

A place for linguistics in language teaching?

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Outline

- i. What is linguistics and why does it matter?
- ii. Why don't language teachers teach it?
- iii. Knowledge about language vs. knowledge of language
- iv. Three examples of how linguistics can be useful to language teachers/learners
 - a. French vowel contrasts
 - b. The subjunctive
 - c. Spanish direct/indirect objects

What is linguistics?

- ❖ Scientific study of language
- ❖ The linguistic system of specific languages and languages in general
 - ❖ Sounds, word and sentence structure, meaning
- ❖ How language is used (in speaking and writing)
 - ❖ Pragmatics and discourse analysis - politeness, turn taking, back-channelling
 - ❖ Stylistics - cohesion, metaphor, text-speak, internet language
 - ❖ Literary linguistics - how language is manipulated in poetry
- ❖ The social function of language
- ❖ How language(s) change(s)
- ❖ How language is acquired, processed, represented in the mind/brain
- ❖ How language can be modelled computationally
- ❖ How language evolved

Which bits are relevant to language teaching?

- ❖ Scientific study of language

- ❖ The linguistic system of specific languages and languages in general

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Why does linguistics matter?

- ❖ Linguistic discrimination is rife
- ❖ Standard language and literacy act as gatekeepers to success.
- ❖ Linguistics, which takes a descriptive approach to language, teaches us that all languages (and all varieties of all languages) are linguistically equal
- ❖ It is empowering to know that you know the grammar of your first language perfectly.
- ❖ It's also liberating, as a learner, to know that there is not one 'correct' version of an L2.
- ❖ Linguistics also provides tools for autonomous language learning (IPA, deeper grammatical understanding, historical contextualization)
- ❖ All languages vary and change and whether we are L1 or L2 speakers, some understanding of this is useful and good for us!
- ❖ People are also really interested in language variation and change, sociolinguistics, language acquisition, politeness, phonetics etc. in their L1 and L2s.

Why don't language teachers teach linguistics?

- ❖ Descriptive vs. prescriptive tension
- ❖ Language teachers usually teach an abstract standard version of a language as this is, usually, what learners want to learn.
- ❖ Variation could be confusing for learners who want there to be a 'correct answer'.
- ❖ Many language teachers have not studied linguistics and so are not well prepared to teach it.
- ❖ There are not many materials for this kind of teaching.
- ❖ Languages tends to be thought of as a (set of) skills, rather than objects of study
- ❖ The relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge remains controversial (see [Ellis 2008](#))

Competence vs. performance

- ❖ Chomsky (1965) makes a useful distinction between competence and performance
- ❖ In L2 terms, the gap between the two can be quite wide (and is complicated by the difference between explicit and implicit knowledge).
- ❖ Assessment focuses almost exclusively on performance.
- ❖ This is different from other disciplines in which practical and theoretical skills are evaluated separately (sports science, chemistry)
- ❖ A learner may 'perform' agreement errors for many reasons: lack of grammatical understanding, lack of morphological knowledge, pronunciation difficulties, spelling issues, short-term memory.
- ❖ Assessments should also assess competence – what people know about grammar, pronunciation, morphology as well as performance.

Three examples of how linguistics can be useful in language teaching

- 1) French vowel contrasts
- 2) The Spanish subjunctive
- 3) Spanish direct/indirect objects

French vowel contrasts

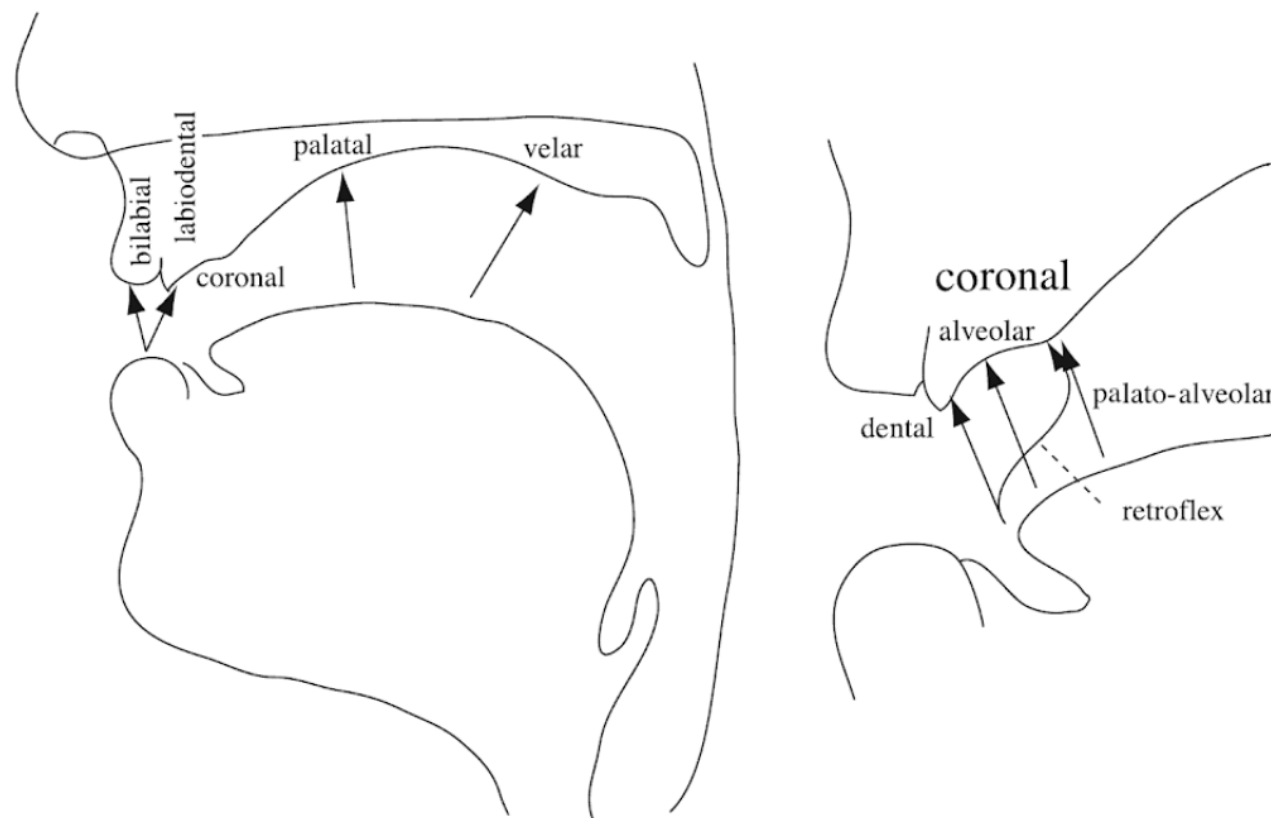
- Mastering L2 phonology can be very challenging.
- Even for advanced learners, L2 phonology is often affected by the L1 ([Flege 1987](#))
- What is crucial for communication reasons is that contrasting sounds are mastered.
 - In English, vowel length is crucial: sheep vs. ship, back vs. bark, cot vs. caught (dialectal)
 - French, unlike English contrasts front and back rounded vowels: loup vs. lu, dessous vs. dessus
- These contrasts are difficult to produce and detect, even for advanced speakers ([Darcy et al. 2012](#))
- A bit of phonetic understanding could really help here!

French vowels

- In phonetics/phonology, we describe vowels in terms of the relative **position** of the tongue, lips and jaw so vowels can be:

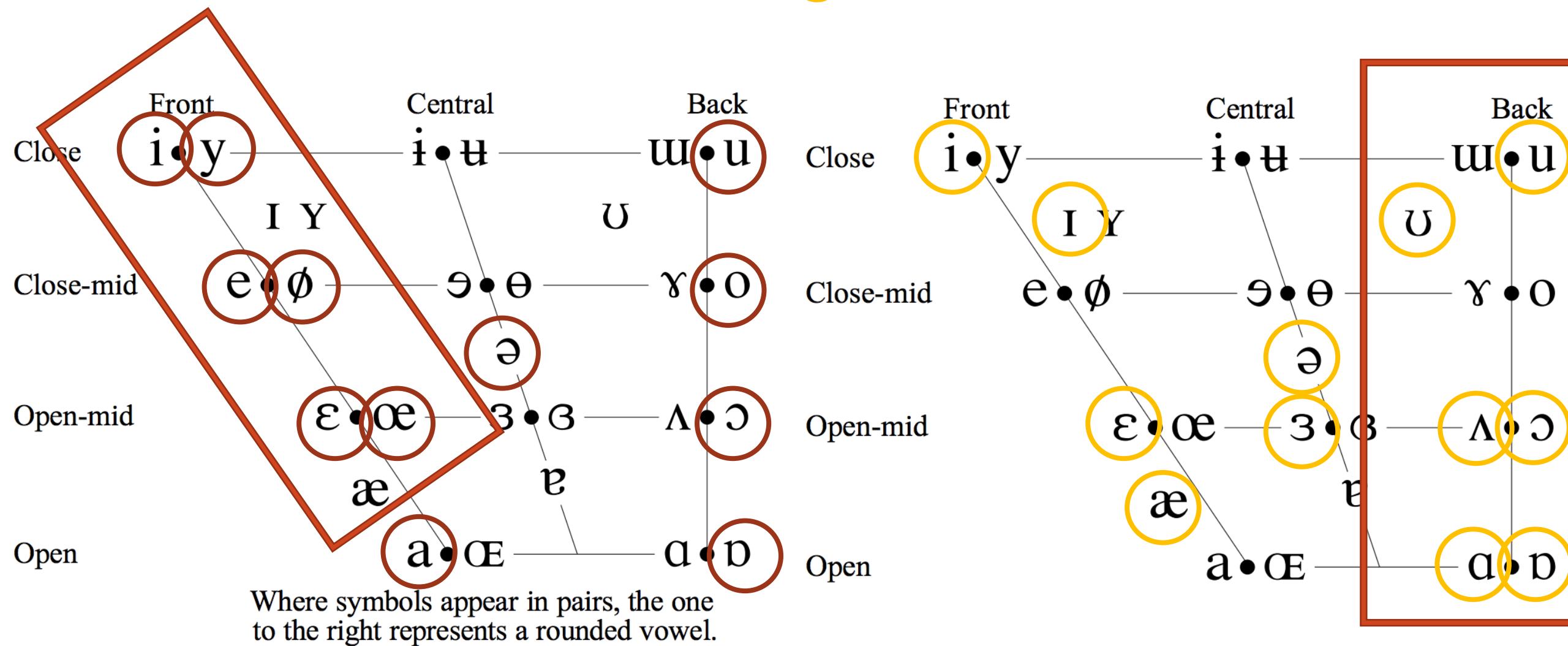
- *Front or back (tongue)*
- *Rounded or unrounded (lips)*
- *Close or open (jaw)*
- *Nasal or oral (tongue)*

Thanks to Dr Jonathan Kasstan for this slide!



(Figure: A mid-sagittal view of the oral tract)

French vowels vs. English vowels



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Vowel rounding

- /u/ vs /y/
 - loup vs. lu, dessous vs. dessus, coup vs. cul, pousse vs. puce, roue vs. rue, boule vs. bulle
- Suggestion: say /i/ (as in we) and then round your lips to /y/.

/œ/ vs. /ɔ/

- beurre vs. bord, coeur vs. corps, peur vs. porc, seul vs. sol, leur vs. lors
- Suggestion: say /ɛ/ (as in pet) and then round your lips to /œ/.

Nasal vowels

œ̃ un

ɔ̃ bon

ɛ̃ vin

ɑ̃ blanc



They are the nasal versions of the vowels in the following words in Parisian French:

Heure (/œ/)

Bord (/ɔ/)

Fait (/ɛ/)

English 'bath' (/ɑ/)

The subjunctive

- We often tell pupils that the subjunctive is about hypotheticals.
 - But this can be confusing...
 - 1) Bien que Jean soit/*est incompétent, je vais l'embaucher.
 - 2) Je regrette qu'il soit/*est incompétent.
 - 3) Le fait qu'il soit/est là m'aide beaucoup.
-
- It is often needed in contexts where the thing we are talking about is not hypothetical but taken to be true ([Schlenker 2005](#)).

The subjunctive

- There are many such contexts, some of which are included in common mnemonics like this one from [@StefPianigiani](#):
 - Wishes (quiero que)
 - Emotions (temo que)
 - Doubt (dudo que)
 - Desire (me gusta que)
 - Imperative (tu-, Ud+Ud+,etc)
 - Negatives (no creo que)
 - Good (es bueno que)
 - Surprise (me sorprende que)

Reversing our perspective!

- The indicative is used wherever something is **asserted to be true**.
- The subjunctive occurs **elsewhere**.

- The red contexts involve facts that are **presupposed** to be true.

Note that we can paraphrase them with ‘the fact that...’

- Desire (me gusta que)
- Good (es bueno que)
- Surprise (me sorprende que)

I like the fact that...

The fact that...is good.

The fact that...surprises me

Rethinking the subjunctive

- The indicative is used to assert that something is true.
- The subjunctive is used elsewhere.
- These contexts can be wishes, desires, hypotheticals **or facts**.

- 1) Bien que Jean soit/*est incompétent, je vais l'embaucher.
- 2) Je regrette qu'il soit/*est incompétent.
- 3) Le fait qu'il soit/est là m'aide beaucoup.

Despite the fact that..., I regret the fact that..., The fact that...

Embrace the variation! Make it into a research topic!

- The subjunctive is subject to variation in both Spanish and French, especially inside relative clauses and nominals (alguien que, el hecho que, le fait que, quelqu'un qui)
- This is something that students can investigate either by interviewing native speakers (over the internet) or by using a corpus.
- <https://www.corpusdelespanol.org/now/>
- <http://cfpp2000.univ-paris3.fr/search-transcription/#2>

Spanish indirect/direct objects

- Spanish has a requirement for specific animate/human objects to be introduced by 'a'.

1) Vi **a** Juan.

2) Vi **a**l muchacho.

- For many speakers, this does not affect clitics:

3) Lo vi (a él)

Leísmo and laísmo

- But there are also other patterns with clitic pronouns (see [Fernández Ordóñez 1999](#)).
- Leísmo (common)- use of le to mark an animate direct object:
 - **Le** vi ayer. 'I saw him yesterday'
- Laísmo (less common)- use of la to mark a feminine indirect object:
 - **La** di su regalo. 'I gave her her present.'

Semantic effects of le

- With some verbs, both lo and le are possible with different meanings:
 - 1) A mi hijo lo asustó aquel perro.
 - 2) A mi hijo le asustan los truenos.
 - 3) María la preocupó con la mala noticia.
 - 4) La mala noticia / María le preocupa día y noche.
- The accusative clitic is needed where the subject is an agent, acting with volition.

Other research projects!

- Investigate where *leísmo/laísmo* is found in the Spanish speaking world using the NOW corpus or COSER.
- Find examples of the following verbs with *lo* and *le* and see if they have the expected meanings (based on context): *aburrir, asombrar, asustar, atraer, decepcionar, distraer, divertir, impresionar, inquietar, irritar, sorprender*
- *Look up examples of hacer, dejar, oír, ver* and work out what regulates the use of *le/lo/la* with these verbs.

Conclusions

- Linguistics has a lot to offer language teaching
- Deeper understanding of what language is and how it works which may help improve language skills.
- Potential to explain difficult aspects of language at a deeper level.
- Interesting in its own right as the theoretical component of language study (think sports science, chemistry etc.)

Thanks for listening!

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Read the articles I wrote for [TES](#) or [The Conversation](#)

Read my joint-authored article in [Language, Society and Policy](#)

Other useful linguistics resources

- <http://www.univ-paris3.fr/francais-contemporain-vernaculaire-fracov--227156.kjsp>
- <http://www.corpusrural.es>
- <https://www.corpusdelespanol.org/now/>