



Schools of Linguistics

Competition and evolution

Geoffrey Sampson

Professor of Linguistics, University of Leeds

Based on extensive study of 150 years of linguistic literature, this book provides a lively and readable guide to the varied and rival approaches to language study in Western countries up to the present day. Geoffrey Sampson explains the contrasts between linguistic theories by describing the wider background of intellectual and social trends in which each theory evolved. In evaluating individual schools Sampson not only gives a reasoned, sometimes controversial, account of their ideas, but also indicates how conflicts between schools arose and were resolved. Sampson himself

never hesitates to dissent from currently fashionable orthodoxies, in particular the Chomskyan transformational grammar movement. *Schools of Linguistics* is both a thought-provoking survey of linguistic thought and a common-sense approach to the phenomenon of language.

Reviews

'Sampson has written a frank, funny, personal, clear, literate, and scholarly . . . survey of the prelude . . . and the cacophonous themes of recent linguistic theorizing in the English-speaking world . . .' *Choice*

' . . . Geoffrey Sampson once again offers his unique mixture of polemical exposition of linguistic ideas and mordant comment on the sociology of linguistic scholarship.' *Review of English Studies*

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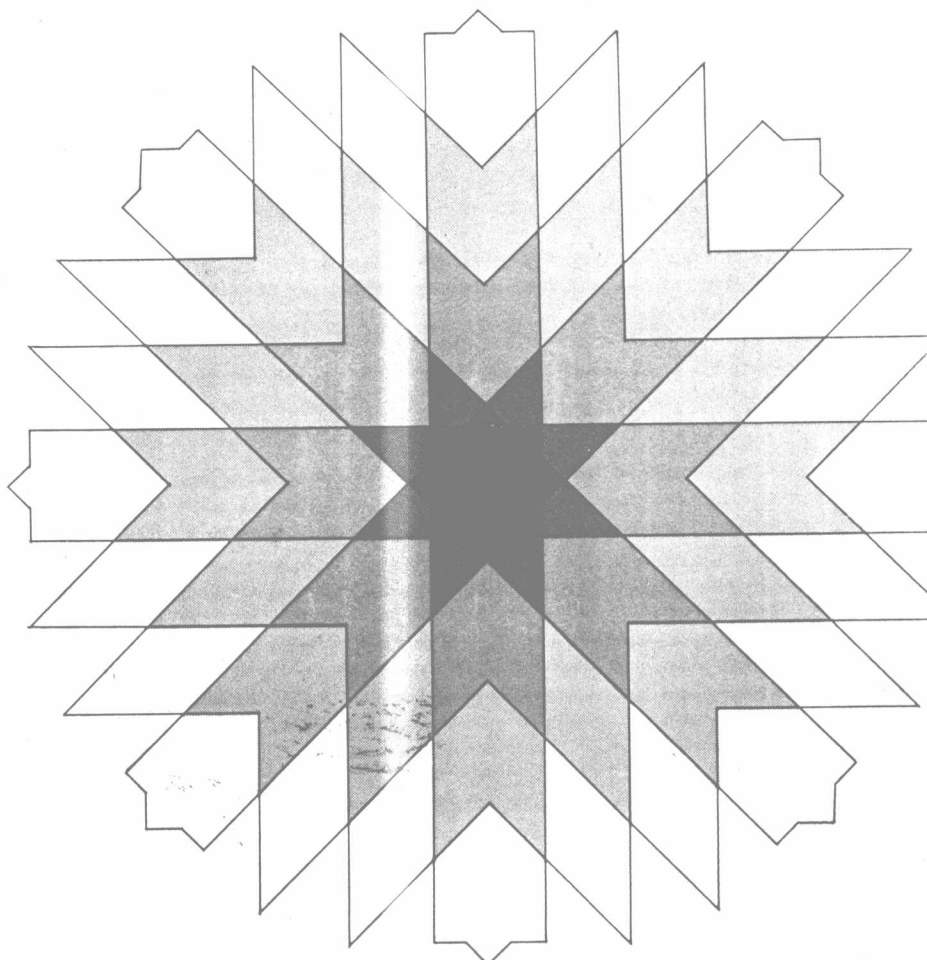


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Geoffrey Sampson was born in 1944 in Hertfordshire. He studied Chinese at St John's College, Cambridge and afterwards, as an English Speaking Union Scholar, did post-graduate work in Linguistics at Yale University. He was a research fellow at Queen's College, Oxford, and taught at the London School of Economics before taking up a lectureship at the University of Lancaster where he was Reader in Linguistics until 1984. He is currently Professor of Linguistics at the University of Leeds. His previous books include *The Form of Language* (1975) and *Liberty and Language* (1979). He, his wife and two daughters live in a Victorian house in the Yorkshire Dales.

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For Vera

who told me to get back to linguistics

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Preface

The study of linguistics has grown up in many widely separated parts of the Western world. Often one individual or a small group of original minds has founded a tradition which has continued to mould approaches to language in the university or the nation in which that tradition began; between adherents of different traditions there has usually been relatively limited contact. Hence this book. It cannot fail to be an advantage to any student of linguistics (whether he is a 'student' in the formal or the amateur sense) to learn something of the ideas that have been current in traditions other than the one with which he is most familiar. This is not only because some of the ideas he has been taught as received truth are likely to be wrong (although I do believe that there are fundamental errors in the thinking of the most fashionable contemporary linguistic school, and I hope this book may encourage questioning of those points). In many cases one school has directed its attention to issues which simply have not been considered by another school, so that one can gain by studying other orthodoxies without necessarily rejecting any elements of one's own. Furthermore, it is impossible fully to appreciate a scholar's ideas without some understanding of the intellectual atmosphere within which, and in reaction to which, those ideas were evolved; so that one needs to learn something about past theories if only, in some cases, to see why they were wrong.

In a book of this size it is not possible to do more than sketch broad, general tendencies of thought shared, more or less, by sizable groups of linguistic scholars. Happily, scholars do not come in well-defined categories. Some individuals mentioned here conform more clearly than others to the tendencies I ascribe to their 'schools'; even those who seem easiest to categorize will often be found to have made remarks at some

point in their careers which, taken in isolation, might appear to place them in a different camp altogether.

I cannot claim that the book is wholly comprehensive. I know less about developments outside the English-speaking world than within it; in particular, I suspect that I should have found the French 'linguistic geography' movement and Italian 'neolinguistics' worthy of extended discussion, if I had known more about them. No doubt there are other developments about which I do not even know that I am ignorant. And on the other hand there is only one group represented here (the 'stratificationalist' followers of Sydney Lamb) about whom I can claim to be unusually knowledgeable. However, I have had the fortune, during my time as a student and a teacher at ten British and American universities and university colleges, to be exposed perhaps more than most colleagues to a variety of linguistic orthodoxies in their respective native habitats. In case partisans of one school or another should feel tempted to refer to the proverb about Jack of all trades, let me say that to my mind by far the greatest danger in scholarship (and perhaps especially in linguistics) is not that the individual may fail to master the thought of a school but that a school may succeed in mastering the thought of the individual.

I have intentionally limited the book to 'core' linguistics, excluding various peripheral branches of the field. Subjects such as sociology, psychology and anthropology are discussed when they are particularly relevant (as they often are) to the linguistic theories of given schools. But there also exist brands of 'hyphenated linguistics' (socio-linguistics, psycho-linguistics, and the like) which involve investigating the relationships between, for example, sociology and a current linguistic theory irrespective of whether that particular version of linguistics forces one to think in sociological terms. Such studies can be quite legitimate, but I ignore them here.

Still less do I discuss so-called 'applied linguistics', which in practice means the study of language-teaching methods. This is because I do not believe that linguistics has any contribution to make to the teaching of English or the standard European languages. The many people who claim that it has seem to me to deceive themselves and others. (This would not matter, were it not for the extent to which the 'applied linguistics' industry,

like so many other dubious modern enterprises, is financed not by those who see it as having some value but by taxpayers helpless in the grip of a voracious and tyrannical state.) Linguistics has an honourable role to play in the teaching of 'exotic' languages lacking a pedagogical tradition, which is presumably likely always to be a small-scale activity; but what is relevant there is not a special applied version of linguistics, but straightforward descriptive linguistics as discussed in this book.

I have not hesitated to allow my own views about the various issues treated in the book to become apparent, although I hope I have avoided the danger of confusing my views with those of the various writers I discuss. A book of this kind does its readers more service by offering reasoned judgements with which they may agree or disagree, than by treating each figure and each school at their own self-evaluation and thus leaving the reader no wiser than if he had been given a bibliography and left to read the sources for himself. Furthermore I have not striven, as scholars often do, to eradicate all expression of the personal tastes, foibles, and unscientific prejudices which may have affected my judgement of the issues discussed. As an admirer of the philosophy of Imre Lakatos, I regard such a procedure as positively undesirable, serving only to lend to the writer's work the appearance of an impartial authority which no product of a human mind possesses in reality. It goes without saying that the reader should feel free to disagree frequently and strongly with my opinions. All my friends do.

I owe a special debt of gratitude in connexion with this book to Dick Hudson, who first asked me, six years ago, to give the course of lectures out of which the book has finally grown. He has furthermore been kind enough to comment on drafts of the manuscript, as have Richard Hogg and Nigel Vincent on part of it. The book owes a great deal also to Charles Hockett, from whom I have learned much without ever meeting him. Over and over again I have discovered the source of some idea which I had fondly imagined to be original on re-reading *The State of the Art* or another of his publications. None of these people, of course, are to be blamed for the shortcomings of my work.

It is a pleasure to thank the library staffs of Lancaster University and the British Museum for their very considerable help, always given with willing enthusiasm; and I must thank

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Lancaster University also for permitting me the leisure to write. I thank the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Linguistic Society of America, for permission to quote passages by Edward Sapir on pages 82-3.

To Vera, my debt is inexpressible.

Ingleton, Yorks.

September 1977

1 Prelude: the nineteenth century

This book deals primarily with linguistics as it has developed in the twentieth century. The scientific study of language did not, of course, begin in this century; but the years around 1900 happen to have marked an important turning-point in the history of modern linguistics. At very roughly that time, independently in Europe and America, linguistics shifted its orientation in such a way that much nineteenth-century work in the subject has become relatively remote from the concerns of the linguist of recent years. Not that twentieth-century linguistics is a wholly new enterprise quite lacking connections with the past; far from it. Noam Chomsky, in some ways the most innovative of contemporary linguists, stresses the relationship between his own work and that of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) and of the rationalist philosophers of seventeenth-century France. But, if we want a boundary that will divide the stream of linguistic inquiry into ‘history’ and ‘current affairs’, as it were, then the beginning of our century will do very well.

The re-orientation that occurred about then was a shift from the ‘historical linguistics’, also known as ‘diachronic linguistics’ or ‘philology’, which had dominated nineteenth-century linguistic research – the investigation of the history of languages, the uncovering of their relationships, and the reconstruction of the lost ‘proto-languages’ from which families of extant languages descend – towards what became known as ‘synchronic linguistics’: the analysis of languages as communicative systems as they exist at a given point of time (often the present), ignoring (as their speakers ignore) the route by which they arrived at their present form.^{1*}

It is never easy to appreciate novel ideas without some

*Notes (including definitions of technical terms) are on pages 243–58.

understanding of the climate of opinion existing when those ideas were formed, and against which they constituted a reaction. Accordingly, in this first chapter I shall sketch the intellectual trends which caused linguists of the nineteenth century to be preoccupied with the historical approach, as a prelude to considering in subsequent chapters the alternative views of language which have been advanced since that approach ceased to predominate.

It is easy for a newcomer to linguistics today to dismiss the philologists of the nineteenth century as pedants motivated more by a love of accumulating facts for their own sake than by a feeling for the excitement of scientific theory-construction. Such a judgement would be quite incorrect. It is true that the enormous effort devoted to the historical study of the Indo-European² language-family was inspired partly by personal taste, as opposed to considerations of rational scientific research strategy. The change of emphasis from 'classical philology' to the new subject of linguistics occurred first in Germany (indeed, throughout the nineteenth century linguistics was mainly a German pursuit); and the flourishing of Indo-European (in German '*Indogermanisch*') linguistic studies went hand in hand with the general intellectual and artistic movement of late-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth-century Germany known as Romanticism, with its rejection of the classical tradition and its emphasis on indigenous ethnic and cultural roots. (The link between linguistics and these wider intellectual and aesthetic currents is particularly clear in the work of such men as J.G. Herder (1744–1803), the leading figure in the *Sturm und Drang* movement in literature, collector of folk songs and relics of the early culture of the Germanic people, one of whose most influential works was his *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1772), and Jacob Grimm (1785–1863), one of the founders of Germanic linguistics, and collector with his brother Wilhelm of a world-famous anthology of traditional German fairy-tales.) Since race, language and culture were assumed to be intimately related, reconstruction of the prehistory of the Germanic and other language-stocks was attractive to the Romantic temperament.

But there was much more to the situation than this: the history-centred outlook of nineteenth-century linguistic scientists was related to the general state of science at the time.

It is commonly the case in the history of science that at any given time there are a few outstandingly successful branches of science which are regarded as models of what a science should be, so that scholars attempting to investigate scientifically some new field of phenomena will almost inevitably imitate the methods and theories of the 'model' sciences. The modern philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1962) has coined the term 'paradigm' to suggest how, at a given period, thinking about a particular subject is commonly conditioned by some more or less coherent system of ideas which act, not so much as explicit tenets of a scientific theory, but as unspoken assumptions about the range of possible hypotheses which the scientist may entertain. For Kuhn, the most important scientific advances occur on the rare occasions when scholars manage to break out of these mental straitjackets by rejecting assumptions which their predecessors did not even feel the need to defend (as when Einstein responded to problems about the observed speed of light by suggesting that space, time, and mass might be observer-dependent rather than absolute quantities).³ We may use Kuhn's term 'paradigm' also in a rather wider sense, so that the outlook of practitioners of a particularly successful science constitutes a paradigm not only for that science itself but also for less developed sciences. The nineteenth century contained two outstandingly successful scientific paradigms in this sense.

The first of these was mechanistic physics, according to which all phenomena could be described by simple, deterministic laws of force and motion – so that all future states of the world could in principle be inferred from a complete knowledge of its present state (the view classically expressed by Laplace in the preface to his *Théorie analytique des probabilités* (1820), and abandoned in our own century with the adoption of the quantum theory); the second was the biological theory of evolution by natural selection, which emerged from a great upsurge of interest in natural history during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and culminated in Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and the storm of controversy aroused by that book.

From physics, philologists took the notion of describing the history of sound-changes occurring in a language in terms of 'laws' which apply uniformly to whole ranges of examples, rather than discussing individual words in the anecdotal, case-by-case

way in which a historian (in the ordinary sense) treats individual persons or events. One of the first such discoveries, for instance, was the Proto-Germanic consonant-shift commonly called Grimm's Law (though in fact stated first by the Dane Rasmus Rask in 1814), whereby Proto-Indo-European consonants changed in the Germanic branch in accordance with the following rules:

PIE		Germanic
voiceless stops [p t k]	>	voiceless fricatives [f θ x]
voiced stops [b d g]	>	voiceless stops [p t k]
voiced aspirates [bh dh gh]	>	voiced stops [b d g]

Since in other branches of Indo-European the consonants remained unchanged (or developed differently – thus PIE voiced aspirates become voiceless aspirates [ph th kh] in Classical Greek, which in turn become voiceless fricatives in Modern Greek), the Germanic consonant-shift produces many cases of words alike in meaning but containing distinct consonants in different languages: compare, for example, the initial consonants of Greek *thyra* and English *door*, Greek *genos* and English *kin*, Greek *pous* and English *foot*.⁴ 'Grimm's Law' reduces many hundreds of cases like these to three simple formulae.

The term *Lautgesetz*, 'sound law', was first used by Franz Bopp in 1824 (Wechssler 1900, p. 400). (Bopp even offered what he called a 'mechanical' explanation for the Indo-European phenomenon known as 'Ablaut' – the alternation between different vowels in a morphological paradigm, of which we retain traces in the conjugation of English strong verbs such as *sing~sang~sung* – by invoking a 'law of gravity' in connection with the relative 'weight' of different syllables, cf. Delbrück (1880, pp. 68–9). If intended literally, however, this is surely a rather crude attempt to apply the findings of one discipline to the subject-matter of another.) Bopp's sound laws were only statements of general tendencies, and Bopp did not feel it necessary to provide explanations for cases which failed to follow the general rule; but, as the century grew older, the concept of 'sound law' took on more and more the rigorous character of genuine scientific laws such as those of physics: by the last quarter of the nineteenth century apparent counter-examples to a sound law were permissible only if they could be explained by a sub-law of their own.