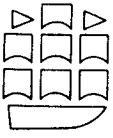
A Short History of Linguistics

A Short History of Linguistics

R. H. Robins
Professor of General Linguistics in the University of London



LONGMAN

LONGMAN GROUP LIMITED
London

Associated companies, branches and representatives throughout the world

First published 1967

Third impression 1976

ISBN 0 582 52397 4

Printed in Great Britain by
Lowe & Brydone (Printers) Ltd, Thetford, Norfolk

Preface

In this book I have attempted to give a brief account of the history of linguistic studies up to the present day. For the reasons stated in the first chapter, the narrative is organized around the history of linguistics in Europe, but it is my hope that due notice has been taken of the contributions that the subject has drawn from work originating outside the European continent.

The history of linguistics is now widely recognized as a field for teaching and research, and it has been incorporated into the syllabus of courses in linguistics in a number of universities in Great Britain and elsewhere. The interest currently being shown by linguists in past developments and in the earlier history of their subject is in itself a sign of the maturity of linguistics as an academic discipline, quite apart from any practical applications of linguistic science. It is my hope that the present book will go some part of the way towards fulfilling teachers' and students' needs in this field, both in deepening their appreciation of what has been done in the study of language and in suggesting profitable areas of further research.

In venturing on a book of this scope, one is at once made conscious of a number of difficulties. In the first place, no one person can achieve anything like equal familiarity with the entire range of linguistic work that such an undertaking requires of him. Secondly, the extent, the nature, and the present state of the source material varies widely from one period to another. There are lamentable gaps in our knowledge of some of the early pioneers of linguistics, while in the contemporary history of current trends the problem is an opposite one, that of trying to select from the great mass of published material that which is likely to be of permanent historical significance. Moreover, different periods vary greatly in the amount of basic research already undertaken; quite a lot has been written on the Greco-Roman era of linguistics, and a number of recent historical treatments have followed the inspiration of

Pedersen's important *Linguistic science in the nineteenth century*; Chomsky has recently drawn attention to some striking anticipations of present-day topics in the works of certain seventeenth-century writers; studies of mediaeval and Renaissance work within the various branches of knowledge comprised by general linguistics are now being taken in hand, but a great deal remains to be done before a really satisfactory full-scale historical treatment of the years linking western antiquity with the modern world can be envisaged.

If one looks outside Europe to the linguistic scholarship on which Europeans drew so heavily and so beneficially, the need for editions and commentaries is no less urgent. Much of Chinese, Arabic, and Indian linguistic work has been extensively studied already, but largely from the standpoint of its place in the cultural and literary history of the peoples themselves. Scholarly treatments that relate individual writings in these fields to current linguistic theory and practice will fill a considerable gap in our understanding of the world's cultural history.

For all these reasons, in addition to the inadequacy of the author's knowledge and abilities in relation to this self-imposed task, readers are likely to find substantial grounds for disagreement and disappointment with what is here written. But if this book should stimulate further detailed research into our sources for the history of linguistics, it will have achieved a part of its purpose.

In trying to cover so wide an area, one is made more than usually aware of one's debt to contemporary and to earlier scholars who have laboured in this field. This debt is partially acknowledged in the bibliographical references that follow each chapter. More personally, I am happy to express my thanks to colleagues in London and elsewhere whom I have consulted, and in particular to Professor David Abercrombie, for his painstaking help in reading and checking the text of this book and for his important comments and corrections, and to those who have been kind enough to read drafts of chapters dealing with topics in which they are far better qualified than I am: Dr. Theodora Bynon, Mrs. Vivian Salmon, and Mr. K. L. Speyer. The book is the better for their help and advice; I remain responsible for any remaining errors and blemishes. Finally, I have been greatly assisted by the kindness and patience of my wife, who read through the entire book in typescript, making numerous valuable suggestions on diverse points of detail.

London, 1967 R. H. ROBINS

Contents

Preface Pages v–vi

CHAPTER ONE Pages 1–8
Introduction

CHAPTER TWO Pages 9–44
Greece

CHAPTER THREE Pages 45–65
Rome

CHAPTER FOUR Pages 66–93
The Middle Ages

CHAPTER FIVE Pages 94–132
The Renaissance and after

CHAPTER SIX Pages 133–163
The eve of modern times

CHAPTER SEVEN Pages 164–197
Comparative and historical linguistics in the nineteenth century

CHAPTER EIGHT Pages 198–240
Linguistics in the present century

Index Pages 241–248

One

Introduction

During the greater part of our lives, we accept our use and understanding of our native language without awareness, comment, or questioning. Memories of early childhood and experience in bringing up young children may cause us temporarily to ponder the complexity of every normal person's linguistic ability, and the learning of one or more foreign languages after mastering one's first or native tongue reveals just how much is involved in mankind's faculty of communication through language.

However, despite this general acceptance of the gift of articulate speech, most cultures in the world have engendered among certain of their members some realization of the scope and power of language. This linguistic self-consciousness may be first stimulated by contacts with foreign speakers, by the existence and recognition of dialect cleavage within a speech community, or by a particular orientation of man's inherent and disinterested curiosity about himself and the world around him. From this source springs 'folk linguistics', speculation or dogmatic pronouncement about the origin of language, or of one's own language, and its place in the life of the community. It may take the form of pejorative comments on other dialects and other languages; but many cultures contain aetiological myths purporting to describe the origin of language as a whole or, at least, of the favoured language of the people. The conception of language as a special gift of a god has been found in several diverse and unrelated cultures, and is itself significant of the reverence rightly accorded by reflective persons to this priceless human capability.[1]

In certain cultures, namely those that are for this and for other reasons credited with the title of civilizations, curiosity and awareness

of one's environment have been able to grow into science, the systematic study of a given subject or range of phenomena, deliberately fostered and transmitted from one generation to another by persons recognized for their skill and knowledge in a particular activity of this sort; and all mankind owes a great debt to those cultures that have in one way or another fostered the growth of the sciences.

Among the sciences that arise in this fashion, folk linguistics has developed in different parts of the civilized world into linguistic science. The term *science* in the collocation *linguistic science* is used here deliberately, but not restrictively. Science in this context is not to be distinguished from the humanities, and the virtues of exactness and of intellectual self-discipline on the one hand, and of sensitivity and imagination on the other are all called into operation in any satisfactory study of language.

The sciences of man, which include linguistics, arise from the development of human self-awareness. But equally these sciences, or more strictly their practitioners, may become aware of themselves for what they are doing and for what they have done. When this scientific self-awareness includes an interest in the origin and past development of a science, we may recognize the birth of that specific discipline known as the history of science. In recent years the rapid and at times bewildering growth in linguistics as an academic subject, both in the numbers of scholars involved and in the range of their activities, has led to a corresponding growth in the interest of linguists in the past history of the subject. In part this may be due to the feeling that some understanding and appreciation of the problems and achievements of earlier generations may be a source of stability during a period of unprecedentedly swift changes in theory, procedures, and applications.

Linguistic science today, like other parts of human knowledge and learning, and like all aspects of human cultures, is the product of its past and the matrix of its future. Individuals are born, grow up, and live in an environment physically and culturally determined by its past; they participate in that environment, and some are instrumental in effecting changes in it. This is the basis of human history. Like a people and like an intellectual or moral conception, a science (in the widest sense) has its history. Scientists do not start from scratch in each generation, but they work within and on the basis of the situation which their science, and science in general, has inherited in their culture and in their age. Historical thinking about science or about anything else in human affairs consists in the study of the temporal sequences of

persons and events, and the causal connections, influences, and trends, that may be discovered in them and may throw light on them.

It is tempting, and flattering to one's contemporaries, to see the history of a science as the progressive discovery of the truth and the attainment of the right methods. But this is a fallacy. The aims of a science vary in the course of its history, and the search for objective standards by which to judge the purposes of different periods is apt to be an elusive one. 'The facts' and 'the truth' are not laid down in advance, like the solution to a crossword puzzle, awaiting the completion of discovery. Scientists themselves do much to determine the range of facts, phenomena, and operations that fall within their purview, and they themselves set up and modify the conceptual framework within which they make what they regard as significant statements about them.

Brief historical sketches of a subject, such as are often included in introductory textbooks, inevitably look at the past through the eyes of the present, concentrating on those aspects of earlier work that seem either peculiarly relevant or, on the other side, shockingly irrelevant, to present-day approaches. This is quite proper, indeed it is almost inevitable, in such a short notice; but it carries with it the danger of evaluating all past work in a subject from the point of view in favour at the present, and of envisaging the history of a science as an advance, now steady, now temporarily interrupted or diverted, towards the predetermined goal of the present state of the science.

This does not mean that one should exclude the evaluation of past work against later achievements and against the present position in the same field, where there is reason to see therein a definite advance. Indeed, such comparisons may be rewarding, in that they show which aspects of a science were most favoured by particular circumstances and in particular periods and areas of civilization. What is needed is an attempt to discern the evolution of the past into the present and the changing states of the science in its changing cultural environments. One should strive to avoid the deliberate selection of only those parts of earlier work that can be brought into a special relationship with present-day interests.

If history is to be more than just an annalistic record of the past, some subjective judgment is inevitable in the ordering and in the interpretation of events; hence the classic statement that there can be no unbiased history. In the history of a science, and in the present case in the history of linguistics, there is the additional subjective element involved in determining what activities and aims on the part of earlier

workers shall be deemed to fall within its sphere and so to belong to its history. In order not to impose the standards of linguistics today on the decision on what to admit as linguistic work from the past, we may agree to understand as part of the history of linguistics any systematic study directed towards some aspect or aspects of language envisaged as an interesting and worthy object of such study in its own right.

Changes and developments in a science are determined by a number of causes. Every science grows from its past, and the state reached in a previous generation provides the starting point for the next. But no science is carried on in a vacuum, without reference to or contact with other sciences and the general atmosphere in which learning of any sort is encouraged or tolerated in a culture. Scientists and men of learning are also men of their age and country, and they are participants in the culture within which they live and work. Besides its own past, the course of a science is also affected by the social context of its contemporary world and the intellectual premises dominant in it. Applications of the science, its uses for practical purposes and the expectations that others have of it, may be a very important determinant of the directions of its growth and changes. In linguistics, as elsewhere, attempted and projected applications, practical ends to be achieved, have often preceded the statement of the theoretical positions on which they implicitly depend.

Scientists are not all alike in ability, motivation, and inspiration. Every practitioner must learn his craft and master the state of his science as it is presented to him when he enters upon it; and if it is to continue, some must teach it in turn to others. Probably most scientists must be content to do no more than that, but every lively branch of knowledge attracts a few men of outstanding enterprise who are able to take some control of its direction and to respond positively to the challenges that the present inherits from the past. Such persons think more deeply and question accepted theory and practice more searchingly. If a culture is not to be entirely static they are a necessity, and in our own European history it is fortunate that ancient Greece of the classical age produced men of this character in hitherto unprecedented numbers and of unprecedented qualities, in so many spheres of human thought and activity.

When some lead, others follow; and leaders and innovators in a science, given favourable circumstances or making for themselves favourable circumstances, become the founders of schools, with disciples and followers continuing the exploitation of the lines of

thought or practice developed by the founder or leader. Changes in scientific thinking and in scientific attitudes may arise from outside or from inside the science whose history is being traced. The existing state of a science, the starting point for any change, is the product both of external and internal factors. The general contemporary intellectual and social context, whether favouring stability or encouraging change, is largely external to the particular science itself, although each science and branch of learning is a part of the whole context along with all the others and along with the general cultural attitude towards learning.

When the dominant innovators in a science respond to the challenge of a situation that demands some change in its practice, this may take a number of forms, and rival schools may grow up around different leaders responding differently to a particular situation. These rivalries may be reinforced and perpetuated by the use of standard textbooks in the teaching of newcomers to the field. Any empirical science (and linguistics is an empirical science, since its data are observable) must be able to cope with its own phenomena, and once any observation is accepted as relevant its theory and modes of description and analysis must be able to handle it, and to handle it with scientific adequacy, of which exhaustiveness, consistency, and economy are canons. Fresh data, or the extension of a science to new but relevant fields, may require the further elaboration and articulation of existing theory along lines similar to those followed in the past and logically implied by them; it may, on the other hand, demand a radical recasting of existing theory and existing models of description. The Copernican heliocentric universe is a classic example of the recasting of existing theory when it was becoming incapable of handling economically some of the newly observed astronomical data. Equally well, the data considered relevant to a science and the methods of that science in dealing with the data may be fundamentally altered by the response that one or more of its leaders makes to what he accepts as the dominant situation in which he is working or to the practical and intellectual needs that he is persuaded it is to the task of his science to fulfil. Throughout the history of linguistics all these factors can be seen at work in different ages and among different groups, as the science experienced changes in its objectives, its methods, and its theoretical positions.

Interest in language and in practical linguistic problems led independently to linguistic science in more than one centre of civilization. Each had its own merits and its own achievements, and in the course of history each has come into contact with the European linguistic tradi-

tion and has contributed to it. In some important respects it is difficult to believe that European linguistics would be in the position it is today without the insights brought to it by linguistic work from outside Europe, in particular the work of the ancient Indian linguists on Sanskrit grammar and phonology. But since in the present age European science has become international science, and linguistics is no exception here, we can trace several streams of linguistic studies flowing into the European tradition and becoming part of it at different times, thus to constitute linguistic science as the world knows it today.

This statement may provide and justify the framework on which to organize a history of linguistics. To build it around the history of linguistics in Europe in no way implies a claim to European superiority in the linguistic field. Indeed, in much phonetic and phonological theory, and in certain aspects of grammatical analysis, European scholarship was manifestly inferior to that of the ancient Indians. But in the European tradition we are in a position to follow a continuous line of development from the origins of the subject in ancient Greece, whereas we know little of the origin and early stages that lie behind the mature Sanskrit work of the Indians. The practical and theoretical results of Greek linguistics were taken over by Rome (with so much else of Greek intellectual life), and passed on by Rome at the hands of the late Latin grammarians to the Middle Ages, to be received from them in turn by the modern world during and after the Renaissance, together with the vital contributions from outside Europe. At no stage is there a break that amounts to discontinuity in the European tradition of linguistics. Changes of theory, aims, methods, and concepts are repeatedly found, and they are the material of the history of linguistics; but each generation of European linguists has had at its disposal a knowledge of the existence and some of the work of its forerunners.

It is, therefore, reasonable to make the history of European linguistics the foundation for a history of linguistics as a whole. This procedure is not based on any evaluation of the relative merits of European and extra-European work, but it does determine the place at which linguists outside Europe receive attention. They and their achievements will be described at that period wherein they made their first significant impact on European linguistics, and thus entered the stream leading to world linguistics of the present day.

In the history of a science, as in more general historical studies, there is the constant temptation to discern and extract pervasive themes or patterns running through and manifested in the succession

of events and activities. Where such themes may legitimately be revealed they can prove enlightening interpretations of the historian's narrative, and certain very broad correlations suggest themselves. For example, the failure of western antiquity to evolve an adequate theory of historical linguistics, despite the fascination shown for etymology, may be linked with the failure of ancient historians to envisage the fact of change as more than the revelation of what was innately present all the time in a political system or in a person's character;[2] and the all-embracing synthesis of language, thought, and objective reality involved in late mediaeval 'speculative grammar' appears as a facet of the synthesis of knowledge and learning within Catholic theology that characterized the scholastic age.

But at the present stage, at least, of our knowledge and research in much of the history of linguistics, our aims must be more modest. The importance of the history of a science is that it helps to place the present in perspective. Linguists today are not alone in their achievements, their disputes, and their problems. They are the heirs to more than two millennia of the wonder that the 'strangeness, beauty, and import of human speech'[3] has never failed to arouse among sensitive and enquiring minds.

FOR FURTHER CONSULTATION

H. ARENS, *Sprachwissenschaft: der Gang ihrer Entwicklung von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Freiburg/Munich, 1955, covers the history of linguistics as a whole, principally through extracts from representative writers of each period linked by commentaries. Arens devotes most space to nineteenth-century comparative work and historical linguistics; but twentieth-century descriptive work is surveyed up to 1950.

A. BORST'S exhaustive *Der Turmbau von Babel*, Stuttgart, 1957–63, treats in great detail the history of men's ideas and beliefs in different parts of the world on the origin and diversity of languages and peoples in relation to current religious and philosophical opinions.

R. G. COLLINGWOOD, *The idea of history*, Oxford, 1946.

T. S. KUHN, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, Chicago, 1962.

C. SINGER, *A short history of science*, Oxford, 1941.

P. A. VERBURG, *Taal en functionaliteit*, Wageningen, 1952, deals with the period from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the nineteenth century, examining the changing attitudes towards the functioning of language in human life.

NOTES

Bibliographical references to publications listed in the titles 'for further consultation' at the end of a chapter are given in the form of the author's name followed by the date of the work in question; other references are given in full in the first instance, but are repeated more briefly on repetition within a chapter.

1. cp. BORST, 1957–63, volume 1.
2. cp. COLLINGWOOD, 1946, 42–5.
3. L. BLOOMFIELD, *Language*, London, 1935, vii.

Two

Greece

For the reasons given in the preceding chapter, it is sensible to begin the history of linguistic studies with the achievements of the ancient Greeks. This has to do, primarily, not with the merits of their work, which are very considerable, nor with the deficiencies in it that latter-day scholars, looking back from the privileged standpoint of those at the far end of a long tradition, may justifiably point out. It is simply that the Greek thinkers on language and on the problems raised by linguistic investigations initiated in Europe the studies that we can call linguistic science in its widest sense, and that this science was a continuing focus of interest from ancient Greece until the present day in an unbroken succession of scholarship, wherein each worker was conscious of and in some way reacting to the work of his predecessors.

The European tradition of linguistics has passed through several different stages, and has changed its main impetus and direction several times, being sensitive both to internal developments and to external situations. In the course of its history it has made contact with the major contributions of groups of linguistic scholars who started their labours outside the European tradition and developed their own insights independently of it. European linguistics has learned much from them. Indeed, without them present-day European linguistics (and this now inevitably means present-day linguistics in the world as a whole) would be poorer in content and less advanced in technique than we have the right to think it is. In starting from Greece and following the course of linguistic studies in Europe we can take in the work of scholars outside Europe at the point where it became known to Europeans and thereby entered and enriched the subject as the world knows it today.

By the time at which we have any record of linguistic science in Greece, the beginning of the classical age in the fifth century B.C., the Greeks had been settled for many generations in the habitable parts of the Greek mainland, the western coastal areas of Asia Minor, the islands of the Aegean, the east coasts of Sicily, and a few places in south Italy and elsewhere. The settlement of Greece by the Greeks was the result of successive movements of invaders from the north coming down into Greece and spreading outwards from it. The last such invasion was the arrival of the Dorians, probably around the end of the second millennium, disrupting the earlier Greek civilization of the 'Mycenaean age' achieved by other groups of Greek-speakers who had settled the mainland and some of the islands in the preceding centuries.

It is, of course, not just in linguistics that the Greeks were the European pioneers. The intellectual life of Europe as a whole, its philosophical, moral, political, and aesthetic thought finds its origin in the work of Greek thinkers, and still today one can return again and again to what we have of Greek activity in the intellectual field for stimulus and encouragement. With the Greeks as with no other earlier or contemporary civilization modern man feels an undeniable intellectual kinship. Just what circumstances, environmental, cultural, and biological, gave rise to this brilliant flowering of the human intellect in the Greece of the classical age we shall never know with certainty. We can only be thankful that it all happened.

The Greeks were not the first group of civilized men in the area that they entered. They learned much from established civilizations with which they came into contact in and around the eastern end of the Mediterranean and the 'fertile crescent' of Asia Minor, the cradle of civilized man in the west. But with the Greeks and in Greek civilization there developed for the first time in human history an insatiable demand for questioning the world around and the ways of men in the world. Among the Greeks there were those who insisted on enquiring into things that others failed to notice or in which they were uninterested. The Babylonians had made use of geometry for land surveying and of arithmetic and astronomy for the calendrical measurement of time, but in Greece we find astronomy, arithmetic, and geometry studied as abstract independent sciences for the first time, and built up on the basis of systematic observation and the establishment of postulates and principles. In taking notice of the Greek achievement in linguistics, Bloomfield remarks of their peculiar brilliance of intellect: 'The

ancient Greeks had the gift of wondering at things that other people take for granted'.[1]

Among the factors that were observed in the preceding chapter as giving rise to an interest in language as part of human life, the Greeks of the classical age were already aware both of the existence of peoples speaking languages other than Greek and of dialectal divisions within the Greek-speaking population. There must have been considerable linguistic contacts between Greeks and non-Greeks in trade, diplomacy, and in much of everyday life in the Greek 'colonies', settlements of Greeks on the coastal fringes of non-Greek-speaking areas in Asia Minor and Italy. We know surprisingly little about this. Herodotus and others quote and discuss foreign words, Plato admits in the *Cratylus* dialogue the possibility of the foreign origin of part of the Greek vocabulary, and we know of the existence of bilingual speakers and of professional interpreters. But of serious interest in the languages themselves among the Greeks there is no evidence; and the Greek designation of alien speakers, *bárbaroi* (βάρβαροι), whence our word 'barbarian', to refer to people who speak unintelligibly, is probably indicative of their attitude.

Quite different was the Greek awareness of their own dialectal divisions. The Greek language in antiquity was more markedly divided into fairly sharply differentiated dialects than many other languages. This was due both to the settlement of the Greek-speaking areas by successive waves of invaders, and to the separation into relatively small and independent communities that the mountainous configuration of much of the Greek mainland and the scattered islands of the adjoining seas forced on them. But that these dialects were dialects of a single language and that the possession of this language united the Greeks as a whole people, despite the almost incessant wars waged between the different 'city states' of the Greek world, is attested by at least one historian; Herodotus, in his account of the major achievement of a temporarily united Greece against the invading Persians at the beginning of the fifth century B.C., puts into the mouths of the Greek delegates a statement that among the bonds of unity among the Greeks in resisting the barbarians was 'the whole Greek community, being of one blood and one tongue'.[2]

Not all the dialects were reduced to writing, but by the classical age the major dialects were, and we have inscriptional evidence of them, giving us a more detailed knowledge of the ancient Greek dialect situation than is available elsewhere in antiquity. Apart from the spoken