

Studies in the History of the Language Sciences

200 Years of Syntax

A critical survey

Giorgio Graffi

200 YEARS OF SYNTAX

A CRITICAL SURVEY

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PREFACE

Among the different branches of linguistics, syntax has possibly been the one that experienced the strangest fate. Its study and its name date back to Classical Antiquity: think of Apollonius Dyscolus' treatise entitled simply *Peri syntáxeos*. Nevertheless, when "scientific" (or, it might be better to say, "professional") linguistics had its start, at the beginning of the 19th century, and for about 150 years afterwards, it was relegated to a rather marginal position in comparison to the mainstream of research. The monumental building of historical-comparative linguistics elaborated during the 19th century was mainly based on the phonological and morphological comparison of Indo-European languages; and the major issues of structural linguistics, in the first half of the 20th century, concerned phonological and morphological matters. Things changed radically in the second half of this same century, when syntax, in whatever theoretical framework, became the really "fashionable" field. My personal feeling is that most of today linguistic research deals (or attempts to deal) with syntactic topics. Such a feeling is not supported by any indisputable statistical data; however, a glance at the programs of the GLOW ('Generative Linguistics in the Old World') colloquia may show that it is not entirely unjustified. GLOW is surely not representative of many theoretical frameworks, since almost all of its members profess a "Chomskian orthodoxy"; but one has to keep in mind that research in generative grammar, and by Chomsky himself, was not limited to syntax: generative phonology and generative morphology have been thoroughly developed from the sixties until the present day. Nevertheless, the program of the last GLOW colloquium (Vitoria & Bilbao, April 2000) lists twenty talks, only three of which deal with phonological and one with morphological matters. The proportion has been more or less the same in all other GLOW colloquia held annually since 1977.

It would be interesting to ask for the reasons for this current predominance of syntax over other branches of linguistics; this is not, however, the goal of the present volume. It aims rather to correct a false image of the history of syntactic studies which derives from the situation outlined above: namely, that very few or no syntactic studies were elaborated before the 1950s. Actually, as will be seen throughout the entire book, syntactic matters were carefully investigated both during the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th

century. Moreover, the enormous development of syntactic research in the last fifty years or so has led to an analogous effect: even several ideas and analyses of the most recent decades have already been condemned to oblivion. I thought, therefore, that it was useful to present this considerable amount of research over the last two centuries in a systematic way and to put it at the disposal of the interested reader, whether her/his interest lies in the history of linguistics or in theoretical and descriptive syntax. As a guideline of this whole survey, I have chosen that of the relationship of syntax with psychology and of the vicissitudes of such a relation: while 19th century syntax was mainly psychology-based (or ‘psychologistic’, which is the term I shall use throughout the book), the syntax of the structuralist epoch essentially rejected a connection between syntax and psychology, although this has once again been assumed (although in very different forms) by the majority of the syntactic theories of the second half of the 20th century. In general, I have preferred to give more space to the presentation of the different syntactic approaches and analyses than to the polemics between the different schools. Similarly, I have also avoided almost any criticism of the ideas and the works presented: first, since I think that it is not always justified to criticize ideas from the past on the basis of today’s knowledge; secondly, since I think that for the time being the most important task for the historiography of linguistics is to present ideas and materials of the (more or less recent) past, rather than to attempt to sketch great syntheses of the assumed development of the discipline. Here and throughout the book, I will avoid any discussion of the significance and the usefulness, not to say the necessity, of the historiography of linguistics for the theoretical and/or descriptive linguist. All I can say is that I do not assume that it is necessary for a linguist (or for any other scholar) to know the history of his research field, but I am also certain that to do so is by no means useless.

It is almost mandatory, among linguists, to close any preface such as the present one with a list of names of “teachers, friends and colleagues” to whom “thanks are due for helpful advice”, with the added statement that “errors are my own”. My list would be very long, since the research presented here is the result of a lengthy period of work, which in some cases dates back to my college years. I will therefore limit myself to list two kinds of people: my teachers and my friends and colleagues who read parts of the manuscript. Among the former, I would like to mention Aldo Giorgio Gargani, my teacher at the University of Pisa, in the Department of Philosophy, who initiated me to the study of the history of scientific ideas; Tullio De Mauro, whose acquaintance transformed me from a philosopher into a linguist; Alfredo Stussi, who generously followed my works in my early years as a graduate student; Giulio Lepschy, whose work in the history of linguistics has always

been a constant reference for me and who also read several chapters of the present volume, offering me a lot of insightful comments, as is customary for him; and, last but not least, the precious memory of Luigi Rosiello, another master of the historiography of linguistics, whose advice always was and still remains unvaluable. The friends who took pains to read parts of this work were Paolo Casalegno, Annibale Èlia, Nunzio La Fauci, Lunella Mereu, Andrea Moro, and Alessandra Tomaselli; Konrad Koerner was in continuous contact with me during the long gestation of the present work, giving me important editorial suggestions: thanks to all of them, as well as to the anonymous referee of the book. Thanks are also due to the University of Verona for having financially supported the English version of the text.

Now, some words on the editorial criteria I have followed.

1. All quotations are taken from the last edition of the work cited; the year of the first edition is added within square brackets. If a given paper has been reprinted in a collective volume or in a volume of collected essays by the same author, the original source is entered as an independent item in the reference list, but page references are made to the volume edition.
2. All quotations from texts originally written in other languages have been translated into English. When a published English translation was available to me, I resorted to it; in the remaining cases, translations are mine.
3. English examples are given within single quotation marks. Examples from other languages are in italics: in such cases, I provided a translation of them within single quotation marks. Where necessary, the translation has been preceded by a literal gloss, introduced by the abbreviation 'lit.'. Sometimes, only the gloss is given.
4. The same syntactic phenomena often receive different labels in different syntactic approaches. For a standard terminology for referring to such facts in a 'neutral' way, I have chosen (whenever possible) that of Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1972; 1985).
5. All emphasized passages within quotations are original except where indicated. I have reproduced emphasis in italics, regardless of its original form.
6. The dates for the birth and death of the various scholars quoted throughout this volume can be found in the index of names, whenever I have been able to find them. However I did not always succeed in doing so: *Desint vires, tamen est laudanda voluntas*, as the Latin poet Ovid said. Such a quotation might stand as the epigraph of my whole book.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1. *'History of linguistic science' and 'history of linguistic thought'*

The enormous development of the history of linguistics during the last few decades has not only enlarged our knowledge of linguistic studies in the past to a previously unimaginable extent, but has also raised a variety of methodological problems that any historiographer of linguistics has to face: such problems have been discussed in depth in several works, among which those of Koerner (1989; 1995) deserve special mention. However, I will not engage myself here in a systematic discussion of the problems and principles of linguistic historiography, but will limit myself to a few questions that are most directly connected with the main topic and the organization of the present volume.

The first of such questions refers to a distinction drawn by Giulio C. Lepschy in the opening pages of the *History of Linguistics* (Lepschy 1994:vii), namely that between the history of linguistic 'science' and the history of linguistic 'thought'. Lepschy says that the work he is introducing is a history of the latter, rather than of the former kind. This means, he goes on, that it aims more at investigating the attitudes towards language which prevailed in the different chronological periods and cultural settings, independently from their more or less 'scientific' status according to the standards of today's linguistics. Such a distinction, of course, has not to be interpreted as an absolute one; nevertheless, one would be inclined to say that works such as Leroy (1963), Mounin (1967), and Robins (1997[1967]) are mainly histories of linguistic thought, while Pedersen (1962) is rather an instance of the history of linguistic science. However, the picture of linguistic science offered by the last-mentioned work is surely too restricted, since it almost wholly identifies linguistic science with historical-comparative linguistics.

To write a history of linguistic science as a whole therefore appears to be a difficult enterprise: the reason is that scholars have not yet reached any agreement about what is really scientific in linguistics. In other words, a dominating paradigm (to resort to a term which has been somewhat abused of late) is still missing in linguistics. As far as syntax is concerned, generative theory (espe-

cially in its 'Chomskian' version) is possibly the best known theoretical model, or, it would be better to say, the one most quoted also by the "layman", but it is certainly far from having found general acceptance among professional linguists. It is therefore not accidental that Pedersen (1962), which is certainly partial, since it deals with the evolution of a single branch of linguistics, i.e. historical-comparative linguistics, is generally recognized as a history of (at least a part of) linguistic science: for the principles and techniques of historical-comparative linguistics are by now essentially agreed on by almost all linguists, their disagreement simply concerning the fact of whether historical linguistics is truly the only really 'scientific' linguistics or not (even if the supporters of the former, extreme, position, which was Pedersen's, are today very few). By contrast, no work comparable to Pedersen's has yet appeared concerning the history of syntax: Drăganu's (1945) posthumous work is still possibly the only one attempting to give a 'general' view of it (and, it may be added, it is still useful as a bibliographical source, especially for the period covering the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century).

Some essays in the history of linguistics (and, in particular, of syntax) of the last decades have mainly aimed at bringing into light those doctrines of past ages which appeared consistent with a particular conception of linguistic science. This has been, for example, Chomsky's attitude; but a similar attitude is also shown by Kneale & Kneale (1962) in their famous book devoted to the "development of logic": their avowed aim is not "to chronicle all that past scholars (...) have said about the science", but "to record the first appearances of those ideas which appear to us most important in the logic of our own day" (p.v). In an analogous way, many mathematicians or physicists seek, within the works of their predecessors, sketches of current theories, and overlook what appears to be wrong or superseded from the point of view of today's knowledge. In this respect, they differ greatly from professional historians of science, who instead aim at globally reconstructing the 'scientific thought' of a given age.

One might therefore think that a work such as the present one, which deals with the history of syntactic theories during the last two centuries, is faced with two alternatives: it could try, on the one hand, to globally reconstruct the 'cultural climate' in which the different theories originated and developed; or, on the other hand, to single out the results which still today appear important from a given theoretical point of view. In other words, it should choose between being an history of a given *period* of linguistic *thought* or of a certain *kind* of linguistic *science* (obviously, within the given chronological limits). The research line adopted here has instead been slightly different from both of these options, for reasons which I shall now discuss.

The present work does not aim at being a history of syntax in the *scientific* meaning of the term, where the standards of 'science' are established by a given syntactic theory: this is not because the present author is skeptical about the possibility of having really scientific syntactic theories, nor because he thinks that such an approach to the history of linguistics is inevitably wrong. Rather, he is convinced that there exist some 'ingenuous' (in the etymological sense of 'native', 'inborn') categories of syntax concerning which a history can be written, independently from the adoption of specific theoretical assumptions. Full objectivity is no doubt unattainable: each of us is unavoidably conditioned by her/his own beliefs. Nevertheless, nobody holds that such notions as 'subject', 'sentence', or 'word group' exclusively belong to a specific theory: they rather belong to a set of 'ingenuous' syntactic concepts, each of which can be redefined within a given theoretical framework. Such ingenuous concepts therefore represent the starting point for any syntactic theory, which can obviously modify both their scope and their value, or even dispose of them, but it cannot avoid facing them (I argued for such a thesis in Graffi 1991). Hence the coexistence of both ingenuous and theoretical concepts within linguistics (and, especially, within syntax) allows one to write a history of linguistic science while at the same time adopting a perspective of history of linguistic thought: investigating how given ingenuous concepts have been dealt with in some past theories can also offer some interesting suggestions to contemporary linguists. Such an interest lies, however, more on a level of theoretical affinity than of historical heritage. In the present volume, instances of theoretical affinities are the analogies between some analyses of Jespersen's and of generative grammar: e.g., Jespersen's notion of 'nexus-substantive' (see 4.1.7) closely reminds one of Chomsky's analysis of 'derived nominals' (see 8.4.5), or the notion of 'split nexus' (see again 4.1.7), of the generative concept of 'Raising' (see 8.4.4). A historical link may be hypothesized, for example, between Gabelentz's distinction between 'psychological subject' and 'psychological predicate' (see 3.2.2), on the one hand, and the Prague school pair 'theme' vs. 'rheme', on the other (see 5.2.2). In my view, one of the tasks of the history of linguistic thought is to ascertain if such kinds of influence did really take place, whether in a direct or indirect way. Indeed, the task of the history of linguistic science is that of determining, among other things, to what extent affinities such as those just quoted, express real identities between theories worked out in different periods.

As will have been observed, all instances of the history of linguistic thought as well of linguistic science quoted above are typical of an 'internal' history of the discipline, and such a kind of history is that which mainly characterizes the present survey. This does not wish to imply, however, that problems of 'external' history, namely of the relationships of linguistics with other

research fields or with the social and institutional environment at a given age, etc., do not have any importance: quite the contrary, their study is often useful, not to say necessary, to fully understand the content of the investigated theories within the history of linguistics as in that of any other scientific field. However, because of the limits that any work must impose on itself, the present volume does not take into considerations all such possible external factors, but concentrates on the relationships between syntax and a single non-linguistic discipline, namely psychology, or, rather, on the attitude that syntacticians have shown towards psychology in the period under investigation.

2. Syntax and psychology: vicissitudes of a relationship

The leading thread of my investigation has therefore been the idea that syntactic research over the last two centuries is characterized by an oscillating attitude towards its relationship with psychology: an initial 'psychologistic'¹ epoch was followed by an epoch wholly rejecting psychologism, and finally a new period arose during which most scholars again stressed the necessity of connecting syntactic investigations to psychological considerations. I said 'most' scholars rather than 'all' scholars. In fact, some linguists of the third period did not assume that syntax has psychological concerns: this was, for example, the case of Montague (see below:9.2). But the fact that even scholars such as Montague or his followers felt obliged to express their attitude towards the relationship between syntax and psychology shows that the existence of such a relationship was recognized as an absolutely central problem.

The three periods alluded to above will each be the subject of a part of the present volume: the birth of 19th-century psychologistic syntax, its rise and its fall are treated in the first part (chapters 2, 3 and 4); the second part (chapters 5, 6 and 7) deals with syntax of the structuralist period, which is characterized by a rejection of psychologism and by a striving for an 'autonomous' linguistics; finally, the third and last part (chapters 8, 9 and 10) has as its topic the exceptional proliferation of syntactic theories which characterized the second half of the twentieth century, whether 'psychologically oriented' or not.

Where can the chronological boundaries of such periods be put? Any answer to such a question cannot avoid being arbitrary, to some extent. I think that the beginning of the first psychologistic period may be assumed to coincide with the crisis of the general grammar model: such a crisis originated as an

¹ I employ this term rather than 'psychological' mainly for historical reasons: the term 'psychologistic' is resorted to by Husserl (1928[1900]) in his polemics against the 19th century view of logic, which was strictly connected to that of syntax I am going to survey (cf. below:2.4.3). The term 'psychologism' and the adjective 'psychologistic' which derives from it have, therefore, the advantage of immediately recalling a given epoch of the relationships between linguistics (and logic) on the hand and psychology on the other.

effect of the increasing development and success of historical-comparative grammar, one consequence of which was stress on the essential *diversity* among languages. Several features of general grammar still persisted within historical-comparative grammar during its early decades but the fate of general grammar was accomplished around the middle of 19th century, as an effect of attacks coming from two opposite sides namely by Schleicher and by Steinthal (see 2.1). The former scholar denied the possibility of a general syntax; the latter one stated that syntax has to be based on psychology and no longer on logic as had been assumed by general grammar (see 2.2). Hence, the birth of psychologicistic syntax was, although indirectly, connected with the success of historical-comparative grammar, which imposed itself as a real paradigm in the Kuhnian sense during the first decades of 19th century. One could therefore maintain that psychologicistic syntax is the first syntactic approach exclusively belonging to 19th century linguistics. Other forms of syntax practiced during the first half of the same century are more or less linked with ideas developed during the preceding ones. This is the reason why little or no space has been devoted in the present volume to works that chronologically belong to the 19th century but whose roots certainly lie in 18th century such as, for example, Bernhardi (1801; 1803; 1805). Reference to some linguists preceding the psychologicistic period will however be made whenever this is deemed necessary to a better understanding of the immediate background of psychologicistic syntax. Thus some ideas of K.W.L. Heyse and K.F. Becker will be investigated in some detail (see 2.1.1; 2.2.1).

Once the birth of psychologicistic syntax is established as around the middle of 19th century, its end point has to be determined, and, more substantially, the choice of putting some linguists within such a period or in the immediately subsequent, 'anti-psychologicistic' one has to be motivated. Why, in other words, are linguists such as Jespersen or Ries mainly dealt with in the first part of the present volume, rather than in the second one, unlike their near contemporaries Saussure or Bloomfield? After all, Jespersen's and Ries' criticisms contributed to the fall of psychologism within syntax: they explicitly tried to work out 'purely linguistic' syntactic categories (see e.g. 2.5.3; 3.1). There is, however, a difference between Jespersen or Ries and the founders of structuralism: it cannot be denied that the latter aimed at a whole break with their predecessors, while the former did not. This is shown by the fact that psychologicistic linguists are seldom, if ever, quoted by the early structuralists, who, however, were well acquainted with their works. This attitude is macroscopic in Hjelmslev: his first book (Hjelmslev 1928) is full of quotations of linguists belonging to the epoch of psychologism but such references almost completely disappear from his works written after his turning to structuralism in the thirties. By contrast, reference to psychologicistic syntax is constant in Jespersen's

or Ries' works: as a matter of fact, the grammatical systems worked out by the two scholars are not understandable, from a historical point of view, other than as a result of psychologistic syntax. Therefore it seems historiographically correct to put scholars almost contemporary with each other inside two different periods of the history of linguistic thought.

The reasons for the crisis of psychologism will be investigated in some detail in 2.5. The mistrust towards psychology which had begun to develop in the first decades of the twentieth century is expressed in the most explicit way in the opening pages of a classical work of the structuralist period:

We have learned, at any rate, what one of our masters suspected thirty years ago, namely, that we can pursue the study of language without reference to any one psychological doctrine, and that to do so safeguards our results and makes them more significant to workers in related fields. (Bloomfield 1933: xv)

The 'master' referred to by Bloomfield was Delbrück, in his polemics against Wundt (see 2.3.4). Therefore, the frequently cited 'behaviorism' of Bloomfield was largely 'anti-psychologism', and such anti-psychologism was a general feature of structuralism shared by the different structuralist trends.

That structuralism almost exclusively focused on phonology and morphology is a commonplace that must be abandoned. Indeed, both European and American structuralist schools developed explicit and detailed techniques of syntactic analysis, several of which were taken up, more or less explicitly, by syntactic theories of the third period investigated within the present survey. The "intellectual climate", however, of the two periods is very different: the anti-psychologism of the structuralism age is replaced by a new, deep interest for the relationships between linguistics and psychology. Another feature which sharply distinguishes the new period from both the preceding ones is the relationship of linguistics to logic. In the psychologistic age, grammar explicitly "divorced" itself from logic; in the structuralist age, both disciplines marched on parallel paths, with little interest for each other (although there were some exceptions, such as Brøndal's work). By contrast, since around the middle of twentieth century an increasing number of logicians showed an interest in natural language and an increasing number of linguists became aware of the necessity of mastering the tools of symbolic logic (see 8.2). It was more or less in the same years that linguists rediscovered an interest in psychology: what was later called "the cognitive revolution" had begun. Such a revolution is normally linked to the name of Noam Chomsky, as is surely right; but the renewed interest for psychology characterized other linguists too even before him. The term 'psycholinguistics' was coined on the occasion of a conference held in 1953 at Indiana University (see 8.3.1).

In this same period, the term 'theory' begins to systematically occur throughout linguistic (hence also syntactic) works. Furthermore, an increasing