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Some Works on the History of Linguistic

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Survey

Some Works on the History of Linguistics

VILELM THOMSEN made a modest attempt to survey the most important achievements of linguistics up to his time, and his little volume which first appeared in Danish in 1902 under the title *Sprogvidenskabens Historie* (Koenhavn, 1902) was not well-known perhaps because of the limited number of Danish readers outside Denmark. Later, in 1927, it was translated into German by H. Pollak (Halle, 1927), and this became the basis of a Spanish translation, *Historia de la linguística* (Barcelona: Colección Labor, III: 418, 1945). The book has not been translated into English. It gives, after a rapid survey of ancient (Greek, Roman, Hindu) and medieval contributions, a detailed description of the contributions of the nineteenth century. The most interesting fact perhaps that Thomsen brought out was that Jakob Grimm had by no means been the first linguist to discover the so-called "Grimm's Law", which had been widely credited with having formally launched the spectacular career of comparative linguistics. Grimm's work, *Deutsche Grammatik*, in which the laws governing the "sound shifts" between the Germanic languages and other Indo-European languages were formulated, was published first in 1819; but in 1811, Rasmus Rask had already written (the work was published in 1818) an essay entitled, *Undersogelse om det gamle Nordiske eller Islandske Sprogs Oprindelse* (Investigation on the Origin of the Old Norse or Icelandic Language), in which the materials brought up by Grimm were contained. The im-

plication was that Grimm had learned from Rask, the Dane, and that the dawn of the new era in linguistics had actually been heralded not by Grimm but by Rask. One detects a form of flag-waving in this exposition.

In 1924, Holger Pedersen, also a Dane, wrote his historical survey of linguistics, and this fact was played up even more. Pedersen's book was entitled *Sprogvidenskaben i det Nittende Aarhundred: Metoder og Resultater*. This book has enjoyed a much wider audience because it was translated by John Webster Spargo and was published by Harvard University Press in 1931, and recently it has been reprinted in paperback form under the title *The Discovery of Language: Linguistic Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1962. Midland Books 40). This book has become popular because of its narrative style, which is easy to read since it contains some historical anecdotes, pictures, maps, diagrams, and samples of scripts. According to Pedersen, Rasmus Rask was the "first of the great specialists in comparative linguistics in the century". Rask endeavored to show the relationships between Greek, Old Norse, the neighboring languages (Germanic) and the other Indo-European languages (Baltic, Latin, Armenian etc.) by pointing out that sound correspondences could be exhibited between their words. Thus, Rask explained that "when agreement is found in such words in two languages, and so frequently that rules may be drawn up for the shift in letters (we would say now 'phonemes') from one to the other, then there is a fundamental relationship between the two languages; especially when similarities in the inflectional system and in the general make-up of the languages correspond with them." Grimm, argues Pedersen, had already something to learn from Rask when he formulated the now famous "Grimm's Laws": "This becomes clear on comparison of the first and the second edition of the first volume of Grimm's grammar." The truth of the matter, however, seems to be that both arrived at the sound laws independently of each other, and that then Grimm built on Rask. And Pedersen admits this when he writes: "The first edition (of Grimm's *Deutsche Grammatik*) appeared

in 1819, and was completed before Grimm had read Rask's *Undersogelse*. The second appeared in 1822, and shows plainly that Grimm, who of course read Danish, had not remained uninfluenced by Rask."

Pedersen's book contains facts not only about linguists and linguistics but also about archaeological discoveries during the nineteenth century and their linguistic implications. Pedersen, for instance, recounts the discovery and decipherment of the first cuneiform writing, Old Persian. From inscriptions mostly on stone and buildings found in Persepolis, Susiana, Media, Armenia and Egypt (Isthmus of Suez), and especially from inscriptions on a great rock from Bisutun, in the neighborhood of the town of Kermanshah, in ancient Median territory, the Englishman Rawlinson and the Dane Westergaard are reported to have worked on the translation and interpretation of this material. Like most of the inscriptions of Persia, the inscription on the rock of Bisutun had been set down in all the three principal languages of the empire (Persian, Babylonian, and Elamitic). But unfortunately, a brook made its course across it and obliterated the Assyrian (Babylonian) text and this made the work of interpreting the text much more difficult. Finally, the German scholar, Grotefend, broke the code first by assuming that the inscription began from the ancient Persian kings, and that, therefore, the first line represented the language of the ruling nation. He laid his decipherment before the Academy of Sciences of Gottingen in 1802. Among other interesting accounts are: Vilhelm Thomsen's decipherment of the Orkhon inscriptions (Old Turkish "runes") in 1893, Francois Champollion's decipherment of the Egyptian hieroglyphics on the Rosetta stone in 1924.

Pedersen covers also the history of the various writing systems, and gives samples of each. He divides his treatment into two main parts, each part in turn divided also into two: I—Pre-alphabetical systems: a) Word- and syllable-script, b) Syllable-script; II—Alphabetical systems: a) the Semitic alphabet (a syllable-script, which to us may seem to be a consonant-script), b) the Greek alphabet. The author brings out some interesting facts, such as, that the Ogham alphabet,

which had been used in inscriptions found all over Ireland, was not an independent Irish invention, but rather presupposes a knowledge of the principle of the alphabet, and that since it contained a resolution of the syllables into vowels and consonants, it is perhaps derived from the Greek or the Latin alphabet. An interesting question which the author brings up is whether the Japanese syllabary (*Katakana* or *Yamatogana*) was built on the Chinese characters plus the phonetic know-how of the Hindu grammarians. Pedersen comments, "it is not certain that the Japanese would have been able to create it if both they and the Chinese had not learned phonetics from the scholars of India." I. J. Gelb, who made a rather thorough investigation of the origin of the various systems of writing, says about Japanese writing that "the Japanese syllabary is formally derived from the Chinese writing. Structurally however, it is farther removed from its Chinese prototype than are the Near Eastern syllabaries from their respective word-syllabic models. The creation of a syllabary consisting solely of monosyllabic signs ending in a vowel may have been induced by the character of the Japanese language which generally requires open syllables as, for example, in the words 'mikado, Hirohito, Nagasaki', etc. Therefore, there may not be any need for assuming the influence of the Sanskrit writing upon the Japanese, as suggested by some scholars." (*A Study of Writing*, Phoenix Impression, 1936, p. 164).

The main criticism levelled at Pedersen's book is that it is merely a cataloging of the principal and most influential works and linguists of the nineteenth century. There is no attempt to present the origins, assumptions, and methods of the various schools of linguistics, and each work is evaluated in rather peremptory and brief statements. There is a brief summary of the principles of the comparative method, but none on structural linguistics.

Another difficulty with the book, and one which the author himself could not have solved, is the fact that it is outdated. Thus, for example, Pedersen's account of the discovery of inscriptions of the Greek alphabet is complete from the Xanthos stone of Lycia (ca. 4th to 5th century B.C.), to the

Lemnos stone (ca. 600 B.C.), to the Phrygian inscriptions (ca. 8th cent. B.C.). But the more recent discoveries of clay tablets at Knossos, Pylos, Mycenae, and elsewhere in the Greek mainland and Crete and the story of their decipherment by the team of Michael Ventris, an Englishman who, though an architect by profession, did palaeography (especially the Minoan Script), and John Chadwick, a professor of classics at Cambridge University, are not reported. The decipherment was accomplished in 1953, and was reported by Ventris and Chadwick in *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* (Cambridge University Press, 1956), and later, after the tragic death of Ventris, by John Chadwick in *The Decipherment of Linear B* (Cambridge University Press, 1958). To the surprise of scholars it turned out that the language of these tablets from the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C. was an early form of Classical Greek, closely related to the somewhat composite dialect employed by Homer (ca. 10th cent. B.C.).

An attempt was made recently to fill both needs, i.e., continue the Pedersen story by bringing it up to the present time, and give a more thorough coverage of the various schools of linguistic thought. The book I am referring to is John T. Waterman's *Perspectives In Linguistics* (University of Chicago Press, 1963). This book has a fine summary of the achievements of structural linguistics in the twentieth century, the approach which is sometimes called "descriptive", and built on Wilhelm von Humboldt's definition of the term as "the analysis of language as an internally articulated organism". Here, there is a good summary of the approach of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) which had a strong influence on contemporary linguistics. Saussure conceived of language as essentially the relationship between a concept and speech sounds, since before a sound can have a meaning it must be related to a concept. Further, he insisted that this relationship was not a *thing* but rather a *function*, and therefore the object of linguistic study was the "linguistic sign". These signs, besides their signification, had their value, i.e., their relationship to the other signs of the particular language in question. Thus, the phonemic principle, which was discovered by J. Baudouin

de Courtenay at the end of the 19th century, fitted perfectly into the Saussurian system, since the speech sounds are characterized "not, as one might think, by their own positive quality but simply by the fact that they are distinct. Phonemes are above all else opposing, relative, and negative entities." Language, said Saussure, was a functioning of linguistic oppositions which yield a pattern of relationships, and these are the object of the study of linguistics.

From Saussure, Waterman moves on to N. Trubetzkoy and the Prague school. There is a brief summary of the principles contained in the *Gründzuge der Phonologie* (1939) in which Trubetzkoy stated the guiding principles of his system and that of the Prague School. The system is based on the method of sound-structuring by means of contrast and opposition. Trubetzkoy contended that that which serves to differentiate the phonological unit—the *phoneme*—is actually not the sound itself, but rather the sound's contrastive function. Therefore, the phoneme is a sum of these contrasting factors. One of his disciples, Roman Jakobson, was later to develop the theory of distinctive features, a theory which has been "adopted" by Morris Halle (e.g. *The Sound Pattern of Russian*, 1959), and a theory currently employed by the Chomsky school of transformation analysis.

From Trubetzkoy, Waterman goes on to Louis Hjelmslev and the so-called "Copenhagen School." The coverage of this linguist is made by summarizing Hjelmslev's book *Omkring Sprogteoriens Grundloeggelse* (1943), which was translated into English by Francis J. Whitfield under the title *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (1953). The approach is sometimes referred to as glossematics, since it is based on the Saussurian assumption that language is a form and not a substance, and therefore the key to its analysis is an "immanent" linguistics that is operationally self-sufficient and self-contained, with no reference to metaphysical reality (meaning). The subject matter of this sort of linguistic analysis will therefore have an existence only in terms of the patterns arrived at by these completely formal, inherently de-

terminated procedures. Today, this school of thought has few adherents.

There is a brief mention of Leonard Bloomfield and his contribution to American linguistics, as well as to his connection with the "neo-grammarians" of the nineteenth century comparativists. Waterman then makes a roll call of the chief contributors to what he calls the "Bloomfieldian era", from 1933 to about 1950: Kenneth L. Pike, Eugene A. Nida, Bernard Bloch, Zellig S. Harris, Charles F. Hockett, Morris Swadesh, and several others.

The author makes an attempt to present in his own words the contributions of the nineteenth century "neo-grammarians", but he does not add anything to what Pedersen covered. Moreover, his treatment of the linguists of the "Bloomfieldian era", and the pre-Bloomfieldian era of Franz Boas and Edward Sapir seems nothing more than a name-dropping drill. There is no mention of the group in London of Daniel Jones, J. Firth and the Edinburgh group of M.A.K. Halliday, J.C. Catford, J.O. Ellis, A. McIntosh, J.M. Sinclair and J. P. Thorne.

Rather than merely mention names, the author could have given a summary of the various approaches to grammatical analysis, for example, Noam Chomsky's transformation analysis, Kenneth L. Pike's tagmemics, B. Bloch's and Roulon Wells' immediate constituent analysis, Zellig S. Harris' morpheme class substitution system and string analysis, Charles F. Hockett's item and arrangement and constructional grammar, Sydney Lamb's stratificational syntax, M.A.K. Halliday's theory of grammatical categories, and J. Firth's prosodic approach. He could have evaluated each approach and shown their strength and weaknesses, as for example, Paul Postal does in "Constituent Structure: A study of Contemporary Models of Syntactic Description," *International Journal of American Linguistics*, Vol. 30, no. 1, part III (January, 1964).

In brief, what this survey suggests is the need for a thorough treatise on the ideas that have been operative in the various developmental stages of linguistic science. In such a work, each of the men should be considered, his biography given, his aca-

demic genealogy indicated, his principal works summarized, his assumptions, methods and procedures evaluated. It is, no doubt, a monumental task, but books of this type have been written for other disciplines, as for instance, Brehier's and Ueberweg's histories of philosophy.

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