

# What Kind of Linguist am I?

A fun quiz, but with serious undertones

*There are no right answers!*

<b>A:</b>	<b><i>Which of these two statements is most representative of your view of language?</i></b>	
A1	Language is mostly predetermined by our genes. There are specific mechanisms in the brain which determine the nature and rules of our language.	
<b><i>OR:</i></b>		
A2	Language is mostly learned through social interaction with other language users. Without social interaction there would be no language.	

<b>B:</b>	<b><i>Which of these two statements is most representative of your view of language?</i></b>	
B1	Language is something especially human, no other animal has a signalling system like it. Only humans have the necessary cognitive mechanisms to use it.	
<b><i>OR:</i></b>		
B2	Language is different from the signalling systems of other species; but all the mechanisms it uses can be observed, in some form, in other species.	

<b>C:</b>	<b><i>Which of these two statements is most representative of your view of language?</i></b>	
C1	Language is a cognitive process. Most language is thought, and only a fraction is communicative. Communication is mainly a side-effect of language.	
<b><i>OR:</i></b>		
C2	Language is a tool for communicating with other humans. While language can be used for thinking, linguistic thought is only a small part of cognition.	

**Find your combination of answers on the table below to identify your –ism**

A1	B1	C1	<b>Generativism</b>	<p><b>Language is: Genetic, Exclusively Human, and Cognitive.</b>                      Generativists believe language is mostly innate, it is exclusive to humans, and it is essentially a system for cognition.                      Your linguist-of-choice is Noam Chomsky, your gemstone is obsidian, your lucky number is zero, and your lucky day is Sunday.</p> <p><b>MORE SERIOUSLY:</b>                      The key features of language are grammar and syntax – the capacity to use rules in the production of signals, allowing us to combine meanings into novel, propositional meanings. These rules are the product of innate, peculiarly human, cognitive systems which are dedicated to language. Linguistics should be the scientific study of language as a universal cognitive phenomenon. Social applications of language are distractions, not real linguistics.                      Generativism has at least three different forms:</p> <p><b>Revised Extended Standard Theory:</b> language is essentially computational, so there must be a computation system which is specialised for language. This system must be species-specific, but universal within the species; and it may be monolithic or composed of specialised modules. Few linguists are still working with REST.</p> <p><b>Principles &amp; Parameters:</b> the key component of language is the sentence, which is composed of nested noun phrases and verb phrases. The way components work to make sentences is bound by a finite set of rules, many of which are universal.</p> <p><b>Minimalism:</b> the set of rules behind language is remarkably small, and there may be only one: MERGE. Recursion is the capacity behind MERGE, and only humans have recursion.</p>
A1	B1	C2	<b>Structuralism</b>	<p><b>Language is: Genetic, Exclusively Human, and Communicative.</b>                      Structuralists believe that, while language is innate and exclusive to humans, it evolved as a system of communication and should be studied as such.                      Your linguist-of-choice is Ferdinand de Saussure, your gemstone is brick, your lucky number is pi, and your lucky day is Thursday.</p> <p><b>MORE SERIOUSLY:</b>                      This is largely a historical discipline, a product of Ferdinand de Saussure’s work. It takes the view that language is the exchange of signifiers (meanings) about signifieds (things) through the medium of signs. Structuralism was an approach used in many areas of science in the early 20th century, but it was later seen as too mechanistic. It remains significant in computational linguistics.</p>
A1	B2	C1	<b>Cognitivism</b>	<p><b>Language is: Genetic, Natural, and Cognitive.</b>                      Cognitivism is an umbrella term for many different approaches to language. It covers metaphor, semantics, grammar (there are several different grammatical systems), language origins – anything language-related can be relevant. Cognitivists tend to define cognitivism as including the work they are currently doing.                      Your linguist-of-choice is George Lakoff, your gemstone is brain coral, your lucky number is <math>\sqrt{2}</math>, and your lucky day is Wednesday.</p> <p><b>MORE SERIOUSLY:</b>                      For cognitivists, while language systems are natural for humans, they have a basis in non-human systems – you can see examples of</p>

What Kind of Linguist Am I?

				language like capacities scattered throughout nature; and, while language is communicative, it is based on embodied representations in the brain. The way we work in the world determines the forms of language we use: language is applying thinking rather than just thinking, but it is still about thought.
A1	B2	C2	<b>Socio-cognitivism</b>	<p><b>Language is: Genetic, Natural, and Communicative.</b></p> <p>Socio-cognitivists agree with what the cognitivists say, except that language is clearly about establishing social representations in the brain – you don't lose language if you lose an arm, but you do if you have no social interaction.</p> <p>Your linguist-of-choice is Rod Ellis, your gemstone is wood, your lucky number is some, and your lucky day is Tuesday.</p> <p><b>MORE SERIOUSLY:</b></p> <p>Socio-cognitivism is interested in language as a social phenomenon. Language may originate in brains, but its purpose is in the world. The communicative needs dictate form and content, and are what is interesting about language. While socio-cognitivism itself has few adherents, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists are advocates of this approach (but not anthropological linguists, who are cognitivists). Socio-cognitivism is more an approach than a school of thought.</p>
A2	B1	C1	<b>Functionalism</b>	<p><b>Language is: Learned, Exclusively Human, and Cognitive.</b></p> <p>Functionalists know that innate systems are fundamentally constrained – but language does not seem to be, so it must be learned; it is, though, a cognitive system for defining the universe in an exclusively human way. Functionalism is available in a range of styles.</p> <p>Your linguist-of-choice is Michael Halliday, your gemstone is mystic quartz, your lucky number is 3 or 4 or 5, and your lucky day is Saturday.</p> <p><b>MORE SERIOUSLY:</b></p> <p>Functionalism is mainly interested in describing language as used rather than language as a concept. There are several forms of Functionalism (e.g. Lexical Functionalism, Danish Functionalism, Axiomatic Functionalism), but the most common is Systemic Functionalism. In SF, language has three, or four, or five, systemic clusters of function (or metafunctions):</p> <p><b>Textual metafunction:</b> the text is itself an encoding of meaning.</p> <p><b>Interpersonal metafunction:</b> meaning is encoded into the pre-existing cultural relationship between speakers and listeners.</p> <p><b>Ideational metafunction:</b> meaning is encoded in the minds of speakers and listeners, and language is the conduit between minds.</p> <p><b>Experiential metafunction:</b> this is a subset of the ideational metafunction; what speakers and listeners share is their experience of the world.</p> <p><b>Logical metafunction:</b> the other subset of the ideational metafunction; experiences can be combined to make new knowledge about the world.</p>
A2	B1	C2	<b>Pragmatism</b>	<p><b>Language is: Learned, Exclusively Human, and Communicative.</b></p> <p>Pragmatists agree (sort of) with the Functionalists; but ... you know, it's about people using language, like ... they're not just thinking about it.</p> <p>Your linguist-of-choice is Talmy Givón, your gemstone is melamine, your lucky number is x+y, and your lucky day is Friday.</p>

What Kind of Linguist Am I?

				<p><b>MORE SERIOUSLY:</b> Pragmatists see language as largely a set of ad hoc conventions, heavily overlaid with more primitive signalling systems. What is meant and understood is much more important than what is said, or how. Meaning is not expressed just in the language used but in the whole utterance experience, the physical context, the social context, and the cultural context. Language is a specifically human method of communication, but that is no more significant than that gannets communicate in a specifically gannet way.</p>
A2	B2	C1	<b>Distributionism</b>	<p><b>Language is: Learned, Natural, and Cognitive.</b> For Distributionists, language is not just up in the head, it is out in the world. An organism is not just a body, it is part of an environment, and languaging is how we relate to the environment. However, cognition is the key to understanding languaging. Your linguist-of-choice is Stephen Cowley, your gemstone is flint, your lucky number is the golden ratio, and your lucky day is Monday. <b>MORE SERIOUSLY:</b> Distributionists believe that humans live in an information system – it is in them and around them. Languaging is a way of accessing that information system. They talk of language as a process of cognition (hence languaging); but cognition itself need not involve a single brain. Languaging allows brains to network, handling information in ways that single brains cannot manage.</p>
A2	B2	C2	<b>Integrationism</b>	<p><b>Language is: Learned, Natural, and Communicative.</b> Language is just part of thinking, and thinking is just a part of being, and being is essentially indivisible. Everything is integrated. We can pretend that language is a separate thing, but that does not make it a separate thing, and viewing it as a separate thing may not be helpful. Your linguist-of-choice is Roy Harris, your gemstone is ice, your lucky number is imaginary, and, as the week is a sociolinguistic construct, you don't believe in lucky days. <b>MORE SERIOUSLY:</b> There is no rule-based system of language for integrationists, language is a convenient term for describing humans communicating together. Integrationism is largely a protest against rule-based approaches to language, but it does have value in narrative analysis and stylistics. It is a relatively old discipline, and it has a small, but dedicated, band of followers.</p>

Remember that this is mostly for fun: you don't need an –ism to be a good linguist. However, it is useful to know how people around you may be thinking, and why they may be thinking what they are thinking.

Very roughly, about 50% of linguists identify themselves with an –ism. Of these, about 20% are Generativists, 10% are Functionalists (mostly Systemic Functionalists), 10% are Cognitivists, and 10% are the rest.

This quiz does not give a definitive list of –isms in linguistics, nor does it cover all the possible points of opposition being debated in the subject (the various linear approaches are not mentioned, for instance). It does, however, show some of the key questions – and disputes – in the fascinating area you are exploring in this degree.

Everything we hear is an opinion,  
not a fact. Everything we see is a  
perspective, not the truth.

*Marcus Aurelius*