

Literary English Since Shakespeare

Edited By

GEORGE WATSON

IN CANADA \$3.00

GB 314 / \$2.75

Literary English Since Shakespeare

Edited by
GEORGE WATSON
St. John's College, Cambridge

1970
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
London Oxford New York

Preface

This collection links more than twenty essays, five of them new (those by Watson, Davies, Rogers, Ingham, and Donoghue), on the literary uses of English since the sixteenth century. There are two sections. The first treats such wide issues as the state of linguistics at the present time, style, the literal and the figurative, and the statistical analysis of literary English. The second is devoted to individual writers or schools of writers from Shakespeare to the Moderns.

Such a book plainly needs no justifying, since the linguistic study of English literature is now widely felt to be among the most inviting prospects of English studies. There is no denying, however, that the subject is in an early and highly unequal state of development. No book by a single hand exists, or perhaps could exist, which attempts as much as this; and it is remarkable how little even of essay-length is so far available, how tentative even the best attempts often are, and how many major English authors are still unapproached in these terms.

Considered attempts to reconcile modern linguistics with the study of English literature did not become common until the 1960s. Earlier ventures in the study of literary language are not usually concerned with English, or not mainly with English, or not with those aspects of English which are fully characteristic of its genius as a language.

Early examples include Gustaf Stern, *Meaning and Change of Meaning* (Gothenburg, 1932), which attempted to put semantics to the service of literary studies; and G. Udney Yule, *The Statistical Study of Literary Vocabulary* (Cambridge, 1944), a mathematician's approach to the problems of word-frequency. Attempts to bridge the gap from the literary side have more often had a French application than an English. Albert Thibaudet's chapter "Le Style de Flaubert" in his study of Flaubert (Paris, 1922) is a notable forerunner; and Leo Spitzer's *Linguistics and Literary History* (Princeton, 1948), P. Guiraud's *La Stylistique* (Paris, 1954), and Stephen Ullmann's studies, especially his *Language and Style* (Oxford, 1964), continue an active tradition in Romance studies. But in the English-speaking world the enquiry has remained awkwardly interdisciplinary and hard to isolate. Literary language has been the concern now of the practical critic, such as William Empson in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London, 1930), now of the linguistic philosopher on one of his rare excursions into literary language, and now of the professional linguist. I have already discussed the prospects and problems of reconciliation in a chapter on linguistics in *The Study of Literature* (London, 1969). Three departments of knowledge are involved here, in principle and in practice. I hope the book will serve to stimulate enquiry as well as to satisfy a need. It seems inconceivable, whatever the immediate difficulties, that the three disciplines should not some day learn to exchange what they know.

GEORGE WATSON

St. John's College
Cambridge, England
November 1969



The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the west. It abounds with works of imagination not inferior to the noblest which Greece has bequeathed to us; with models of every species of eloquence; with historical compositions which, considered merely as narratives, have seldom been surpassed, and which, considered as vehicles of ethical and political instruction, have never been equalled; with just and lively representations of human life and human nature; with the most profound speculations on metaphysics, morals, government, jurisprudence, and trade; with full and correct information respecting every experimental science which tends to preserve the health, to increase the comfort, or to expand the intellect of man. Whoever knows that language has ready access to all the vast intellectual wealth which all the wisest nations of the earth have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations. It may safely be said that the literature now extant in that language is of far greater value than all the literature which three hundred years ago was extant in all the languages of the world together.

Macaulay, *Indian Education*
(Minute of 2 February 1835)

Contents

Language and Literature

- NOAM CHOMSKY The Current Scene in Linguistics, 3
ERICH AUERBACH Realism and the Three Styles, 17
OWEN BARFIELD The Meaning of "Literal", 22
G. UDNY YULE On Sentence-Length, 35
A. C. BRADLEY Monosyllabic Lines and Words, 50

From Shakespeare to Modernism

- OTTO JESPERSEN Shakespeare and the Language of Poetry, 67
MORRIS W. CROLL The Baroque Style in Prose, 84
JONAS A. BARISH Jonson's Dramatic Prose, 111
GEORGE WATSON The Language of the Metaphysicals, 156
HUGH SYKES DAVIES Milton and the Vocabulary of Verse and Prose, 175
RICHARD FOSTER JONES Science and English Prose Style, 1650-75, 194
W. P. KER The Style of Dryden's Prose, 231
J. P. W. ROGERS Pope and the Syntax of Satire, 236
LOUIS T. MILIC Swift and Syntactical Connection, 266
WAYNE C. BOOTH Irony in Eighteenth-Century Fiction, 281
W. K. WIMSATT The Consistency of Johnson's Style, 289

- DONALD DAVIE Syntax in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, 308
E. M. W. TILLYARD Scott's Linguistic Vagaries, 319
F. W. BATESON The Language of the Victorians, 328
W. A. WARD On Dickens, 339
PATRICIA INGHAM Dialect in the Novels of Hardy and George Eliot, 347
IAN WATT The First Paragraph of James's *Ambassadors*, 364
DENIS DONOGHUE The Holy Language of Modernism, 386



Language and Literature

NOAM CHOMSKY



The Current Scene in Linguistics

The title of this paper may suggest something more than can be provided. It would be foolhardy to attempt to forecast the development of linguistics or any other field, even in general terms and in the short run. There is no way to anticipate ideas and insights that may, at any time, direct research in new directions or reopen traditional problems that had been too difficult or too unclear to provide a fruitful challenge. The most that one can hope to do is to arrive at a clear appraisal of the present situation in linguistic research, and an accurate understanding of historical tendencies. It would not be realistic to attempt to project such tendencies into the future.

Two major traditions can be distinguished in modern linguistic theory: one is the tradition of "universal" or "philosophical grammar," which flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the second is the tradition of structural or descriptive linguistics, which reached the high point of its development perhaps fifteen or twenty years ago. I think that a synthesis of these two major traditions is possible, and that it is, to some extent, being achieved in current work. Before approaching the problem of synthesis, I would like to sketch briefly—and, necessarily, with some oversimplification

From *College English*, XXVII (1966), pp. 587-95. Reprinted by permission of the publisher and author.

—what seem to me to be the most significant features in these two traditions.

As the name indicates, universal grammar was concerned with general features of language structure rather than with particular idiosyncrasies. Particularly in France, universal grammar developed in part in reaction to an earlier descriptivist tradition which held that the only proper task for the grammarian was to present data, to give a kind of “natural history” of language (specifically, of the “cultivated usage” of the court and the best writers). In contrast, universal grammarians urged that the study of language should be elevated from the level of “natural history” to that of “natural philosophy”; hence the term “philosophical grammar,” “philosophical” being used, of course, in essentially the sense of our term “scientific.” Grammar should not be merely a record of the data of usage but, rather, should offer an explanation for such data. It should establish general principles, applicable to all languages and based ultimately on intrinsic properties of the mind, which would explain how language is used and why it has the particular properties to which the descriptive grammarian chooses, irrationally, to restrict his attention.

Universal grammarians did not content themselves with merely stating this goal. In fact, many generations of scholars proceeded to develop a rich and far-reaching account of the general principles of language structure, supported by whatever detailed evidence they could find from the linguistic materials available to them. On the basis of these principles, they attempted to explain many particular facts, and to develop a psychological theory dealing with certain aspects of language use, with the production and comprehension of sentences.

The tradition of universal grammar came to an abrupt end in the nineteenth century, for reasons that I will discuss directly. Furthermore, its achievements were very rapidly forgotten, and an interesting mythology developed concerning its limitations and excesses. It has now become something of a cliché among linguists that universal grammar suffered from the following defects: (1) it was not concerned with the sounds of speech, but only with writing; (2) it was based primarily on a Latin model, and was, in some sense “prescriptive”; (3) its assumptions about language structure have been refuted by modern “anthropological linguistics.” In addition, many linguists, though not all, would hold that universal grammar was misguided in principle in its attempt to provide explanations

rather than mere description of usage, the latter being all that can be contemplated by the "sober scientist."

The first two criticisms are quite easy to refute; the third and fourth are more interesting. Even a cursory glance at the texts will show that phonetics was a major concern of universal grammarians, and that their phonetic theories were not very different from our own. Nor have I been able to discover any confusion of speech and writing. The belief that universal grammar was based on a Latin model is rather curious. In fact, the earliest studies of universal grammar, in France, were a part of the movement to raise the status of the vernacular, and are concerned with details of French that often do not even have a Latin analogue.

As to the belief that modern "anthropological linguistics" has refuted the assumptions of universal grammar, this is not only untrue but, for a rather important reason, could not be true. The reason is that universal grammar made a sharp distinction between what we may call "deep structure" and "surface structure." The deep structure of a sentence is the abstract underlying form which determines the meaning of the sentence; it is present in the mind but not necessarily represented directly in the physical signal. The surface structure of a sentence is the actual organization of the physical signal into phrases of varying size, into words of various categories, with certain particles, inflections, arrangement, and so on. The fundamental assumption of the universal grammarians was that languages scarcely differ at the level of deep structure—which reflects the basic properties of thought and conception—but that they may vary widely at the much less interesting level of surface structure. But modern anthropological linguistics does not attempt to deal with deep structure and its relations to surface structure. Rather, its attention is limited to surface structure—to the phonetic form of an utterance and its organization into units of varying size. Consequently, the information that it provides has no direct bearing on the hypotheses concerning deep structure postulated by the universal grammarians. And, in fact, it seems to me that what information is now available to us suggests not that they went too far in assuming universality of underlying structure, but that they may have been much too cautious and restrained in what they proposed.

The fourth criticism of universal grammar—namely, that it was misguided in seeking explanations in the first place—I will not discuss at length. It seems to me that this criticism is based on a mis-

understanding of the nature of all rational inquiry. There is particular irony in the fact that this criticism should be advanced with the avowed intention of making linguistics "scientific." It is hardly open to question that the natural sciences are concerned precisely with the problem of explaining phenomena, and have little use for accurate description that is unrelated to problems of explanation.

We have much to learn from a careful study of what was achieved by the universal grammarians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Contemporary linguistics would do well to take their concept of language as a point of departure for current work. Not only do they make a fairly clear and well-founded distinction between deep and surface structure, but they also go on to study the nature of deep structure and to provide valuable hints and insights concerning the rules that relate the abstract underlying mental structures to surface form, the rules that we would now call "grammatical transformations." What is more, universal grammar developed as part of a general philosophical tradition that provided deep and important insights, also largely forgotten, into the use and acquisition of language, and, furthermore, into problems of perception and acquisition of knowledge in general. These insights can be exploited and developed. The idea that the study of language should proceed within the framework of what we might nowadays call "cognitive psychology" is sound. There is much truth in the traditional view that language provides the most effective means for studying the nature and mechanisms of the human mind, and that only within this context can we perceive the larger issues that determine the directions in which the study of language should develop.

The tradition of universal grammar came to an end more than a century ago. Several factors combined to lead to its decline. For one thing, the problems posed were beyond the scope of the technique and understanding then available. The problem of formulating the rules that determine deep structures and relate them to surface structures, and the deeper problem of determining the general abstract characteristics of these rules, could not be studied with any precision, and discussion therefore remained at the level of hints, examples, and vaguely formulated intentions. In particular, the problem of rule-governed creativity in language simply could not be formulated with sufficient precision to permit research to proceed very far. A second reason for the decline of traditional linguistic theory lies in the remarkable successes of Indo-European comparative linguistics

in the nineteenth century. These achievements appeared to dwarf the accomplishments of universal grammar, and led many linguists to scoff at the "metaphysical" and "airy pronouncements" of those who were attempting to deal with a much wider range of problems—and who at that stage of the development of linguistic theory were discussing these topics in a highly inconclusive fashion. Looking back now, we can see quite clearly that the concept of language employed by the Indo-European comparativists was an extremely primitive one. It was, however, well suited to the tasks at hand. It is, therefore, not surprising that this concept of language, which was then extended and developed by the structural and descriptive linguists of the twentieth century, became almost completely dominant, and that the older tradition of linguistic theory was largely swept aside and forgotten. This is hardly a unique instance in intellectual history.

Structural linguistics is a direct outgrowth of the concepts that emerged in Indo-European comparative study, which was primarily concerned with language as a system of phonological units that undergo systematic modification in phonetically determined contexts. Structural linguistics reinterpreted this concept for a fixed state of a language, investigated the relations among such units and the patterns they form, and attempted, with varying success, to extend the same kind of analysis to "higher levels" of linguistic structure. Its fundamental assumption is that procedures of segmentation and classification, applied to data in a systematic way, can isolate and identify all types of elements that function in a particular language along with the constraints that they obey. A catalogue of these elements, their relations, and their restrictions of "distribution," would, in most structuralist views, constitute a full grammar of the language.

Structural linguistics has very real accomplishments to its credit. To me, it seems that its major achievement is to have provided a factual and a methodological basis that makes it possible to return to the problems that occupied the traditional universal grammarians with some hope of extending and deepening their theory of language structure and language use. Modern descriptive linguistics has enormously enriched the range of factual material available, and has provided entirely new standards of clarity and objectivity. Given this advance in precision and objectivity, it becomes possible to return, with new hope for success, to the problem of constructing the theory of a particular language—its grammar—and to the still more ambitious

study of the general theory of language. On the other hand, the substantive contributions to the theory of language structure are few, and, to a large extent, the concepts of modern linguistics constitute a retrogression as compared with universal grammar. One real advance has been in universal phonetics—I refer here particularly to the work of Jakobson. Other new and important insights might also be cited. But in general, the major contributions of structural linguistics seem to me to be methodological rather than substantive. These methodological contributions are not limited to a raising of the standards of precision. In a more subtle way, the idea that language can be studied as a formal system, a notion which is developed with force and effectiveness in the work of Harris and Hockett, is of particular significance. It is, in fact, this general insight and the techniques that emerged as it developed that have made it possible, in the last few years, to approach the traditional problems once again. Specifically, it is now possible to study the problem of rule-governed creativity in natural language, the problem of constructing grammars that explicitly generate deep and surface structures and express the relations between them, and the deeper problem of determining the universal conditions that limit the form and organization of rules in the grammar of a human language. When these problems are clearly formulated and studied, we are led to a conception of language not unlike that suggested in universal grammar. Furthermore, I think that we are led to conclusions regarding mental processes of very much the sort that were developed, with care and insight, in the rationalist philosophy of mind that provided the intellectual background for universal grammar. It is in this sense that we can look forward to a productive synthesis of the two major traditions of linguistic research.

If this point of view is correct in essentials, we can proceed to outline the problems facing the linguist in the following way. He is, first of all, concerned to report data accurately. What is less obvious, but nonetheless correct, is that the data will not be of particular interest to him in itself, but rather only insofar as it sheds light on the grammar of the language from which it is drawn, where by the "grammar of a language" I mean the theory that deals with the mechanisms of sentence construction, which establish a sound-meaning relation in this language. At the next level of study, the linguist is concerned to give a factually accurate formulation of this grammar, that is, a correct formulation of the rules that generate deep

and surface structures and interrelate them, and the rules that give a phonetic interpretation of surface structures and a semantic interpretation of deep structures. But, once again, this correct statement of the grammatical principles of a language is not primarily of interest in itself, but only insofar as it sheds light on the more general question of the nature of language; that is, the nature of universal grammar. The primary interest of a correct grammar is that it provides the basis for substantiating or refuting a general theory of linguistic structure which establishes general principles concerning the form of grammar.

Continuing one step higher in level of abstraction, a universal grammar—a general theory of linguistic structure that determines the form of grammar—is primarily of interest for the information it provides concerning innate intellectual structure. Specifically, a general theory of this sort itself must provide a hypothesis concerning innate intellectual structure of sufficient richness to account for the fact that the child acquires a given grammar on the basis of the data available to him. More generally, both a grammar of a particular language and a general theory of language are of interest primarily because of the insight they provide concerning the nature of mental processes, the mechanisms of perception and production and the mechanisms by which knowledge is acquired. There can be little doubt that both specific theories of particular languages and the general theory of linguistic structure provide evidence for anyone concerned with these matters; it is within this general framework that linguistic research finds its intellectual justification.

At every level of abstraction, the linguist is concerned with explanation, not merely with stating facts in one form or another. He tries to construct a grammar which explains particular data on the basis of general principles that govern the language in question. He is interested in explaining these general principles themselves, by showing how they are derived from still more general and abstract postulates drawn from universal grammar. And he would ultimately have to find a way to account for universal grammar on the basis of still more general principles of human mental structure. Finally, although this goal is too remote to be seriously considered, he might envisage the prospect that the kind of evidence he can provide may lead to a physiological explanation for this entire range of phenomena.

I should stress that what I have sketched is a logical, not a temporal order of tasks of increasing abstractness. For example, it is not nec-

essary to delay the study of general linguistic theory until particular grammars are available for many languages. Quite the contrary. The study of particular grammars will be fruitful only insofar as it is based on a precisely articulated theory of linguistic structure, just as the study of particular facts is worth undertaking only when it is guided by some general assumptions about the grammar of the language from which these observations are drawn.

All of this is rather abstract. Let me try to bring the discussion down to earth by mentioning a few particular problems, in the grammar of English, that point to the need for explanatory hypotheses of the sort I have been discussing.

Consider the comparative construction in English; in particular, such sentences as:

(1) I have never seen a man taller than John.

(2) I have never seen a taller man than John.

Sentences (1) and (2), along with innumerable others, suggest that there should be a rule of English that permits a sentence containing a Noun followed by a Comparative Adjective to be transformed into the corresponding sentence containing the sequence: Comparative Adjective-Noun. This rule would then appear as a special case of the very general rule that forms such Adjective-Noun constructions as "the tall man" from the underlying form "the man who is tall," and so on.

But now consider the sentence:

(3) I have never seen a man taller than Mary.

This is perfectly analogous to (1); but we cannot use the rule just mentioned to form

(4) I have never seen a taller man than Mary.

In fact, sentence (4) is certainly not synonymous with (3), although (2) appears to be synonymous with (1). Sentence (4) implies that Mary is a man, although (3) does not. Clearly either the proposed analysis is incorrect, despite the very considerable support one can find for it, or there is some specific condition in English grammar that explains why the rule in question can be used to form (2) but not (4). In either case, a serious explanation is lacking; there is some principle of English grammar, now unknown, for which we must search to explain these facts. The facts are quite clear. They are of no particular interest in themselves, but if they can bring to light some general principle of English grammar, they will be of real significance.