

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. The word was first used in the middle of the 19th century to emphasize the difference between a newer approach to the study of language that was then developing and the more traditional approach of philology. The differences were and are largely matters of attitude, emphasis, and purpose. The philologist is concerned primarily with the historical development of languages as it is manifest in written texts and in the context of the associated literature and culture. The linguist, though he may be interested in written texts and in the development of languages through time, tends to give priority to spoken languages and to the problems of analyzing them as they operate at a given point in time, without reference to their history. The linguist, in principle, is interested in all languages and not merely in the great literary languages of the world.

The field of linguistics may be conveniently divided in terms of three dichotomies: synchronic versus diachronic, theoretical versus applied, and microlinguistics versus macrolinguistics. A synchronic description of a language describes the language as it is at a given time; a diachronic is concerned with the historical development of the language and the structural changes that have taken place in it between successive points in time. The goal of theoretical linguistics is the construction of a general theory of the structure of language or of a general theoretical framework for the description of languages (there is some controversy as to the difference between these two conceptions of the subject); the aim of applied linguistics is the application of the findings and techniques of the scientific study of language to a variety of practical tasks, especially to the elaboration of improved methods of language teaching. The terms microlinguistics and macrolinguistics are not yet well established, and they are, in fact, used here purely for convenience. The former refers to a narrower and the latter to a much broader view of the scope of linguistics. According to the microlinguistic view, languages should be analyzed for their own sake and without reference to their social function, to the manner in which they are acquired by children, to the psychological mechanisms that underlie the production and reception of speech, to the literary and the aesthetic or communicative function of language, and so on. In contrast, macrolinguistics embraces all of these aspects of language. A number of areas within macrolinguistics have been given terminological recognition: psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropological linguistics, dialectology, mathematical and computational linguistics, and stylistics. Macrolinguistics should not be identified with applied linguistics. The application of linguistic methods and concepts to language teaching may well involve other disciplines in a way that microlinguistics does not. But there is, in principle, a theoretical aspect to every part of macrolinguistics, no less than to microlinguistics.