The Handbook of Linguistics

Edited by
Mark Aronoff and Janie Rees-Miller

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For over a century, linguists have been trying to explain linguistics to other people who they believe should be interested in their subject matter. After all, everyone speaks at least one language and most people have fairly strong views about their own language. The most distinguished scholars in every generation have written general books about language and linguistics targeted at educated laypeople and at scholars in adjacent disciplines, and some of these books have become classics, at least among linguists. The first great American linguist, William Dwight Whitney, published *The Life and Growth of Language: An Outline of Linguistic Science*, in 1875. In the dozen years between 1921 and 1933, the three best known English-speaking linguists in the world (Edward Sapir in 1921, Otto Jespersen in 1922, and Leonard Bloomfield in 1933) all wrote books under the title *Language*. All were very successful and continued to be reprinted for many years. In our own time, Noam Chomsky, certainly the most famous of theoretical linguists, has tried to make his ideas on language more accessible in such less technical books as *Language and Mind* (1968) and *Reflections on Language* (1975). And more recently, Steven Pinker’s *The Language Instinct* (1995) stayed on the best-seller list for many months.

Despite these efforts, linguistics has not made many inroads into educated public discourse. Although linguists in the last hundred years have uncovered a great deal about human language and how it is acquired and used, the advances and discoveries are still mostly unknown outside a small group of practitioners. Many reasons have been given for this gap between academic and public thinking about language, the most commonly cited reasons being: that people have strong and sometimes erroneous views about language and have little interest in being disabused of their false beliefs; or that people are too close to language to be able to see that it has interesting and complex properties. Whatever the reason, the gap remains and is getting larger the more we learn about language.

*The Handbook of Linguistics* is a general introductory volume designed to address this gap in knowledge about language. Presupposing no prior knowledge