REVIEW

Blake, Barry J. 2008. *All About Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. xvii + 322.

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What do we want from a linguistics textbook? The question is not a trivial one; neither is there just one answer to it – fortunately for publishers. For example, we vary on how much detail we want in a text, presumably related to the way in which we use a textbook: as back-up to the lecture course, as a replacement for lectures, as the fundamental source of information to which the lectures provide an outline introduction. We might want something that covers only the core aspects of linguistics, or we might want to cover some of the more peripheral bits of linguistics that, we might argue, provide a great deal of interest: language acquisition, aspects of sociolinguistics, and so on. We presumably want something that is relatively up-to-date theoretically, though the phoneme survives well in textbooks despite being rarely found in the research literature (at least not overtly). We seem to want textbooks that we believe our students will be able to read with ease: one of the differences between, say, Bloomfield (1935[1933]) or Lyons (1968) and most modern textbooks is that the more recent ones provide less dense text and more encouragement for readers: anecdotes, examples, figures, cartoons, boxes, and the like. Inevitably, they do this at the expense of a certain amount of content.

All About Language provides Blake's answer to these various questions, based on a lifetime's experience of teaching linguistics to undergraduates. Its

very title suggests that it will take a broad approach to what is included. If it cannot actually tell us "all" about language, it certainly manages to tell us a great deal about many aspects of language.

The book is made up of an introduction and five parts. Part I, 'Words', deals with parts of speech, morphology and lexical semantics; Part II, 'Syntax and discourse', deals with fundamental syntactic notions and a brief introduction to several key pragmatic notions; Part III, 'Speech and writing', introduces phonetics, phonology and writing systems; Part IV, 'Variation and change', considers dialects, styles, and language change; and Part V, 'The brain', deals with first and second language acquisition, language processing, and the origins of language. There is a lengthy glossary, a brief set of references and works for further reading, and a good index.

The text is full of illuminating examples, and illustrated with, among other things, the author's own cartoons. The book is beautifully produced, on very high-quality paper, with exemplary material and headings marked in green.

Because B is trying to put so much material into a relatively small space, there are inevitably times when the text seems rather dense. Some of the discussion of phonetics and language families, in particular, looks as though it might still be rather intimidating for the undergraduate reader. But overall this is not a problem, and the text is generally lively. The individual teacher will have to determine whether this makes up for the relative cursoriness of treatment of some matters, but it would surprise me if instructors turned this text down on those grounds.

Although there are a handful of irritating misprints (was the subeditor asleep, to allow *Dalmation* (p. 40) past?) and minor errors, there is really only one point on which I find myself wanting to argue with B. He introduces the notion of grammatical subject as 'what is being talked about' (p. 12). I believe that students have difficulty with the notion of grammatical subject precisely because they understand *subject* in this way. Consider the sentences:

What do you know about tweetle beetles? Well… when tweetle beetles fight, it's called a tweetle beetle battle. (Seuss 1965: 50)

The answer to 'What is being talked about?' in these sentences is clearly 'tweetle beetles', yet *tweetle beetles* is not the grammatical subject of either sentence (though it is the subject of a subordinate clause in the second sentence). Subject is more usefully defined in terms of the controller of agreement (at least in English), or with reference to the tag question test (*it's called a tweetle beetle battle, isn't* ***it****?*). In sentences like *The man with the golden gun hated Bond*, beginners are apt to identify *(the) man* as the subject, and this problem is

not solved by B's approach any better than it is by the more formal approach. I find the use of this particular criterion all the more surprising since B is a syntactician, and the chapters on syntax are models of how to introduce quite complex syntactic notions without putting the student off.

Lecturers who are looking for a coursebook for an introductory course in linguistics, and who want to cover the breadth of material that this book offers will find this a valuable addition to the range of texts available, and an option to which they will want to pay serious attention. It should definitely be in the library as a resource anywhere linguistics is taught.

References

Bloomfield, Leonard 1935 [1933]. *Language*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Lyons, John 1968. *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Seuss, Dr 1965. *Fox in Socks*. Glasgow: Collins.