John E. Joseph
Nigel Love and
Talbot J. Taylor

Landmarks in Linguistic Thought II

The Western Tradition in the Twentieth Century

HISTORY OF LINGUISTIC THOUGHT

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- Chomsky
- Derrida
- Firth
- Goffman
- Harris
- Jakobson
- Labov
- Orwell
- Sapir
- Skinner
- Whorf
- Wittgenstein

This second volume follows on from *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought I*, which introduces the key thinkers up to the twentieth century. The series is ideal for anyone with an interest in the history of linguistics or of ideas.

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Introduction

This book presents twentieth-century linguistic thought as a continuation of the ideas and arguments that have made up the warp and weft of the Western tradition in linguistic thought since its beginnings in Classical Greece. In this respect it is unlike most books on the history of twentieth-century linguistics, in particular those that take linguistic theory at the close of the century to be the end of the story, a story seen with hindsight and told as a matter of 'how we got to where we are today'. The co-authors of this book do not view linguistic thought as a matter of progress towards the theories that have now attained the status of academic standards. Instead, in contrast to such a 'progressivist' perspective, we offer a 'continuist' alternative, according to which twentieth-century thinking about language continued to debate and develop the same themes, questions, issues, concepts and arguments that have preoccupied Western thinking about language since its inception.

Since we look at twentieth-century linguistic thought from the vantage point of the past – that is, as a continuation of pre-twentieth-century thought – we include in our discussion a number of writers and theorists who have not typically been classified as 'linguists'. Again, this is unlike the typical history of linguistics. Beginning with Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*, a characteristic feature of the twentieth century was the attention given to establishing and policing the borders of linguistics as a field of inquiry. What counts as 'linguistics' – or as a 'linguistic' study of language – has been an important ideological issue, strongly influencing the ways that language is studied and written about, within as well as without the walls of the professional institutions of learning.

However, this is not to say that the matter of intellectual territorial borders was ignored prior to the twentieth century. As Michel Foucault made abundantly clear (see, for example, Foucault 1971), in all fields of intellectual inquiry – although perhaps in language inquiry more than most – issues of disciplinary territoriality have often been regarded as inseparable from the inquiry itself: that is, issues such as what counts as the subject of study, what are legitimate questions to ask about the subject, what methods and tools are appropriate in searching for their answers, and how subject, questions, methods, and answers relate to those of other fields of inquiry. Moreover, historical context, in the broadest terms, has always determined – and doubtless always will – how these discipline-defining issues are addressed and who is seen as qualified to address them. As regards linguistic thought, this much should be clear from the first volume of this series: *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought: the Western tradition from Socrates to Saussure* (Harris and Taylor 1989). What was distinctive about the twentieth (and to some extent the nineteenth) century was the desire of professional, academic linguists to have their questions, methods and theories – in other words, what the discipline of linguistics *is* – seen as autonomous and scientific. There are many persuasive, practical-professional motivations for linguistic inquiry to seek this status: funding, institutional politics and respect in the academic community are merely the most obvious ones. Disciplinary autonomy was already a part of Saussure's goal in identifying *langue* as the scientific object proper to linguistics and independent of the scientific objects of other disciplines such as psychology and sociology.

Unfortunately, in the twentieth century this 'disciplinary' perspective on linguistic thought led to the exclusion of many scholars and theorists who have written on language not only with great knowledge and insight but also with significant impact on the thinking of non-linguists and laymen alike – and, by this means, on public policies regarding language. Our book is based on the premise that these writers need to be recognized and included among the important contributors to the century's linguistic thought, no less so than those who have worked within the confines of academic linguistics: 'linguistics proper' as it is often called. If, as we try to do here, one looks at twentieth-century linguistic thought free from the blinkers of academic-professional territorialism, it becomes clear the extent to which 'extra-disciplinary'

reflection on language shaped – and responded more effectively to – what in general cultural discourse has been taken to be of importance and significance in language, i.e. to be in need of discussion, investigation, explanation and action. (For an extended discussion of this point, see Cameron 1995.)

In this sense, then, the perspective taken in this book is not only 'continuist', it is also – in contrast to that of disciplinary linguistics – 'inclusive'. Included herein are chapters on the linguistic ideas not only of professional linguists but also of psychologists (Bruner, Skinner), anthropologists (Sapir), sociologists (Goffman), critical theorists (Derrida), philosophers (Austin, Wittgenstein) and even a fire insurance engineer (Whorf) and a novelist (Orwell). There is also a chapter on the implications for language theory of the efforts by primatologists to teach language to apes. A less inclusive history of twentieth-century linguistic thought would have placed the writings of most of these thinkers on the periphery, if within sight at all.

But although 'inclusive' in the sense of not being restricted to linguistics proper, this book is hardly all-inclusive. Limitations of space have enforced selective coverage of the subject matter, and many readers will notice gaps. Just *what* is missing is a function partly of considered authorial choices, and partly of the presentational format of the *Landmarks* collection – essentially, extended commentary on key passages from key writers. Very likely a mere difference of expository framework would have resulted in a substantially different book. That said, however, we do at least hope to have provided a broader-based foundation for serious study of the subject than is at all common in comparable introductory texts.

The continuist and inclusive characters of our presentation are complementary. For it is by adopting an inclusive perspective on twentieth-century linguistic thought that its continuity with pre-twentieth-century linguistic thought is more easily recognizable. Instead of seeing modern disciplinary linguistics as a completely new field – invented by Saussure and the American descriptivists – it emerges as merely one of the threads of development that twentieth-century theorists have woven into the centuries-old fabric of Western linguistic thought.

Nevertheless, we are not claiming that our own perspective is free from the influence of the intellectual and historical context in which we write. On the contrary, we acknowledge that the way

we have conceived and written this book has been shaped by our firm conviction that contemporary work on language should resist the efforts by disciplinary linguistics to determine what is relevant and worthy of study in language. There is much more to language than can be recognized or investigated from a purely 'linguistic' perspective, as is illustrated by the chapters in this volume and the one that preceded it. Language is too important, and in too many ways, to be left in the possession of a single disciplinary field. It is our hope that intellectual re-fertilization – both from the past and from outside the boundaries of disciplinary linguistics – can help to open up language theory to new influences, new concerns, new approaches and new applications. Accordingly, our goal has been to produce a book that will be of use not only to students of linguistics but also to students from the wide range of fields to which linguistic thought is relevant, including anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, rhetoric, public policy, communication studies, psychology, literary studies and philosophy. Linguistic thought, in other words, we take to be an essentially *interdisciplinary* endeavour. It always has been. It is our acknowledged goal in writing this book to make sure that this continues to be recognized.

At the same time, we would not want the continuist approach that we adopt to lead to misunderstanding. We are not denying that there were new ideas and original problems in the twentieth century. The facts clearly point to the opposite conclusion. A great deal in twentieth-century linguistic thought was new and original. The sources of these new ideas were many and various, but for convenience's sake the ideas may be categorized as coming from three general sources:

- within linguistics itself, from the radical ideas of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (see Volume I, Chapter 16), combined with the impact of North American work on Native American languages;
- from changes in the intellectual and ideological context brought about by the two world wars, the propaganda battles of the Cold War and the globalization of Euro-American culture and economy;
- from developments in neighbouring fields of inquiry, particularly psychology, philosophy, anthropology, neurology, sociology and literary studies.

Nevertheless, we do not take the new ideas and questions that these sources have introduced into linguistic thought as intellectual isolates, existing independently of the intellectual and discursive contexts in which they emerged and prospered. On the contrary, we view them as new threads woven into an already-existing tapestry. The material and colour of these new threads may well be original, but the threads are integrated into the fabric of Western linguistic thought, a fabric whose pattern of ideas and issues has an unbroken continuity from the very beginning of the Western cultural tradition.

As an example, we might cite one of the century's most pervasive linguistic topics. As is illustrated in many of the chapters herein, the twentieth century – from beginning to end – was preoccupied with the question of whether language influences thought and, if it does, how it does so and what the implications are. Our chapters on Sapir, Whorf, Austin, Orwell, Wittgenstein and Derrida all show this to be one of their central concerns. In Derrida's case, for instance, the way the issue is raised bears the hallmark of Saussure's influence. What then matters are the implications of Saussure's claim that it is the differential structure of *langue* which gives shape to thought and that, before the introduction of linguistic structure, thought is indeterminate, 'like a swirling cloud where . . . no ideas are established in advance and nothing is distinct' (Saussure 1916: 155). While Saussurean influence is also detectable in their views, the study of Native American languages and cultures leads Sapir and Whorf to aim for quite different goals in discussing how language influences thought. The topic arises for Austin and Wittgenstein from an entirely different direction: namely, the attempts by analytic philosophers to determine the foundations of logic and reasoning (see Volume I, Chapter 15). Whereas Orwell's concern with how language influences thought stems primarily from his experience of the ideological battles of the 1930s and 1940s and the ways that propaganda was used to shape and manipulate public opinion. And yet, each writer approaches the topic in a way that both takes for granted and makes use of certain features of the long-running discourse on the relationship between language and thought, a discourse whose threads may be traced back to the very beginning of the Western cultural tradition. The various ways that the twentieth century discussed the topic of the influence of language on thought rely entirely on the Western tradition's conception of

the topic's components – thought, language, reality, self – and the possibilities of their interaction. The twentieth century played the 'linguistic influence' game in original ways, using techniques motivated by concerns and developments that are specific to the historical context. But the game and the pieces used remain the same.

As the first volume of this series shows, the Western tradition has been focused on a fairly broad, but not unlimited, range of topics and issues that, for cultural, political, religious and technological reasons, have been thought to require scholarly attention. The issue of the relationship between language and thought is just one. Others include what the origins of language are, what its parts are, and what its purpose is, how language conveys meaning, how language can represent reality and do so truly or falsely, what the implications are of language diversity, what properties are shared by all languages and why this is, how language makes understanding possible, and how language can be used as a cultural and interpersonal tool. Western thinking about these issues provides the subject matter for each of the chapters in the first volume of this collection, as it does for all the chapters in this volume.

It might be thought that one topic that was wholly new to twentieth-century reflection on language is what might be called 'the reflective turn': that is, the growing interest in and criticism of the foundations of Western linguistic thought itself. We mean by this questions such as the following. Why does Western linguistic thought focus on a family of related issues and topics? Why are particular sorts of concepts, problems, arguments, assumptions, methods, puzzles and solutions characteristic of Western thinking about language? What is the way to solve these issues once and for all, or to break free from the rhetorical spell that they cast? These sorts of questions, characteristic of the reflective turn in the Western tradition, are central to at least three chapters herein, those on Wittgenstein, Derrida and Harris. They are reflected also in the dramatic challenge to the Western linguistic tradition that is presented by those who claim to have taught an impressive range of linguistic skills to non-human primates. Yet even this reflective turn in linguistic thought is not an entirely new development, but is continuous with a trend that goes back at least to the Renaissance. In part, this crisis in linguistic confidence was the combined effect of two historical

developments: (1) the 'second babelization' that seemed to be augured by the decline of Latin as a universal language of Europe along with the increased use of the vernacular languages and (2) the impact of printing technology (see Volume I, Chapter 7). Today the Western world is clearly in the throes of another techno-linguistic revolution. A major source of this revolution is the accelerated development and exploitation of new technologies for electronic communication (see Baron 2000). At the same time, what some see as a new 'universal' language is rapidly emerging, taking on the role that Latin once had in the European world. What the consequences will be for the development of linguistic thought in the twenty-first century is hard to predict. Will twenty-first-century linguistic thought continue to focus on the same family of related issues and topics? Will the preceding century's characteristic questions, problems, arguments and puzzles finally be 'solved'? Or will they lose their charm and be forgotten, only to be replaced by others? A major shift in linguistic thought may indeed be looming, in which case the twentieth century, which this volume attempts to cover, will in fact prove to have been a remarkably self-contained unit of intellectual history.

Contents

Chapter 1

Sapir on language, culture and personality

It is of course true that in a certain sense the individual is predestined to talk, but that is due entirely to the circumstance that he is born not merely in nature, but in the lap of a society that is certain, reasonably certain, to lead him to its traditions. Eliminate society and there is every reason to believe that he will learn to walk, if, indeed, he survives at all. But it is just as certain that he will never learn to talk, that is, to communicate ideas according to the traditional system of a particular society. Or again, remove the new-born individual from the social environment into which he has come and transplant him to an utterly alien one. He will develop the art of walking in his new environment very much as he would have developed it in the old. But his speech will be completely at variance with the speech of his native environment. Walking, then, is a general human activity that varies only within circumscribed limits as we pass from individual to individual. Its variability is involuntary and purposeless. Speech is a human activity that varies without assignable limit as we pass from social group to social group, because it is a purely historical heritage of the group, the product of long-continued social usage. It varies as all creative effort varies – not as consciously, perhaps, but nonetheless as truly as do the religions, the beliefs, the customs, and the arts of different people. Walking is an organic, an instinctive, function (not, of course, itself an instinct); speech is a non-instinctive, acquired, 'cultural' function.

(Sapir 1921: 2)

The Great War of 1914–18 marked a turning point in global intellectual history. Since early in the nineteenth century the study of language had been dominated by Germany, and the rest of the world largely followed the lead of the centres of linguistic study at Berlin and Leipzig (see Volume I, Chapter 14). With Germany's defeat in the war, it was as though a spell was broken. Linguists in both Europe and America were ready for a new start, a modern approach that they could make their own.

A strikingly new approach had been promulgated in the courses in general linguistics given before the war by Ferdinand de Saussure at the University of Geneva (see Volume I, Chapter 16). But the compilation of his lectures was not published until 1916, the middle of the war, and did not then attract the widespread notice it would receive following publication of a slightly revised second edition in 1922. A year before that, however, a new book appeared by an American linguist-cum-anthropologist which was the first post-war general study of language to attract wide notice. It was a rich and readable account of language embedded in culture, written by a man with field experience to match his intellectual and literary gifts. Significantly for the degree of confidence it expressed in its subject matter, it had as its main title the single word *Language* (Sapir 1921).

Somewhat ironically, in view of the break from German linguistic thought it represented, the book's author, Edward Sapir (1884–1939), had been born in Germany, though his parents emigrated when he was still a small boy. What is more, the teacher who most directly shaped his approach to language was another German *émigré* to America, Franz Boas (1858–1942), who specialized in the anthropology of North America.

After a short period of teaching in Berlin, Boas settled in the United States in the late 1880s. What made him the founder of a large and productive school of linguistic research was his work as organizer, under the aegis of the Smithsonian Institution, of a survey of the indigenous languages of America north of Mexico. *The Handbook of American Indian Languages* was published in 1911. Boas's introduction to it contains a good summary of the approach to language that came to be known as 'American descriptivism'. Several of the chapters on individual languages were written by Boas, and he trained those who investigated the others. For decades, subsequently, all the great names in American linguistics learned their subject from Boas at first or second hand (Sampson 1980: 58).

The native languages of America are in many respects radically different from the various forms of Indo-European with which Western language studies had hitherto been primarily concerned: whatever their European heritage may have been, it availed Boas and Sapir little in the day-to-day anthropological work of recording and analysing the dozens, indeed hundreds, of languages of the American Indian tribes of North America. One of Boas's main contributions to American linguistics was to develop a method of transcribing these languages that relied as little as possible on categories and designations familiar from the languages of Europe, and to train generations of anthropologists in its use. In so far as they were anthropologists, the object of this exercise was to equip them with a prerequisite for understanding the culture whose vehicle a given language was. But in so far as they were linguists, description came to be seen as an end in itself, not just as a source of data for the construction of a general theory of language. It is true that the most eminent of the descriptivists are well known because they did theorize about language in general, but in all cases their general theories were backed up by intensive research on the detailed structure of various 'exotic' languages, and many of their less famous colleagues and followers preferred to take theories for granted and concentrate on the data.

Once the languages were recorded, Boas's interest in them – apart from the anthropological content of the stories and songs that made up many of the linguistic samples – lay in determining the historical affiliations of the various American Indian language groups. The problem was that, whereas for European languages there were written records dating back into the distant past that might reveal their historical affinities, there was nothing comparable available for American Indian languages. If sufficient similarities existed, a common ancestor was reconstructed by comparing them, in the way historical linguists attempted to reconstruct the proto-Indo-European parent language, but with a much shallower time-depth in the recorded sources. Moreover, whereas German-dominated Indo-European linguistics approached languages as discrete, organic wholes in which laws of sound-change operated with near-perfect regularity (distorted only by processes of analogy, a kind of psychological interference), Boas's experience with American Indian languages suggested that they did not develop in isolation and that similarities among them did not necessarily point to a common genetic origin. Rather, he argued that similarities were more the product of linguistic contact among

peoples, and that this affected all levels of language structure, including phonology, vocabulary and grammar.

> While I am not inclined to state categorically that the areas of distribution of phonetic phenomena, of morphological characteristics, and of groups based on similarities of vocabularies are absolutely distinct, I believe this question must be answered empirically before we can undertake to solve the general problem of the history of modern American languages. If it should prove true, as I believe it will, that all these different areas do not coincide, then the conclusion seems inevitable that the different languages must have exerted a far-reaching influence on one another. If this point of view is correct, then we have to ask ourselves in how far the phenomena of acculturation extend also over the domain of languages.
>
> (Boas 1940[1920]: 215)

That last sentence is a direct challenge to the German neogrammarian linguistic establishment (see Volume I, Chapter 14), and takes up the resistance to their approach that had been steadfastly maintained by a minority of linguists. These included Hugo Schuchardt (1842–1927), whose interest in contact phenomena led him to initiate the serious study of pidgins and creoles, and Otto Jespersen (1860–1943), whose work included inquiry into the symbolic functions of language for nations and individuals.

Although Boas had an abiding interest in language, his skills as a descriptive linguist were self-taught and outshone by those of his protégé Sapir, who came to be regarded as *the* linguist of Boasian anthropology (Darnell 1990: xii). Sapir, the most eminent student of American Indian languages of his time, began his career in charge of the anthropological division of the Canadian Geological Survey; in 1925 he moved to the University of Chicago and in 1931 to Yale.

Sapir's own anthropological background and bias are evident from the quotation from *Language* (Sapir 1921) which opens this chapter, where he insists upon the social and cultural nature of human speech. The neogrammarian linguistic science of the late nineteenth century took as its objects speech sounds and forms in abstraction from the human beings who produced them and the cultures within which those human beings lived. Language was studied as the essentially natural mechanics of the human