



Foreword

This is the forty-sixth volume in the M.I.T. Research Monograph Series published by The M.I.T. Press. The objective of this series is to contribute to the professional literature a number of significant pieces of research, larger in scope than journal articles but normally less ambitious than finished books. We believe that such studies deserve a wider circulation than can be accomplished by informal channels, and we hope that this form of publication will make them readily accessible to research organizations, libraries, and independent workers.

HOWARD W. JOHNSON

Preface

This work is a revision of my doctoral dissertation "Modern British Linguistics: A Study of Its Theoretical and Substantive Contributions" completed in 1964 under the supervision of Professor Noam Chomsky. Except for the addition of an appendix to Chapter 3 dealing with John Lyons' *Structural Semantics: An Analysis of Part of the Vocabulary of Plato*, and the elimination of a chapter dealing with the work of Sir Alan H. Gardiner, only relatively minor changes in the thesis have been made.

I especially wish to thank Professor Chomsky, whose influence on the writer is apparent throughout this work, and also Professor Henry A. Gleason, Jr., of the Hartford Seminary Foundation, for his constant encouragement throughout the writing of the thesis itself.

Columbus, Ohio
January 1967

D. TERENCE LANGENDOEN

Contents

Introduction	1
1. The Linguistic Views of B. Malinowski	7
1.1 "Classificatory Particles" (1920)	7
1.2 <i>Argonauts of the Western Pacific</i> (1922)	12
1.3 "The Problem of Meaning" (1923)	15
1.4 <i>Coral Gardens and Their Magic</i> (1935)	30
1.5 Conclusion	35
2. The Early Views of J. R. Firth	37
3. The Later Views of J. R. Firth	49
3.1 Introduction	49
3.2 Prosodic Analysis	50
3.3 Meaning by Collocation	61
3.4 Views on Syntax	65
3.5 Rejection of Universal Grammar	67
Appendix: The Views of J. Lyons in <i>Structural Semantics</i>	69
4. Exemplifications of Prosodic Analysis	76
4.1 Introduction	76
4.2 E. J. A. Henderson on Siamese (1949)	77
4.3 W. S. Allen on Sanskrit (1951, 1954)	83
4.4 W. S. Allen on Hārāuti (1957)	85

xii	CONTENTS	
4.5	W. S. Allen on Abaza (1956)	87
4.6	J. Carnochan on Hausa (1951, 1952, 1957)	98
4.7	R. H. Robins on Sundanese (1957)	100
4.8	T. F. Mitchell on Arabic (1960)	101
4.9	J. T. Bendor-Samuel on Terena (1960, 1962)	109
4.10	F. R. Palmer, N. Waterson, and J. Carnochan on Vowel Harmony in Tigre, Turkish, and Igbo	114

Selected Bibliography	116
-----------------------	-----

Index	121
-------	-----

Indeed, to understand most of the important aspects of Firth's work, it is necessary to be acquainted with Malinowski's linguistic studies. These studies have up to the present time been almost completely ignored by both anthropologists and linguists, and this is particularly unfortunate since Malinowski was one of the few important anthropologists of his time, and the only one in Great Britain, to have had an abiding interest in language itself. A critical analysis of this work, if only to supply a background for the later work of Firth, has therefore long been needed.

Such a critical analysis, when accomplished, turns out to have other values as well. First it sheds light on the steady change in theoretical orientation that Malinowski underwent from his earliest writings in the 1910's down to his latest publications in the early 1940's. It makes sense, in fact, to draw a line somewhere in the early 1920's, and to speak of work done before that time as representative of the "early" Malinowski and of work done after that time as being that of the "later" Malinowski. This cleavage is appropriate not only to his linguistic work but to his anthropological work as well. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* stands to *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* much as Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* stands to his *Philosophical Investigations*, though not for the same reasons.

Roughly speaking, the early Malinowski maintained a rich theoretical position that far exceeded those of his contemporaries in terms of the number and kinds of assumptions he was willing to make concerning the structure of society and the relationship of the individual to it. Compared to his empirically oriented contemporaries, Malinowski seems almost a rationalist, one who believed not only in the reality of institutions and relationships, like Durkheim, but in their psychological reality. He also expressed belief in the existence of universal abstract entities in anthropological theory, whose actual manifestation could take different forms in different societies but which were generally expressible as rules for social conduct. While individual natives are generally unable to formulate them explicitly, they are usually able to determine their consequences in particular situations.

The later Malinowski, by contrast, espoused a much weaker theoretical position, one based on the tenets of behavioristic psychology. This is most clearly seen in his *Coral Gardens*, published in 1935 after the seminars in which he and Firth participated, and it is reasonable to suppose that Firth, always effective in arguing his position, actually had a considerable influence on Malinowski during the time that they worked together. This suggests that Firth had a well-defined theoretical

Introduction

This book is intended to acquaint linguists and others interested in the development of linguistics in this century with the character of the dominant school of descriptive linguistics in Great Britain today. That school can quite fairly be called the creation of one man, John Rupert Firth, and its date of origin can be given as 1944, the year in which Firth acceded to the Chair of General Linguistics at the University of London. He held this position until his retirement in 1956, and his death in 1960 (in the words of R. H. Robins) marked "the end of an era in the study of linguistics in Great Britain" (1961, p. 191). Because of Firth's long association with the University of London, the school has come to be known as the "London school," and we shall follow that usage. Like other geographic labels for schools in linguistics, this particular one is not entirely felicitous, inasmuch as the linguistic school of Daniel Jones, which we do not consider in this work, is equally deserving of this designation. Furthermore, London was and continues to be only one of the locations of this school, outposts of which are now located in many other academic centers throughout the United Kingdom, and indeed the Commonwealth.

Firth's entry into the field of linguistics in the early 1930's was certainly not a conspicuous one — details are given in Robins' obituary article just quoted from — and most important for an understanding of his later work is the fact that he participated in the seminars conducted at that time by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski at the University of London.

framework of his own and that in formulating his linguistic position he simply fitted key concepts from Malinowski into this framework, while at the same time encouraging Malinowski's drift toward a radical form of behaviorism. There is reason to believe that Malinowski resisted this drift to some extent; even in *Coral Gardens* certain passages have a definitely early Malinowski ring. But as far as his view of language was concerned, the drift was quite complete. Chapter 1 of this book is therefore devoted to a critical study of Malinowski's linguistic work, and forms a self-contained unit.

The second and third chapters are devoted to a study of the major linguistic writings of Firth; Chapter 2 deals with his work up to 1944, and Chapter 3 with his subsequent publications. A systematic study of and, one might say, commentary on the linguistic theories and notions propounded by Firth have also long been needed. The reasons for this are not hard to find. First, all of Firth's published writings on linguistic theory and, for that matter, all of his descriptive work are notoriously obscure and programmatic. This state of affairs has been readily admitted by his followers. Robins, for example, described Firth's publications as "all readable and stimulating, but programmatic rather than definitive, often allusive rather than explicit, and sometimes infuriatingly obscure on points obviously vital to the theory he was expounding" (1961, p. 198). Second, no one else has ever successfully presented an explicit formulation of the theories of the London school and showed the historical and theoretical connections between them and those of the American and continental linguists. Third, the total history of the development of the London school has never been attempted before, except in outline.¹

Firth's attention, at least in his published writings, was restricted to considerations of phonology and semantics, and in each area he formulated a very distinct-sounding position. In semantics, he extended the later Malinowski's contextual theory of meaning to cover a wider range of cases than Malinowski's, and in so doing he also made certain modifications of it. Our contention in this book is that while Firth's ideas are of some interest for the general theory of style, they are of no interest at all for the study of meaning. The single most important reason for this is that Firth's view is based on the opinion that language is not "creative" and that a person is totally constrained essentially to say what he does by the given social situation. Firth recognized the possibility that a person might not say what was expected of him in a

¹ The best recent treatment is by Robins (1963). Firth's own discussion of his debt to Malinowski may be found in Firth (1957b).

given situation, but then all that can be said of such utterances is that they are inappropriate.² After Firth's death in 1960, however, J. Lyons completed under the direction of W. S. Allen and R. H. Robins a dissertation on semantics that not only made use of Firthian notions of semantics but also drew on the generative linguistic theory of N. Chomsky. The dissertation in its published form in 1963 doubtless represents the most important original contribution to semantic theory to come out of British linguistics since Ogden and Richards, and for this reason critical discussion of this work has been included as an appendix to Chapter 3.

In phonology Firth owed no debt to Malinowski, who never much concerned himself with the subject. Firth saw himself as a phonologist standing at the culmination of a long line of British phoneticians and orthoepists, starting in the Elizabethan period, his immediate forebear in this line being Henry Sweet. Three of his papers in linguistics are devoted to the historical study of selected phoneticians and orthoepists. British workers are treated by Firth in (1946, pp. 92-120 in 1957c), Americans in (1949, pp. 156-172 in 1957c), and Europeans who worked in India and Burma in (1936, pp. 54-75 in 1957c). Firth was strongly motivated by the desire to dispel the myth that linguistics began with the nineteenth-century comparativists (cf. Firth [1949, p. 139 in 1957c]: "it is all to the good that we should look back on a couple of thousand years without fear of being turned into pillars of salt. The German comparativists had so harnessed and blinkered Western European linguistics in the nineteenth century that nothing earlier could have much interest for linguistic science"). Firth clearly took an antiquarian's delight in uncovering the insights of sixteenth- to eighteenth-century phoneticians and spelling reformers, but though these papers are of some historical interest they will not be considered in detail here.

Despite his admiration for Sweet, Firth did not inherit any particular theory from him. The only reference in which Firth clearly indicates that he is "carrying on" from Sweet is in (1948b, p. 146 in 1957c), where he asserts, first, that the idea of consonant and vowel cardinalization was originally hit upon by Sweet, and second that he has finally made a concrete proposal for consonantal cardinalization parallel to Daniel Jones's well-known vowel cardinalization. Furthermore, it is not true that Firth consistently maintained one single phonological theory throughout his

² A parallel to this position can be detected in the Parmenidean position, expounded by Cratylus in Plato's dialogue of that name: one cannot say what is not true, or that what is false is unintelligible. Firth held roughly that what is inappropriate is unintelligible.

linguistic career. Actually, three stages in Firth's thinking on phonology can be distinguished. In his earliest papers in the early 1930's he propounded essentially orthodox Daniel Jones phonemics. By 1935, however, he had come to a position roughly equivalent to that of W. F. Twaddell in the latter's *On Defining the Phoneme*. Finally in 1948 he published an account of his theory of prosodic analysis, which in essence is very much like Z. S. Harris' theory of long components first expressed in 1945. Arguments to substantiate the validity of these assertions are given in Chapters 2 and 3.

It is not hard to determine the reasons for Firth's shift in thinking about phonology. He disavowed Jonesian phonemics because he came to believe at some time in the early 1930's that there was something wrong with the principle of complementary distribution for phonology (although it remained quite valid for purposes of orthography design). His rejection of the principle, unlike Halle's and Chomsky's rejection of it, was not for any logical reason but for an aesthetic one. He simply believed the principle to be *inappropriate*. If two classes of sounds are in complementary distribution, then the particular sounds appearing in one context are diagnostic of that context, and similarly for the sounds in the other contexts. If one then invokes the principle and merges the various sounds into phonemes, there is no phonological reflection of the diagnostic or signaling value of the particular sounds.

The theory of prosodic analysis was arrived at simply by pushing the decision to reject complementary distribution to its ultimate conclusion and still remain within the framework of a taxonomic phonological theory. Prosodic analysis is really nothing more than a notation for carefully distinguishing features in an utterance which are diagnostic of a particular environment from those which are not, and is thus in a curious way the reverse of a phonemic analysis in which (within certain limits) phonetic features uniquely characteristic of a particular environment are disregarded (that is, considered subphonemic).

Since 1948 a large number of British linguists have enthusiastically adopted Firth's prosodic analysis approach, and a considerable number of descriptions, covering a large number of languages, have been written by these linguists. Many of the articles in which these descriptions appear were written largely to justify the Firthian approach, notably those found in *Studies in Linguistic Analysis*, which appeared in 1957.³ We have included a dozen of these articles for examination in Chapter 4; they were chosen either because of their intrinsic impor-

³ See also the author's review of this book in Langendoen (1964).

tance as illustrations of particular features of prosodic analysis or because in them the taxonomic constraints imposed by the theory were either consciously or unconsciously broken. We note that in all of the cases in which the authors went beyond these constraints they did so to achieve some kind of descriptive adequacy. These latter articles must be considered to rank among the outstanding descriptive phonological publications in the linguistics literature of that period. In our discussion of these articles some attempt is made to restate the various phonological descriptions in terms of the generative phonological theory of Morris Halle and Noam Chomsky. These restatements are meant to be taken only as suggestive. They introduce nothing new by way of data in the languages under consideration and so should not be interpreted to reflect the statements of generative phonologists working independently on these languages.

With the exception of the second of John Bendor-Samuel's papers on Terena phonology and John Lyons' book on semantic theory, nothing published after 1960, the year of Firth's death, has been discussed critically in this book. Since that time, largely under the leadership of Michael A. K. Halliday, of the University of Edinburgh, and his student Robert M. W. Dixon, now of the University of London, a distinct new school of "neo-Firthian" linguistics has developed. No attempt to analyze the theoretical and substantive contributions of this school has been attempted in this book. For some critical discussion, the reader is referred to a number of recent articles and books by Paul M. Postal, Peter H. Matthews, and myself.⁴

⁴ Postal (1964, pp. 97-117), Postal (1966), Matthews (1966), Langendoen (forthcoming *a, b*).