

**OLD SCHOOL LINGUISTICS MADE NEW—**  
**REVIEW OF *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction*. 5th ed.**  
**By William O’Grady, John Archibald, Mark Arnoff, and Janie Rees-Miller**  
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**ABSTRACT**

Amidst the recent explosion of interest in linguistic science and the subsequent publication of large numbers of introductory works on the subject, O’Grady et al.’s *Contemporary Linguistics* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) stands out as a solid general purpose primer directed at an academic audience. Written by some eighteen contributors specializing in each of the seventeen branches of linguistics covered, topics are judiciously chosen while drawing on current scholarship and integrating different theoretical persuasions, without losing sight of the book’s target readership. The result is an up-to-date text balanced in its treatment of subject matter and perspectives—a work that lives up to its moniker of “Contemporary” Linguistics.

Key words: language, linguistics, general linguistics, textbook, reference

**REVIEW**

The past decade has seen the publication of a large number of introductory works on linguistic science, among which are layman’s guides that offer the casual reader a spectator’s view of the discipline (Aitchison 2003; Fortescue 2002; Hall 2005; Poole 1999; Widdowson 2003), and special purpose textbooks aimed at non-linguists requiring a background in the subject (Dirven and Verspoor 2002; Freeman and Freeman 2004; Justice 2004; Parker and Riley 2004; Rowe and Levine 2007; Winkler 2007). O’Grady et al.’s *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction* (5th ed.) is none of these. A hefty tome rich with materials

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that provide training for the budding linguist, it is a hardcore, old school textbook aimed at English or linguistics majors, suitable for use in a college survey course. Written by some eighteen contributors specializing in each of the seventeen branches of linguistics covered, topics are judiciously chosen to meet the needs of the beginning student. The book draws on much current scholarship and integrates different theoretical perspectives, making it in many ways a more complete package than comparable works on the market.

The book is divided into eighteen chapters, which together cover key areas of the discipline, including language structure (phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax), change and variation (historical linguistics, language classification, sociolinguistics), meaning and semiotics (semantics, animal communication), language acquisition (first language acquisition, second language acquisition), language and mind (psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics), and communication conventions (writing systems, sign language), as well as computational linguistics and native American languages. There is no separate chapter on pragmatics (included in chapter 6 “Semantics”), and discourse analysis is treated only briefly in the chapters on semantics (chapter 6) and sociolinguistics (chapter 15). Also absent from the repertoire is linguistic anthropology and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Departures from conventional practice include the use of feature geometry in the phonology chapter (chapter 3).

The book’s introductory chapter may well be its weakest link. This is a chapter that should address two questions: “What is Language?”, and “What is Linguistic Knowledge?”, while at the same time helping students to overcome common misconceptions about language. While this is eventually achieved, it is done in a roundabout way—Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2007, 4-5), in this reviewer’s opinion, begin their introductory chapter more effectively by providing the gratification of an answer. Notably, the issue of “descriptive” vs. “prescriptive” grammars, common in the opening chapter (e.g., Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams, 2007, 13-17) appears as only a single sentence (7-8) in the present volume, and no mention is made of the emphasis on spoken language rather than writing conventions (c.f., Bergmann, Hall, and Ross 2007, 12-13; Justice 2004, 1).

Chapter 2 “Phonetics: The Sounds of Language” is a solid chapter that covers phonetic transcription (for American English) and articulatory phonetics (vocal tract description, place and manner of articulation, phonation, vowel description, suprasegmentals). Instructors will be

pleased to find that all sounds introduced are given in accurate International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) notation—one does not see symbols of the American tradition used for affricates, fricatives, and vowels (e.g., Freeman and Freeman 2004; Justice 2004; Parker and Riley 2004; Weisler and Milekic 2000) or the use of single letters to represent English mid-high falling diphthongs (e.g. Fasold and Connor-Linton 2006; Finegan 2007; Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams 2007; Hudson 2000; Justice 2004; Parker and Riley 2004; Winkler 2007). Notably, the chapter does not introduce acoustic phonetics, or provide training in experimental phonetics or field methods (c.f. Bergmann, Hall, and Ross 2007; Fasold and Connor-Linton 2006). The authors' explanation of voicing using depictions of glottal states (28-29) is, in this reviewer's opinion, less effective than Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams's diagram for voice onset time (2007, 230). The chapter concludes with a brief section on articulatory processes (43-48)—more commonly found in the phonology and/or historical linguistics chapters of textbooks. But the issues raised above are minor concerns that do not detract from what is otherwise a sound chapter (no pun intended) with materials ideally suited to the beginning student.

Chapter 3 “Phonology: The Function and Patterning of Sounds” is another well-designed unit, covering classical phonemics, phonological features, syllable structure, and rules and derivations. In treating these traditional topics however, the authors take the bold step of introducing methods gleaned from recent scholarship, making this a much more current exposition of phonology than corresponding chapters in rival texts. In the section on phonological features, the authors use not the 1968 feature set of Chomsky and Halle from the *Sound Patterns of English* (SPE), as is the practice in most linguistics primers, but rather a set comprising monovalent and binary features characteristic of feature geometry. Granted, students at this level will not be able to fully appreciate why some features should have two possible values and others only one—but if familiarity with phonological features is a requirement, mastery of a multivalent feature set of this sort will better prepare the student for higher level analysis. In the section on the syllable, syllable structure and syllabification protocols are spelled out in detail, further aiding the student in solving phonological problems. Syllables and morphophonemics aside, the chapter limits itself to the treatment of segmental phenomena, and does not venture into feet and metrical phonology (c.f. Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, and Harnish 2001).

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In contrast to Chapter 3 “Phonology”, which breaks new ground, Chapter 4 “Morphology: The Analysis of Word Structure” and Chapter 5 “Syntax: The Analysis of Sentence Structure” are more modestly-conceived texts that, while clearly presented and containing all the relevant information, do not differ significantly from corresponding sections in comparable publications. The morphology chapter (chapter 4) treats such familiar topics as affixation, derivation (taking the additional step of distinguishing between Class 1 and Class 2 English derivational affixes), inflection, compounding, and morphophonemics, and provides a good selection of morphological data sets for students to analyze. The syntax chapter (chapter 5) presents a middle-of-the-road incarnation of generative syntax, not minimalism in its newest inception, but neither is it to be labeled dated or non-mainstream—the authors strike a good balance between current scholarship and structures that students find intuitive. The challenge, however, is to present within the space of a chapter the essence of generative grammar while equipping the student with the ability to parse sentences and draw syntactic tree structures, and that much is achieved. The chapter begins with lexical categories, then proceeds to X-bar structure, introducing possible “Merge” operations for noun phrases, verb phrases, adjectival phrases and prepositional phrases, from which sentences (inflectional phrases and complementizer phrases) are built. Yes-No questions, “Do” insertion, and Wh-movement are used to illustrate the “Move” operation. Additional structures introduced at the end of the chapter include coordination, relative clauses, and passive sentences.

Chapter 6 “Semantics: The Analysis of Meaning” is to be applauded for being inclusive in its choice of approaches to semantics, which is a field that can be very disparate in its choice of content and methodology. The authors wisely steer away from truth-conditional analyses, but cover a wide range of theoretical perspectives and topics, including lexical relations, cognitive semantics, semantic primes, thematic roles, anaphora, and structural ambiguity. While coverage of each area is generally balanced, the section on cognitive semantics could use some elaboration. When introducing prototype theory (210-211), no mention is made of family resemblance, and the example used—“baseball star”—is probably too culturally-specific to be appreciated by a wider audience. In the section on metaphor (211-212), the handful of random examples given fails to demonstrate the systematicity of metaphor—here it would be useful to introduce the distinction between image metaphor and

conceptual metaphor, and to give a wider range of examples to illustrate spatial metaphors and mappings onto the sensori-motor realm. Towards the end of this chapter, discourse analysis is touched upon, followed by a short section on pragmatics, which is limited to Grice's conversational maxims.

Chapter 7 "Historical Linguistics: The Study of Language Change" and Chapter 8 "The Classification of Languages" cover language change and its application to genetic relations and language typology. Both chapters give broad coverage of key topics and balance different perspectives well. The historical linguistics chapter (chapter 7) begins with an impressive catalog of sound change, followed by relatively shorter expositions on morphological, semantic, and syntactic change—the semantic change section, it is felt, would benefit from inclusion of a wider variety of processes (e.g., broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration). The final section of this chapter is a short primer in comparative reconstruction, the techniques of which are applied to the history of Indo-European. If there is any ground left uncovered, it would be a discussion of attitudes to language change—is it progress or decay? Is it teleological? The language classification chapter (chapter 8) presents not only typological and genetic classification, but also introduces the student to the theory of language universals. Here, however, it seems to make sense to introduce genetic classification first, which follows from reconstruction methods treated in the previous chapter; language universals and language typology can then be brought in as an alternative classification.

Chapter 9 "Indigenous Languages of North America" and chapter 10 "Natural Sign Languages" are less theory and more eye-opener chapters that expose the student to the range of human linguistic diversity, while at the same time applying theoretical constructs introduced thus far. The chapter-length treatment of Amerind languages in chapter 9 is unique among linguistics primers.

Chapter 11 "First Language Acquisition" and chapter 12 "Second Language Acquisition" are two superbly-written chapters that treat L1 and L2 acquisition incorporating the latest scholarship in linguistics, psychology, and pedagogy. Chapter 11 describes language development from birth on up, cataloging stages in the development of phonology, morphology, and syntax, and introducing research methods for the study of child language. Controversial issues such as innateness, the role of cognitive development, and the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) are

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given balanced coverage at the end of the chapter. Chapter 12 is divided into sections on interlanguage grammar, factors affecting second language acquisition, and foreign language pedagogy. In the section on interlanguage, L2 phonology, L2 morphology, and L2 syntax are explored from the perspectives of L1 transfer and universal grammar, with reference to pertinent findings such as Eckman's (1977) "Markedness Differential Hypothesis" and Major and Kim's (1996) "Similarity Differential Rate Hypothesis". The section on factors affecting L2 acquisition manages to reconcile different perspectives on second language acquisition, a field notorious for bickering among proponents of different interpretations. The final section on L2 pedagogy includes a typology of bilingual education programs, immersion programs, and heritage language programs popular in the United States. Notably absent from the chapter is a catalog of L2 teaching methods (c.f. Yule 2006, 165-166), useful for students wishing to enter the field of applied linguistics.

Chapter 13 "Psycholinguistics: The Study of Language Processing" begins by introducing field techniques and experimental paradigms used to gauge language processing in the mind, from malapropisms and lexical decisions to timed-reading experiments, eye-movement studies, and event-related potentials. This is followed by sections on mental processing at the phonological, morphological, and syntactic levels, culminating in a discussion of psychological models of language processing: serial versus parallel models, symbolic versus connectionist models. From this reviewer's standpoint, the chapter reads as one that is extremely current, though not the most comprehensive—Bergmann, Hall, and Ross (2007) for example, has stronger sections on speech production (365-370) and speech perception (374-378), and gives a more detailed account of speech errors (367-373).

The human brain and its relation to language processing is an area that has made enormous strides in recent years; the field of neurolinguistics has progressed so much in the past decade that a timely update such as chapter 14 "Brain and Language" will serve students and instructors alike. Main sections include the physiological architecture of the brain, investigative methods (e.g., autopsy and brain imaging), and brain disorders such as aphasia, dyslexia, and dysgraphia, which shed light on language processing.

Chapter 15 "Language in Social Contexts" is a chapter with a wealth of materials on the sociology of language and sociolinguistic research

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methods, but the material is presented in a confusing way, such that the beginning student may not grasp upon initial reading what sociolinguistics is about. Much of what is traditionally understood as sociolinguistics appears in section 2 (Sociolinguistics of Society) of this chapter, which includes issues such as standard versus non-standard language, dialect and socio-economic variation, code-switching, language contact, and language planning; whereas the first half of the chapter (section 1 “Sociolinguistics of Society”) introduces investigative methods. The chapter would work much better if the two sections are reversed. That said, like the many chapters preceding this one, the chapter is comprehensive and up-to-date, stronger than corresponding chapters in comparable textbooks.

Chapter 16 “Writing and Language” and chapter 17 “Animal Communication” treat two subjects that are not at the core of theoretical linguistics, but are nevertheless closely associated with the lay notion of “language”, and arouse much student curiosity. Both chapters are well-structured, and contain the right balance of information, making for great readability. In addition to reviewing experiments that show what animals are capable and incapable of linguistically, chapter 17 also provides the student with background on signs and semiotics, features of verbal and non-verbal communication, and methodology for communication research.

Chapter 18 “Computational Linguistics” is arguably one of the book’s weaker chapters. Ambitious as it is to be comprehensive in its coverage of newer areas of research, the chapter is nevertheless addressing an audience that lacks the background linguistic knowledge to appreciate these new developments. As such, not only does much of the chapter end up barely scraping the surface of many of these exciting new areas, much space is devoted to cramming background information that has little to do with computation itself, making for very painful reading. A case in point is the section on speech synthesis, which relies heavily on knowledge of acoustic phonetics—an area never covered in chapter 2 “Phonetics”. Thus in pages 590-591 the author attempts to squeeze the basics of acoustic phonetics into two short pages (c.f. Bergmann, Hall, and Ross 2007, which spends ten pages introducing sound waves, formants, and experimental procedures)—disorienting the student and not really helping him to understand what the field is about.

Viewed as a whole, O’Grady et al.’s *Contemporary Linguistics* (5th ed.) manages to cover all the key areas of linguistics, and in this

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reviewer's opinion, does so in the right balance and depth for an undergraduate linguistics survey class. The heart of linguistics—language structure—is covered at length in the first five chapters, presented in the sequence phonetics → phonology → morphology → syntax, progressing naturally from the smaller to the larger units of language. Many newer texts (e.g., Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, and Harnish 2001; Finegan 2007; Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams 2007; Parker and Riley 2004) choose instead to subvert this sequence and start with softer topics such as morphology or semantics, opening with subjects that students traditionally find easier to grasp, and progress towards the more abstract phonetics and phonology chapters somewhat later. The present text would work well for instructors who prefer to expose students to more challenging subject matter at the beginning, and allow students to have a “breather” sometime in the middle of the semester.

Additional design features enhance the readability of each chapter: main concepts are presented in bold typeface; objectives are given as bullet points at the beginning of each chapter, and content is reinforced with summaries and keyword lists at the chapter's end. Also at the end of each chapter is a fair selection of exercises, both general and advanced. Each chapter includes a list of recommended readings—a list which unfortunately does not always reflect the most current materials available, and in some instances include works far more advanced than the student's level (see Finegan 2007 for a more current and accessible list).

By now the reader will have noticed certain recurring themes in this review: that of the text being balanced in its treatment of topics, and its reflection of current scholarship. Granted, the book has its fair share of competitors on the market: theory enthusiasts will want to look at Crowley, Lynch, Siegel, and Piau (1999), Fromkin (2000) or Radford, Atkinson, Britain, Clahsen, and Spencer (1999), while those emphasizing communication and pragmatics will find broader coverage in Finegan (2007) and Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, and Harnish (2001), and those leaning towards field and experimental work would be better off adopting Bergmann, Hall, and Ross (2007), but as a general purpose linguistics primer directed at an academic audience, O'Grady et al.'s *Contemporary Linguistics* is as good as it comes. With chapters that are often stronger, more diverse, and more in-depth than the competition without losing sight of its target audience, the pooling of expertise really shows in this work—a work that lives up to its moniker of “Contemporary” Linguistics.

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