

THE THEORY OF SPEECH AND LANGUAGE

By

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THIS BOOK
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SOME fifteen years ago it became my habit, whenever occasion offered, to discuss questions of grammar and linguistics with such of my friends as were interested, and it is under the influence of conversations with Miss Paget (Vernon Lee), Dr. Malinowski, and my former assistant, Mr. Battiscombe Gunn, that the first outlines of my linguistic theory were conceived. At a subsequent date I had various opportunities of discussion with the late Professor Sonnenschein and with Professor Rolf Pipping. The real impulse to the writing of this book was, however, given by Dr. Bertrand Russell, as he then was. A somewhat crude attempt to describe and analyse a single act of speech had been made in a paper of mine which failed to find acceptance when offered for publication. On my appealing to Dr. Russell he was good enough to express the opinion that the contents might fitly form the nucleus of a book. In another quarter, also, I received valuable encouragement, namely from my friend and Egyptological colleague, Professor H. Grapow. Spurred on in this manner, I finally decided to embark upon the present adventure. A number of unsuccessful efforts were consigned to the wastepaper-basket. At last, in 1928, the first chapter was written to my satisfaction, and the second was added in the following year. Both of these have been read by many friends, among them Dr. Ludlow Bull, Dr. A. de Buck, Dr. E. Classen, Professor Peet and Mr. Leonard Woolley, and to each and all I owe comments of interest. Later on, Mr. Gunn read the first four chapters with great care and sent me a number of notes which have proved very helpful. He considered that I had

understressed the mechanization of speech as usually practised, and in revising I have endeavoured to bear this criticism in mind. To Professor Peet I am especially indebted for the knowledge of Samuel Butler's witty essay. Until last autumn I imagined that some years of work still lay ahead of me. Two stimulating conversations with Professor Karl Bühler of Vienna convinced me, however, that it would be better to publish a first instalment without further delay, so I set to work on the final revision. When the book was complete, Professor Morris Ginsberg had the kindness to read it through in its entirety, and to him I owe some valuable observations. I cannot sufficiently thank Mr. K. Sisam, of the Clarendon Press, for his interest and help.

My old friends the Printers have expended their wonted skill upon the external appearance of my book, and I am correspondingly grateful. To Mr. Paul Jones I am indebted for the care bestowed on the drawings, and to my assistant, Mr. R. O. Faulkner, for much secretarial help and vigilance in reading the proofs. I am particularly happy to acknowledge important aid from two members of my own family. As in the case of my Egyptian Grammar, my father has backed my work with the necessary financial subsidy. To my daughter Margaret my debt is particularly great. She has revised my typescript with me from beginning to end, and there is hardly a page but has benefited by her sensitive and acute criticism. To my many helpers I tender my sincerest thanks.

A. H. G.

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FOREWORD

§ 1. **The crisis of grammar.** It is in periods of transition like the present that the never-ending struggle between authority on the one hand, and the spirit of reform on the other, becomes most insistent and vocal. Belief in the established order being weakened, the number of those who advocate a wholesale clearance of what they regard as clogging traditional rubbish is correspondingly increased, while a party of opposition automatically arises among those who feel that the achievements of the past are being jeopardized. This state of affairs, familiar in the contemporary world of politics, repeats itself in the smaller domains of science and art, so that the latter appear as veritable microcosms. The uninformed might be excused for assuming that so apparently tranquil a backwater as that of grammatical lore would be exempt from any such violent antithesis. In this assumption they would be wrong, however, for the science of language is, at the present moment, more than ever a storm-centre of conflicting theories and opposing cross-currents. Nothing could be more apparent to those for whom, during no inconsiderable part of their working lives, the supposed backwater is their actual world. On the one side we see the revolutionaries, as those scholars must be called who regard conventional grammar as a tissue of absurdities. Theirs is at least the merit of having recognized how inadequate, or on occasion positively false, are many of the definitions and explanations propagated in even the best of our school-books. Their weakness is an excessive readiness to throw overboard such time-honoured grammatical categories as verb and noun, subject and predicate, adverb

and conjunction, sometimes substituting a terminology of their own to the defects of which they are completely blind. On the other side we find the traditionalists, the most open-minded of whom admit, perhaps somewhat grudgingly, the strictures of their opponents, and who seek to remedy the situation by more acute, more carefully reasoned, logical analysis of the facts. As exponents of the forward movement may be named Brunot¹ and Jespersen,² while equally distinguished champions of the conservative party are the late Professor Sonnenschein³ and the German grammarian John Ries.⁴ It would seem that the differences between these eminent scholars could be reconciled, if at all, only by appeal to general linguistic theory. But although Brunot entitles his great work *La pensée et la langue*, and though Jespersen is author of a *Philosophy of Grammar*, neither is in truth a systematizer or a theorist. Both are scientific investigators and exponents of linguistic facts; the same is true of Sonnenschein, who would have claimed nothing different for himself. Ries is a theoretician less of speech or language than of grammar. Now it is quite in accordance with the present writer's outlook that the practical grammarians should be regarded as the protagonists in this controversy rather than the psychologists, logicians, and other more philosophically minded adepts of grammar. My own approach to linguistic theory

¹ F. Brunot, *La pensée et la langue*, Paris, 1922.

² O. Jespersen, *Language, its Nature, Development, and Origin*, London, 1922; *The Philosophy of Grammar*, London, 1924.

³ E. A. Sonnenschein, *A New English Grammar*, Oxford, 1916; *The Soul of Grammar*, Cambridge, 1927. The latter work bears on its title-page the motto, 'Evolution, not Revolution'.

⁴ John Ries, *Beiträge zur Grundlegung der Syntax*, Prague, 1927-31, Part 1, *Was ist Syntax?*, 2nd edition, 1927 (first published in 1894); Part 2, *Zur Wortgruppenlehre*, 1928; Part 3, *Was ist ein Satz?*, 1931.

is from the side of specific grammatical problems, and I could wish that such a theory should be constructed purely on the basis of empiric observations. Unfortunately, most professional grammarians are too deeply absorbed in particular problems to be willing or able to look at the mechanism of speech as a whole. Their attitude is not unlike that of Delbrück, who, writing concerning the opposing schools of *Sprachpsychologie* represented by Paul¹ and Wundt² respectively, declared that it was possible for the practical grammarian to live at peace with either.³ Within its limits this standpoint cannot be disputed. The fact is that important progress in detail may still be made without reference to general theory. But it is another question whether all philological work would not be strengthened and deepened by the possession of a systematic and comprehensive theory of speech acceptable, at least in its main lines, to all. The prevailing disharmony leads one to suspect that the absence of such a wide theoretic view is the real root of the trouble.

It is not to be denied that linguistic theory is nowadays attracting more and more attention. Every few months some new book dealing with the topic makes its appearance,⁴ and the problem of the nature of speech seems to be slowly but surely nearing solution. But with a few honourable exceptions—and here the names of Wegener,⁵ de

¹ H. Paul, *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte*, 4th edition, Halle, 1909.

² W. Wundt, *Völkerpsychologie*, vol. i, *Die Sprache*, Parts I-II, 2nd edition, Leipzig, 1904.

³ B. Delbrück, *Grundfragen der Sprachforschung*, Strasbourg, 1901, p. 44.

⁴ For a brief survey, with bibliography, see G. Ipsen, *Sprachphilosophie der Gegenwart*, Berlin, 1930, being *Philosophische Forschungsberichte*, Heft 6.

⁵ Ph. Wegener, *Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen des Sprachlebens*, Halle, 1885. Philipp Wegener was born at Neuholdensleben in 1848, and died in 1916 as Director of the Gymnasium in Greifswald. A sympathetic

Saussure,¹ Erdmann,² Sheffield,³ and Kalepky⁴ may be specially mentioned—the theorists of speech are mainly recruited from the ranks of psychologists and logicians. Among the psychologists Karl Bühler⁵ is the writer on linguistic theory with whose views I find myself most in sympathy. Many of his conclusions, reached along quite different channels from my own, coincide almost completely with those to be expounded in the present book.

§ 2. **The problem stated.** What then is this ‘linguistic theory’ to which the foregoing section repeatedly made allusion, and which has given the present book its title? Let me disclaim, without further delay, any intention of writing about origins. It has been found difficult, or at least inexpedient, to exclude all speculation with regard to the origin of speech, but the main argument neither depends thereon, nor yet is seriously affected thereby. Less than anyone else can a competent student of Egyptian hieroglyphics believe that the language of his predilection will teach him anything of value concerning the origins of speech. The old Egyptian language, like Sanskrit and Chinese, is a highly developed and sophisticated tongue, on a long view little less modern than French or English. Such information as Egyptian can yield to throw light upon the nature of speech is due not so much to its

account of the man and of his career as a teacher is given by A. Leitzmann in *Indogermanisches Jahrbuch*, vol. iv, Strasbourg, 1917, pp. 246 foll.

¹ F. de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Lausanne and Paris, 1916. Posthumous work published by C. Bally and A. Sechehaye.

² K. O. Erdmann, *Die Bedeutung des Wortes*, 3rd edition, Leipzig, 1922.

³ A. D. Sheffield, *Grammar and Thinking*, New York and London, 1912.

⁴ Th. Kalepky, *Neuaufbau der Grammatik*, Leipzig, 1928.

⁵ Various articles summarized and criticized by H. Dempe, *Was ist Sprache?*, Weimar, 1930. See especially K. Bühler, ‘Kritische Musterung der neuern Theorien des Satzes’, in *Indogermanisches Jahrbuch*, vol. vi for 1918, Berlin and Leipzig, 1920.

antiquity as to the difference of its structure from that of the languages most frequently studied by writers on general linguistics. At all events it is not the main source from which I have drawn my arguments. That source is English, my mother-tongue. It is my conviction that every adult human being is the living repository of a profound knowledge of language. Not only does he possess a vast store of words, but even the veriest yokel is something of an artist in the matter of their employment. Here, then, existent in the consciousness of everyone, is an immense treasure of evidence available for the construction of a solid fabric of linguistic theory.

The problem which I am setting before myself may best be indicated by a comparison. Suppose an intelligent boy to be inquiring how the telephone or the wireless works. If the question were rightly addressed, the answer would doubtless supply a clear account of the mechanism—an account which, without penetrating very deeply into the laws of physics, would satisfy the inquirer and carry with it immediate conviction. Could a like question be profitably put to the ordinary philologist? Could he be trusted to give a sensible reply to the inquiry what language is and how speech works? A fairly wide acquaintance with the literature of linguistics has convinced me of the contrary, and indeed I have searched high and low without finding the problem either stated or systematically handled in this way.

§ 3. **The method to be employed.** The problem here to be studied is, accordingly: How does speech work? And if now we ask ourselves by what method this problem should be tackled, the procedure of other sciences at once affords the answer: By the study of concrete, particular examples. Here, however, the practical grammarian will

intervene and object that his own way of approach is no other. On this point I cannot altogether agree with him, for though the grammarian certainly treats of specific words and types of sentences, it is only when he assumes the role of commentator that he is really concerned with particular occasions of speech. In what manner, then, does the method which I am advocating differ from that of the orthodox grammarian? The botanist may be called upon to point the road. Words being so constituted as to be used over and over again, they are comparable, not to individual plants, but to the botanical species of which those individual plants are specimens. Similarly, syntactic forms and rules correspond, not so much to observed conditions appertaining to particular flowers or trees, as to the general inferences based on much observation of such conditions. But what botanist would think of attacking his problems otherwise than by a minute examination of individual specimens, considered in relation to the soil in which they have grown, to the climate, in fact to their total environment? So far as the philologist is concerned, this way of procedure is, unless I am mistaken, nearly an untrodden path. Kalepky¹ and others have, it is true, devoted some attention to individual samples of speech observed in their natural surroundings, but I am aware of no attempt, except my own, to analyse a single act of speech with fullness or exactitude.

This, then, is my method: to put back single acts of speech into their original setting of real life, and thence to discover what processes are employed, what factors involved. For controversial reasons it seemed desirable to precede the analysis of a simple act of speech (Ch. II) by some discussion of its essential factors (Ch. I), and I have

¹ *Neuaufbau der Grammatik*, p. 21.

found surprising and encouraging confirmation of my views at a lecture recently given in London. On that occasion Professor Karl Bühler, of Vienna, wrote upon the blackboard the four factors, (1) the speaker, (2) the listener, (3) the things referred to, and (4) the linguistic material, the interrelations of which I had declared, nearly ten years ago, to constitute the whole mechanism of speech.¹ No more welcome indication that I have been upon the right track could have been desired than this independent testimony of one who is primarily not a grammarian, but a psychologist.

On the view here advocated, speech is a human activity demanding at least two persons possessing a common language and finding themselves in a common situation. The science to which linguistic theory thus ultimately owes allegiance is neither logic nor psychology, but sociology.² Logic is concerned with the relations of propositions to facts, and psychology with subjective states, observed or inferred. Sociology, on the other hand, has at least as a large part of its field intersubjective phenomena, the dealings of man with man, among which speech is one of the most important techniques. This formulation of the status of speech is not, of course, intended as a denial of the claim of the logician or the psychologist to regard certain aspects of linguistics as his own peculiar sphere. Much more questionable is, indeed, the claim of the philologist to construct a linguistic theory without the help of experts in those abstract fields. My own feeling is that the philologist not only has the right to form a general

¹ A. H. Gardiner, 'The Definition of the Word and the Sentence', in *Brit. Journ. Psychol.*, vol. xii, pp. 354-5.

² This has, of course, been recognized by many, but by none more clearly than Durkheim and his school, with Meillet as the leading philological exponent. See, too, J. Ward, *Psychological Principles*, p. 287.

conception of the nature of the material with which he deals, but that it is also his duty. To penetrate deeply into the psychological processes or philosophical truths which underlie the mechanism of speech is no doubt as much beyond his powers as to explain the ultimate mysteries of the telephone or the wireless is beyond the powers of the practical engineer. But surely every intelligent workman in any of these branches should possess a shrewd idea how the mechanism with which he is particularly concerned achieves its ends. His views will be based on elementary technical knowledge combined with common-sense observation, and will be expressed not in philosophical jargon, but in the language, and from the standpoint, of everyday life. Such, then, are the subject and the method of my book.

§ 4. **The practical results anticipated.** The first benefit that may be expected from a sound general linguistic theory, if attainable, is that it will teach us which of the old-accepted grammatical categories should be retained and which of them are really in need of modification or rejection. On the whole, I believe it will be found that most of the traditional terms, though often badly named, correspond to real facts and distinctions in the linguistic material. It may be reasonably doubted whether a serviceable grammar which dispenses entirely with such terms as noun or verb will ever be written. The second benefit which I anticipate is, however, that the current accounts given of such categories will be substantially changed; to my mind it is not so much the traditional terms that are unacceptable as the explanations of them which are usually given. Common sense favours this view. It is *a priori* hardly likely that practical grammarians should have continued, generation after generation, to use terms utterly unsuited to the facts. In writing my

Egyptian Grammar,¹ I found no difficulty in fitting the material into the framework of the grammar which I learned at school. On the other hand, I derived considerable benefit from the revised terms and even from the definitions provided by the Joint Committee on Grammatical Terminology. Nevertheless the commonly accepted definitions do, in very many cases, stand in need of serious revision. Even so great a scholar as Meillet could state, not many years ago, that the noun is a means of indicating things, while the verb is an indicator of processes (*procès*).² Though these definitions are clearly approximations to the truth, as they stand they are either ambiguous or else definitely false. The second of them is rendered nugatory by the fact that *assassination*, *flight*, *pressure* are undoubtedly names of actions or processes, but nevertheless are nouns, not verbs. And as regards the first, denominative verbs like *to cage*, *to motor*, and *to censure*, at the very least render the formulation inadequate. The linguistic theory set forth in this book will, I think, not only throw some light upon the reasons why these definitions are open to objection, but will also show how they may be ameliorated. All words whatsoever will be seen to be names of 'things', that term being understood in the very widest sense as covering material objects, persons, actions, relations, concepts, and figments of the imagination. The so-called parts of speech are distinctions among words based not upon the nature of the objects to

¹ A. H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, Oxford, 1927.

² 'Le nom indique les "choses", qu'il s'agisse d'objets concrets ou de notions abstraites, d'êtres réels ou d'espèces: *Pierre, table, vert, verdure, bonté, cheval*, sont également des noms. Le verbe indique les "procès", qu'il s'agisse d'actions, d'états ou de passages d'un état à un autre: *il marche, il dort, il brille, il bleuit* sont également des verbes.' A. Meillet, *Linguistique historique et linguistique générale*, Paris, 1921, p. 175.

which they refer, but upon the mode of their presentation. Thus the name of anything presented *as* a thing is a 'noun', and the name of anything presented *as* an action, or, if Meillet's expression be preferred, *as* a process, is a 'verb'. In the verb to *rage*, reference is made to the thing called a *rage*, but it is not presented as a thing but as an action. In the noun *assassination* reference is made to an action, but it is not presented as an action but as a thing. The details of this topic belong to my second volume; here it need be added only that the terms 'verb' and 'noun' are not really incompatible, but that one and the same thing may be presented simultaneously as an action and as a thing, though possibly never with exactly equal emphasis. Thus grammar rightly distinguishes between verbal nouns, e.g. (*the*) *murder*, and nominal parts of the verb, e.g. (*the*) *murdering*.

To some philologists the acquisition of a satisfactory linguistic theory will appear a worthy aspiration in itself. But it is not to be denied that many regard the quest upon which I am engaged as idle and nebulous. Before the eyes of such I must dangle a few more enticements not to throw my book in a corner even at this early stage. Every schoolboy is familiar with the phrases 'a noun used as an adjective' or 'an adjective used as a noun'. If these terms refer to function, why, our schoolboy may well ask, does his master not call the former an adjective, and the latter a noun, and have done with it? The reasons why the accepted mode of expression is not merely legitimate, but even imperative, are among the things which I pledge myself to explain. Enticement the second. Wundt tells us that the boundary between the word and the sentence is shifting and uncertain.¹ This standpoint is utterly false.

¹ *Die Sprache*, vol. i, pp. 599 foll. See, too, L. Sütterlin, *Das Wesen der*

I shall prove that one and the same verbal expression may be simultaneously both a word and a sentence, but that there is no more difficulty about this than there is about a rat being simultaneously both a rodent and a nuisance. Enticement the third. Is it not something of a puzzle that especially in letters and in ancient documents of different kinds the meaning of the component individual sentences should often be perfectly clear, but that the reader should nevertheless be left in almost complete darkness as to what the document is really about? At first sight this state of affairs seems almost a contradiction in terms. The position is one which the argument of my book will, I hope, completely elucidate.¹

§ 5. The present volume and remoter prospects.

Critics acquainted with the treatises on general linguistics by Steinthal,² Paul,³ von der Gabelentz,⁴ Marty,⁵ Wundt,⁶ and a host of others will possibly be indignant at my implied pretension that the search for a comprehensive linguistic theory is something new. Far be it from me to decry or underestimate the very real merits of these learned and admirable works. Nevertheless the method here advocated is relatively untried, and I believe that it holds out promise of greater success than previous efforts on account

sprachlichen Gebilde, Heidelberg, 1902, p. 59: 'Zwischen Wort und Satz sind nach Wundt die Grenzen fließend. Das ist nicht zu bezweifeln, und darum vielleicht stellt Wundt auch nirgends begrifflich fest, was das Wort eigentlich sei.'

¹ See below, p. 61, the last paragraph of Additional Note B.

² H. Steinthal, *Abriss der Sprachwissenschaft*, Part I, *Die Sprache im Allgemeinen*, 2nd edition, Berlin, 1881.

³ See above, p. 3, n. 1.

⁴ G. von der Gabelentz, *Die Sprachwissenschaft*, Leipzig, 1901.

⁵ A. Marty, *Untersuchungen zur Grundlegung der allgemeinen Grammatik und Sprachphilosophie*, vol. i, Halle, 1906.

⁶ See above, p. 3, n. 2.