LANGUAGE AND REALITY: THE STATUS OF LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION
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1   Two (related) topic areas:

1a   The status of descriptions of language in language (and/or in formulations parasitic
        on language)
1b   The status of descriptions of the world outside language in language (huge area)

Argument about basic distinction implied in 1b and in 1a/1b contrast (postmodernists etc)
and associated argument about closeness of relation (Whorf etc; see talk of 6/2/96)

Closeness of relation between 1a and 1b debatable (granted distinction); perhaps not close

2 = 1a

Surprisingly large differences of viewpoint, even for I) very general theory providing terms
and ii) description of English (best described language); many claims appearing to be about
basic points in fact depend on complex theories, themselves not well supported

2a - Key terms
Sentence: only in written usage? even there, only some special styles? also boundary
problems
Word: only in some languages? even there, boundary problems?
   cf *liber Petri / Peter's book / Piet se boek / le livre de Pierre*; also Chinese, Inuit etc
Phoneme (linguists' own term; contrast as for *a/e* in *bad* vs *bed, cf bad vs bat vs ban*
   where *a* differs but not contrastively: abstract or concrete? how many levels of analysis
   (Chomsky vs older structuralists)? rejected altogether by some (Trotter)
Subject/Object (etc): universal? definitions? primary or secondary (Chomsky)

2b - Analysis of sentences:

(Mark) (has)(drunk (the beer))   Chomsky
(Mark) (has drunk) (the beer)   Halliday etc

'Deep' structures particularly awkward: empirical criteria often lacking; universal (cf basic
   word order differences, etc)?

(Mark)+ (PERFECTIVE + PRESENT) + (drink (the beer))

2c - Nature of a theoretically sound description (of what?): Katz, Matthews vs Chomsky

2d - Universals of grammar, phonology etc (genuine - and *linguistically motivated* - or
     not?): Whorf (& here Sampson, Hudson etc vs Chomsky)

Still much *is* agreed upon by most linguists (and relevant philosophers), but differences are
numerous and serious enough to cast doubt on any derived/complex analyses/arguments

To what extent (whatever our answer to the above) can we give a (true) description of something in the world outside language in language (granted the distinction)?

Capacity of language to describe world at all?
Compare two phases of Wittgenstein
Scope of language: are there aspects of the world which can be described only, e.g., mathematically, or in highly parasitic systems

Given above: absolute or relative truth?
Scientific notion of better and approximations to a truth which is in fact (arguably) absolute but perhaps (perhaps not?) unknowable as such
Notion of 'theory-laden' nature of all observations (Popper, Derrida & postmodernists); itself debatable?
Relativism; links to Whorf
But: Popper vs (some) postmodernists on issue of relativism vs (degrees of) truth
Popper's closeness to early Wittgenstein on 'correspondence with the facts'; intermediate position between traditional (naive?) view of facts/theoretical explanations and relativist postmodernism (?)

Relativist postmodernism: no theory (unless self-contradictory?) 'wrong'/'worse' than others
Impossibility (theoretical, not just psychological/contingent) of 'objective' knowledge of
a) theoretical explanations
b) (in extreme versions) even individual facts
Admission of possibility of different *perspectives* (cf Map Analogy) not enough
Dangers for scholarship, especially science (but would presumably have to be borne if view appeared valid)
Threat to notion of *intellectual progress* (and wide ramifications in ethics etc)

Arguably *self-contradictory* or at least *overstated* (see Gross & Levitt, Windschuttle etc)

4   Connections

If we had a better theory for 2, could we modify language so as to better deal with 3?
But would that be 'legitimate'? Would it be parasitic? Would it only repeat current gulf between language for everyday purposes and technical discussion?
Or at least could we better understand the shortcomings of language with respect to 3?

Notion of 'better'/'worse' languages (from this and from other angles)
Generally rejected (reasonably?) by C20 linguists (for fully-fledged languages), except for culture-specific areas (whatever view of Whorfian relativism)
Could still apply to *analyses*

Is there a true theory for 2? If not for 3 generally, perhaps not. But are the two issues (to a degree) independent?
Issue of 2 more self-contained (serious but not generally threatening) if 3 less problematic