Linguistic Society of America

REVIEWS

Selected papers of J. R. Firth, 1952–59. Edited by F. L. PALMER. (Longmans' linguistics library; Indiana University studies in the history and theory of linguistics.) London and Bloomington: Longmans and Indiana University Press, 1968. Pp. x, 209.

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This companion volume to Firth 1957 makes readily available all of Firth's theoretically oriented papers not previously reprinted; indeed, Palmer has done us the additional service of preparing for publication five previously unpublished papers from the period 1952–59. Two of these, 'Descriptive linguistics and the study of English' (96–113) and 'A new approach to grammar' (114–25) might seem especially important, since they tell us something of Firth's concept of syntax, a matter hardly touched on in any of his writings published during his lifetime. However, in 'Descriptive linguistics', there is only a three-page discussion of the 'verbal piece' in English (103–5); while in 'A new approach', two pages (121–2) are devoted to going over roughly the same ground, and a scant page (123) deals with negation. Not only are these discussions brief, they are not systematic. We are told by Firth only what tenses and aspects appear in the expression *He kept popping in and out of my office all the afternoon*; that 'in describing the English verb, I would only set up two tenses, present and past'; and that there are twenty-four 'operators' which play a role in negation, interrogation, emphasis, and in the expression of sentence fragments (104). Why Firth would set up only two tenses, he does not tell us, although we might easily guess; as for the 'operators', these are the familiar 'auxiliary verbs' of anybody else's English grammar. The only novelty in Firth's list is that he gives equal status to all inflected forms of the verbs *be* and *have*, but no argument in defense of these decisions is given. Similarly, he does not attempt to justify his claim that *keep*, *go*, *get*, *begin*, *start*, *stop*, and *finish* are verbs of aspect in English, but not *commence* or *cease* (124).

Firth's study of negation, he tells us, has given him little hope for the idea of universal grammar and for one-to-one equivalents in the grammatical analysis of different languages, but again he fails to tell us why. He declares, 'Again our grammatical analysis must not require us to supply missing words understood' (123); but we do not learn the reason. It would appear that all Firth was capable of doing in syntax was to discuss isolated examples ad hoc, and to make pronouncements ex cathedra. These pages contain no sustained arguments.

Probably the same uncharitable conclusion should be drawn regarding his published work in semantics and phonology, although in the latter he was clearly able to stimulate others to original and creative work. Perhaps his widely proclaimed genius lay in having clear and insightful intuitions about what linguistic analysis is all about. I would list these as follows: (1) post-Bloomfieldian American phonemics was sterile; (2) phonological analysis should be 'appropriate' for the material under examination (the current term is 'natural'); (3) there is a

broad interpretation of 'meaning' such that it involves all levels of linguistic analysis; and (4) people use different versions of their language under different circumstances. Palmer, in his introduction, agrees that Firth's importance and influence had to do mainly with his dogged maintenance of these largely unpopular doctrines. Since phonology is not the primary concern in any of the papers appearing in the volume under review, let us pass over insights 1 and 2. Despite the obvious truth in 3, it does not warrant the conclusion, arrived at by Firth, that there is no sense to a narrow interpretation of 'meaning' which is independent of syntax and phonology; Lyons 1967, in a thorough critique of Firth's theory of meaning, has pointed this out. The current debate among generative-transformational grammarians, as to whether transformations are to be viewed as meaning-preserving, involves the same sort of issue; one can grant that the application of a transformation does change meaning (broadly construed), without conceding that there is a sensible notion of meaning (narrowly construed) which is unaffected by the application of any transformation.

Insight 4 leads to the position that the proper object of linguistic study is not a language, such as English, as a whole, but rather the varieties of English as they are used under varying circumstances. There is, however, an unclarity in Firth's formulation of this point. His notion of a 'restricted language' is meant to include, for example, such constructs as 'polite, standard English', the language spoken on a cricket field, the language of the Declaration of American Independence etc. By this last example, I would imagine Firth meant the language in which the document was framed, not taking the text itself as the language, as if one were to write a grammar for that document alone; but his meaning is not always clear. Firth also appears to have drawn the unwarranted conclusion that the study of non-restricted languages (e.g. English as a whole) is impossible.

Besides the previously unpublished articles, the present volume also contains three articles which previously appeared in the *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 'A synopsis of linguistic theory, 1930–55' from *Studies in linguistic analysis*, Firth's contribution to *For Roman Jakobson*, a short article for a medical audience, and his paper on 'Ethnographic analysis and language with reference to Malinowski's views' from *Man and culture: an evaluation of the work of Bronislaw Malinowski*. This last article, although a rambling affair, provides a clear account of Malinowski's linguistic ideas and of their importance for Firth.

REFERENCES

FIRTH, J. R. 1957. Papers in linguistics, 1934–51. London: Oxford University Press.
LYONS, JOHN. 1967. Firth's theory of meaning. In memory of J. R. Firth, ed. by C. E. Bazell et al., 288–302. London: Longmans.

Linguistics. By PETER H. SALUS. (The Bobbs-Merrill series in speech communication.) Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969. Pp. xiv, 66. $1.45.

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This little book aims at introducing 'students of communication, communicative disorders and the social sciences' (viii) to the basic concepts of linguistics.