Pieter A. M. Seuren

# WESTERN LINGUISTICS

## AN HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

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# An Historical Introduction

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# Preface

Modern linguistics has, regrettably, grown accustomed to living without its history. This is unfortunate not only because it makes for a limited horizon and deprives one of the pleasure of being conversant with the past (we all have a deep-seated wish to know about the past: man is a historical animal), but also because it creates the risk of continuously re-inventing the wheel. There are, of course, already quite a number of books available detailing the history of linguistics, but they are often not directly relevant to the concerns and issues that are at play in modern theoretical linguistics, as their principal aim is to achieve a systematic reconstruction of the past. While this is the historian's noble and indispensable task, the linguist is more interested in the historical backgrounds of his actual professional interests. I have, therefore, written this book as a linguist, which I am, not as an historian, which I am not.

The present book thus looks at the history of the subject from the angle of what occupies the minds of present-day theoretical linguists. And since methodology is among the primary concerns nowadays, a great deal of attention has been devoted to issues of methodology and of philosophy of science. The reader will thus find, at often unexpected points in the text, discussions of and references to modern issues in linguistic theory. This has been done with the purpose of making explicit the continuity of the questions at hand. This strategy also made it possible to show more clearly if, when and how progress was made, and how sometimes important issues were lost sight of in modern linguistics, much to its disadvantage.

Given this purpose, it proved necessary to go into the actual issues to a much greater extent than is customary in current textbooks on the history of linguistics. And it requires the 'long view', the identification of those currents of history, both large and small, that have led to the present state of affairs. The book is, therefore, meant as a synthesis of history and theory, so that the student can follow the coming about of the key notions of his subject through the course of time, and thus gain an extra dimension of understanding.

The main guiding principle of this book is given by the question 'If linguistics is justified in claiming the status of a real science (which is doubtful), when and how did the application of scientific methodology come about, and what mistakes have been made in this respect?' It is from this overarching point of view that the book tries to paint the notions, discoveries, principles, techniques that have, through the ages, contributed to the modern state of affairs in general linguistic theory, including its weaknesses, gaps and unevenly distributed interests.

Organizing the book around this question implied a certain selectivity. Unlike current studies on the history of linguistics, this book does not aim at completeness in the sense that everything needs to be mentioned. On the contrary, I have tried to avoid overburdening the reader with details, names and dates, and to concentrate on a handful of large issues that have dominated the history of linguistics throughout. This gives more unity to the book, and it will, hopefully, make for pleasanter reading.

In taking this perspective I have restricted myself to the western or Graeco-Roman tradition, thus neglecting the Chinese, the Indian, the Mesopotamian (cp. Black 1989), the Judaeic, and the Arabic traditions, despite their sometimes monumental achievements. This decision is not simply due to considerations of size and of expertise, but to other reasons as well.

First, there is the fact, not often recognized in the literature, that all non-western traditions of linguistic inquiry, with the possible exception of China, have been strongly dominated by religion in one form or another. Very often, thought about language was mainly focussed on the interpretation and preservation of ancient sacred texts of divine or semi-divine origin, such as the Bible, the Koran, or the Vedic hymns. In this respect the Graeco-Roman tradition is essentially different. This tradition has been characterized from the very beginning by a sharp rejection of religious thought and is therefore basically secular and non-religious. Neither Homer, whose Iliad and Odyssey came closest to the status of a canonical text in the Greek world, nor the Christian Bible played a significant part in the coming about of linguistics in the western world. Graeco-Roman linguistics has its origins first in the philosophical question, central to Greek philosophy, of truth as correspondence between what is said and what is the case, and secondly, in the Hellenistic period, in the practical necessity of having to teach Greek to Egyptian and other non-Greek children. Not that the religious element has always been completely absent. On the contrary, there have been episodes, especially in the work of St. Augustin and during the Middle Ages, when attempts were made to turn linguistics into applied theology, but these attempts clearly lost out against the strong secular strand inherited from the Greeks.

Most of the other traditions, on the contrary, show a much stronger influence of, and sometimes even domination by, religious forces. Here too, of course, there are degrees. The Indian tradition, for example, with Pāṇini's work as the most outstanding achievement, seems to have been significantly less religious and more secular than the Judaeic or the Arabic traditions, though there, too, occasional secular elements are found. In this respect, the Indian tradition comes closest to what we consider scientific linguistics (cp. Staal 1972). In fact, modern scholarship has recognized many features in ancient Indian grammatical analysis that have been rediscovered in present-day linguistics.

A further reason for excluding the non-western traditions is the fact that they are often also strongly directed at practical, usually political or commercial, aims, such as the development of a writing system, or the furthering of an ideology with the help of a metaphorical interpretation of an ancient canonized text. Basic scientific research, with the primary aim of *understanding*, was hardly ever germane to those traditions. True, as has been said, the Graeco-Roman tradition is rooted at least in part in the necessity to teach Greek as a foreign language and thus had a clear practical purpose as well, but, as is shown in section 1.2, this exercise was, right from the start, permeated by existing philosophically motivated methods of linguistic analysis, and parallelled by purely philosophical investigations of language in the post-

Aristotelian schools of philosophy. Eventually, the practical and the philosophical currents merged to give rise to what is known, in the western world, as traditional grammar.

The decisive reason, however, for not taking other linguistic traditions into account has been the consideration that there is no evidence of any influence from non-western on western linguistics, despite the fact that the interest of western scholars in the other traditions dates back to the first half of the eighteenth century. There may have been some influence the other way round, from western on non-western linguistics, but that can only have been relatively recent, in the general context of the expansion of western power and culture.

This book differs from existing genres also in that I have felt free to express value judgements wherever I considered that to be appropriate, but always with a holy respect for the historical facts and a proper historical perspective. I have presented these value judgements in the hope that the reader will take them to be an invitation to think about the issues and to apply and test his or her own standards and thus form a personal opinion.

Besides bringing history and theory together, the book also aims at a synthesis of grammar and meaning. One thing this book makes clear is that while these two were united in one coherent tradition from Antiquity till the 19th century, modern developments separated them to the point where they became two, even three, distinct streams. For many years, linguists, psychologists and semanticists have formed largely separate groups, each with their own ways of thinking, standards and perspectives. We should, therefore, not be surprised to find that now that they are meeting up again they are finding it difficult to understand each other's viewpoints and methodologies. One purpose of the book is to help bring about a better understanding of the situation, and thus perhaps also a better integration of the academic populations concerned.

The book consists of two parts. Part 1 contains the chapters 1 to 4 and deals with the history of what is normally considered to be linguistics proper, concentrating on the study of grammar. Chapter 1 deals with Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the subsequent period till the end of the 17th century. Chapter 2 takes us into the 18th and 19th centuries. During this period the study of language form and the study of meaning began to be separated, the latter being extremely tentative and lost between an incipient psychology and a mind-oriented logic. In the early 20th century logic takes off and goes its own course, leaving grammar and psychology to battle with each other. The chapters 3 and 4 describe the rise of 20th century theoretical linguistics in Europe and in America, respectively, first as structuralist linguistics then as formal grammar, with generative grammar at centre stage in chapter 4. They show, among other things, how, after logic, psychology was also shed by the linguists during the 1930s.

Part 2 is about the study of meaning. Modern semantics has been dominated for some time by logical model-theory. Although, as is shown in chapter 6, model-theoretic semantics is not adequate for natural language, a good know-

ledge of logic is indispensable for a linguist who wants to understand meaning. Chapter 5, therefore, explains the basic notions of logic and describes the main lines of its history, against the background of model-theory. It leads up to chapter 6, which first explains the basic notions of model-theoretic semantics, showing its fundamental weaknesses, and then explains some principles of a more suitable semantics, which has to be discourse-oriented. Anaphora and presupposition play a prominent role there. Chapter 7 discusses the question of how meaning links up with grammar. Two strategies are distinguished, a Platonic tradition according to which sentence meaning is reflected in a separate 'deep' or semantic structure, distinct from surface structure, and an Aristotelian tradition which rejects the notion of a separate semantic structure and wants to see meaning reflected directly in surface structure. The latter is followed mostly by logically oriented, the former by generative linguists. The book ends with a description of the rise and fall of the Generative Semantics movement that came about during the 1960s.

This book is meant for all those who, for professional or other reasons, want to hear about the main issues that have arisen during the two thousand odd years of the history of theoretical linguistics. The professionals will, I hope, find it useful and entertaining to read about historical developments while at the same time being challenged as to the main parameters of their discipline. If this book makes them subject the philosophical and methodological foundations of their work to renewed scrutiny it will have fulfilled its purpose.

It took a lifetime of teaching, reading and thinking to find and mould the insights and to summon the courage required for writing this book. While I was working on it I read, of course, a pile of new literature. But I also reread most of the stuff I went through as a beginning linguist and saw the notes and glosses I had scribbled in the margins of the old books, or found again the chits of scrap paper with my comments on them, and was surprised to find, on the one hand, how intensive my reading had been in those days, but, on the other hand also, how narrow my grasp of the issues. This gave me hope because, apparently, I had not deluded myself in thinking that over the past forty years my understanding of the issues and their history had gained in depth and breadth. It also made me feel that writing this book was a worthwhile exercise.

It was also an extremely pleasant exercise, not least because of the wholehearted support and practical help from my colleagues at the Nijmegen Arts Faculty, especially Ad Foolen, Haike Jacobs, Wus Kloeke, Henk Schotel and Leon Stassen, and also from Camiel Hamans and Jan Noordegraaf, all of whom lent me their books or their knowledge, read parts of the manuscript and made me correct and add enough details for me to realize that my, and perhaps anyone's, knowledge only goes skindeep.

Nijmegen, May 1997 P.A.M.S.

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# Contents

# PART 1

# CHAPTER 1

# Linguistics from Antiquity till the seventeenth century

## 1.0 Preamble

This chapter is the first leg of our trip through the history of linguistics. It covers the long road from the earliest Greek linguistic conceptualizations in the fifth and fourth centuries BC to the end of the seventeenth century, when grammatical description became a profession. Obviously, it is not possible to cover such a long period completely in barely 45 pages. The mere thought seems frivolous, especially since many of the main lines of thought and some fundamental approaches or 'philosophies' have their roots in Antiquity. But then, there are quite a number of excellent works which, taken together, provide a well-nigh complete survey of existing scholarship regarding this period. We may mention, for example, Allen (1948), Arens (1955), Barwick (1957), Borst (1957-1963), Coseriu (1975), Householder (1994a, 1994b), Hovdhaugen (1982), Pinborg (1967, 1975), Robins (1967), Steinthal (1890-1891), Taylor (1994), and many other valuable studies.

The point of this chapter is thus not to provide a complete survey. It is selective in a number of ways. First, we will select and emphasize those notions and techniques which are of special relevance to modern linguistics. Too often one finds that students and professionals alike are not or hardly aware of the earliest origins of the concepts and analytical means they consider central to linguistics, and it is hoped that this chapter will make them realize that many of those concepts and analytical tools do, in fact, go back to the very beginnings of linguistics.

In this context special attention is devoted to the tension between word linguistics and sentence linguistics. We shall see that in the beginning grammatical theory was heavily concentrated on the word as the unit of description and analysis. Only much later did the sentence come up as the primary structural unit, which is the point of view almost universally accepted nowadays. Although the earliest proposals for a sentence linguistics date back to the Stoics (who were unable, unfortunately, to do much about it), and were later elaborated by the 6th century Latin grammarian Priscian and taken up again in the Middle Ages, word linguistics persisted till way into the 20th century: de Saussure and Gardiner, for example, as we shall see in chapter 3, still thought that the sentence was a free, 'creative' product of language use, not a unit of the language system.

We shall likewise emphasize the distinction between underlying semantic form and surface structure, which goes back, essentially, to Plato and even to his great predecessor Heraclitus of Ephesus. This issue is not elaborated but just touched upon from time to time. A much fuller treatment is provided in chapter 7, especially in section 7.1.

The Platonic tradition, with its assumption of an underlying 'semantic' form, contrasts with the Aristotelian tradition, where no such underlying form is postulated. Both traditions have been immensely influential. The enormous influence of Aristotle through his logic and through his categories will become apparent in this and almost all following chapters.

We shall also highlight the importance of the opposition between ecologism and formalism, which finds its counterpart in the ancient controversy between anomalism and analogism, the former a part of the Platonic, the latter of the Aristotelian tradition.

Finally, we stress the historical importance of the eternal triangle of language, thought and world. This triangular relation, brilliantly schematized in Ogden & Richards famous semiotic triangle (1923:11), dominates virtually all thinking about language from the very beginning (the only notable exception being the American structuralist notion of a linguistic theory without meaning – see chapter 4).

A further aim of this chapter is to show what motivated the originators of linguistics. Why did they shape the ideas that form the basis of linguistics? In what context? For what purpose? Here we touch on wider issues of historical and cultural context, including some very practical circumstances, such as the demand for the teaching of Greek as a foreign language (see 1.2.2).

Then we shall, with big strides, enter the Middle Ages and try to find our way through the tangled web of theories and developments of those centuries. This is not an easy task, mainly because ever since they came to an end, the Middle Ages, quite generally, have been subjected to a form of malign neglect so thorough and so vicious that its effects are still felt today, despite the many excellent studies produced by medievalists. There are two related difficulties here. First, we want to make a proper selection of those aspects that are relevant to present-day linguistics, and, secondly, we must impose the correct interpretation, one that is not biased by the modern point of view (we are all prone to giving in to the coquettish wish to see ourselves prefigured in history). This danger is, of course, present everywhere, but especially so in matters concerning the Middle Ages, with their often abstruse and overdifferentiated terminologies. For the purpose of this chapter it seemed best to concentrate on the generally enigmatic theory of Speculative Grammar, which, though despised by later grammarians and philosophers, was kept alive in one form or another in ecclesiastical circles. It thus led some kind of underground, para-academic existence, but its influence remained strong, owing to the power and status of the scholarly institutes run by the Church and its religious orders.

The Renaissance period is, again, treated selectively. We only select three main figures, Linacre, Scaliger, and Sanctius, leaving the many others who worked and wrote on language undiscussed. The most important figure of the three is no doubt Sanctius, who is given pride of place on account of his almost prophetic vision of deep semantic structure (in the Platonic tradition), and his