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Grammatical theory in the United States from Bloomfield to Chomsky

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This is a study of the history of linguistics in North America. It begins before the First World War and surveys the whole field up to the 1990s. It then explores in detail the development of grammatical theory from Bloomfield's first book (1914), through his *Language* (1933) and the work of Harris and other 'Post-Bloomfieldians', to the latest ideas of Chomsky. The last chapter in particular is an account of Chomsky's intellectual development since the 1950s. One of the main objects is to trace the origins of a set of ideas that are often taken for granted. The first is the Bloomfieldian concept of constituency structure, which includes that of the morpheme as the ultimate constituent. The second is the attempt by the Post-Bloomfieldians and their successors to separate the study of syntax from the study of meaning. The third is the more recent Chomskyan theory that the object of linguistics is to study a genetically inherited universal grammar. These three ideas have come to dominate linguistics, and for anyone who wants to understand how they have arisen this book will be essential reading.

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For Lucienne
with love and gratitude

Preface

Parts of this book are based on earlier publications. Chapter 2 substantially reproduces a paper with the same title that is about to appear in the *Transactions of the Philological Society* (Matthews, 1992); I am grateful to the Secretary for Publications for allowing that earlier version to go ahead. In the first two sections of Chapter 3 I have incorporated some material from my contribution to a Festschrift for R. H. Robins, edited by F. R. Palmer and Th. Bynon and published by Cambridge University Press (Matthews, 1986). A preliminary and much shorter version of Chapter 4 appeared with a different title in *An Encyclopaedia of Language*, edited by N. E. Collinge and published by Routledge (Matthews, 1990a). It has been rewritten almost entirely, but I am grateful for their permission to incorporate material from it.

John Lyons has very kindly read and commented on the final typescript. I dedicate the book to my wife, Lucienne Schleich; she has not only commented on most of it but, more importantly, she has taught me the self-discipline needed to write it.

October 1992 P.H.M.

Note on the text

In citing works I have sometimes used later editions or reprintings; in such cases, I have added the original date of publication in square brackets. There are also times when the publication of a work has been substantially delayed; if the original date of composition is important, I have again added it in square brackets.

In the citations themselves all indications of emphasis, whether by italics or small capitals or by spaced or bold letters, have been reduced to italic. Where I have expanded or altered a passage for explanatory reasons, this is indicated by square brackets, including empty brackets where letters, for example, have been removed.

Abbreviations

FL	*Foundations of Language*
Harris, *Papers*	Harris, 1981
IJAL	*International Journal of American Linguistics*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JL	*Journal of Linguistics*
LBA	*A Leonard Bloomfield Anthology* (Hockett (ed.), 1970)
Lg	*Language*
LIn	*Linguistic Inquiry*
MSLL	*Monograph Series on Languages and Linguistics*
RiL	*Readings in Linguistics* (Joos (ed.), 1958)
SIL	*Studies in Linguistics*
TPhS	*Transactions of the Philological Society*

Contents

1 *Introduction*

Many readers will be familiar with the classic historiographic study by Walter Carruthers Sellar (Aegrot. Oxon.) and Robert Julian Yeatman (Failed M.A. etc. Oxon.), in which they set out 'all the parts you can remember' of the History of England (Sellar & Yeatman, 1930). What 'Every student can remember' of the history of linguistics is not perhaps so bad, and sadly less hilarious. But it would not be difficult to put together an account of '1957 and All That', in which developments in the twentieth century are quite seriously garbled.

It would contain at most two 'memorable dates'. One is that of the publication, in 1957, of Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*, in which Structuralism, or (according to some authorities) American Descriptivism, was overthrown. The other date, which careful research might well reveal not to be memorable, is that of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*. Before this, at the beginning of the century, linguists were only interested in the history of languages. But according to Saussure, who is known as the Father of Modern Linguistics, the subject had to be synchronic, and we had to study 'la langue', which is just an arbitrary inventory of signs. This was at first a Good Thing, since it led to a lot of important work especially on American Indian languages. But in the long run structuralism was a Bad Thing. One reason is that the structuralists did so much work with American Indians that they came to believe that languages could differ from each other in any way whatever. Therefore they were interested only in techniques for classifying data. Another reason is that the American descriptivists ignored meaning. This is mainly the fault of Bloomfield, who was the First to Make a Science of Linguistics. But he decided that meaning could not be studied scientifically. It also has to do with their work on American Indian languages, which were so strange that one could not get at them reliably unless one paid no attention to what the words meant.

All this was swept aside by the Chomskyan Revolution. This was the

Best Thing that has happened to linguistics in the past 2500 years, since, as soon as Chomsky became top linguist, anyone who was anybody worked in an entirely New Paradigm. From the beginning Chomsky has seen language as a Window on the Mind. Therefore he insisted that a grammar had to be generative, and should include meaning. He is the first linguist since the eighteenth century to be interested in Universal Grammar, which he has shown to be innate. He is therefore a Rationalist and not an Empiricist, and this is a Good Thing because it explains why any child learns any language equally fast. He was also famous at one time for his theory of Deep Structure and Transformations. But this turned out to be not such a Good Thing, and according to some authorities may even have been a Bad Thing, because transformations were too powerful.

Of some of the statements that make up this pastiche it might perhaps be said with charity that they are no worse than gross over-simplifications. Others are nonsense, or can easily be proved wrong. But assertions like them do appear in students' essays; and, what is worse, although they are in part perversions of the account in sources that are broadly reputable, much of this story could be cited in inverted commas from other books that are, unfortunately, quite widely read. Nor am I confident that there are no teachers and examiners who will not give an 'A' to more specious versions of it.

One of my aims in writing this book is to try to bring home to colleagues who teach the subject what the currents of ideas in twentieth-century American linguistics have in reality been. I am not sure that I can reach their students directly, since, despite the admirable work of Hymes and Fought (1981 [1975]), which has exploded many of the myths that are told about the period up to 1960, we will still need to discuss in detail texts that are sometimes difficult and not always on students' reading lists. I shall also offer some interpretations that may be genuinely contentious. But I hope that, even in so doing, I will persuade my readers that the recent history of linguistics is a serious topic; that it can be treated as more than just a chronicle of individuals and schools; and that, in going beyond this, we can do better than to trust the official histories of dominant theories, or the polemics of one faction against another, or the haphazard comments of compilers of books of readings, or the attempts by middle-aged scholars to disguise what they believed when they were young, or any of the other sources that are often uncritically followed.

My main purpose, however, is to trace the development and continuity

of three dominant ideas. One is that the study of formal relations can and should be separated from that of meaning. It has appeared in many variants: in the insistence that a description of a language must be justified by distributional criteria; in the belief that there are syntactic facts or syntactic arguments for syntactic rules that are distinct from semantic facts or semantic arguments; in a theory of levels in which one component of a grammar accounts for the grammaticality of sentences and another supplies their semantic interpretation; in other weaker concepts of the autonomy of syntax. Not every scholar I will refer to has subscribed to such ideas. But it is a motif that runs through American linguistics from the 1940s onwards, and where similar views are current elsewhere it is largely under American influence.

The second idea is that sentences are composed of linear configurations of morphemes. Strictly, this involves three propositions: firstly, that relations are basically of sequence; secondly, that they hold within and between the units in a hierarchy of constituents; thirdly, that morphemes are the elementary units in this hierarchy. But these propositions usually go together, especially in the potted expositions of grammatical theory that are read by students. They have in consequence become so widespread, at least or above all in English-speaking countries, that many scholars have to be reminded forcibly that there might, in principle, be arguments against them. But their origins, as we will see, lie in the specific preoccupations of American theorists earlier in this century.

The third idea is that many aspects of grammar are determined genetically. This is more recent, and has arisen independently of the others. But, like them, it is widely held, and all three are commonly held by the same people. It is not, of course, my business as a historian to say whether these ideas are right or wrong, or to discuss any criticisms of them that are not themselves part of their history. But I would be disingenuous if I did not confess that my account will be in part what might be called an 'anti-Whig' interpretation. I have selected these ideas because they have come to dominate grammatical thought in the late twentieth century, because their history fascinates me and because existing accounts are partly misleading. But the dominance of the first two, in particular, is not (to return to the language of Sellar and Yeatman) a Good Thing, and I would not be disappointed if my study of their origins were to lead more scholars to question them.

The time span of this study runs approximately from the appearance in 1911 of the first part of the *Handbook of American Indian Languages* to the

late 1980s, but will deal in greatest detail with the middle of this period. Its geographical scope will be limited to the United States. This has in practice been an easy decision, since the main stream of American linguistics has for much of this century had few tributaries. It will also concentrate on Bloomfield and Chomsky, who, if nothing else, are the most influential figures in our story. But they are, of course, much more; and the reading and rereading undertaken for this book has only increased my admiration for their subtlety, originality and ingenuity of mind. They are therefore the only scholars whose contributions to grammatical theory will be studied systematically over their whole lifetime. Others have played a dominant role at various times: in the term used in the ancient analysis of the *Iliad*, there is an ἀριστεία or moment of glory of one group in the 1940s, of another in the late 1960s, and so on. The contribution of Harris, in particular, is central to the history of American linguistics for nearly twenty years, and, over that period, will be discussed in the same detail. But neither for him nor for others will I attempt a rounded intellectual biography.

For, finally and most importantly, this is a history in which ideas will generally loom larger than people. In that respect the echo of Ranke, which may have been detectable some paragraphs back, was serious. Particular ideas will often be seen to persist as the personnel who hold them change, and as other ideas change also. This is especially the case, and especially understandable, when an idea is not itself the immediate focus of debate. There is no doubt, for example, that Bloomfield's views on meaning and the psychology of language changed radically between his first book (1914) and the one for which he is best known (1935 [1933]). But as I will try to show in Chapter 2 (§§2.1–2), much of his detailed concept of grammar survived, in a new form and with a new justification. There is also no doubt that the goals of American linguistics were transformed in the early 1960s, when Chomsky's partial critique of Post-Bloomfieldian work sank in. But that did not affect ideas which he did not criticise, such as the concept of constituency structure (see §2.3); or that of the morpheme, which, as we will see in §§2.4–5, most American scholars have continued to take for granted; or a commitment to distributional criteria (§3.2). There is nothing odd about this, nor, in the illustrations I have given, anything that will not be accepted at once by anyone who has read the primary sources. But the secondary sources tend to deal in schools and individuals, and emphasise the discontinuities between them. They also tend to treat the thought within each school as a

unit. It is therefore worth stressing that ideas often persist, evolve and may be abandoned on a time scale that does not correspond to the transitory intellectual hegemony of one group of scholars or another.

There is also a logic of ideas that is not always obvious from the explicit reasoning of those who hold them. When a new theory of the morpheme was developed in the 1940s, it was said to remedy defects of the existing theory developed by Bloomfield. But when we look at this episode more closely, we find that the defects were not strictly as they were said to be, and that the real motives, as I will suggest in §2.3, lie deeper. A quarter of a century later, the main issue among Chomsky's followers was whether semantics was 'interpretive' or 'generative'; and, since the latter view did not prevail, it is often seen as an aberration. But I will suggest in §3.4 that it was a natural consequence not just of the way that transformational grammar developed in the early to mid-1960s, which is undoubtedly how its proponents saw it, but of a view of form and meaning whose roots lie earlier and which Chomsky, in developing the theory of transformations, had accepted and supported. This kind of history becomes increasingly difficult from the early 1970s onwards, as the arguments are too recent and for the most part continue. But for the earlier period it is feasible and, controversial as it may be, is more interesting than any other.

1.1 American linguistics 1900–1990

Let us begin with a general historical survey. This will include some statements that either need or deserve more detailed discussion and documentation, which, where the leading scholars are concerned, will be reserved for later chapters. But the main stream of American linguistics is naturally not the only stream. I will therefore have to allude briefly to the work of other schools, good or in its day important, to which I will not be able to return.

Our history may conveniently begin around 1910. This is just before the publication of the first part of the *Handbook of American Indian Languages* (1911), which included Boas's 'Introduction', and four years before Bloomfield's first book; it is also the date when Sapir took up his first post, in Ottawa. Insofar as it is possible to divide the century into periods, the first might then be said to run from 1910 to the foundation, at the end of 1924, of the Linguistic Society of America. No division can serve as more than a skeleton for the exposition of ideas. But the latter date is also chosen by Andresen (1990) to end a survey of American

linguistics that begins in the mid-eighteenth century. It is also worth remarking that, although he was active until much later, Boas had by then reached a normal age of retirement; and that in 1925 Sapir moved from relative isolation in Ottawa to a chair in Chicago. This led to new contacts and a new role, and, as Darnell's recent biography makes clear, an accompanying shift in his interests (Darnell, 1990).

In the light of what was to come, the most important intellectual trend is the emergence of what we now call structuralism. The term itself was not used until later; but, in reviewing Sapir's *Language* in the early 1920s, Bloomfield spoke already of the 'newer trend of linguistic study' with which Sapir's work was associated (Bloomfield, 1922: *L[eonard] B[loomfield] A[nthology]* 92). Its 'theoretic foundation' had, he said, been given by Saussure, and in the following year, in a review of the second edition of the *Cours de linguistique générale*, he stressed the value of Saussure's work as a 'clear and rigorous demonstration of fundamental principles' (Bloomfield, 1923: *LBA* 106). 'Most of what the author says has long been "in the air" and has been here and there fragmentarily expressed'; but, he adds, 'the systematization is [Saussure's] own'. The precise contribution of Saussure is still a topic of debate, into which we need not enter. But some of these ideas had been 'in the air' especially in America, and American structuralism thus had partly native origins. It also had some biasses and characteristics of its own, which were to set American linguistics on a distinct course.

One central structuralist idea is that every language has a structure of its own, in which individual elements have a role distinct from that which superficially similar elements have in other languages. For example, a [ð] in English does not have the same role as a phonetically similar [ð] in Spanish. In phonology, this point was definitively made in Sapir's classic paper on sound patterns (1925); and in his major review of Sapir's posthumous *Selected Writings*, Harris speaks of the 'patterning of data' as the 'greatest contribution' of Sapir's linguistic work. The 'fact of patterning' he sees as 'the overshadowing interest' from 'de Saussure to the Prague Circle and Sapir and Bloomfield' (Harris, 1951b: 292, 297). In semantics, Boas had laid great emphasis, at the beginning of our period, on the very different principles of classification to be found in the vocabularies of different languages, and the striking ways in which grammatical categories may vary (n.d. [1911]: 19f., 28ff.). Earlier in his chapter on 'The characteristics of language', Boas too had shown how distinctions made in one 'phonetic system' may be quite foreign to another (n.d.: 11ff.).