

# Misconceptions about Linguistics

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**Series:** Language and Linguistics

**Lesson:** Misconceptions about Linguistics

## PART 1. Learn Content

### Definitions

Linguistics is the scientific study of language and its structure. It includes the study of distinct areas such as **phonetics** (the sounds of a language), **morphology** (how sounds are put together to form words and meaning), **syntax** (the principles that determine the structure of sentences), **semantics** (how a speakers of particular language create meaning), and so on.

### Branches of Linguistics

Linguistics is also divided into branches, each with a different approach to understanding language. For example, **historical linguistics** is the study of how language changes over time (see [Etymology and surprising origins of words](#)). **Sociolinguistics** is the study of how social factors influences language use (e.g., differences in language use by different social groups). **Syntax** is the study of the rules speakers use. There are several other branches such as lexicology, computational linguistics, philosophy of language, descriptive linguistics, and so on.

Linguists typically specialize in one of the many branches of linguistics. As a result, you will find linguists working not only in universities but also "on the field" and even in places as varied as companies, the film industry, or governmental agencies.

### Prescriptivism versus Descriptivism

Many people associate linguistics with grammar, believing that the linguist's only concern is with "correct grammar." **Prescriptivism** consists of determining "correct" spelling, pronunciation, and syntax. In

that sense, prescriptivists determine what language "should be like."

**Descriptivism**, on the other hand, focuses on how people use the language regardless of what grammarians establish as "proper grammar." For a descriptive linguist, instead of determining whether or not a double negative construction (such as "*You ain't seen nothing yet*") is "correct" or "incorrect," the interest lies in documenting that both forms occur in spoken language; the interest is then in understanding who produces such forms and when.

## Linguists and Polyglots?

Because linguists busy themselves studying languages, many people think that they are polyglots (or people who speak multiple languages). However, not all linguists are polyglots, nor does being a polyglot make you a linguist. Imagine an American linguist studying aspects of the English language as it is spoken in the United States. Such a linguist would have no need to learn other languages. In some cases, depending on the branch of linguistics in which you are working, you may end up learning another language; after all, if you are a linguist, you are probably fascinated by language in general.

The point is that it is not a requirement to learn other languages to be a linguist. For some linguists, speaking other languages may give them insight into whatever aspect of linguistics they are investigating. Language enthusiasts and polyglots may gravitate toward linguistics, which leads to the misconceptions that being a linguist and being a polyglot is one of the same.

## PART 2. Instructional Video

Watch [this Snap Language video](#) on YouTube in a new tab. As you watch the video, take good notes so you learn the content well and are able to answer comprehension questions afterward.

You can use your own paper or use the "Note-Taking Form" below.

## **Note-Taking Form**

**Definition of Linguistics:**

**Misconception 1**

**Misconception 2**

**Misconception 3**

**Misconception 4**

**Misconception 5**

## **PART 3. Comprehension Questions**

The following questions are based on what you have just learned. The answer key is at the end of this document.

1. What is linguistics?
2. What aspects of language do linguists study?
3. Which branch of linguistics studies social factors in language?
4. Where do linguists work?
5. What is the difference between prescriptive and descriptive grammar?
6. What is a polyglot?
7. Are polyglots linguists?

## Part 4. Extension

1. To understand how language works, is it important to understand the social context in which it is used? Explain.
2. "*Me and my friend are going out*" is considered grammatically incorrect. You should say "*My friend and I are going out.*" Yet, a linguist would study the grammar used in both constructions. If the first form is "incorrect," can you really say there is a "grammar" structure involved?
3. If someone speaks two or more languages and understands the grammar of those languages very well, is that person a linguist?

# Answer Keys

## Part 3. Comprehension Questions

*Answers may vary.*

1. What is linguistics?

Linguistics is the scientific study of language and its structure.

2. What aspects of language do linguists study?

Linguists study a variety of topics such as phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, and so on.

3. Which branch of linguistics studies social factors in language?

Sociolinguistics.

4. Where do linguists work?

It depends on the area of study in which a linguist specializes. Linguistics work in universities, private companies, and government agencies.

5. What is the difference between prescriptive and descriptive grammar?

Prescriptive grammar determines what is correct or incorrect grammar. Descriptive grammar simply studies how people use language whether or not it is considered "correct."

6. What is a polyglot?

A polyglot is someone who speaks several languages.

7. Are polyglots linguists?

No. Polyglots know a lot about languages because they learned several of them; however, unless they studied linguistics formally, they are not linguists.

## Part 4. Extension

Answers may vary.

1. To understand how language works, is it important to understand the social context in which it is used? Explain.

A language does not happen in a vacuum. When speakers of a living language use the language, they use the language differently depending on the social situation. For example, adults speak to children differently from the way they speak to other adults. Younger people tend to use the language in specific ways. Men and women use the language differently in different cultures. Without an understanding of how language works in different social contexts, you may not be able to account for the way the language works.

2. "*Me and my friend are going out*" is considered grammatically incorrect. You should say "*My friend and I are going out.*" Yet, a linguist would study the grammar used in both constructions. If the first form is "incorrect," can you really say there is a "grammar" structure involved?

Even when people in a certain social group uses non-standard grammar (that is, they "make mistakes" or use forms considered ungrammatical), they do so following rules. In essence, even non-standard varieties of a language have their own grammar. Whether it is considered "correct" or "incorrect," it is a grammar nonetheless.

3. If someone speaks two or more languages and understands the grammar of those languages very well, is that person a linguist?

No. Linguists spend many years studying various aspects of language and earn a college degree. If you teach someone how to play the guitar, you may call yourself a "guitar teacher," but you are not necessarily "an educator." Similarly, a person who speaks several languages may have the awareness of linguistic phenomena; however, such a person is not necessarily a linguist.