

ROBERT DE BEAUGRANDE

Linguistic Theory

THE DISCOURSE OF FUNDAMENTAL WORKS



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Linguistic Theory: The Discourse of Fundamental Works

Robert de Beaugrande

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Graphic conventions

To conserve space, references to works by the sample linguists are made with abbreviations; note 1 to each chapter provides a key, and the general key follows (p. vii). A page reference is not shown when it is identical with the one just before it, and may thus be shared by a series of quotes (and an unmarked quote after one marked, say, '100f', might come from page 100, 101, or both); cross-references (indicated by 'cf.'), however, are not included in this tactic. A number with 'n' designates a footnote; 'f' is for a quote extending over two pages, and 'ff' is for one over three pages. Several page numbers for one quote indicate that it is a composite or that the source repeated itself in whole or in part; passages closer to the exact or complete wording of the quote are cited before looser or shorter approximations. References to other works are done with author and date; where relevant, the original publication date follows in square brackets. To avoid numerous brackets or spaced periods, I set each part of a quote in its own quotation marks ('_____'). I made some minor changes in the form of verbs (person, tense) and nouns or pronouns (number, case), but none I felt would change the meaning or intention of the quote. Linguistic examples were placed in double quotes ("_____"). 'Italics' were 'added' ('i.a.'), 'removed' ('i.r.'), or, rarely, 'shifted' in a quote ('i.s.');

otherwise, all italics here came from the original sources. My own translations into English are indicated by 'm.t.'. Thematic terms are highlighted in bold type to help direct the flow of the exposition.

List of abbreviations

AT	<i>Aspects of the Theory of Syntax</i> (Chomsky)
BL	<i>Language</i> (Bloomfield)
CG	<i>Course in General Linguistics</i> (Saussure)
EF	<i>Explorations in the Function of Language</i> (Halliday)
EL1	<i>Essais linguistiques</i> (Hjelmslev)
EL2	<i>Essais linguistiques II</i> (Hjelmslev)
IF	<i>Introduction to Functional Linguistics</i> (Halliday)
IG	<i>Intonation and Grammar in British English</i> (Halliday)
LB	<i>Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior</i> (Pike)
NT	Notes on transitivity and theme in English (Halliday)
PT	<i>Prolegomena to a Theory of Language</i> (Hjelmslev)
P1	<i>Papers in Linguistics 1934–1951</i> (Firth)
P2	<i>Selected Papers of J.R. Firth 1952–1959</i>
RT	<i>Résumé of a Theory of Language</i> (Hjelmslev)
SB	<i>Syntax und Bedeutung</i> (Hartmann)
SD	<i>Strategies of Discourse Comprehension</i> (van Dijk & Kintsch)
SL	<i>Language</i> (Sapir)
SS	<i>Syntactic Structures</i> (Chomsky)
TG	<i>Theorie der Grammatik</i> (Hartmann)
TMS	<i>Tongues of Men and Speech</i> (Firth)
TS	<i>Theorie der Sprachwissenschaft</i> (Hartmann)

Mottos

We ignore the achievements of our predecessors not only to our individual detriment but greatly to the peril of our collective scientific enterprise.

Charles Hockett

Any new attempt at synthesis in linguistics must consider the origins of our theories and terminology.

J.R. Firth

The difficulty of explaining the various phases of speech is so great and there are so many sources of error, that we must be more cautious in accepting statements here than in other sciences of observation.

Samuel Stehman Haldeman

A truly creative dialogue is not at all common, even in science What is essential is that each participant is suspending his or her point of view, while also holding other points of view in a suspended form and giving full attention to what they mean.

David Bohm and David Peat

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Chapter 1

Linguistic theory as discourse

1.1 'Surveys' of 'linguistic theory' have become so numerous that a new one calls for some justification. It seems to me that even though linguistics is *about* language, the major works in linguistic theory have seldom been analysed and synthesized *as* language, specifically: as a mode of discourse seeking to circumscribe language by means of language. Perhaps this lack is due in part to the limitations imposed by theorists who did not address discourse as a linguistic phenomenon, or only marginally so. Perhaps too, it was tacitly assumed that theories do not critically depend on the language in which they happen to be expounded. Today, however, discourse has become a major area of concern, and the dependence of concepts and arguments on the discourse that constitutes them is widely acknowledged.

1.2 Therefore, to examine linguistic theories as discourse constructions is by no means to discount their conceptual importance, but to insist on attending very carefully to the emergence of those conceptions within the original discourse before proceeding on to the more usual stages of abstraction and paraphrase. This insistence can be particularly instrumental in tracing the development of terminology, and the continuity, evolution, or change in the major lines of argument not merely between theorists, but within the work of an individual theorist.

1.3 On the whole, the history of the 'science of language' has not been unmanageably diffuse. Major theoretical works and frameworks have not been overly numerous. And on the whole, the discipline has been fairly parsimonious in its theorizing, indeed resolutely so in the face of the complexity of language. Yet we can certainly not claim that the problems addressed by our predecessors have by now vanished or been completely resolved. Instead, we frequently sense a need to return to those problems and re-examine the principles set forth decades ago to approach them.

1.4 In that situation, surveys of linguistic theory should be cautious about imposing an artificial, retrospective sense of order and direction on the discipline by distilling out a few main 'ideas', 'schools', 'trends', or 'paradigms'. That method can abbreviate or conceal the complexity and

diversity of scientific interaction and discourse. A counterbalance could be attained by surveying linguistics as a 'model science' perpetually in the process of situating itself in respect to language.

1.5 Such a survey is a problematic and arduous project, but I hold it to be urgent for several reasons. First, many of the issues in linguistics that preoccupy linguistic theorists today were recognized and deliberated by our predecessors. We cannot get a full sense of our domain by reducing the works of the founders to a handful of precepts and slogans, without due regard for the overall argument and context, including important qualifications and reservations. That strategy tends to convert complicated, energizing research programmes too eagerly into inhibiting new orthodoxies. And in hindsight, we may get the utterly mistaken impression that linguistics did not properly appreciate the depth and difficulty of the issues.

1.6 Second, linguistic theory is essentially a domain of work in progress, a discipline always in search of itself. Leading theorists often voiced their dissatisfaction with the state of linguistics as they saw it (cf. 12.3). But if we construe their discontent as a pretext for writing off the past, we incur the risk of repeating the same shortcomings they perceived and strove to alleviate.

1.7 Third, certain signs indicate that linguistic theory has for some years been moving into a phase of stagnation and diminishing returns. Despite decades of effort, the relations between theory and practice, between model and domain, or between method and evidence have not been definitively established, and seem to be shifted once again by every new school or trend. In consequence, the history of the discipline may appear discontinuous and non-cumulative, with research projects typically clustered around sporadic bursts of theorizing. The status of theoretical entities, even such central ones as 'word' and 'sentence', remains in dispute. No consensus obtains about the future trends and modifications that linguistics should undergo. In such a state of affairs, we cannot merely wait to see what develops in day-to-day research and discussion. We need to draw up the theoretical balance sheets of past investigations. Surveying the major issues and problems of the discipline through their treatment in the discourse foundational works can be an inaugural step in planning for future research on a truly comprehensive and organized scale.

1.8 All linguists share at least one special predicament: they can get evidence only from their own *encounters with language*, with and within some mode of **discourse** (cf. 12.1, 48). The system never steps forward to be 'observed' in some concrete selfhood; and data are not data until they have been *understood as language*. In consequence, linguists deal with data in whose constitution and interpretation they are always to some degree involved, at least behind the scenes. Since language is so extraordinarily sensitive to how it is used, it may assume different appearances depending on how it is grasped. We therefore need to expand our scope from 'looking at language' to 'looking at linguists looking at language' and in particular

talking or writing about it. We cannot eliminate the linguist's perspective, but we can scrutinize it by asking how human beings, whether linguists or ordinary speakers, abstract systematic knowledge from language experience and at the same time apply systematic knowledge in order to relate experience to language (cf. 12.44).

1.9 That you must 'know language' to 'understand language' and vice versa is a truism, but by no means an insignificant one. We seem to confront a peculiarly vicious circularity enshrouding the question of how we might approach language from the 'outside': how children or linguists or anybody else can reach the 'critical mass', the stage of 'knowing' the system behind or beyond the individual *uses* of language (cf. 12.38). Much of that knowledge is concealed from conscious awareness during everyday discourse, and the prospects for making it conscious and explicit are by nature precarious (cf. 12.49). To observe yourself observing language, to watch or hear yourself thinking, to grasp your own understanding – all these acts are easily beset by paradox or infinite regress. We can, however, subject the discourse of those engaged in such acts to steadily more circumspect and integrative scrutiny, thereby adding fresh emphasis to our perennial insistence on the centrality of language (cf. 12.22).

1.10 My survey accordingly proceeds by arranging and presenting the discourse, the statements and arguments, of representative theorists in linguistics of this century, sticking as close as is feasible to their actual wordings, especially where major points are expressed. By this expedient, I hoped to restrict my own role in increasing or complicating the mediation between linguistics and language, as I would have had to do had I paraphrased and summarized the sources in my own words. Though admittedly laborious, this method may help to reanimate the complex flow of the discourse in the gradually emerging discipline, to focus on characteristic moves, and to retrace the key terms as they gain or lose currency. Proceeding by author rather than by 'school' may help to accentuate individual views, voices, and personalities, and thus to re-experience some of the momentum and perplexity of repeated confrontations with the recalcitrant problems that the study of language necessarily raises.

1.11 Due to this gallery of problems, a general book on linguistics tends to have the character of a performance, raising and responding to typical questions, such as:

Where does linguistics stand among the other disciplines?

Which aspects of language deserve to be put in focus, and which ones are of lesser interest?

What means or methods are recommended or rejected?

How do linguists gather data, and how can they check their own estimation of it against other sources?

How are examples brought to bear on theoretical issues and abstractions?

What are the fundamental units and structures of language?

What is the theoretical status of traditional concepts such as 'word', 'phrase', and 'sentence'?

We shall be seeing quite a spectrum of potential answers, some explicit, others merely implicit. Few of the answers will seem definitive, since they depend on the goals and aspirations of the particular theorist, and these are by no means uniform (cf. 12.58, 60ff). Still, considering such a spectrum assembled in one volume may shed light on the nature of the questions, whatever the eventual answers we may yet select.

1.12 It was rather agonizing to decide which 'fundamental works' should be used, given the unmanageably large number worthy of inquiry. My selection was guided by two major criteria. First, these works were influential in the general development of theories or models, as attested for instance by frequent citation. Second, these works propound such a wide range of positions and issues that we can profit by bringing them into explicit interaction with each other. I do not mean to suggest that the works I selected are the only ones or even the best ones produced by each linguist, but only that they are important and rewarding examples of the discourse of linguistic theory.

1.13 My treatment is only roughly in chronological order, because the works and their spans of influence sometimes overlapped in time, and because some influences emerge more clearly through direct follow-ups, e.g. Bloomfield to Pike, Hjelmslev to Chomsky, and Firth to Halliday. However, similar arguments and conceptions also appear where we cannot trace such influences, or at least none that the authors acknowledge. Conversely, demonstrable influences do not necessarily promote agreement, and successors may differ from their predecessors or teachers on major issues.

1.14 Obviously, my selection could have been different or larger. But the approach proved to require such detailed attention to each work and theorist that I lacked the space to include more of them. For motives of size, I regretfully deleted a chapter on Terry Winograd, a major thinker both in linguistics and in artificial intelligence. I also deeply regretted not being able to deal with such undeniably influential linguists as Emile Benveniste, Dwight Bolinger, Wallace Chafe, Simon Dik, Charles Fillmore, Charles Carpenter Fries, Hans Glinz, Joseph Grimes, Z.S. Harris, Roman Jakobson, Daniel Jones, William Labov, George Lakoff, Robert E. Longacre, Aleksei Leontev, Nikolai Marr, André Martinet, Vilém Mathesius, Ivan Meshchaninov, Nikolai Trubetzkoy, or Leo Weisgerber. Also, I would have liked to include such precursors and pioneers as Franz Bopp, Jan Baudouin de Courtenay, Samuel Haldeman, Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt, Hermann Paul, Rasmus Rask, Henry Sweet, Dwight Whitney, etc. And major figures from neighbouring disciplines also deserve such attention: semioticians such as Julia Kristeva, Jurij Lotman, Charles Morris, Charles Peirce, Thomas Sebeok, etc.; language philosophers such as John Austin, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Paul Grice, Martin Heidegger, Alfred Korzybski, Jacques Lacan, John Searle, Ludwig Wittgenstein, etc.; logicians such as Rudolf Carnap, Max Cresswell, Richard Montague, János Petöfi, Alfred Tarski, Lotfi Zadeh, etc.; psychologists and psycholinguists

like Philip N. Johnson-Laird, Alexander Luria, William Levelt, William Marslen-Wilson, George Miller, Charles Osgood, etc.; sociologists like Basil Bernstein, Erving Goffman, Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff, etc.; anthropologists such as Edmund Leach, Bronislaw Malinowski, Claude Lévi-Strauss, etc.; or analysts of narrative and literary or poetic discourse such as Roland Barthes, Algirdas Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov, etc. Though I had to exclude all these figures, I glean some comfort from the fact that I have made use of their work in my previous writings, and from the hope that I may give them more attention in the future.

Chapter 2

Ferdinand de Saussure¹

2.1 Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (*Course in General Linguistics*) is a peculiar book, not merely published but in part composed after the author's death. Since he 'destroyed the rough drafts of the outlines used for his lectures', the editors, Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger, used 'the notes collected by students' in order to 'attempt a reconstruction, a synthesis', and to 'recreate F. de Saussure's thought' (CG xviiiif). To 'draw together an organic whole', the editors tried to 'weed out variations and irregularities characteristic of oral delivery', and to 'omit nothing that might contribute to the overall impression' (CG xix). Thus, the 'Saussure' of the *Cours* is a composite voice, speaking from a lecture platform between 1897 and 1911 and passing through the notebooks of followers who confess that 'the master' 'probably would not have authorized the publication of these pages' (CG xvii, 38, xviiiif). Many problems with its formulation and interpretation may reflect the difficulties of its composition.

2.2 Saussure – or 'Saussure', as I should write perhaps – seems fully conscious of his role as founder of a 'science'. He constantly searches for generalities, high-level abstractions, and fundamental definitions. Over and over, he states what is 'always' or 'never' the case, what applies in 'each' or 'every' instance, what are the 'only' relevant aspects, and so on. At times, these universalizing assertions may go beyond what can be demonstrated, or conflict with each other in puzzling ways.² Formulating the common denominators of Saussurian 'thought' can thus be quite challenging.

2.3 His 'hesitation to undertake the radical revision which he felt was necessary' in linguistics seems to have deterred him from writing a general book; in fact, 'he could not bring himself to publish the slightest note if he was not assured first of the fundamental foundations' (Benveniste 1971: 33). In a letter to Antoine Meillet dated 4 January, 1894 he proclaimed himself 'disgusted' 'with the difficulty' of 'writing ten lines concerning the facts of language which have any common sense', and with 'the very great vanity of everything that can ultimately be done in linguistics' (*ibid.*, 33f). He lamented 'the absolute ineptness of current terminology, the necessity to

reform it, and, in order to do that, to show what sort of subject language in general is'. In the *Cours*, he still finds 'current terminology' 'imperfect or incorrect at many points', and its components 'all more or less illogical' (CG 44). Still, he often proposes and defends terms with bravura, and many of these have become standard. And he 'does not hesitate to use' 'the expressions condemned' by 'the new school' he envisions (CG 5n) (cf. 2.30).³

2.4 Like most of the theorists in my survey, Saussure was highly discontent with the state of the discipline (cf. 12.3). He charged that 'no other field' was so beset by 'mistakes', 'aberrations', 'absurd notions, prejudices, mirages, and fictions' (CG 7, 3f, 97, 215). He deplored the 'confusion' 'in linguistic research' as well as the 'absurdities of reasoning', and the 'erroneous and insufficient notions' created by his predecessors (CG 99, 4f) (cf. 2.10). The intent to found a new direction can sharpen such polemics, especially when established 'schools' 'watch the progress of the new science suspiciously' and each 'mistrusts the other' (cf. CG 3).

2.5 'Before finding its true and unique object', 'the science that has been developed around the facts of language passed through three stages' (CG 1) (cf. 4.4ff; 8.6–9, 15; 11.22–26; 12.4–8).⁴ First, the 'study' of "'grammar'" was 'based on logic', but 'lacked a scientific approach and was detached from language itself'. Preoccupied with 'rules for distinguishing between correct and incorrect forms', grammar 'was a normative discipline, far removed from actual observation'. Second, 'classical philology' was devoted to 'comparing texts of different periods, determining the language peculiar to each author, or deciphering and explaining inscriptions' (CG 3, 1). This approach 'followed written language too slavishly', 'neglected the living language', and focused on 'Greek and Latin antiquity' (CG 1f). Third, 'comparative philology' explored the relatedness of many languages, but 'did not succeed in setting up the true science of linguistics', because it 'failed to seek out the nature of its object of study' (CG 2f). Also, 'the exaggerated and almost exclusive role' 'given to Sanskrit' was a 'glaring mistake' (CG 215) (cf. 4.4, 40; 8.4f, 74, 8⁵; 11.20f).

2.6 Although (or because) he owed so much to it,⁵ Saussure was especially critical of 'philology', the historical study of language. Because 'modern linguistics' 'has been completely absorbed in diachrony', (i.e., issues of 'evolution'), its 'conception of language is therefore hybrid and hesitating'; this 'linguistics' 'has no clear-cut objective' and fails 'to make a sharp distinction between states and successions' (CG 81f). In contrast, 'the "grammarians" inspired by traditional methods' at least tried to 'describe language-states'. Though 'traditional grammar neglects whole parts of language', does not 'record facts', and 'lacks overall perspective', 'the method was correct': however 'unscientific', 'classical grammar' is judged 'less open to criticism' than 'philology' (cf. 12.4). Now, 'linguistics, having accorded too large a place to history, will turn back to the static viewpoint of traditional grammar, but in a new spirit and with other procedures, and the historical method will have contributed to this rejuvenation' (CG 82f)

(cf. 2.15; 6.49; 7.4; 8.38; 11.41, 88; 12.7). In effect, 'general linguistics' would become a 'true science' by supplying the theoretical and methodological framework absent from earlier approaches, while drawing freely on their findings and examples.

2.7 Saussure envisioned 'linguistics' taking its place among 'other sciences that sometimes borrow from its data, sometimes supply it with data' – e.g., 'political history', 'psychology', 'anthropology', 'sociology', 'ethnography', 'prehistory', and 'palaeontology' (CG 102f, 147, 9, 6, 224) (cf. 12.9–20). Yet 'linguistics must be carefully distinguished' from such sciences, which can contribute only to 'external linguistics', concerning 'everything that is outside' the 'system' of 'language' (CG 6, 9, 20f) (cf. 2.9; 12.9). In return, 'we can draw no accurate conclusions outside the domain of linguistics proper' (CG 228).

2.8 On a grand scale, Saussure foresaw '*a science that studies the life of signs within society*', and called it **semiology** (CG 16). 'Linguistics is only a part of that general science' and is charged with 'finding out what makes language a special system within the mass of semiological data'. 'If we are to discover the true nature of language, we must learn what it has in common with all other semiological systems' (CG 17) (cf. 6.50–56; 11.9f). For Saussure, 'language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also the most characteristic; in this sense linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology' (CG 68) (cf. 6.53; 12.18, 21f). Though he didn't elaborate on this future science in detail, he predicted it would establish 'laws', 'rules', and 'constant principles' (CG 16f, 88).

2.9 To explain why 'semiology' had 'not been recognized as an independent science with its own object', Saussure contends that 'heretofore language has almost always been studied in connection with something else, from other viewpoints' (CG 16) (cf. 6.5ff; 9.2). He now announces, in a much-quoted aphorism at the close of the book, that '*the true and unique object of linguistics is language studied in and for itself*' (CG 232) (cf. 6.64; 12.35). Against Dwight Whitney, he demurs that 'language is not similar in all respects to other social institutions' (CG 10). Also, 'other sciences work with objects that are given in advance', whereas in 'linguistics', 'it would seem that it is the viewpoint that creates the object' (CG 8) (cf. 12.58).

2.10 In Saussure's estimate, 'all idioms embody certain fixed principles that the linguist meets again and again in passing from one to another' (CG 99). Hence, 'the linguist is obliged to acquaint himself with the greatest possible number of languages in order to determine what is universal in them by observing and comparing them' (CG 23) (cf. 6.57; 12.18, 49, 12⁴). 'But it is very difficult to command scientifically such different languages', and 'each idiom is a closed system', so 'each language in practice forms a unit of study' (CG 99). In this connection, Saussure concedes that 'the ideal, theoretical form of a science is not always the one imposed upon it by the exigencies of practice; in linguistics, these exigencies are more imperious