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## DESCENT THEORY

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*See* Alliance-Descent Debate

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## DESCRIPTIVE LINGUISTICS

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Descriptive linguistics (henceforth DL) is the scientific endeavor to systematically describe the languages of the world in their diversity, based on the empirical observation of regular patterns in natural speech.

### Definitions

The core principle of DL is that each language constitutes an autonomous system, which must be described in its own terms. Modern descriptive linguists carry out detailed empirical surveys on a language. After collecting language samples from speakers, they analyze the data so as to identify the components of the system and the principles that underlie its organization. Through its commitment

to the empirical description of speakers' actual practices and to the diversity of languages as creations of linguistic communities, DL is closely allied with the social sciences.

The research agenda of DL can be contrasted with a number of related yet distinct approaches to language. *Anthropological linguistics* and *sociolinguistics* study, each in its own way, the interaction between cultural or social factors and language use; by contrast, DL focuses on the structural properties of the languages themselves. *Historical linguistics* studies the diachronic processes of language change, whereas DL focuses on the synchronic forms taken by a particular language at a given point in its development. The endeavor to compare individual languages, and the search for potential universals, is known as *linguistic typology*. DL may be understood as the preliminary step in the typological effort, the stage during which the facts of each individual language are established, before comparison can take place.

These subdisciplines of linguistics differ in their scientific goals, yet they essentially share with DL the same fundamental principles, including the emphasis on a bottom-up, empirical approach: All these approaches are complementary components of a single scientific agenda. By contrast, the principles of DL conflict more frontally with those of *formal linguistics*. Formal linguists—particularly proponents of generative grammar—claim that the facts of language are best explained by resorting to an apparatus of theoretical principles that are defined a priori, independently of the facts of particular languages. Descriptivists reject these aprioristic assumptions and require that all results be derived from the observable structures of the languages themselves.

### History

#### *A Long History of Language Description*

The earliest known attempts to describe a language in a systematic way originated in ancient northwestern India, where the desire for a faithful transmission of the sacred scriptures known as the Vedas brought about the need to describe Sanskrit. The best known member of that grammatical tradition, commonly dated 5th century BCE, is Pānini—arguably the first descriptive linguist. Similar grammatical traditions were later established in other civilizations and gave birth to the first

grammars of Greek, Latin, Tamil, Chinese, Hebrew, and Arabic.

Due to the dominance of Latin in medieval Europe, most modern languages had to wait until the Renaissance to be described for the first time—for example, Spanish in 1492, French in 1532, and English in 1586—whether in the form of grammars or lexicons. At the same time, the languages spoken in the newly discovered Americas also became objects of description—often as a result of missionaries’ religious agendas. Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, had its first grammar written in 1547 and Quechua, the language of the Inca Empire, in 1560.

While the discovery of new languages should have raised awareness of the world’s linguistic diversity, such a realization was hampered by the persistent tendency to base grammatical descriptions on the categories that had been established for languages then deemed more prestigious. A good example is Diego Collado’s explicit attempt in 1632 to describe Japanese, following the linguistic categories of Latin. Well into the 19th century, many languages were described using the terminology and grammatical concepts of European languages. As more and more languages of the world were explored and as the new discipline of linguistics started to develop in the mid-19th century—following the groundbreaking work of Alexander von Humboldt and the Brothers Grimm—a new approach to language description became necessary.

### *The Structuralist Revolution and the Theorization of Descriptive Linguistics*

The main turning point in the history of DL was the structuralist revolution. During the first decade of the 20th century, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure articulated a theory whereby a language is essentially a system of meaningful oppositions. Contrasts between forms (*signifiants*) are paired with contrasts between meanings (*signifiés*). For instance, “I feed my cat” and “I feed my dog” differ by the segments “cat” and “dog”; this contrast in form corresponds to differences in meaning. In English, the meanings of *cat* and *dog* are also defined by the set of words they compare with: *Cat* differs from *dog* but also from *tiger*, *lion*, *kitten*, and so on. Each segment gains meaning by virtue of its contrasts with other elements within the system of

the particular language. Saussure’s insights inspired the new methodological principle of DL: that each language be described on its own terms, based on the empirical observation of contrasts—or “structures”—internal to its system, rather than on categories imported from other languages.

During the same decade, anthropologists developed a sustainable interest in languages and their descriptions. The American Franz Boas placed the description of local languages at the core of his research on American peoples, initiating a long-lasting tradition in which linguistic description forms an integral part of ethnographic description. Boas also articulated a question about language that linguists had not raised: that of the relation between language and culture. Similar issues were later tackled by Boas’s student Edward Sapir, who formulated the famous “linguistic relativity hypothesis,” later consolidated by Benjamin Whorf. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which concerns mutual influences between language, thought, and culture, still constitutes a significant domain of research.

It took a little longer before linguists followed ethnographers in their interest for human diversity. Saussure’s theories had freed linguistic description from the mould of Indo-European patterns, yet Saussure himself worked on Indo-European languages. In the wake of Boas and Sapir, the attention to language diversity became central to another prominent figure of linguistic structuralism, the American Leonard Bloomfield. While Bloomfield became famous for fully developing structuralist theories, he also dedicated his work to American languages, particularly Ojibwe and the Algonquian family, based on firsthand data collected in the field.

Equipped with the appropriate theories and methods, increasingly aware of the scientific and human heritage embedded in linguistic diversity, descriptivists undertook to study as many languages as possible, across all continents. With about 6,000 languages in the world today and only a fraction of them adequately described, the task is colossal—but urgent. Colonization and globalization have already sealed the fate of thousands of languages, and it is estimated that half of today’s languages will disappear in the 21st century. In response to this threat, some linguists have developed thorough techniques of language documentation. They emphasize the need for extensive corpora and high-quality sound and video recordings, so as to keep a sound print

of each threatened language. The *documentation* of languages does not, however, replace the scientific insight provided by their *description*.

### Principles and Methods of Linguistic Description

The first step toward describing a language is data collection. Most descriptive linguists carry out fieldwork in a linguistic community and record samples of speech from different speakers, embodied in different speech genres: narratives, daily conversation, poetry, and so on. Although spontaneous, naturalistic speech is the ideal, in practice, linguists also carry out *elicitation*, by asking speakers for translations, testing specific sentences, and checking pronunciation or grammar rules.

This patient process can span several years and results in the creation of a corpus, a body of reference materials, against which hypotheses can be tested. Eventually, this analysis results in a published grammar, which spells out most of the rules of the language. Following the “Boasian trilogy,” a complete language description includes a grammar, a dictionary, and a collection of texts.

In line with the structuralist agenda, the linguist analyzes the corpus in such a way that the language’s own structures emerge from a system-internal analysis rather than being imported from another language or imposed via theoretical assumptions. These internal structures define *emic* categories: categories whose identification is based on the internal properties of a particular system. The terms *etic* and *emic*, whose contrast is central to structural linguistics and to structuralism in general, originate in the study of phonology; they allude to its central contrast between *phonetic* and *phonemic*. While phonetics deals with sounds and how they are produced, phonology deals with the way sounds are grouped together as meaningful, contrastive units (phonemes) in a given language.

Thus, consider the three different sounds noted, [t], [ɾ], [ʔ], in the International Phonetic Alphabet. In English, these sounds are three dialectal variants of a single consonant spelled *t*. Thus, in the word *better*, British Received Pronunciation has a sound [t], [bɛtə]; but American and Australian dialects typically pronounce this word with a “flap,” [bɛɾə]; and the modern dialect of London has a “glottal stop” (the sound in *uh-oh*), [bɛʔə]. In spite of their

phonetic difference, in English, these three sounds constitute variants of a single phoneme, which linguists will represent as /t/. The phonetic variation between [t], [ɾ], and [ʔ] does not affect the meaning of the word *better*; all three pronunciations can be subsumed under a single underlying form, /bɛtə/. In other terms, even though they differ from the (*phon*)*etic* point of view, these three sounds all instantiate a single (*phon*)*emic* category in the system of this particular language.

Crucially, while this analysis is correct for English, it may not hold for another language. For example, Tahitian contrasts the meanings of *pata* [pata] “sling,” *para* [para] “yellowed,” and *pa’a* [paʔa] “carapace”; these oppositions are evidence that within the Tahitian system, the three *etic* units (sounds) [t], [ɾ], and [ʔ] reflect three separate *emic* units (phonemes), /t/, /ɾ/, and /ʔ/, each endowed with its own contrastive value. Every system cuts up the phonetic space differently: Where English has a single category, Tahitian has three.

A similar approach governs the exploration of semantic categories. Every word in a lexicon constitutes an *emic* category—that is, a set of potential referents—and this category is language specific. This is well exemplified by kin terms. In English, *father* refers to F alone, while *uncle* groups together FB (father’s brother) and MB (mother’s brother). But in Dalabon, an Australian language, *bulu* groups together F and FB, while *kardak* refers to MB. Similar observations would apply to other words in the lexicon; words cut up the semantic space in different ways across languages. The structural analysis of the lexicon parallels the one illustrated above in phonology.

Finally, the same structuralist method applies in the realm of grammar. To take a brief example, one must not take it for granted that all languages distribute their words into the same syntactic categories or “word classes”—such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives. In Teanu, a language of the Solomon Islands, the word meaning “beautiful” is an adjective, but “clever” is a verb, despite its English translation, because it behaves like other verbs of the system. Some languages do not even have a separate “adjective” class, because in their systems, the equivalent of English adjectives consistently behaves like verbs (e.g., Northern Iroquoian languages) or like nouns (e.g., Warlpiri, central Australia). While some languages have three major word classes, others may have

fewer or more. Languages cut up the “grammatical space,” as it were, along different lines.

Just like the units of phonology or of the lexicon, the categories of grammar can only be described accurately by observing how they behave within their own system. The same principles and methods apply throughout language description, whether to establish the units of the system (the categories) or their behavior (the rules).

### Conclusion

Every language embodies a different way to perceive and categorize reality. The aim of DL, as a discipline, is to capture that linguistic diversity before it can be explained and interpreted. Of course, this diversity is in turn balanced by a number of properties that are shared by many or even all languages. Based on the description of individual languages, it is then the task of *linguistic typology* to gauge empirically how similar and diverse our languages can be.

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*See also* Bloomfield, Leonard; Boas, Franz; Comparative Method; Generative Grammar; Sapir, Edward; Saussure, Ferdinand de; Sociolinguistics; Whorf, Benjamin Lee

### Further reading

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## DIFFUSIONISM, HYPERDIFFUSIONISM, KULTURKREISE

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The term *diffusionism* normally is used to characterize a paradigm within anthropology and the social sciences that aims at writing a history of (early) mankind by reference to similarities between the present cultures of different regions. This approach rests on the assumption that cultural innovations have been rare in the past and their occurrence in distant regions normally is caused by culture contact and associated processes of diffusion that bridge even long distances. Diffusionists thus deny that parallel evolution or independent invention took place

to any great extent throughout history. The term *hyperdiffusionism* designates an even more radical position characterized by the idea that all cultures originated only from a single culture. Furthermore, the adherents to the “culture circle” theory (*Kulturkreislehre*) of German ethnology assumed that the complex cultural picture of the present is the result of the continuous intermixture of a small number of “primary cultures.”

The relevance of this complex of theories for the present debates, for reasons that are discussed below, is rather limited. By World War I, diffusionism had been challenged by the newly emerging functionalist school of thought of Bronisław Malinowski (1884–1942) and Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955). In the 1890s, Franz Boas (1858–1942) rejected the great narratives of both evolutionists and diffusionists. He argued that cultural change had been influenced by many different sources. The critique of Boas and his followers was compelling enough so that most of these concepts lost credibility and ultimately were abandoned. Nevertheless, at least in the German tradition of ethnological research, certain elements of this kind of thinking have survived until the present. And with the more recent “spatial turn” and globalization studies during the past 2 decades, at least some of the elements of this paradigm have been revived.

### Diffusion and Diffusionism

Hardly any other theory in anthropology and in the social sciences has such a bad reputation as *diffusionism*. Indeed, the term is used in a pejorative sense by many scholars. This comes as a surprise since diffusion itself, which means the transfer of ideas (technologies, languages, religions) and objects between different places and cultures, is a process familiar to all societies, ancient and modern, and as such is largely uncontroversial. In cultural anthropology, (trans) cultural diffusion was conceptualized by Alfred L. Kroeber, among others, as a process involving three successive phases: (1) the presentation of a new element, (2) its acceptance, and (3) its integration into the new culture, which may be combined with a modification of that element. Diffusion in this sense, which may be caused by exchange/trade, war, or other forms of intercultural contact, is opposed to *migration*, which means the transfer not only of ideas and objects but also of people