

AMERICAN LINGUISTICS TODAY

(Summary of a paper read to the Linguistic Society
of New Zealand on September 22nd, 1958.)

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The distinctively American approach to linguistics has developed from the study of unfamiliar spoken languages. It is, in part, the outcome of problems raised by such study. Although most linguistic work being done in America today is descriptive and synchronic there are interesting marginal fields of research, involving scholars from other fields, and a good deal of co-operation between linguists, mathematicians, psychologists, communications engineers and so on.

In articulatory phonetics K.L. Pike's work has provided for descriptions of sounds not allowed for in such systems of description as, for instance, the International Phonetic Alphabet. Since 1943 the prospects for acoustic, rather than articulatory descriptions of speech sounds, are much enhanced by the developments in acoustic physics, and communications engineering. Linguists are using such instruments as the sound spectrograph to decide the distinctive sound features crucial to phonemic differentiation in specific languages.

Research into machine translation is fostered by government funds, and there seems to be no reason to doubt the ultimate success of research in this field. This success however is dependent upon complete descriptions, based on formal features, for languages concerned.

The interrelationships between language and culture are the subject of current co-operation between linguists and psychologists and anthropologists. Much of the interest in such research has been aroused by B.L. Whorf's provocative thesis that the structure of the language one uses influences one's perception and understanding of the real world.

In the field of historical and comparative linguistics Morris Swadesh has propounded the theory that certain areas of vocabulary, known as the basic vocabulary, tend to change at a slow and fairly uniform rate for all languages, at all times. This has interested the culture historians and anthropologists and they rather than straight linguists have shown the greatest interest. Polynesian languages and other branches of Malayo-Polynesian are being studied from this point of view. Again, however, successful research will depend upon adequate source material to be provided in most cases by descriptive linguists.

Martinet, a French scholar recently in America, is particularly concerned with the application of the phonemic approach to historical linguistics, and he is also active in studying the dynamics of sound change, a field left severely alone by some key figures in American linguistics, for example, Bloomfield himself.

Greenberg, at Columbia University, is interested in the general statement of problems, techniques, and principles of historical linguistics. He supports strongly the significance of vocabulary as against grammatical features in determining language interrelationships, and maintains that the question of genetic versus other types of relationship is always meaningful, thus denying the concept of a mixed language.

In spite of this apparent diversity there is a common area of theory and principle from which most American linguists work. The Americanist sees linguistics as divided fairly clearly into two main branches, the descriptive and synchronic, and the historical. They are complementary, not antagonistic fields, but the methodological importance of distinguishing between them is generally recognised.

The formal, rather than the semantic criterion for distinguishing categories in language is the cardinal principle of modern linguistics. At least as fundamental is the recognition that objectively different sounds may be linguistically the same—this is the phonemic principle.

Recent developments suggest that distinctive features, rather than the bundles of sound we call phonemes, are crucial in the linguistic codes of all languages. If this is so it is probable that all languages are elaborate codes built up from fewer than twenty different signals.

In analysing a language the descriptivist usually distinguishes clearly between several levels of analysis, almost always between phonemics (the significant sounds), and morphemics (the smallest meaningful sequence of phonemes, and their arrangements in some such unit as the word;) and usually between morphemics and syntax (the arrangements of words within larger units).

The techniques and principles of phonemics may fairly claim to be scientific, in that the results obtained by them are susceptible to testing, and in that different linguists will come up with analyses which are comparable, if not identical. Morphemics is less well developed, but a great amount of work has been done with interesting results, in the past thirty years. Especially interesting is the work of C.F. Voegelin and his students who, following an earlier model set by the anthropologist and linguist Franz Boas, express morphological arrangement as quasi-mathematical formulae. The problem of syntactical statements has not been solved, and many linguists at this point will abandon formal for semantic criteria.

READING LIST IN AMERICAN LINGUISTICS

General Linguistics:

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|----------------------|--|
| Bloomfield, Leonard. | <u>Language.</u> |
| Sapir, Edward. | <u>Language.</u> |
| Hockett, C.F. | <u>A Course in Modern Linguistics.</u> |

Descriptive Linguistics:

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| Harris, Zellig S. | <u>Methods in Structural Linguistics.</u>
(572.8, H.31). A difficult book by
an extreme structuralist. |
| Joos, M. | <u>Readings in Linguistics.</u> (408.2, J.81)
Reprints of important articles. |
| Gleason, H.A. | <u>An Introduction to Descriptive
Linguistics.</u> |
| Greenberg, J.H. | <u>Essays in Linguistics.</u> |
| Hockett, C.F. | <u>A Manual of Phonology.</u> (Memoir 11
of the International Journal of
American Linguistics.) |
| Piko, K.L. | <u>Phonemics.</u> |
| Nida, E.A. | <u>Morphology.</u> |
| Jakobson, Fant, Halle. | <u>Preliminaries to Speech Analysis.</u> |

Language and Culture:

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| Hoijer, Harry. | <u>Language in Culture.</u> (572.8, H.71) |
| Whorf, B.L. | <u>Language, Thought, and Reality.</u> |

Psycholinguistics:

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| Miller, G.A. | <u>Language and Communication.</u> |
| Osgood & Scobock (Ed.) | <u>Psycholinguistics</u> (Memoir 10, I.J.A.L.) |

Articulatory and Acoustic Phonetics:

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| Potter, Kopp, Groen. | <u>Visible Speech.</u> (534.7, P.86) |
| Joos, M. | <u>Acoustic Phonetics</u> (Language
Monograph No. 23) |
| Piko, K.L. | <u>Phonetics.</u> |
| Stotson, R.H. | <u>Mctor Phonetics.</u> |