

# LINGUISTICS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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How many languages are there? Where do modern languages come from? When did human beings first learn to speak? What's going on when somebody speaks with a stammer? Why do people have different accents? How do children learn their mother-tongue so quickly? Which language has the most speakers?

If questions like these intrigue you, you could be a born linguist. That's 'linguist' meaning 'someone who practises linguistics', of course, not 'someone who speaks a lot of languages fluently'. Linguistics is the science of language. It is the subject whose practitioners devote their energy to understanding why human language is the way it is. They study the history, acquisition, structure, and use of as many languages as possible. It would be nice to study them all, but life's too short. There are currently about 6,000 languages to choose from.

You can specialise in any language, or group of languages, when you study linguistics. I have friends working on Celtic languages, the Romance languages, American Indian languages, Australian aboriginal languages, or on just one language, such as Russian, Arabic, Welsh, Japanese – or English. Exactly which ones you encounter in a course will vary greatly; but in principle, the whole of the linguistic world is your oyster.

Linguists start with the study of individual languages, but they don't stop there. Their long-term goal is to find out what all languages have in common, and what makes them different. They want to establish the defining characteristics of human languages. Do all languages have nouns? (yes) future tenses? (no) vowels? (yes) nasal consonants? (no) Are there any languages with just a few hundred words? (no) Do all languages have words for 'yellow'? (no)



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Back in the real world, a degree in linguistics, or with a linguistics component, can give you a definite edge over the more numerous students who emerge with a degree purely in English literature. This is particularly true if you are considering a career in teaching, whether in this country or abroad. It also applies if you are hoping to pursue a career in publishing, especially in more specialised areas like lexicography (dictionary compilation), or the media.

Stylistics, critical discourse analysis, and sociolinguistics are just three of the linguistic subjects available to students who opt for linguistics and English language courses at university. Others, like phonology (the study of the sound system of languages) and psycholinguistics (the study of how we acquire language, and process it in our brains) can lead to postgraduate study in areas like artificial intelligence and speech therapy. Since linguistics is classified as a science, rather than an arts subject, you may also be in a stronger position than graduates in English literature should you wish to attract funding for study at postgraduate level.



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