Frederick J. Newmeyer, *American linguistics in transition: From post-Bloomfieldian structuralism to generative grammar.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. xvi + 412.

Reviewed by ROBERT D. BORSLEY ⬤, University of Essex & Bangor University

This book is concerned with the evolution of American linguistics from the foundation of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) in 1924 until the 1960s. Someone might wonder whether this is an important matter. Probably, a researcher could make a valuable contribution to linguistics with little real knowledge of the history of the discipline, and it might be argued that keeping on top of current literature is a major task that leaves little time for delving into the past. However, some knowledge of what happened and why, what was a productive research strategy, and what was a dead end is likely to be useful. One might even agree with Theodore Lightner, quoted on page 119, that 'it is not really possible to understand what is being said in linguistics today without knowing the history of the field, without knowing what events led up to the current issues that are being argued today'. But, however useful knowledge of the history of a discipline is, it is a matter of considerable interest, especially in a relatively young discipline like linguistics. Personally, I found a lot of the content of the book fascinating (and some of it amusing).

As Frederick J. Newmeyer notes in the foreword to the book, he is probably best known for his book *Linguistic Theory in America: The First Quarter Century of Transformational Generative Grammar* (Newmeyer 1980, 1986).[1] He notes that there were two widespread criticisms of that work: 'there was a general feeling that I treated the structural linguists who preceded transformational generative grammar (TGG) with little respect and even less understanding' (xi) and 'there were objections to the "triumphalist" tone that pervaded the book' (xi). He now thinks that the critics 'were essentially correct' (xi). Thus, this book is in part a reconsideration of some of the themes of the earlier work, but, as the subtitle makes clear, it is essentially an in-depth investigation of the transition from structuralism to generative grammar. It explores many different dimensions of the history, seeking to establish not just what happened but also why it happened, with the help of extensive research in personal archives.

Structuralism is the focus of the first three chapters of the book. In Chapter 1, 'The structuralist ascendancy in American linguistics', Newmeyer considers how structuralism of a particular kind came to dominate American linguistics. Important here

---

[1] He is also quite well known for his explorations of various broad, general issues in linguistic theory, especially but not solely in Newmeyer (1998, 2005).

was the idea that this was a 'scientific linguistics' making rapid progress and potentially relevant to neighbouring disciplines. Also important was the 'egalitarian' idea that all languages could be analysed by the same methods, and LSA-sponsored summer schools helped spread knowledge of structuralist ideas. A further significant factor was government-sponsored work in linguistics during the Second World War. Newmeyer quotes (34) this from Charles F. Hockett: 'I was like a war millionaire … So, while many young people were … fighting and dying, I was living in comfort and making, not a lot of money, but a lot of intellectual progress, which people like us are inclined to consider even more important' (Hockett 1980: 103).

The chapter also has some interesting remarks about the development of the LSA and its journal *Language*. On the LSA, Newmeyer comments that '[i]t was apparently taken for granted until relatively recently that an LSA officer's wife would do most of the heavy lifting' (37n31). And I was amused as a former editor of *Journal of Linguistics* to see this on Bernard Bloch, editor of *Language*: 'Bloch's editorial notes [on a paper by Gordon M. Messing, professor of classics and linguistics at Cornell] state that the paper is "ignorant, biased, unfair, [and the] main point is rotten". But he published it anyway' (27n25).

Chapter 2, 'American structuralism and European structuralism: How they saw each other', focuses on the changing relationship of American structuralism and European structuralism. Newmeyer notes that American linguistics had deep roots in Europe. He points out, for example, that three of the first four presidents of the LSA were born in Europe. However, by the late 1930s, negative views of European work were widespread. Thus, Roman Jakobson submitted two papers to *Language* in the 1940s, and both were rejected, with Bloch seeing the first as 'utter drivel' (56). (There is perhaps some comfort here for anybody who has had a paper rejected by *Language*.) More serious was what Newmeyer calls 'the most despicable incident in the history of American linguistics' (59), namely 'the two-dollar bill conspiracy', in which a number of linguists signed a two-dollar bill, which was supposedly a contribution toward paying the fare of Jakobson and others back to Europe. However, attitudes toward the Europeans began to improve in the late 1940s, and the improvement was marked by the election of Jakobson as LSA president in 1956.

Chapter 3, 'Martin Joos's *Readings in Linguistics* as the apogee of American structuralism', looks at Martin Joos's famous (or infamous) *Readings in Linguistics: The Development of Descriptive Linguistics in America Since 1925* (Joos 1957). Newmeyer notes that the idea for such a volume went back to 1946. He comments that it would be good to know more about the process by which Joos decided which articles should be included, but there is very little evidence about this. Whatever the process, the work that appears in the *Readings* 'overwhelmingly and disproportionately represents the most "extreme" wing of American linguistics, that is, the wing that was characterized by an empiricist epistemology and an accompanying rigid methodology' (99). The book remains well known. But

925

why? Newmeyer answers: 'I would say primarily for the rabidly empiricist material in Joos's prefaces and intercalated comments' (123).

Newmeyer turns to generative grammar in Chapter 4, 'Early transformational generative grammar: Some controversial issues'. This is arguably the most important chapter of the book, and it addresses a variety of issues. Newmeyer takes the view that there is little point in discussing whether linguistics has (or has not) seen a Chomskyan revolution, because it all depends on what one understands by a revolution (143). Instead, he considers the extent to which generative grammar was original. There was plenty that was original, notably the abandonment of the search for discovery procedures and the associated empiricist constraints on theory construction, and the emphasis on generative analyses that are sufficiently precise for one to ask what they entail about the facts (with a need for changes when an entailment is incorrect). Also original was generative phonology, with its rejection of the structuralist phoneme. It seems it was this that first aroused the ire of structuralists, but when the extent to which generative grammar represented a break with structuralist orthodoxy became clear, there was a broader hostility. Thus, for example, Newmeyer comments (160–161) that 'Robert Hall warned that Chomsky is "threatening to negate all the progress achieved over four centuries [and] dragging our understanding of language back down to a state of medieval ignorance and obscurantism" (Hall 1968: 128–129)'. Generative grammar was clearly more than just a minor departure from structuralist ideas.

Newmeyer also provides an interesting investigation of some of Noam Chomsky's claims about his early days. He looks, for example, at his claims that he had 'no serious professional qualifications' and that he was 'largely self-taught' and remarks that 'I cannot think of any word besides "absurd" to describe such claims' (168). More generally, he concludes that Chomsky's remarks about his 'early days' 'need to be taken with a grain of salt' (181–182).

Newmeyer also considers military funding for linguistic research at MIT and how this was seen by Chomsky and others. Among other things, he looks here at the claim of Chris Knight (2017) that Chomsky INTENTIONALLY made his theory unintelligible so that the military could make no use of it. He suggests this is 'implausible, to put it mildly' (179). He concludes that military funding had no great effect on the content of generative work.

Five more chapters focus on aspects of generative grammar. The most interesting in my view is Chapter 6, 'The European reception of early transformational generative grammar', which sketches the very different ways in which generative grammar was received in the various countries of Europe. I was pleased to see references here to Jacek Fisiak in Poland, my first head of department, and Conn Ó Cléirigh, in whose University College Dublin department I worked (briefly) in the 1980s. And I was amused to learn that '[t]here was no generative linguistics carried out in Luxembourg during the 1960s and 1970s for the simple reason that there was no university in the country at that time' (226). The chapter is a mine of interesting information, and probably most of it will be new to most readers.

The other four chapters also contain a variety of interesting material. Chapter 5, 'The diffusion of generativist ideas', is a response to suggestions that Chomsky and his colleagues were an elitist in-group, interested in talking only to each other through inaccessible 'underground' publications. Newmeyer argues at length that they in fact used every means at their disposal to get their ideas across: 'publishing books, journal articles, anthology chapters, and technical reports; aiding the writing of textbooks; giving conference talks; teaching at LSA Institutes; and hosting numerous visitors to MIT' (215).

Chapters 7 ('The contested LSA presidential election of 1970') and 8 ('Charles Hockett's attempt to resign from the LSA in 1982') look at controversial episodes in the history of the LSA: the LSA presidential election of 1970, in which Joos was defeated by Dwight Bolinger, 'a drama unprecedented in LSA history' (281), and Hockett's attempt to resign from the LSA in 1982, which was unsuccessful because he had been a life member since 1952 and the constitution provided no mechanism for anyone to terminate a life membership. Some may feel that the minutiae of LSA politics are not that interesting, but of course they are not just a matter of person-alities and politics but a reflection of various aspects of the developments that are the main focus of the book.

The LSA is also important in the final chapter ('The generativist non-dominance of the field in the 1970s and 1980s'). Hockett's objection to the LSA was that it was 'under the control of generative linguists' (282). Newmeyer argues that this was never true and more generally that 'the visibility and intellectual success of generative grammar in the 1970s and 1980s was not matched by the ability of its advocates to dominate the field's organs of power or to secure a major share of grant funding' (320). The argument is supported by a variety of data set out in five appendices to the book.

The preceding pages give some idea of the content of the book, but space limitations have meant that I have had to pass over numerous fascinating details. Naturally, there are questions that might have been raised in this book but are not. One is the what if question: Could the changes that swept away the post-Bloomfieldian orthodoxy have taken a different form? Probably things could have been different in certain ways. One concerns syntactic categories. Chomsky only fully committed to the idea that syntactic categories are complex entities (in Chomsky 1970), more than a decade after his earliest work in generative grammar. On the face of it, there is no reason why he could not have assumed this position from the outset, given that complex categories are implicit in traditional discussion with terms like 'third person plural past tense subjunct-ive verb' and 'accusative plural feminine adjective'. If complex categories had been assumed from the outset and if their potential had been fully exploited, generative grammar might have looked rather different in the following decades. In particular, it might have been clear much sooner than it was that similarities between different sentence types do not necessitate the assumption that one derives from the other or shares a structural core with it.

Another important feature of the earliest work in generative grammar, which has been challenged in recent decades, is its procedural character. Structuralist phonological analyses often had a similar character, but the processes that were postulated were seen as fictions. Newmeyer quotes (149) these remarks of Leonard Bloomfield (1933: 213): 'the descriptive order of grammatical features is a fiction and results simply from our method of describing the forms; it goes without saying, for instance, that the speaker who says *knives*, does not first replace [f] with [v] and then add [-z], but merely utters a form (*knives*) which in certain features differs from a certain other form (namely, *knife*)'. As an empiricist, Bloomfield was happy to view theoretical entities as convenient fictions. Chomsky, as a realist, had to claim that his processes were real, but it has never been clear what sort of reality the processes of Chomskyan generative grammar represent. There is no close relation between Chomskyan derivations and the processes of production or comprehension. This has led some to advocate a declarative view of grammar (see e.g. Sag & Wasow 2015). Could such views of grammar have been embraced from the outset? It is not clear to me. Perhaps they could have, but perhaps it was inevitable that procedural views of grammar would dominate the scene for a number of decades.[2]

It is of course no objection to this book that there are issues that it does not address. This just means that the subject is a large and complex one. There is more work for historians of modern linguistics to do, and more books that could be written. But the present book is a very good one, which deserves to be widely read.

REFERENCES

Bloomfield, Leonard. 1933. *Language*. New York: Holt.
Chomsky, Noam. 1970. Remarks on nominalization. In Roderick Jacobs & Peter Rosenbaum (eds.), *Readings in English transformational grammar*, 184–221. Waltham, MA: Ginn.
Hall, Robert A. 1968. *Essay on language*. New York: Chilton Books.
Hockett, Charles F. 1980. Preserving the heritage. In Boyd Davis & Raymond O'Cain (eds.), *First person singular: Papers from the Conference on an Oral Archive for the History of American Linguistics*, 99–107. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Joos, Martin (ed.). 1957. *Readings in linguistics: The development of descriptive linguistics in America since 1925*. New York: American Council of Learned Societies.
Knight, Chris. 2017. *Decoding Chomsky: Science and revolutionary politics*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Newmeyer, Frederick J. 1980. *Linguistic theory in America: The first quarter century of transformational generative grammar*. New York: Academic Press.
Newmeyer, Frederick J. 1986. *Linguistic theory in America*, 2nd edn. New York: Academic Press.
Newmeyer, Frederick J. 1998. *Language form and language function*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

---

[2] Newmeyer defines generative grammar as 'a mathematical system that defines a set of strings by means of a procedure that constructs any member of the set without ever constructing a non-member' (146). This is unfortunate wording as it suggests that generative grammars are necessarily procedural, which, as noted here, is not the case.

928

Newmeyer, Frederick J. 2005. *Possible and probable languages: A generative perspective on linguistic typology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sag, Ivan A. & Thomas Wasow. 2015. Flexible processing and the design of grammar. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 44.1, 47–63.

Author's address: *University of Essex & Bangor University*
                rborsley@essex.ac.uk

929