Perspectives in Linguistics
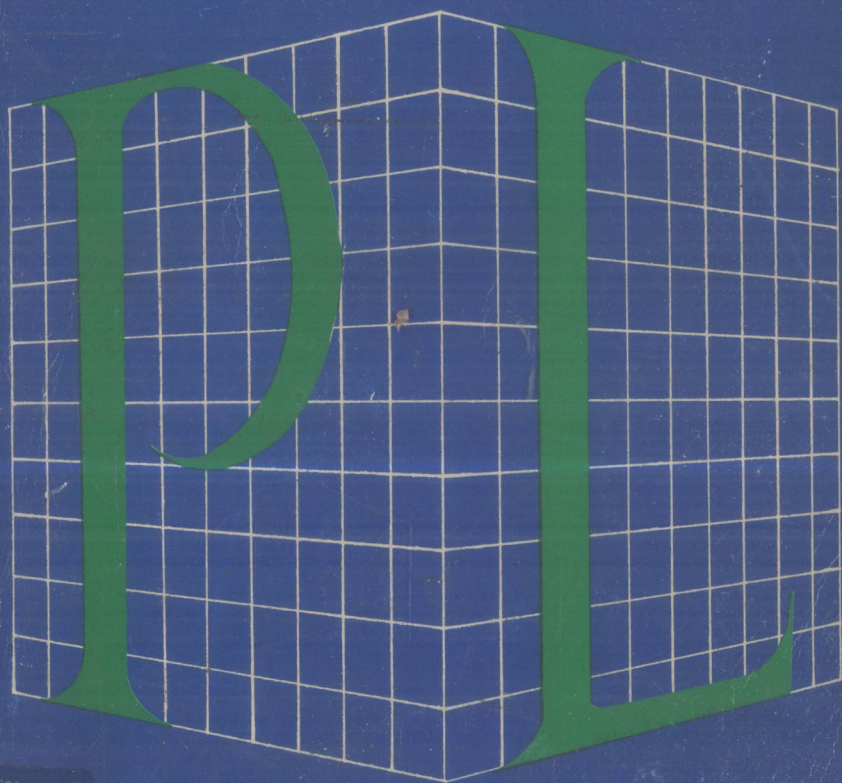
An Account of the Background of Modern Linguistics

Second Edition

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Perspectives in Linguistics

JOHN T. WATERMAN

To My Wife

Perspectives in Linguistics

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

Scientiae enim per additamenta fiunt, non enim est possibile eundem incipere et finire.

—GUY DE CHAULIAC

If the student of linguistics or the structural grammarian is to become something more than a well-trained technician, he must sooner or later develop an awareness of his intellectual heritage; he must learn that the ideas which he finds so new and so stimulating are rooted in a long tradition. This is a necessary but frequently neglected part of his education.

As this book goes to press there is no readily available text that adequately provides this perspective. To my knowledge, only one of the recent linguistics texts published in this country does more than mention in passing the names of those scholars—other than Bloomfield—who first formulated and clarified the principles of structuralism. And because linguistics has come to mean so exclusively "structural linguistics," the origins and the theoretical basis of comparative linguistics are often treated most cursorily. The fact that the one would have been impossible without the other is scarcely suggested.

Although I deal at some length with the development of structuralism in linguistics, I do not discuss specific methodologies of what I call—for want of a better term—"American structuralism." This is the one perspective which the reader of a book such as this probably already has or at least to which he has easy access, either in a course of instruction or through one of the several excellent texts that are available. I have tried instead to place major emphasis upon those perspectives which are more likely not only to be lacking, but which might even be somewhat difficult to acquire without special orientation and guidance.

Although this book contains little that is new, I trust that some

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of the things I have to say about Jacob Grimm, as well as my efforts to relate his accomplishments to the work and progress of later scholars, will be accepted as a valid interpretation. To the extent that my comments do honor to the name of this gifted, learned, and dedicated scholar, may they stand as a very minor tribute to his memory, as we prepare to observe the centennial anniversary of his death.

J. T. W.

Los Angeles

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

New in this second edition is the material on the linguistic theories of Noam Chomsky and J. R. Firth. The Selected Bibliography has been revised and updated, and factual errors in the text have been corrected.

My reasons for adding an account of transformational-generative grammar need no clarification. My decision to include a synopsis—however abbreviated—of Firth's major contributions to the study of language stems primarily from a desire to alert more American and Canadian students to the important research in linguistics being conducted in the United Kingdom. But also in my mind is the hope of encouraging a deeper and keener appreciation of an academic tradition which, abetted by ties of kinship, culture, and language, has contributed so much to the scholarship of the English–speaking world.

To my colleagues who alerted me to errors and obscurities in the text of the first edition, I am sincerely grateful.

J. T. W.

Santa Barbara

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THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE
IN ANCIENT TIMES

The most ancient expressions of linguistic interest generally known to the Western world are recorded in the second and eleventh chapters of the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament. The first reference is to the naming of the animals (Gen. 2:19–20):

> And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field. . . .

In chapter 11 of Genesis, verses 1–19, is recorded the account of the Tower of Babel:

> And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for morter. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of

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all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

Most civilizations and cultures—in their sacred writings, in their oral traditions, in their folklore—have some reference to the origin and occasionally to the dispersion of speech. Only rarely (at least in the records that have come down to us) did the ancients try to learn something about speech phenomena by observation or experimentation. The Greek historian Herodotos (fifth century B.C.) records one such incident: an Egyptian king named Psammetichos wished to determine which of the world's languages was oldest. To gain this information he decided to isolate two newborn infants until such time as they should begin to speak; the assumption being that, lacking any pattern to imitate, they would therefore instinctively employ the most primitive of natural languages. In the course of time the children were heard to utter something that was recorded as *bekos*—which turned out to be phonetically similar to the Phrygian word for "bread." Therefore, Phrygian (once spoken in Asia Minor) was held to be the first language of mankind, at least by King Psammetichos and—we may presume—by his court.

Linguistic investigation in the conventional sense of the word, however, could not begin until philosophy and the analytic study of language had been developed. And this goal was not realized until the Greeks and the Indians applied their peculiar genius toward investigating the nature of language. Although they had certain goals in common—such as the clarification of the already obsolescent idiom of the Homeric poems and of the Vedic hymns—their respective approaches to the study of language were fundamentally different. By and large the Greeks speculated about language, whereas the Indians described it.

The earliest Indian literature is religious in theme, consisting of ritualistic hymns composed in a language called Vedic Sanskrit,

to distinguish it from the later Classical Sanskrit. Although not recorded until approximately 800 B.C., the language of the oldest of these hymns is held to be considerably older. With the passage of time this ancient form of Indic, as well as the somewhat later variety known as Classical Sanskrit or simply Sanskrit (the borderline between Vedic and Classical Sanskrit is not sharply drawn), became less and less accessible; a situation that posed special problems for the Hindu priests and scholars, since they believed that the efficacy of certain religious ceremonies depended not only upon the faithfulness of the received text to the original language of the hymns, but also upon an oral rendition accurately reflecting the original pronunciation. Although educational practices coupled with religious zeal had preserved and handed down a most detailed corpus of grammatical and phonetic information, a knowledge of the older language would in time surely have perished, had it not eventually been written down.

This feat was accomplished by the most famous of Indian grammarians, Pāṇini, writing toward the end of the fourth century B.C. His grammar, the first of which we have any knowledge, remains to this day the most marvelously succinct and definitive statement of Sanskrit ever written. It is not a grammar in the conventional sense of the term—indeed, one must be an accomplished Sanskritist even to "read" it!—but rather an algebra-like condensation of the structure of the language, consisting of some four thousand *Sūtras* ("strings") or aphorisms. Obviously, one "reads" Pāṇini's grammar in about the same way we "read" the Periodic Table or the structural formulas of chemistry. In both cases we need a great deal of background. As a matter of fact—with respect to Pāṇini's work —Indian linguistics is little more than one grand, protracted effort to elucidate and elaborate his grammar, an effort culminating in the *Great Commentary* (*Mahābhāṣya*) of Patañjali (second half of second century B.C.). Later treatises are essentially "commentaries on the commentaries."

The Sanskrit word for grammar is *Vyākaraṇa*, which means "separation, analysis." True to this sense, Indian grammar is al-

most wholly analytic and descriptive. As pointed out earlier, the practical goal of linguistic study was to establish the morphology and phonology of an archaic and obsolescent language. In this the Indian grammarians were singularly successful, due in part to their objective approach, but no doubt due also to the structure of the language itself, for it is an idiom in which the affixing of grammatical elements to a root, and the joining together of simple words to form compounds, is beautifully formalized and obvious. Not so obvious at first blush, of course, since one must first learn how to resolve the phonetic "mergings" that have taken place between roots, affixes, and even larger phrasal elements, for written Sanskrit is roughly analogous to a phonetic transcription. It reflects quite accurately the desired pronunciation, and leaves to the reader the task of resolving the phonetic combinations into discrete lexical units—much as if we were to write something like *Jeetawredi?* and rely upon the reader to convert this into "Did you eat already?" However, once the external and internal phonetic combinations (called *sandhi*) have been accounted for, the neat structure of the language becomes apparent. At this stage of analysis, the student works his way back from some larger grammatical unit to a root, listing and identifying each element that has been affixed in some manner to the root: somewhat analogous to taking a word like *ungentlemanly* and breaking it down into *un-gentle-man-ly*, accompanying each step in the analysis with a statement as to the function and meaning of the unit under discussion. A Sanskrit dictionary, incidentally, consists principally of roots, not "words" as we normally use the term.

The Indian grammarians scarcely mention what we customarily refer to as "syntax"—the grammar of the sentence. Of course, one can argue that the borderline between "phrase" and "sentence" is at best tenuous; however, it is equally true that the linking together of phrases in Sanskrit is not nearly so complicated a procedure as, say, in Latin or Greek.

Although they frequently tried their hand at etymologies, the Indians accomplished little of enduring value in this area. Much of

their prose is given over to interpretations of their poetic works, in a manner reminiscent of our Bible commentaries, and although a detailed word-study is characteristic of this sort of exegesis, the results are sometimes fanciful and scientifically unreliable.

It is interesting to speculate about what direction Western grammar might have taken had it derived from the carefully descriptive studies of the Indians rather than from the speculative flights of Greek philosophy. Be that as it may, it was the Greeks, in grammar as in so many other things, who gave to the Western world an approach to the analysis of language that has endured almost unchanged even unto the present day—for better or for worse.

The earliest extant document in Greek dealing with the subject of language is one of Plato's (425–348/47 B.C.) dialogues, the *Cratylus*. Not only is this the earliest recorded instance of Greek linguistic expression; it is also one of the most important, for in it is presented the philosophical doctrine that language arose "by nature" (*physis:* "nature, inborn quality"). Although the meaning of the text is sometimes quite obscure, Plato apparently believed that there was an ontologically valid and compelling connection between a thing and its name, for he taught (or, more accurately, he accepted and developed the doctrine) that the only enduring reality is an intellectual reality existing essentially in the world of ideas. "Things" are but lower-level physical extensions or counterparts of these idealistic prototypes. Language, therefore—and by "language" Plato means "vocabulary"—probably arose by *necessity:* words *had* to have a certain predetermined meaning, because they could only reflect the immutable and eternal nature of the Idea. A corollary of this doctrine, of course, is that language can only be logical and reasonable, even though in practice we may not always be able to establish the relationship between the shadowy things of the sense world and the intelligible realities of Ideas.

As erudite as his philosophy may sound, Plato's attempt to clarify it by examples—as he does in the *Cratylus*—results in some incredibly naïve etymologizing. In fact, some scholars cannot be-

lieve that he was serious; they feel he must have been joking. However, professional philosophers are not noted for their published humor, and I rather suspect that Plato meant most of what he wrote about the history and meaning of words.

As an example of his method, at one place in the dialogue he has Socrates explaining to his young friends Hermogenes and Cratylus why the Greek word for "air" is *aēr*. He quotes a verbal form, *airei*, which may be translated "it raises," and, after noting its phonetic similarity to the word *aēr*, concludes that "air" is so called because it is capable of "raising" things like leaves and smoke from the ground. In this case, however, he is not absolutely sure of his etymology, since he quotes another possibility, the phrase *aei rhei*, "always flows," which might also he thinks be the philosophical justification for the term *aēr*. Unfortunately, modern etymologists can demonstrate quite conclusively that the phonetic similarities between *aēr*, *airei*, and *aei rhei* are entirely fortuitous, and that none of the words is related to any of the others.

Plato's most distinguished pupil, Aristotle (384–322/21 B.C.), differed with his master as to the origin and nature of language. Aristotle, the father of grammar in the Occidental world, believed and taught (see his essay entitled *On Interpretation*) that language was arrived at by *convention* or *agreement*. To describe this process he uses the Greek words *thesis* and *synthēkē*, meaning "arrangement" and "convention," respectively. He opposed what he considered to be the Platonic doctrine that real being belongs only to the Ideas or Universals, whose existence is independent of the objects that imperfectly manifest them. Aristotle believed that every object in the world is a union of two ultimate principles: matter and form (or essence), the latter force yielding the potential or power to determine the structure of matter. In things linguistic, therefore, he did not feel compelled to search for the rationale behind every name or utterance, since to him the fact that language presented to the observer something formed and structured was, in itself, philosophical proof of its reality. The particular form that a given word assumed was merely one of an infinite number of possible material embodiments. He did not, therefore, do much etymologizing, since

the problem of "original meaning" was of little importance to him. At some time or another a word had come into being because two or more people had agreed to symbolize a certain thing by reference to a given linguistic configuration. Whatever reasons may have entered into this process of selection, they were quite arbitrary; any of a dozen reasons might have served equally well.

This is the view adopted by most linguists today. Language is arbitrary. A Spaniard says *caballo* because his ancestors at one time said *caballus*, not because there is anything about the term *caballo* (or *caballus*) that suggests a four-legged domesticated animal known to speakers of English as a horse. This viewpoint does not, by the way, disclaim the validity of sound-symbolism: onomato-poetic derivation. Linguists do not deny the obvious force of onomatopoeia in language formation; what *is* denied is that there is any *necessity* attached to this naming. Otherwise, of course, all languages would use the same imitative words—which they certainly do not.

From its very beginnings Greek linguistics was closely aligned with philosophy. The notions of language origins held by both Plato and Aristotle were predicated upon philosophical doctrines concerning the nature of reality and knowledge, and in no important sense were they derived from an inspection of linguistic data; although Aristotle, in addition to his philosophical speculat-ing, did make some empirically based observations about the Greek language. He investigated the parts of speech, for instance, distinguishing nouns, verbs, and a third catch-all class he called "conjunctions."

True to its origins, the study of language among the Greeks re-mained the special province of the philosophers, and all the im-portant "schools" contributed something. The Stoics (founded 308 B.C. in Athens by Zeno), for example, formulated much of our traditional grammar. Continuing the study of case-relationships be-gun by Aristotle, they devised the names of the cases that have come down to us in Latin translation.

The very word "case" derives via French from the Latin *casus*, itself a translation of Greek *ptōsis*, meaning "fall." The Stoics held

that all the cases had "fallen away" from the original case, the nominative—the case of the *nomen* or "name." Unfortunately, the Greek terminology did not always fare so well in translation. The accusative case, as an example, was called by the Greeks *aitiatikē*, that is, "the thing caused by the verb." But *aitia* means both "cause" and "accusation," and certain of the Latin grammarians later called it the "accusing" case rather than the "causing." Today we should really refer to the "causative case," but tradition has frozen the mistranslation into our terminology, and it will probably stay there forever.

In many ways the Alexandrian Age of literature (roughly 300–150 B.C.) may be considered the high point of Greek linguistic studies. This was the age of Aristarchus, especially noted for his analysis of the language of the Homeric poems; of Apollonios Dyskolos, writer on syntax and student of the literary dialects of Greek; Dionysios Thrax, who wrote the first formal grammar of Greek: a book of less than four hundred lines, yet acknowledged to be the prototype for all subsequent conventional grammars of both Greek and Latin.

Oddly enough, the Greeks, whose intellectual curiosity was well-nigh insatiable, showed almost no interest in any language other than their own. This fact is all the more remarkable when we remember that the armies of Alexander the Great roamed the then-known world as far to the east as India, and from the shores of the seas called Black and Caspian in the north to the waters of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea in the south. And yet not a word about the speech of the peoples occupying those vast stretches! The ships of all nations dropped anchor in Hellas' ports-of-call, and Greek merchants sold their wares in Egypt, Babylonia, and Italy, conversing much of the time no doubt in the local tongues. But, of course, the foreigners were all barbarians—all "babblers"—and, too, the gods on Mount Olympus spoke Greek. Only one language other than their own ever merited even passing consideration: We know of two works—since vanished—that dealt with Latin; and one of these had as its theme the proposition that Latin was derived from Greek. Centuries later, to be sure (fifth century A.D.), Hesych-

ios compiled a dictionary in which he listed words not only from Greek and Latin, but also from many other languages, most of them located in Asia and Asia Minor. This lexicon is especially treasured because of its multilingual word-lists, and also because certain of these languages are otherwise most skimpily preserved. But a dictionary tells us very little about the structure of a language. And—this is true certainly of Hesychios' lexicon—we have few hints as to pronunciation, a drawback attending most older dictionaries. The Greeks, incidentally, do not tell us nearly enough about how their language was pronounced.

In summary, the Greeks approached language by way of metaphysics, bequeathing to the world a form of linguistic analysis which has come to be known as "philosophical grammar." The term is used here without reproach, for theirs was an intellectual achievement of awesome proportions. Not only did they succeed in describing in a highly satisfactory manner their own intricate language, but they gave to posterity an intellectual discipline and a tool that may still one day be reckoned superior to certain of our twentieth-century linguistic "-isms."

As in so many other areas of learning and culture, the Romans were content to accept the legacy of Greece. Their dictionaries and grammars are all cast in traditional Grecian mold.

The first Latin grammar of consequence was compiled by Varro (116–27 B.C.), and bears the straightforward title *De lingua Latina*. Consisting originally of twenty-six books, only numbers five through ten have come down to us. Mention should also be made of Quintilian's (*ca.* A.D. 35–90) *Institutio oratoria*, although, as the title indicates, it is devoted mainly to rhetoric. Aside from these, about the only other grammatical work of enduring significance is the *Ars minor* of Aelius Donatus, who taught in Rome around the middle of the fourth century A.D. His grammar was widely used for elementary instruction well into the Middle Ages. As evidence of its influence and popularity, it was the first book to be printed by means of wooden type.

With the slow disintegration and collapse of the empire during

the fourth and fifth centuries, Rome could no longer maintain a climate conducive to intellectual pursuits, and many of her scholars and men of letters found refuge in the new capital on the Bosporus, Constantinople. It was here that Priscian (512–60) wrote his elaborate *Grammatical Categories*, the standard Latin grammar of the Middle Ages, consisting of eighteen books devoted to the parts of speech (*Priscianus maior*) and two books to syntax (*Priscianus minor*).

Likewise in the field of etymology the Romans did not get beyond their Greek models. The outstanding accomplishment in Latin is the etymological dictionary of St. Isidore of Seville (*ca.* 570–639), *Origines sive etymologiae*. But just as Plato in the *Cratylus*, so the Latin authors in their writings gave free rein to the imagination when searching for reasons *why* a word had a given meaning. The word *vulpēs* "fox," for example, was explained as being derived from *volō* "I fly" plus *pēs* "foot," thus meaning "fly-foot"; or *lepus* "hare" was supposedly compounded from *levis* "light" and *pēs* "foot." As is obvious from the examples, no proof of linguistic relationship or of regular phonetic correspondences valid throughout the language was required. The wildest guesses were not only admissible but entirely in order, even the notion that things could be named from opposing qualities. In line with this reverse logic, *bellum* "war" was explained as coming from the adjective *bellus* "beautiful" because war is *not* beautiful! Latin etymological works contain many such bizarre derivations.

Obviously, this survey touches only the most prominent and enduring monuments of linguistic activity among the Ancients—and certainly not even all of these, as a glance at one of the larger specialized handbooks will reveal. However, as far as grammatical theory and practice are concerned, the Western world followed faithfully the paths marked out by the Greeks. Although we must mention briefly certain achievements of the late Middle Ages and Early Modern period, we shall find little actually new in the study of language until we reach the eighteenth, or even indeed, the nineteenth century.