

INSTITUTO DE BIOCÊNCIAS, LETRAS E CIÊNCIAS EXATAS
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Instruções:

- **Responda em português, na folha de respostas, às quatro questões abaixo sobre um trecho do artigo *The Object Called “Language” and the Subject of Linguistics*, escrito por Asif Agha;**
- **Evite responder às questões apenas citando partes do texto ou traduzindo-as;**
- **É permitida a utilização de um dicionário impresso durante a prova;**
- **Enumere, na folha de respostas, as questões respondidas;**
- **O valor atribuído a cada questão é apresentado entre parênteses após cada uma delas.**

Questões:

- 1- Qual é o paradoxo que o autor apresenta? Explique-o. (2.5)
- 2- Como o autor justifica as pressuposições que embasam esse paradoxo? (2.5)
- 3- Como o autor define um projeto epistêmico? (2.0)
- 4- Qual é a questão central que o autor pretende discutir ao longo do artigo? (3.0)

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The Object Called “Language” and the Subject of Linguistics

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The trajectory of linguistics in the coming decades is likely to be shaped by how it formulates its object of study (whether as language or as some narrowly defined aspect of language) and by the corresponding breadth or narrowness with which it articulates its own epistemic project within the twenty-first-century-academy. This article discusses two epistemic projects that have shaped linguistics in the previous century, both of which survive in rather distinct institutional zones of the academy today. I diagnose some of the assumptions underlying the narrower conception of linguistics in the first of these traditions. I argue that the “linguistic turn” within the academy is, by contrast, oriented to the study of language more broadly understood. This creates difficulties for any narrowly conceived linguistics, difficulties which a broader vision of language as an object of study—and of any discipline that studies it—must strive to overcome.

Keywords: *linguistics; language; sociology of knowledge; history of linguistics; discipline formation*

I have been asked by the organizers of this conference to address two rather paradoxical questions, namely (quoting now from the letter of invitation) to discuss “the future direction of linguistics” and to comment on “the possibility of an integrated discipline.” The paradox is posed jointly by their presuppositions: The first question assumes that a unified discipline called linguistics already exists and is going somewhere; but the second, by calling attention to its present-day lack of integration, implies multiple—perhaps mutually exclusive—destinations. We cannot approach these questions by taking a pre-constituted discipline as our topic, nor presume that questions about its future have any meaning independently of choices about destinations. And, we cannot understand (nor choose) *where* linguistics is going without a principled understanding of *why* and *when* something counts as “linguistics” or *what* “disciplinary integration” might mean, and *how* it comes about, or doesn’t.

Linguistics is not simply “whatever linguists do.” In fact most of the activities in which linguists engage (e.g., driving to work, paying taxes) *never* count as linguistics. Activities that count as linguistics are activities oriented to particular objects of study, institutionalized audiences (journals, conferences), units of affiliation (departments, associations), and traditions of inquiry (a reference literature). The referent of “linguistics” is a sphere of activities involving language study (and its products, such as journal articles) in which no linguist engages except some of the time.

Moreover, the referent of “linguistics” is an *institutionally organized* sphere of activities, and questions about its “future” and its “integration” concern several nested levels or scales of social organization. It is obvious that the “future”-question will have very different answers depending on whether we identify the sphere of “linguistics” with activities that take place in certain departments (such as present-day university departments bearing that name), or by the disciplinary orientation of its practitioners (such as those who identify themselves, or are identified by others, as linguists) regardless of their departmental affiliation, or by facts of membership in certain scholarly associations, or as any systematic attempt to study language. The “integration”-question is precisely the question of whether such spheres of activity come together as unified projects in a given period of disciplinary history, or don’t.

It is equally obvious that the referent of the noun “linguistics” is not an ahistorical given. Over the past century or so this sphere of activities has been reconfigured periodically—sometimes in rather violent ways—by disciplinary agendas that seek to open up or curtail the kinds of activities that linguists do, even to broaden or narrow the forms of language study that *count as* “linguistics” in one or more of the institutional spheres I have just described. It is critical, then, to consider the degrees of intellectual latitude that disciplinary agendas can acquire through the constitution of their objects of study, and the ways in which their *epistemic projects* can open up or close off certain destinations for practitioners, including the integration as a field of the forms of language study to which they are committed.

The epistemic project of a discipline is not the same as its epistemological commitments (for which the term *episteme* (Foucault 1994 [1966]) is more appropriate). An epistemic project in my sense is a *social* project of inquiry. It is that aspect of a disciplinary agenda, conceived as a social project, which is organized by the mode of constitution of its object of study. In the pages that follow I am concerned with a single question about “linguistics”: how does the mode of constitution of its object of study organize its character as a sociological sphere of epistemic activity?

My more specific goal is to invite you to consider some problems that emerge when a certain kind of object that exists in our world—an everyday, social fact called “language”—is epistemically reconstituted by disciplinary agendas that focus on a select number of its features as extractable fractions, and, by taking them as objects of study, seek performatively to constitute themselves as unified disciplines. I argue that such an “extractionist” impulse—the impulse to replace the study of language with the study of a language-fraction—runs as a thread within disciplinary “linguistics” during much of the twentieth century, particularly in its dominant “departmentalized” forms; that along with certain corollaries (discussed below) such an impulse constitutes an ideology of language (and of disciplinary modes of its study) for many leading linguists of the period, including Saussure, Bloomfield, Chomsky, and their followers; that it has continued to re-direct the energies of practitioners caught in its grip toward smaller and smaller fractions of language as ordinarily understood, and indeed, during the closing decades of the twentieth century, toward a fraction of language so much smaller than language itself as to make doubtful its own continuing relevance as an epistemic project. And I wish to locate these problems in relation to a specific claim about the present, not the future, which I elaborate below: if a history of linguistic thought in recent times were *now* to be written, it seems clear that what happens in departments of linguistics would form only a small part of the story.

It should come as no surprise that the more narrowly linguistic departments conceive the language-fractions they study, the more perfectly they self-minoritize themselves among the disciplines that study language. My intent in what follows is not to offer a history of linguistics but

to diagnose the ailment that underlies this trend. And to suggest that, for those of us inclined to choose another course, a curious ideological strain that infects many—otherwise disparate—theories and schools of twentieth-century linguistics, and which dominates many departments even today, cries out to be understood, diagnosed, and cured.