General Linguistics

An Introductory Survey

R. H. Robins

FOURTH EDITION

LONGMAN
World Publishing Corp

General Linguistics

An Introductory Survey

R. H. Robins

FOURTH EDITION

LONGMAN
World Publishing Corp

Longman Group UK Limited,
Longman House, Burnt Mill, Harlow,
Essex CM20 2JE, England
and Associated Companies throughout the world.

Published in the United States of America
by Longman Inc., New York

The Licensed Edition of General Linguistics 4th ed.
is published by arrangement with Longman Group UK Limited, London
Reprinted by World Publishing Corporation, Beijing, 1992
Licensed for sale in The People's Republic of China only
ISBN 7-5062-1233-1

Fourth edition 1989
Second impression 1990

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Robins, R. H. (Robert Henry), *1921–*
General linguistics: an introductory survey.
– 4th ed. – (Longman linguistics library).
1. Linguistics
I. Title
410

ISBN 0-582-29144-5

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Robins, R. H. (Robert Henry)
General linguistics.
(Longman linguistics library)
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Linguistics. I. Title. II. Series.
P121.R6 1989 410 88–5619
ISBN 0–582–29144–5

LONGMAN LINGUISTICS LIBRARY

General editors
R.H. Robins, University of London
Martin Harris, University of Essex

Structural Aspect of Language Change
JAMES M. ANDERSON

Text and Context
Explorations in the Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse
TEUN A. VAN DIJK

Introduction to Text Linguistics
ROBERT-ALAIN DE BEAUGRANDE AND WOLFGANG ULRICH DRESSLER

Spoken Discourse
A Model for Analysis
WILLIS EDMONDSON

Psycholinguistics
Language, Mind, and World
DANNY D. STEINBERG

Dialectology
W. N. FRANCIS

Principles of Pragmatics
GEOFFREY N. LEECH

Generative Grammar
GEOFFREY HORROCKS

Norms of Language
Theoretical and Practical Aspects
RENATE BARTSCH

The English Verb
Second Edition
F. R. PALMER

Pidgin and Creole Languages
SUZANNE ROMAINE

General Linguistics
An Introductory Survey
Fourth Edition
R. H. ROBINS

A History of English Phonology
CHARLES JONES

Generative and Non-linear Phonology
JACQUES DURAND

Modality and the English Modals
Second Edition
F. R. PALMER

Multilingualism in the British Isles I: the Oldes Mother Tongues and Europe
EDITED BY SAFDER ALLADIN A. AND VIV EDWARDS

Multilingualism and British Isles II: Africa, Asia and the Middle East
EDITED BY SAFDER ALLADIN A. AND VIV EDWARDS

English Dialects
Studies in Grammatical Variation
EDITED BY PETER TRUDGILL AND J. K. CHAMBERS

A Short History of Linguistics
Third Edition
R. H. ROBINS

Preface to first edition

An apology is perhaps desirable for the appearance of a book purporting to survey the whole range of general linguistic studies. In a period of increasing specialization, experts in several branches of linguistics are likely to find that, in their opinion, their own speciality is treated scantily, superficially, and with distortion in emphasis and selection. Indeed, it has been said that it is now no longer proper or practicable for an introduction to general linguistics to be attempted by one author, as his own competence in the different branches now recognized must be very unequal.

If this were true, it would be a great pity. The various approaches to language accepted as falling within linguistics are so accepted by virtue of some unifying theme or contribution to an integrated body of knowledge. Students are surely entitled to read, and teachers should be able to write, textbooks which take into account recent developments in the subject, as far as they may be made available to beginners, and attempt to show these in relation to its continuing course and progress as part of a set of studies sharing in common more than a mere title.

My intention in writing this book has been to produce an introduction to linguistics as an academic subject, that will be comprehensible and useful to the student entering on the study of linguistics at a university in work for a first degree or a post-graduate degree or diploma, and at the same time will serve to present the subject in outline to the intelligent general reader as one that is both important and interesting in its own right.

Where controversy still surrounds aspects of the subject encountered in the early stages of a student's acquaintance with it, I have not tried to hide this or to suggest that there is one road

to salvation alone worthy of serious attention. Nothing is more pathetic than the dogmatic rejection of all approaches but one to language (or anything else) by a person who has not troubled himself even to consider the arguments in favour of others.

The writer of an introductory textbook has a further consideration to bear in mind. No branch of a living and developing subject stands still. In linguistics, outlooks, theories, and procedures are constantly being revised, and new methods appearing. Such changes, in so far as they represent or promise progress, are to be welcomed, but they inevitably alter in some degree the state of the subject during the unavoidable lapse of time between the writing of the book and its publication; and further changes must be expected in the future. Some experienced readers and teachers may well feel, as a result, that certain matters are given greater emphasis than they now merit as the expense of newer and more significant topics and viewpoints.

In a book such as this, there is little or nothing original, except perhaps the choice of topics and their arrangement; nor should there be. I shall be well satisfied if, after reading it, people are both enabled and encouraged to go further into the subject, undertake further reading, and perhaps to specialize in one branch of linguistics or another, after achieving an adequate understanding and picture of the subject as a whole.

In writing an introductory account of linguistics, one is made very conscious of the debt owed to one's predecessors and contemporaries. Anyone engaged in linguistics in Great Britain lies greatly in debt to the late Professors J. R. Firth and Daniel Jones, who between them did more than any others to establish the subject in this country and to determine the course of its development. To Professor Firth, my own teacher during the eight years between my joining him at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London and his retirement from the Chair of General Linguistics in that university, I owe the main directions of my work in the study of language, both in teaching and research. Equally, no one engaged in general linguistics anywhere in the world can forget or treat lightly the enormous debt owed to American scholarship in this field. Without such international figures as Sapir and Bloomfield it is doubtful if linguistics would have made anything like the progress it has made, or achieved the academic recognition it enjoys the world over. Any serious student of the subject must become quickly aware of the great part American scholars in linguistics have played and are now playing in all its branches. On the continent of Europe, de Saussure, Trubetzkoy, Meillet, and

Hjelmslev, to mention only four names, have been responsible for contributions to linguistic theory and method that are now indispensable components of present-day linguistic scholarship. I hope that in the form this book has taken I have discharged in some measure my debt to my predecessors and contemporaries. If I have failed, the fault is mine, not theirs.

More specifically, I am indeed grateful to successive classes of students whom I have taught in the past fifteen years. Much of what I have written here has arisen in the preparation, delivery, and revision of lecture notes and tutorial material. Some points were first brought clearly to my attention by the work of students themselves. To Professor C. E. Bazell, Professor of General Linguistics in the University of London, and to my other colleagues in the university, past and present, I owe the stimulus of constant discussion, argument, and collaboration. Professor N. C. Scott, Professor F. R. Palmer, and Dr, now Professor, J. Lyons were kind enough to read through a draft of this book. Each made many helpful and important suggestions, not least in trying to save me from a number of inclarities, inaccuracies, and downright absurdities. I hope I have made proper use of their comments; where I have not, and for all errors and imperfections remaining, I am, of course, wholly responsible. To all those who, wittingly or unwittingly, have helped and encouraged me in the production of this book, I offer my sincere thanks.

University of London RHR
1964

Preface to second edition

That a new edition of a textbook should be in demand some six years after its first publication is, naturally enough, gratifying to the author. But it is no less apparent that, in a subject developing as rapidly and vigorously as linguistics is today, more radical alterations are required than the mere correction of errors and the clarification of points hitherto left in obscurity, if the book is to continue in usefulness.

As regards unresolved controversies and competing views on the theoretical understanding and the analysis of language, on which readers were warned in the preface to the first edition, the passing of years has not diminished this characteristic of current linguistics, although older disputes now arouse less heat as the newer ones attract more attention.

I have made an attempt in the sections at the end of Chapter 7 to indicate the main lines on which linguistic theory and linguistic practice seem to be moving in Europe and America today. No one should regard these sections as substitutes for the further reading indicated in the relevant notes, if one wants to gain a real understanding of current developments; but I hope that what I have written will serve as an entry and a guide to the main contemporary 'growth points' in the subject.

On the other hand I have left the account of phonemic phonology and descriptive grammar of the 'Bloomfieldian' period much as it was, because, although these have been under attack from a number of directions, a good deal of what is taken for granted in the way of technical terminology and linguistic concepts was brought into being by linguists working in this tradition (itself by no means dead), and the rigour that was displayed by much of the best in this tradition can serve as an

inspiration and an example to those who may, nonetheless, prefer alternative approaches. Moreover, all those scholars who are responsible for valuable progress in contemporary developments were themselves first masters of 'Bloomfieldian' linguistics and started from a full understanding of what was aimed at and achieved in this stage of linguistics. I remain convinced that the careful study of the linguistics of the 1940s and 1950s is still the proper foundation for scholarly comprehension of the subject today.

Several reviewers of earlier printings of this book were good enough to make detailed and helpful suggestions for improvements, and I have tried to take these into account and make use of them. Once again it is one of the pleasures of academic life to record the help unstintingly given by colleagues whom I have consulted, drawing on their specialist knowledge and on their experience in using this book, along with others, in tutorial work with students. In this respect I am particularly grateful to Dr Theodora Bynon, Professor M. A. K. Halliday, Dr N. V. Smith, and Mrs Natalie Waterson. The deficiencies that will no doubt become apparent are fewer and less glaring, thanks to their co-operation, and the reader as well as the author will be indebted to them.

University of London RHR
1970

Preface to third edition

In preparing the third edition I have revised the content of this book to a considerable extent in the endeavour to bring it up to date as regards current developments in linguistic theory and practice, so far as these can be made readily available to beginners. In making these revisions I have again benefited from the helpful advice from my colleagues, and particularly from Dr D. C. Bennett, Dr Theodora Bynon, Dr R. J. Hayward, Dr N. V. Smith and Mrs Natalie Waterson, as well as from students and correspondents, who have drawn my attention to various omissions and infelicities in previous editions.

Although I have carried out some considerable reordering and reworking in the presentation of the elements of linguistics as I understand them, the basic balance of the book remains much as it was. That is to say, 'classical' phonemic phonology and 'structuralist' grammar of the Bloomfieldian era are still explained to the reader in some details as the proper groundwork on which to build an appreciation and understanding of contemporary theories and methods. Some readers may consider that too much space is given to 'structuralist' linguistics and that an introductory textbook is no longer the place for these topics. For such readers there are several excellent textbooks available, but in my opinion one can best evaluate the merits and the objectives of linguistic work today if one is familiar with the theoretical background within which many of the linguists who are now most influential themselves grew up, and if one has a firm grasp on the basic concepts with which any linguistic description and analysis must be concerned.

I have also tried to maintain a broad coverage of the different topics involved in any comprehensive account of general linguis-

tics as an academic subject. For further details in these topics the reader must consult the specialist literature, to some of which attention is drawn in the bibliographies and notes that follow each chapter. But I consider it quite essential for the student of linguistics to acquire as soon as possible an awareness of just how extensive the study of human language must be and how many different paths of enquiry it opens before him, paths that he should at least recognize, even though he may not follow them all through, if he is to comprehend properly the richness of this field of knowledge upon which he is entering.

University of London **RHR**
1979

Preface to fourth edition

In preparing this edition of my *General Linguistics* I have endeavoured to maintain the structure and the purpose of earlier editions while taking proper notice of recent and current developments in linguistics that have come to prominence since the third edition.

I remain in the conviction that readers of an introduction to a subject as rich and as rewarding as general linguistics, whether they be university students or interested members of the lay public, need and deserve a survey of the subject as a whole in its various branches and aspects, in so far as these can be made reasonably accessible in a single textbook. Perhaps this may now be a vain hope. If this is the case, I am sorry, since linguistics is, for all its diversity, a basic unity as the quest for an understanding of the structure, the history, and the working of human language.

Teachers are usually research workers in their own specializations, and naturally they are anxious to lead their students and their classes to the 'frontiers of knowledge' where they themselves are engaged. They are right in such an objective; exciting research leads to exciting teaching, and the best of our students should be acquainted early in their courses with the 'growth points' of their subject. But there is a danger here; one can only tackle with understanding current advances and specialties against a firm command of basic principles, concepts, and methods. Linguistics is not a science that 'destroys its past' (even if any science can be said to do this), and much of its subject matter has been well set out in books and articles published earlier in this century that have now achieved something of the status of classics in the discipline. While I hope I have drawn

attention in the chapter bibliographies to important current and contemporary literature for further reading by advanced students and intending specialists, I have not hesitated to retain references to earlier writings where these appear to me to present basic information accurately, adequately, and accessibly.

An attractive television advertisement for a brand of beer claims that it 'refreshes the parts that other beers cannot reach'. I would like to express the reverse hope that this book reaches those parts that are sometimes neglected or passed over too briefly by some other introductory textbooks. More seriously, I am wholly in sympathy with the thoughts of a reviewer of a recent such textbook (*Language* 58 (1982), 896): 'It is easy for linguists of different theoretical persuasions to overlook the extent of their common ground . . . . . To teach a 'professionalist' introductory course without first ensuring that some of the thickets of misconception are cleared away is like teaching a course on immunology to a population that does not yet believe in the germ theory of disease'.

In planning and preparing this edition, as with previous editions, I am very conscious of the help that my colleagues have given me, whether in seminars when I was trying out my ideas, in casual conversations, or in direct consultations. In particular I must thank Dr Geoffrey Horrocks for reading drafts of chapters 5, 6, and 7 and making many helpful suggestions, as well as saving me from errors in areas about which he knows far more than I do. Dr Katrina Hayward was no less generous in reading a draft of chapter 8 and giving me the benefit of her expert knowledge in this field. To Professor Theodora Bynon, my successor as Head of the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics, I owe much for her constant encouragement to me to continue my academic work in the Department, and for her patience in responding to my repeated questions about what might be acceptable German, often at times when she was at her busiest as Head of Department. To all these friends and colleagues I offer my sincere thanks; this book is less imperfect for their help. Where obduracy, inattention, or incomprehension may have led me to neglect their proffered advice, *sit venia soli mihi.*

School of Oriental and African Studies,
University of London
1988

R. H. Robins

System of reference

Bibliographies

The chapters are followed by bibliographical lists of books and articles relevant to the topics discussed in them. These are numbered serially, and referred to in the chapter notes by author's surname and number; numbers following the serial number refer to pages in the work concerned. Thus '34, 11' means 'page 11 of number 34'.

The bibliographies to each chapter are independent of each other, relevant works being listed in more than one, where necessary. To avoid excessive overlapping the bibliographies of Chapters 5 and 6 are combined into one, appearing at the end of Chapter 5. After Chapter 1 a general bibliography of elementary and introductory works on linguistics is given, with some brief comments.

None of the bibliographies is intended to be anything like exhaustive; they are designed simply to serve as a guide for further reading on the various aspects of general linguistics.

Notes

In the notes to each chapter reference is made to books and articles which carry further the discussion of points made in the preceding chapter, set out alternative views, provide additional information justifying statements already made (particularly on languages not widely studied), or appear in some other way to be relevant.

In this edition the notes are numbered serially through each chapter, and superscript number appear in the text; but the

intention is that the beginner and general reader should be able to get a picture of the subject as a whole without the need to look at the notes at all. They are directed more towards the student who knows something of the subject already and wants to check any data to which reference has been made or to follow up in more detail questions arising from what he has read.

Transcriptions and abbreviations

Linguistic material cited in this book in the examples is generally represented as follows:

English words and sentences are written in the normal orthography, followed by a reading transciption where necessary.

Words and sentences from most other languages that have a roman orthography are cited in this, followed, from Chapter 3 (Phonetics) onwards, by a reading transcription.

Languages without a recognized orthography and a few that have one but are little known, together with languages written in orthographies other than roman, are cited in reading transcriptions alone. The only exception to this is that Ancient (Classical) Greek words and sentences are given in the Greek script followed by the reading transcription.

Reading transcriptions are enclosed in slant lines / . . . /.

The reading transcription for English is the same as the one used by D. Jones in his *Outline of English Phonetics* and his *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (London, 1948). In other living languages the transcriptions are broad transciptions, on phonemic lines. They are not necessarily strictly phonemic transcriptions; in some of the languages cited, an agreed phonemic analysis covering all the relevant features has still to be achieved, particularly in such features as stress. Sometimes deviations in the direction of narrower transcription are made if it is felt that a reader without a knowledge of the language will be helped to realize something of the sound of the words more readily thereby (thus in the German examples the glottal stop [ʔ] occurring initially in words like *arm* /ʔarm/ poor, and medially in some compound words, though not usually reckoned a separate phoneme, is tran-

scribed). The terms *broad transcription* and *narrow transcription* are explained in 4.2.

The transcription of Ancient Greek is a transliteration, since in dealing with a dead language the phonetic information required as the basis of an adequate transcription is not ordinarily available; this transliteration follows the method set out by A. Martinet, 'A project of transliteration of Classical Greek', *Word* 9 (1953), 152–61, except that υ is transcribed with /y/ not /u/. The transcription of Latin is the same as the traditional spelling except that all long vowels are marked as long, and this is done with the length sign: , not the macron ¯. It is to be noted that Latin /c/ = [k] throughout. The transcription of modern German is based on W. Victor's *Deutsches Aussprachewörterbuch*, Leipzig, 1912.

It is hoped that these conventions will assist the reader unfamiliar with any of the languages from which examples are taken, without inconveniencing or annoying those already enjoying some acquaintance with them.

Transcriptions narrower than the reading transcriptions are printed, where necessary, between square brackets [. . .].

Abbrevations

BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
IJAL	*International Journal of American Linguistics*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
Lang	*Language*
Sociol rev	*Sociological Review*
TCLC	*Travaux du cercle linguistique de Copenhague*
TCLP	*Travaux du cercle linguistique de Prague*
TPS	*Transactions of the Philological Society*