

Appendix 2 – Linguistics Handout

WHAT IS LINGUISTICS?

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. One of the questions it tries to answer is "What is language?"

Linguists are interested in describing and explaining language. They are not really interested in the grammar rules you learn in a textbook, rules like "Don't use *ain't*." However, they can be interested in learning where the rules came from (historical linguistics) or how the rules affect people's behavior (part of sociolinguistics). For example, if someone doesn't use the rules, some people may think that person is stupid or uneducated. That person may not be able to get a good job.

Linguists want to know the common elements of all language. That means they want to know what all languages have in common. One common element of human language is that they are made up of sounds and some linguists study the sounds of languages (phonology). The sounds of a language are put together to create words or "parts" of words that have meaning (morphology). For example, in English the *-ed* we put at the end of verbs is not a word by itself but it has a meaning. It will tell us that the verb is in the past tense. All languages also have rules for putting words together in a sentence (syntax).

Linguistics is a social science. That means it belongs with other sciences that study human beings and their behavior. Other social sciences are psychology, which studies individual human behavior, and sociology, which studies humans as they behave in groups.

Linguistics is also a *cognitive* science. That means it is interested in learning how the human brain works. Linguists believe that if they understand how language works, they can understand how the brain works. One connection between the mind and language involves the way words represent meaning in our minds. Linguists are interested in that representation and how we use it to put sentences together (semantics).

Many people believe that a linguist is someone who speaks many different languages. However, linguists are not required to know many languages and linguists are not interpreters.

In this class we are going to think about language the way linguists do.