned that for finals I sat one paper in general linguistics. Like many other students and young academics of my generation, I swallowed the Kool-Aid. I knew I wanted an academic career, but the prospect of researching to become an authority on some special area of Chinese history, Chinese literature, or the like felt fuddy-duddy and unappealing. Linguistics by contrast was an exciting young person's subject which was promising to open totally new horizons in our understanding of human cognition. How could one turn down the chance of being part of a movement like that? So, by the time I was ready to apply for university posts, I was committed to the new subject. I spent several years as a graduate student in the USA, where most of the impetus behind the subject was coming from, and then gradually climbed the academic ladder, eventually being appointed to the Chair of Linguistics in a leading British civic university in 1984.

Climbing the ladder involved publishing books and journal articles; as I thought and wrote about my subject, I found myself increasingly sceptical about various of its claims. The new horizons were failing to emerge from the haze. Some of my publications were attempts to advance the state of knowledge about some particular language-related topic. Others, though, set out to persuade my fellow linguisticians that in one or another respect our discipline was making unjustifiable claims for itself.

Naively, in the early years of my career I assumed that if my arguments and evidence were strong enough, colleagues would be persuaded and the discipline of linguistics would draw in its horns accordingly. I was too young and inexperienced to reckon with the fact that the first law of any human institution is to survive and if possible expand. An academic discipline is an institution, and hence will never be in the business of voluntarily retreating from territory it has claimed as its own. My writings were well

received, in the sense that reviewers and others saw them as intellectually interesting and worth reading. But that is not at all the same thing as influencing the shape of a discipline. Of course, linguistics rolled on, unaffected by any views of mine.

Happily, when I eventually came to the conclusion that academic linguistics was a hopeless cause, I was able to shift into a different subject. After lecturing on linguistics for the first half of my teaching career, I spent the second half in a computer science department. In my later years as a university prof, I was teaching computing students about electronic business and about the aspects of law relevant to the information-technology profession (and of course writing books and articles about those subjects). These are not topics which raise troubling questions about whether they are worth undergraduates' while to study.

I never ceased to be intensely interested in language and languages, so even in my years as a professor of computing I continued to research various linguistic topics. And I kept up with what was going on within linguistics as an organized discipline – which is what gives me the confidence to write about that discipline here.

(In the interest of full disclosure I ought to add that, after reaching retirement age in Britain, I accepted a research post in the Linguistics department of a South African university. I had no teaching duties there, so there was no issue of conscience about misleading the young. I was encouraged to take the position by being told that the department in question had set its face against current linguistic orthodoxy – I hoped there might be opportunities to help foster better ways of studying language. In practice things did not work out like that, and after a few years I resigned from the post.)

One major reason why the public gives more credence to implausible academic ideas than they often deserve is that educated people in other walks of life have little concept of how dramatically professional academics' "terms of trade" have changed over the past forty years. Previously, university dons had little motive, beyond personal vanity, to press their ideas further than the evidence would take them. Nowadays, the circumstances of university employment create strong motives for academics to devise novel theories and use the techniques of public relations to insist that their theories are important and correct, almost irrespective of their true worth. When commercial firms do this sort of thing, people know to make allowances for their overblown claims. Academics, though, are still taken to be the disinterested seekers after truth that they used to be not long ago, so their pronouncements are treated with more respect – often, with too much respect.

Until the present generation, the "tone" of British academic life was set by the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge. By the 1960s dozens of other universities existed, but they occupied lower rungs of a universally-acknowledged hierarchy. They were staffed largely by Oxbridge graduates, and they aimed to reproduce Oxbridge standards so far as the available resources allowed. (A number of the universities created in the 1960s adopted the collegiate structure which had developed organically in mediaeval Oxbridge, for instance.) At least on the humanities side there was no external source of intellectual authority. When I was an undergraduate in the early 1960s, some of my teachers quite explicitly saw American academic research as a bit of a joke.

As already mentioned, I spent some years at the outset of my career as a fellow of one of the Oxford colleges. It had been founded and endowed in the fourteenth century, and we worked and (if unmarried) lived in elegant buildings dating mainly from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As holder of a temporary junior post I had no seat

on the College council, but the bulk of my colleagues, who had permanent teaching roles, ran the affairs of the College as they collectively saw fit and were beholden to no outside agencies. Some of them researched and published on their subjects, because they wanted to rather than because they were told to, but for all of them their chief activity was teaching undergraduates, which was done largely through weekly one-to-one tutorial meetings. These highly intelligent men put in long hours teaching, and there was good reason for them to see this as a worthwhile use of their time and energy: they were helping to mould the minds of the future leaders of society. Even now, and still more then, most individuals prominent in British public life had spent their undergraduate years at one or other of the Oxbridge colleges, and they and their tutors got to know each other pretty well after three years of individual tutorials. Some students graduated and were never heard of again, but any tutor could expect that a proportion of his pupils would make their mark on the world. It would be no small thing, I imagine, to reflect in later life that it was you who taught the Chancellor of the Exchequer to avoid the fallacy of the undistributed middle.

In these circumstances, banging the drum for some half-baked intellectual theory would have seemed embarrassingly gauche. Oxbridge dons were above that kind of thing. We lunched and dined together on a daily basis, and on special occasions it was not unusual for our dinner guests to include people such as a past prime minister, a member of the royal family, or others prominent in the great world outside. A don who spent his time talking up his particular academic specialism excessively might have found it hard to live with the smirks of the more urbane colleagues surrounding him on High Table.

To some extent that milieu still exists at Oxbridge, but it certainly no longer sets the tone of academic life more widely. Oxford and Cambridge now form a much smaller fraction of the British academic profession, and most members of the profession were educated elsewhere (and in any case Oxford and Cambridge themselves have had to adapt heavily in the face of novel external pressures). The average British academic today is more likely to see the pinnacle of his profession as associated with leading American universities than with Oxbridge. And, crucially, that average British academic is not a member of a self-governing society which sets its own working conditions. He or she is an employee, and is made to feel like an employee. Universities are becoming poorer year by year, and to keep afloat they have to compete for funds doled out by government agencies. The main way in which an individual academic can improve his institution's financial standing is by winning research grants which are distributed on a competitive basis by bodies such as the national Research Councils and their European counterparts. Not only do these grants include elements to cover a university's general running costs, but the relative success of an institution in attracting research grants is a chief factor in deciding its level of overall public funding.

One might think that, at least in the arts, much research scarcely needs special funding – access to a library and time to write are the only necessities. That is true, and a great deal of the most valuable scholarship has appeared in books written by individuals who never applied for a research grant in their lives. But, today, that kind of research no longer "counts" – it does not depend on winning competitions, so it is given little weight in allocating university funding. Essentially it is seen as self-indulgent. To be a good citizen in today's academic world, a don must devise programmes of research which require funding to employ research assistants, to pay for equipment and travel, and so forth, and must "sell" these programmes to his academic peers, writing grant proposals that will be accepted in the face of truly fierce competition. The managerial types who hold the reins of power in a modern university ensure that the academics serving under them are clearly

aware that this is what is required.

(Teaching undergraduates is a low priority by comparison, because the managers know that – provided the students are kept happy, which realistically depends only to a limited extent on the intellectual substance of their courses – there is little an academic can do in his or her teaching role that will affect university income. Consequently, undergraduate teaching is often done in groups too large for teachers to learn the students' names, and a great deal of it is farmed out to the most junior staff, and to graduate students – whom the undergraduates find more congenial as teachers anyway. It tends not to be seen as something for established academics to take pride in.)

In this situation, it becomes important to develop theories which research assistants can be employed to explore and extend, and to persuade the academic community that the theoretical framework one is working in is one which has to be taken seriously. The referees who will judge your grant applications will be drawn from the community of academics pursuing your subject at other institutions, so you need them to come to your particular applications with a prior assumption that this general kind of work makes sense and is valuable. Part of what I shall be arguing in this book is that (as already suggested) there just is not a great deal to say about languages at a theoretical level. Individual languages can be described, as they have been for many centuries past, but there are not many deep "general linguistic" principles to be uncovered: different languages are different. In the professional environment I have sketched, though, that message is disastrous. It says that there is little scope for spending public money on linguistic research – but academics' careers depend on convincing people that public money needs to be spent on it. So the message cannot be allowed to be true.

The consequence is that academics (in all subjects) have been pushed into adopting some of the behaviour patterns of commercial advertising. Without always realizing it, they have come to find it natural to exaggerate the virtues of their particular line of work and to minimize or suppress its limitations or counterarguments, to an extent that would have felt unnatural and shameful to their predecessors of forty years ago. Writing about the changes since his own days as vice-chancellor of the University of London, Noel Annan (Lord Annan) put it bluntly: "The dons had become liars" (Annan 1999: 294). The development is still recent enough that the public often fail to realize that they need to treat academic pronouncements nowadays with the cautious scepticism which everyone sees as appropriate for literature circulated by car or detergent manufacturers.

Excessive cracking up of one's own work is understandable, if regrettable. But things are worse than that. One senior linguistician with nothing to lose, Esa Itkonen, has commented that open criticism of the current orthodoxies of the subject can "jeopardize a person's career prospects" (Itkonen 1996: 471) – the heretic might be denied a university post. One hears of cases where a linguistician with a stellar reputation has withheld the oxygen of publicity from an intellectual opponent by threatening to withdraw from an academic conference if his opponent is invited to share the platform – knowing that the hapless conference organizer has to take the threat seriously, because he depends on the star name to attract a worthwhile audience. I have not knowingly encountered tricks quite as underhand as that myself (though there have been puzzling occasions when I wondered what was going on behind the scenes). But I have for instance had the experience, on being invited to expound some of my ideas about language to an academic audience in an Asian country, of being physically shouted down by an "orthodox" Western linguistician who apparently felt that loudness of voice would serve better as a rhetorical strategy than reasoned debate.

Another tactic is to treat a dissident scholar as an unperson, as in the old Soviet

Union, so that orthodox linguisticians carefully refrain from mentioning his writings for fear that open-minded readers might be led to read them and perhaps find them convincing. (I have had some of that, in situations where the omission was too artificial to be other than deliberate.)

So the reader should not feel that a theoretical edifice which is being worked on by hundreds of professional academics in many countries of the world must necessarily have substance to it. The substance might be little more than academics' need to justify their salaries in 21st-century university circumstances. One can persuade oneself, sincerely, to believe all kinds of things if one is aware that the reward of disbelief may be unemployment.

If the discipline of linguistics has so little to be said in its favour, one might wonder how it continues to flourish as widely as it does. It was never the case that all universities contained a linguistics department, and there are probably fewer of them today than there were in the immediate aftermath of the 1960s wave of enthusiasm. But the many linguistics departments that still exist are fairly secure. In the 21st century, decisions about which subjects should be offered in a university are made not in terms of their intellectual solidity but of which will be cost-effective, by attracting a market of student takers. Linguistics departments are well placed there, for two reasons.

One became apparent to me in the days when I still taught linguistics to undergraduates, and sometimes out of curiosity would ask a first-year student what had led him or her to opt for our subject. An answer which recurred was "I did languages at school but I didn't like literature". Secondary-school pupils who study languages to university-entrance level normally combine them with study of the literature of the respective languages, and evidently these students hoped that linguistics would be "languages minus literature".

As a depressing, negative way for a youngster to choose how to spend three of the best years of his or her life, this struck me as hard to beat. But, in those days and even more so in the 21st century, now that students are forced to obsess about "what will look good on my CV" and how they will pay off their student loans, it is understandable that they look for safe or easy study options rather than ones which will make their hearts sing. I do not suppose this source of recruits will dry up.

The other draw card in the linguistics hand has to do with the fact that English is now unchallenged as the language of international communication. Foreign countries are full of teachers of English, whose governments are willing to pay for them to upgrade their skills by spending some time in an English-speaking country. They will not pay for language teachers just to be tourists for a year, but often they will pay for the teachers to come in order to acquire something that can be seen as an advanced professional qualification. And the financial arrangements that apply to universities (in Britain, at least) mean that foreign students are a more lucrative proposition than students who are British citizens. The consequence is that most or all departments of linguistics offer one-year master's degrees in "applied linguistics", meaning studies which are claimed to use linguistics in order to help people be better language-teachers. For some universities, their applied-linguistics master's is quite a significant component of their overall business model.

If your job is teaching a foreign language, it is obvious that immersing yourself in that language for a while by living where it is spoken must be hugely valuable. Whether the master's studies add much to that value was never very clear to me. Teachers of "applied

linguistics" publish research, but I never noticed them spending much time researching how far their courses do improve language-teachers' performance in practice. (The men who taught me various languages other than my own seemed to manage pretty well without applied-linguistics qualifications, which did not exist at the time; though, since I was never taught by someone with such a qualification, I cannot compare.) But the system certainly has a positive effect on the viability of university linguistics departments.

Some of the chapters following this Introduction are adapted from material I have published previously, as articles in learned journals or contributions to multi-author volumes. For present purposes these chapters are partly rewritten, in order to marshal the ideas they contain into a coherent critique of the discipline. I have added wording to spell out the links between the contents of individual chapters and the overall thesis of the book, and cut out wording that was closely tied to the circumstances of the original publication and irrelevant in the present context. Where I saw ways of improving my original argument, I adopted them.

In order to offer readers some signposts, I have grouped the chapters that follow into sections, and each section is equipped with its own brief introduction.

I should mention in advance that among other references to various languages, in a few chapters I discuss features of the Chinese language in some detail. Obviously I know that most readers will not be familiar with Chinese, and I word these passages accordingly. But a discipline which claims to be discovering general truths applicable to all human languages must be tested against more languages than just English – though English is the only language some linguisticians discuss. (There are linguisticians in the 21st century for whom the subject seems to be not just "languages minus literature", but minus languages too.) Compare the fact that many people enjoy reading books or watching television programmes about the animal kingdom: they would be less interested, if the books and programmes only really covered *Homo sapiens* and implied that other species are all much the same as us.

Chinese is by far the world's "biggest" language. Just the Mandarin dialect alone has two to three times as many native speakers as any other language (the runner-up is Spanish, with Hindi and English a little behind). Taking (more realistically) Chinese as a whole, the ratio approaches four to one. Chinese also has a recorded history several times as long as English, and it is probably the world's "first language" in that respect too (the one or two living languages which might challenge Chinese are spoken by small numbers today). Whether or not he thinks of it this way, whoever theorizes about human language in general is in effect discussing the Chinese language, plus some minor ones – so it feels strange that linguistics often contains ideas that are hard to apply to Chinese. I make no apology for doing a little to redress the balance.

There is an obvious danger with a book like this that the overall impression created will be drearily negative. To an extent this may be unavoidable: there really is a lot wrong with academic linguistics. But no-one wants to read one or two hundred pages of unrelieved negativity. Accordingly, I have included material in the book intended to illustrate the fact that language can be discussed in a worthwhile fashion. Language and languages are fascinating topics, even if linguistics is not. If a few chapters here are less tightly related to the central thesis of the book than others, they earn their place by offering content that is positive, I hope instructive, and, perhaps, enjoyable.