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RECENT TRENDS

IN GENERAL LINGUISTICS

The importance of language for the real understanding of culture is being more and more felt by most students of civilisation. A linguistic system is an expression, though not a complete one, of the system of perception which a social group has of its surroundings and of itself. No civilisation can be fully understood by one who ignores its linguistic means of expression. Modern anthropologists cannot work any more through interpreters if they want to collect really reliable material. As Edward Sapir writes, 'Some day the attempt to master a primitive culture without the help of the language of its society will seem as amateurish as the labors of a historian who cannot handle the original documents of the civilization which he is describing.' [1]

Modern linguistic science was born at the beginning of the last century as a comparative historical grammar and remained such for quite a long time. Although methods were, according to our present standards, often vague and arbitrary, many important traits of the main languages used by

[1] E. Sapir, *Selected Writings*, p. 162.

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the old civilisations of Europe, Asia, and Africa and their genetic relationship were worked out and established in their main characteristics. Then, about 1870, the influence of Darwin and of natural science led to the introduction of new methods based on the belief that linguistic changes are of the same nature as those observed in the physical world. It was held that languages changed through the action of 'blind laws'. If the results upset the character of the language, and especially of its grammar, it was contended that the speakers would even out irregularities by creating new forms 'by analogy', that is to say, by the imitation of some widely used forms. These general views, which originated in a group of eminent German scholars, were not accepted by all linguists, but they led to much stricter methods of research than those current in the past. The new methods brought into bold relief the difference between philology, the study of written documents and their language, and linguistics, which has as its object of research the study of language as such, both written or unwritten.

During the whole of the nineteenth century language was studied almost exclusively in its aspect of change. Towards the end of the century, however, new ideas emerged, particularly in France, ideas which may be said to be the forerunners of the present views of language as a structure. The Frenchmen Maurice Grammont (1866–1946) and Antoine Meillet (1866–1936), followed by their younger colleague Joseph Vendryes (born 1875), were able to demonstrate that sound changes and other linguistic changes cannot be compared to changes in the physical world but imply an interplay between psychophysiological impulses and the system of the language in which the changes take place. The changes occur unconsciously or subconsciously in individuals. The Dutchman Jac. van Ginneken (1877–1945) related these facts to the results of Pierre Janet's research on psychological automatism. Meillet insisted on the social character of the linguistic system and showed that it corresponds entirely to Durkheim's definition of the 'social fact'. The process of change takes place in the individual and is generalised in the social group; the causal factor lies outside the individual and pertains to the social sphere.

At the same time the new discipline of geographical linguistics, whose modern methods have been discovered by the Swiss Jules Gilliéron (1854–1926), made it quite clear that the Darwinian conception of languages and dialects as well delimited entities, developing in a way similar to that of plants or animals, is completely unfounded. Linguistic development is infinitely more complex, thanks to the constant interplay of external and internal tendencies.

The new views led to the conviction that the important fact about language is that it constitutes a system, the different elements of which are interdependent, and that the existence of this system is of equal importance for the understanding of linguistic change, of language as such, and of its role in society. In fact, what is present to the mind of an unsophisticated speaker is only the linguistic system; the concept of linguistic change is alien to him. The importance of a clear-cut distinction between the two points of view, between language as a static system and as linguistic change, was brought out by F. de Saussure's lectures published by his pupils in 1916 (de Saussure was born in 1857 and died in 1913). De Saussure insisted on the necessity of keeping the synchronic and the diachronic study of language well apart. Each discipline must have its own methods. His *Cours de Linguistique Générale* has had a profound influence on subsequent linguistic research.

Not only did de Saussure distinguish rigorously between the synchronic and the diachronic points of view, but he also stressed the necessity of differentiating language as such from speech, the linguistic system common to a social group, from the actual use which the speaker of the language makes of this system. To distinguish between these he introduced the terms *langue* and *parole* which English linguists translate 'language' and 'speech'. His theory coincides with Meillet's view of language as a social phenomenon. De Saussure sees in language a system of signs, which consist of something audible, and a concept inseparably bound up with them. The signs, which are arbitrary or, rather, unmotived, acquire their value through opposition, and language is viewed not as substance but as form.

The introduction of new methods, inspired by those of natural science, led, in the meantime, to a precise study of speech articulation, not only by auscultation but also by means of instruments, and to the creation of a special discipline, that of experimental phonetics. Many scholars tried to describe and analyse as many as possible of the minute different shades of pronunciation found in languages and dialects, without regard to the question of their function. De Saussure has shown, however, more clearly than other linguists have done before him, that a language admits of only a limited number of sound patterns or phonemes, a notion which forms part of the linguistic system suggested by Meillet and Grammont: they both were his pupils when he taught in Paris from 1881 to 1891. Now a Russian emigré scholar, Prince N. Troubetskoy (1890–1938), and his pupil, compatriot, and collaborator Roman Jakobson (born 1896) have

worked out a precise definition of the phoneme as the smallest sound unit used for differentiating meanings and tried to determine the character of the different phonemic systems, their interrelations, and the importance of their characters for the understanding of linguistic change. A phoneme may be called a class or a unit of sounds—which may, acoustically, vary more or less and which differs functionally from other units: in English the words, *ramp*, *romp*, *rump*, contain three different phonemes which serve to differentiate the meaning of these words. The question of their precise articulation—those of *romp* and *rump*, for example, are phonetically different in Southern English, Anglo-Irish, and American—is of secondary importance. The views of the 'phonologists'—as Trubetskoy, Jakobson, and their collaborators were called (they proposed to distinguish between *phonology*, the science of phonemes, and *phonetics*, the science of speech articulation)—became generally known at the first Linguistic Congress at The Hague in 1928. Trubetskoy and Jakobson gathered round them a group of scholars, mostly Slav, centred on Prague. They tried to develop their views into a coherent theory of language, which joins up on important points with that of Meillet, but they did not get very far beyond phonemic problems before Nazi persecutions began and the war broke out. Trubetskoy died shortly after the *Anschluss* in Vienna, where he was professor of Slav languages.

Taking up the idea that language is form rather than substance, the Dane Louis Hjelmslev (born 1899) has worked out, partly in collaboration with H. J. Uldall, a 'glossematic' theory of language. Professor Hjelmslev aims at a description of language which claims to be non-contradictory, simple, and comprehensive. To this end it is necessary, in his opinion, to elaborate a method by which any text or 'spoken chain' may be analysed according to the principles just mentioned. The analysis must result in the establishment of the system which is hidden behind the text and behind any text in the language in question. By this deductive procedure he hopes to be able to establish a method applicable to language in general. The method is valid if it can be shown to be universally applicable and non-contradictory. He then proceeds to establish the main points of such an analysis in which he determines the relations and the dependence between elements by subdividing the text into smaller and smaller sequences until the minimum units are reached. Language in his opinion is a mere set of relations, and it is unimportant how it is 'manifested'. Linguistic values are unaffected by the 'manifestation' of language in speech, in writing, in morse, or in deaf-and-dumb gestures.

Professor Hjelmslev is the leader of a group of able young Danish linguists who have submitted his theories to a thorough examination and also applied them to linguistic material. He has met, however, with much opposition, mainly from linguists who are primarily interested in linguistic change and, on certain special points, also from 'phonologists' and structuralists who cannot agree with the idea that substance is wholly without importance in language. All the same the main principles underlying the theories of the 'phonologists' and the Hjelmslev group are now shared by a considerable number of leading European linguists, some of whom have arrived, more or less independently, at the same conclusions. Provisionally at least we must add a number of British, French, Norwegian, Dutch, Swiss, and Italian scholars together with a lonely Swede (Prof. Malmberg of Lund), to the group of Slav and Danish scholars already mentioned.

In the universities of the United States linguistics has not yet quite reached the standard of the other humanistic studies, probably because the difference between philosophy and linguistics is, as yet, badly understood in Anglo-Saxon countries. But it may be hoped that this state of affairs will not last long, for during recent years American scholars have done a great deal of research work of the greatest importance from the theoretical point of view. Their publications have made available to scholars the highly interesting material provided by the numerous American Indian languages which differ in some cases largely from those of the old world. They have also elaborated a general theory of linguistic structure which joins the views of European linguists on important points.

There are two great names among the American linguists of the twentieth century: Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949) and Edward Sapir (1884–1939). Bloomfield published in 1933 a highly original book, entitled *Language*, which has become a kind of bedside book of American linguists. He distinguished strictly between the historical and the static point of view and elaborated a structural theory of language founded on a very wide knowledge of linguistic facts. Bloomfield was a convinced behaviourist and wanted to get rid of meaning as far as possible: for him the meaning of a linguistic form is the situation in which the speaker utters it and the response which it calls forth in the hearer. Bloomfield must therefore start from the linguistic forms, not from the meanings of the forms, and he sets up, on the basis of strictly formal criteria, a whole system of phonemes defined as minimum units of sound-features and of their modifications, general relationship, grammatical forms, syntax, and

sentence types. The method has its great advantages when studying a language very different from one's own, and the main principles embodied in it ought to be followed in any study of linguistic structure, but it fails when applied to historical development. Linguistic change begins in an individual or in a small group of individuals, as already stated, and then becomes generalised within the social group. Such changes imply a certain psychophysiological process, generally of a rather primitive nature, and it is this process which must furnish the principle for the classification of phonemic changes. A classification based on purely external criteria is no more than an empty recording of facts and does not contain any explanation. Thus, for example, the change of the old Nordic *gastir*, 'guest', into the old Norse *gestr*, and of the old Nordic *fella*, 'mountain', into *fjall* are typical cases of the reduction of a rhythmic group, in which the dominating element absorbs the dominated one and which is, at the same time, modified to some extent by the absorbed element. A mere recording of these changes would place the two cases in different categories. The behaviourist is forced to content himself with such a mere recording since he denies the existence of something like a mental process or alleges that no such thing can be objectively observed, thus ignoring the results of important psychological and medical research which has stood the test.

Edward Sapir was no behaviourist. On the contrary, he has shown, by experiments with Indians, that one must reckon with something which may be called a 'linguistic consciousness'. He has also shown that some important elements of the social pattern of behaviour are unconscious. What is present, more or less unconsciously, to the mind of an unsophisticated speaker, are the phonemes and the system they constitute rather than the differences of pronunciation of the phonemes; in other words, differences which have no functional importance. Sapir proposed an excellent general structural classification of linguistic systems. These systems may be viewed, on the one hand, according to the degree of synthesis or elaboration of the words. (Compare, for instance, the difference between the Latin *magistri* and the English *of the master*, where the Latin joins together the lexical meaning ['master'] and the concept of possession into one single word, whereas in English the two notions are expressed separately.) On the other hand, the systems can be viewed from the standpoint of mechanical cohesion in which the elements of the words are united. (Compare the contrast between the Latin *patrum*, 'of the fathers', and the Turkish *peder-ler-in*, where in Latin the different elements, the lexical meaning, the plural, and the possessive, are welded

into one indissoluble unity, whereas in Turkish they form one word but are clearly distinguishable: *peder*, 'father'; *ler*, plural suffix; *in*, genitive suffix.) Both Bloomfield and Sapir have works on the structure of Indian languages; and Bloomfield has also included Indonesian Tagalog, and his inquiries are of great theoretical value.

Without underrating the importance of the individual factor, on which he made valuable comments, Sapir insisted strongly on the social character of language: in his opinion language is probably the greatest force working towards social cohesion. This view implies not only the obvious fact that significant social intercourse is hardly possible without language but also that the very existence of a common speech serves as a peculiarly potent symbol of the social solidarity between those who use the language. The psychological significance of this fact goes far beyond the association of particular languages with nationalities, political entities, or smaller local groups.[2]

Sapir remained sceptical in the matter of the possible interdependence of the social pattern and language. His objections to such an interdependence were based mainly on an examination of the details of structure; he did not, however, take into account the great divisions between linguistic forms, currently known as parts of speech. Recent research has shown conclusively that many languages do not distinguish between the same parts of speech as do, for instance, the European languages, or delimit them otherwise. I think that once we are in the possession of sufficiently ample material, it will be possible to show that there exists a certain general correlation between a linguistic system and a degree of social complexity.

Bloomfield and Sapir have found a whole group of successors who have published highly interesting and important works on the structure of many languages, exotic and European alike, as well as inquiries concerning the phonemic and phonetic theory on the future development of linguistics.

Linguistic science is at the moment going through a period of rapid transformation. We may be certain that an international co-operation more intimate than has hitherto been the case in this, the most exact of humanistic studies, will produce important results for all fields of science.

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[2] Sapir, *op. cit.*, p. 15.