Abstract

This dissertation examines the claim that linguistics is a science. Advocates of the science claim have provided conceptual arguments for a scientific treatment of linguistics involving the categories 'natural', 'mental' and 'real'. Starting from the basic assumption that language deals with pairs of sound and meaning, we go on to show that the ontological status of language is not consistent with the idealised and narrow definition of language that is given as part of the science claim. Examining the complexity of the object of inquiry, we show that although Noam Chomsky's theoretical goal of studying language in an autonomous sense by paying attention merely to syntax is valid, it is fundamentally flawed in terms of (i) a realistic picture of language acquisition; (ii) empirical data revealed by typologists; and (iii) layers of meaning involving context and metaphors. Further, we show that Chomsky's idealised view of the object of its study is based on a limited view of science. An analysis of generalisations and law-like statements in the discipline further reiterates the shortcomings of the science claim. The arguments developed here are buttressed by the richer accounts of science that draw on insights from studies of its history, sociology and rhetoric.