

ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE RESEARCH

Since it received the name linguistics,¹ the science of language has undergone changes which are rather difficult to summarize. As a foreword, I would like to recall, without going too far back, that scholars and philosophers in the 18th century were investigating the origins of language without applying any systematic method, but more or less relying on those ideas which occurred to them. An essay by J. J. Rousseau² should be mentioned in particular with regard to this method. An era closed with the resolution of 1868 by the newly created Linguistic Society of Paris, to restrict all study on the origins of language.

We should try then to define the 19th century's contribution under the twofold framework of historical and comparative linguistics. Certain languages were organized into families as a result of rigorous comparisons between the features of different languages and the recognition of a common base in their development. Thus the comparative grammar of some spoken Indo-European languages was established, with the application of the so-called stability of phonetic laws, demonstrating that a

Translated by Juliana Mutti.

¹ The date is uncertain. 1826 has been given without source, and 1832 or 1833 by Charles Nodier.

² With regard to this, see my review of the critical edition by C. Porset (Bordeaux, 1968) on J. J. Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, who never decided to publish it during his lifetime. *Nouvelle Critique*, Nouvelle série No. 18 (November, 1968).

phenomenon which occurs in one word also occurs, in the same context, in words of the related languages.

And so the idea was born that the established changes had to have taken place in a previous era, giving rise to research into a prehistoric reconstitution. This coincided with the development of the concept of evolution, applicable to all natural phenomena. No effort was made to define the trends in ideas which were in question, and only after other positions were developed was an attempt made at classification. A considerable amount of work was done and remains established within "traditional" linguistics, as it is called by those investigating new areas. The social position assumed by Saussure and Meillet under the name of the sociology of language, or socio-linguistics, seems to me to be the greatest foreseeable source of future research, along with all that remains to be discovered from the point of view of comparative and historical linguistics. During the 19th century, and still in the 20th, it has been necessary to indicate the precise description of the sounds of language, limited until they could be recorded by instruments. Recently these instruments have been perfected.

The appearance of Saussure's ideas marks a fundamental moment: that called *structural linguistics*, although the term itself does not appear in the published study to which so many scholars have referred, each with different positions.³ On the whole it is an examination of the inner structure of language, attempting to explain the structure of sentences, and also, with due consideration of social facts, of this expressed within the dichotomies characteristic of Saussure's thought. There is a distinction between *provincialism* and *interaction*, which in my opinion has not been given the attention it deserves. Considering the fact that the diachronic is actually a series of synchronic facts, the distinction between the *synchronic*, or the description of a language condition in itself in a given period, and the *diachronic*, or history has been fairly well discussed. The distinction between

³ Ferdinand de Saussure: a course taught in 1906-1907, 1908-1909 and 1910-1911 and the publication of his lectures by his disciples Bally and Séchehaye under the title of *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, Payot, 1916. This posthumous study of Saussure's notes was necessary so as to avoid a fundamental modification of his theory. A critical edition appeared in August, 1972, by the same publisher.

langue and *parole* has been most developed: *langue* being a socially adopted system whereas *parole* is individual in usage. This has become a kind of dogma in linguistics.⁴

At this point we should mention another thinker who for a long time has been known only in France, and by those who followed French developments, but who is now recognized, in particular by a group active in Canada: Gustave Guillaume, whose books and articles, along with those by his adherents, constitute a complete bibliography. We should add that there are a great number of handwritten notes to be edited.⁵ Since his study on the *article* in 1919, G. Guillaume has been trying to decipher an unknown; on page 46 he says that "...the reflection on reality by the mind gradually opens the path to the reflection on language (idealism)." As his ideas developed, his methodology came to be called "psychomechanics," and at other times he has referred to a "sublinguistic scheme." Going back to Saussure's dualism, he calls *speech* the *parole*, and language for him becomes a particular kind of entity which should dispense with the article. For example, he says that "...in language a notion assumes this or that value."

I shall not review the entire history of American theories which have succeeded one another, in part contradictory, some merely juxtaposed, since the publication in 1933 of the Bloomfield book, *Language*. We are watching the rise of many new theories accompanied by a whole swarm of new terms.⁶

⁴ Sufficient attention has not been given to the article by Witold Doroszewsky, "Langue et parole," which appeared in French, in *Prac filologicznych*, Vol. 14, Warsaw, 1930, where the author seems to prefer the monist definition of language, which is a difficult definition. The monist position prompted my reflections on the ticklish question set forth in *Matériaux pour une sociologie du langage*, Paris, Maspéro, 1971, Vol. 1, pp. 65-66.

⁵ I documented much of Gustave Guillaume in the catalogue which I drew up while directing the linguistic chronicle of *Année sociologique* (see A. S., 3rd Series, 1940-1948, Vol. 2, p. 838). I reviewed *Essai sur le mode subjonctif en latin post-classique et en ancien français*, Paris, PUF, 1959, by the Guillaume scholar Gérard Moignet, who re-examined the theory of his teacher (A. S., 1961, pp. 538-541). I reviewed the volume collected by Roch Valin under the title *Langage et science du langage*, Paris, Nizet, 1964, in A. S. 16 (1965), pp. 558-561.

⁶ I think that we should refer back to Robert A. Hall, Jr., "Some Recent Developments in American Linguistics," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, LXX (1969), pp. 192-227, which includes Chomsky's position. Eric Buyssens's

Alongside with mentalism and anti-mentalism, we should add distributional linguistics, followed by generative and transformational grammar. In short, everything that has become game for the theorists: the surface and not the essence of things. And France has contributed her share.

In the search for the essence, there are new ways of expressing thought which in practical terms accounts for the widespread use of symbols, materialized as letters. Those for whom the noun group suggests nothing will immediately respond to the NS = noun syntagm. I think that this practice of *rewriting* grammatical descriptions first occurred in England. It consists of the construction of angular graphics which combine to form *trees*. If they speak directly to part of the reading public, for me they pose problems.⁷ In language studies today it is necessary to rely upon the ability to penetrate formal descriptions, which must be supported by the intervention of mathematicians.

Let's go to the root of the problem. A vigorous effort is required to penetrate the mechanism behind the production of sentences which make our intellectual exchanges possible. Here it is important to mention Noam Chomsky,⁸ who appears to be the founder of an entire school, the author of many books published in English, the most important of which have been translated into French. Year after year, the publications of his adherents increase, along with those of the opposing camp. (see note 6).

As far as grammar is concerned, Chomsky and his school speak of it as *engendering* or *generating* an infinite number of sentences, implying a creative force. This is the origin of the term *generative*

contribution in *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, Vol. XLVII (1969), No. 3, should be considered, as well as Françoise Dubois-Charlier's article, "La sémantique générative: une nouvelle théorie linguistique," in *Langages* (September, 1972), rejecting the notions of deep structure and *sous-jacence*.

⁷ We should comment on the forerunner to Lucien Tesnière, who in 1963 published *Esquisse d'une syntaxe structurale*, Paris, Klincksieck, and whose complete works appeared after his premature death, under the title of *Éléments de syntaxe structurale*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1959, with an introduction by Jean Fourquet. He called the angles *stemmas*, after a term used by ancient scholars in the classification of manuscripts. The apex of the angles were for him *joints*, indicating verbs whose role he overrated.

⁸ Chomsky, who more than once has changed his directions and theory, and of whom informed persons now claim that the specifically physiological position will be developed in his next university courses.

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grammar, which to me is not an acceptable way of describing language. The method demands introspection, and they concoct horrors simply to demonstrate that they are recognizable as horrors:

grammatical: Peter buys some bread
He eats some
ungrammatical: * He some eats

In the movement of language, reality is quite different. In French it is instructive to examine the stages of the slow establishment and extension of the conditional tense, which did not exist in Latin, and which was interrupted at different moments in different stages of the language. As a result, *il faudrait qu'il part* (he should leave) seems reprehensible, one could say ungrammatical if one wishes to so consider it; but this is the normal direction of various provincial speech patterns. On the other hand, certain of them went as far as complete concord: *il faudrait qu'il partirait* (he should leave).

Anything that we can say as linguists lies outside of the real problem, which is the way the brain functions, the understanding of which, like that of all evolving life in the universe, escapes us.

The only aspect which has been successfully identified seems to be *language aptitude*.

The great biologist Pavlov said the fundamental thing in classifying language as the second signal system belonging to man; the first signal system consisting of all the non-verbal, reflexive signs which establish communications. This brings us back to Saussure's position of arranging linguistics in the semiological context, which soon became semiotic, with some great developments. The truth is that our descriptive linguistics is one-armed; we painfully lack a repertoire of linguistic elements, all of which together, and not just some, could satisfy the needs of those who are investigating the universals. Every language, including those artificially constructed like Esperanto, contains only a fixed number of typological signs.⁹

⁹ See Nicolas Ruwet, *Introduction à la grammaire générative*, Paris, Plon, 1967, and the review included in my article, "Sur les discussions actuelles en linguistique," in *La Nouvelle Critique*, No. 27 (October, 1969), pp. 51-52.

How does one exercise language aptitude? The field is open to psychologists and neurologists. The following passage expresses some of my ideas which are still valid.

... There is... the practice of a faculty impinging on the mechanism behind intelligence. It concerns extraordinary psychic phenomena which are present in the formation of all languages, and which occur in the unconscious of people who do not even suspect that grammar exists... All sorts of internal conditions guarantee a good functioning (whether it's the best is another question) in a given time and place for a given society. Even in the case of limited intellectual entities, these conditions are related to all other physiological mechanisms, with their extremely ingenious devices as well as their limitations. Only with language it is a question precisely of intellectual elements, of which one can become more or less conscious; whereas the knowledge we obtain from the various chemical exchanges in our bodies does not allow us to perceive them in their particulars. Also, language is not acquired at birth but, save for those exceptional cases of disability or isolation, in the first few years of life with a consciousness akin to that of an apprenticeship at least on the part of those teaching. Language acquisition takes place through a series of impressions which leave a trace on the brain through a means which our biological knowledge has not yet clarified, and which is called an *engram*. Engrams accumulated in the course of an indefinite storage period, together with a learning process establish the total potential always available for the actualization of expression, from the more rudimentary to the more complex, and also establish the process of active thought with its reflection on internal language, verbal communication being placed into writing when it occurs. In the case of bi- or multi-lingualism, more or less precocious, the storage period doubles or multiplies itself depending on the needs of the language, and the output system organizes itself for utilization accordingly. Furthermore, this entire mechanism is not concerned just with language, but with all kinds of knowledge and mental activities... We come to the conclusion that the generally diffused social and intellectual values influence grammar ... In our time moreover, regardless of the language, the most sophisticated usage may develop without any clear

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awareness of a grammatical system, or by forgetting what had been rather well-learned in school... *Language is not thought*, but it is inseparable from it. It is not the responsibility of the linguist to explain thought itself, but linguists will have to remain at the side of psychophysicologists, assisting them in every way possible.¹⁰

It is not innate ideas like time and space, etc., . . . but variable notions like those which are created in the vast diversity of observable languages. Where does one begin? We speak more and more about pre-natal perceptions. The phase which begins at that moment when a child actually expresses himself in communication with an adult, around the third year, using words and their components, is contingent upon his capacity to make the connection between what he hears and what he understands. It is at this juncture that we establish the connection for deaf children, rendering them verbal through the proper exercise of the speech organs. It seems that the same results can be obtained from young deaf persons who have acquired only sign language. It is a profoundly astonishing fact that the deaf, trained to read in this method, understand what they read as well as normal children, and sometimes even better. Thus anyone can master a language, or two or three simultaneously, and successfully in each case. Under favorable conditions, a human being can acquire different thought and communication processes right up until the end of his life.

What part of this process can then be called innate? The greatest error made in the observation of language acquisition is its isolation from all other phenomena in the growth of the young human being. It is here that Pavlov's "first system of signalization" enters. Yet it should not be limited to that. There is the entire process of muscle control not only for maintaining the upright position, which engenders a host of steps, but also for the rhythmic manifestations of the dance and many other areas which have drawn the attention of ethnologists in the evaluation of body techniques.¹¹

¹⁰ Marcel Cohen, "Quelques considérations sur langage et pensée," in *Mélanges Marcel Cohen*, Mouton, 1970, pp. 29-35.

¹¹ For these, see *Manuel d'ethnographie* by Marcel Mauss, Paris, Payot, 1947. I do not give any references for animal training, specifically birds

With regard to this essay, I maintain that language, given the way in which it has been able to function among all the human properties, should be considered in its totality and not divided into *langue* and *parole*.

who must learn to fly and sing. These multiply with the studies of the thousands of facts which are in danger of not ever being clarified, along with the different feats successfully performed by bees in the course of a life span of some weeks.