1973

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Recommended Citation

Thomas, David D. (1973) "Some thoughts on language philosophy and structure," *Work Papers of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, University of North Dakota Session*: Vol. 17, Article 21.

DOI: 10.31356/silwp.vol17.21

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/sil-work-papers/vol17/iss1/21>

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Some Thoughts on Language Philosophy and Structure

David Thomas

1. On the nature and study of language.

Language can be and has been viewed in different ways, reflecting different world-views. In Chart 1 some of these views of language have been sketched in loose order of historical prominence, though all of these still co-exist today. View A was probably the most common view during the mediaeval period. View B could characterize the 19th century. View C was one of the dominant views among linguists in the United States during the first half of this century. View D may be fairly close to the most general current view. View E has been voiced recently in a few quarters. And there is truth in all these views. Strict determinists would probably grant truth only to B, C, and D (in part or in whole). Humanists I believe would generally insist on adding E. And Christians include A in any view of language.

Language and the study of it is a natural science, studying universal laws and their specific applications. But it is more than just scientific rules; let us not despise our human birthright of free choice and creativity.

In addition to universal synchronic laws and creative uses in language, there are also synchronic residues of historical processes in language and synchronic flux of change.

And God has not abrogated His right to intervene in human affairs when He chooses, affecting human language in general as at Babel, cutting across normal communication patterns as when He spoke through the prophets

so that they said things they didn't fully understand, or affecting the performance capacity of individual speakers as when He healed a Galilean deaf-mute so that he could speak.

This combined view of language is sketched as View F.

Language as a science and as history has been studied intensively for the past two centuries, as they are the facets of language easiest to describe. And predictions based on scientific laws and logical axioms can be readily verified. Creative use of language, however, can only with difficulty and inappropriateness be described, as with ideophones, onomatopoeia, metaphor, and poetry, and any predictions can be made only in the most general terms, based on general knowledge of human behavior. Divine intervention in language can sometimes have its effect perceived and described, but it is almost never predictable since we can fathom so little of the nature of God.

Thus the practical study of linguistics must perforce consist largely of scientific and historical analysis, yet attention needs to be directed toward poetic and creative use, and God's creating and sustaining of language and His occasional intervention must be borne in mind.

2. On labeling structures.

Definition and labeling of classes sometimes proceeds, for example, like: A functions like the negatives, therefore A is a negative. This could be restated in more formal manner as: There is a group of words meaning 'negative', and they all function alike grammatically. There is

another word A which also functions grammatically like the words meaning 'negative', therefore A is a member of the class which has the meaning 'negative' and functions grammatically in this particular way.

Method 1

Revised
Situation

Method 2

The above described method of labeling (Method 1), probably usually unintentional but unfortunately all too common, ascribes a semantic character to A because of its grammatical similarity to B. This seems a pretty clear case of a bad syllogism. If one wishes to ascribe a semantic character ('negative' in this case) to both A and B, he must first show that both A and B actually have this semantic character (Revised Situation), then he can generalize them into a single semantic class.

But given the original situation, it would seem better to say that A and the negatives both have the grammatical function X, thus form a grammatical class labeled X.

3. On defining units.

There are three ways in which linguistic units can be defined: definition by borders, definition by centers, or definition by areas of density.

Type 1

Type 2

Type 3

The first type, which western logic and science have generally preferred to work with, draws a clean line between areas A and B, with everything on one side of the line being A and everything on the other side of the line being B. This is esthetically pleasing, but it doesn't fit the facts of every language situation. Language should not be forced into this mold.

The second type, which some current East European linguists are emphasizing, notably in Prague, shows centers A and B to be in clear contrast getting fuzzier as one gets farther from the center. With this type of definition there will normally be cases in the twilight areas where it becomes inappropriate to ask whether an item is A or B. This type of definition, I feel, is a better fit in most language situations. This could also be paralleled to a series of peaked curves on a graph, where the peaks are contrastive but the slopes melt into each other. Most instances of such units will cluster near the centers but with occasional indistinct instances.

The third type has not one center but several centers, or several areas of high frequency, among which there is never more than a two-way contrast in any particular environment, thus these various centers can be grouped into an A set and a B set. I suspect that this situation occurs occasionally in language, though I can't document it.

Each of these three types of definition has its own situations where it is most appropriate.

4. On some factors in language description.

Languages may be described in varying degrees of generality, ranging from the very detailed to very general. This has sometimes been called degrees of delicacy. A detailed description may give fine sub-divisions of classes, detailed descriptions of units, lists of exceptions, fine grading of rules, careful studies of cooccurrence, and the like. A general description may just give the broad outlines of the language. Detailed descriptions are more useful for the specialist, general descriptions are more useful for the non-specialist. Both are valid and valuable.

The best description must always be that description which best portrays language as it is, language as a whole. Descriptive adequacy is sometimes shrugged off as a simple matter, but language as a whole is still far from explored, and no one can even start laying claim to descriptive adequacy in his description of any segment of language until he can fit it into the whole. Arguments over anything beyond descriptive adequacy I consider a waste of ink at this stage.

One of the less mentioned facts about language these days is the redundancy which runs throughout language and is a basic factor in language. In view of this it seems to run counter to a natural description of language to insist that economy should be the prime measure of a description.

It is sometimes implied that the ideal of linguistics is to find laws that are more and more far-reaching, hoping to tie everything together, and examples are generally drawn from physics and astronomy (both sciences of mechanical precision), with the supreme example being Einstein's simple

all-embracing formula $e=mc^2$. I personally have considerable question whether language is a single monolithic system like this. Firth and his associates have shown the value of polysystemic approaches to parts of language, and; in the light of my view of language as discussed in Sec. 1, I anticipate that language as a whole will eventually be seen as polysystemic.

FOOTNOTE

1. I am indebted to Barbara E. Hollenbach for helpful criticism of this paper.

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