CHARLES C. FRIES

The past year was a sad one for the Linguistic Society. It witnessed the passing of so many who had helped build the organization and bring it to its present strength. Prominent among these was Charles Carpenter Fries (1887–1967), a former president of the society (1939) and long-time director of the Linguistic Institute.

Any proper recognition of the activities and accomplishments of Charles Fries, however, cannot be limited to his work in the Linguistic Society or even in the field of linguistics. It can only begin there. Fries was first and foremost an educator. For him linguistics was never an end in itself but rather a means toward the goal of heightened educational achievement.

To be sure, he found the study of language an absorbing topic, particularly the fields of morphology and syntax. His interests embraced both the history and the present structure of the language. This was evident as early as his doctoral dissertation, 'The periphrastic future with *shall* and *will* in Modern English' (1925), which interpreted the contemporary situation relative to the use of these auxiliaries in the light of its historical background.

Even this early work possessed certain qualities which were to characterize Fries's approach to linguistic problems throughout most of his career. It was based upon a specific corpus, carefully selected for its representative quality. The material was handled in such a way as to eliminate the factor of subjective interpretation. Although the corpus, as a body of relevant linguistic performance, has become somewhat unfashionable in certain quarters today, one cannot help admiring Fries's ingenuity in selecting the kinds of evidence that he did: drama, for his study of the periphrastic future; letters to a bureau of the federal government, for the *American English grammar* (1940); taped telephone conversations for *The structure of English* (1952); tapes of the 'What's my line' television program for his analysis of English intonation patterns in questions. This listing is by no means exhaustive, but it is indicative of his ability to match the material to the nature of the study.

The very choice of the *shall* and *will* problem was again indicative of an important direction which Fries's work was to take and to which he held consistently throughout his career. In 1925 there was no reliable information at all about the distribution of these auxiliaries in either British or American English. School textbooks, generation after generation, had simply parroted a series of rules which were strongly suspect as far as any basis in fact was concerned. Fries set himself the task not only of determining as fully and accurately as possible the usage of the time and its historical development, but the background of the curious and complex set of rules as well, an investigation which led him into an examination of seventeenth and eighteenth century attitudes and assumptions about language. The discrepancies between these and the actual facts of the language led him into his first crusade, against the unrealistic presen-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0097850768015225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tation of the English language in the school textbooks of the mid and late twenties. What Fries objected to here was the educational waste, the time spent in futile correction of what was already firmly established in the language.

Though he had allies in this effort, his was the voice that was persistent and persuasive, because he was willing to do what many of his linguistic colleagues were not, at least at that time—namely, to talk to and work with professional educators and to write in terms they could understand, presenting the results of his investigations in terms of a workable school program. This was true both of his *American English grammar* and his *Structure of English*.

Just as he was ingenious in seeking out bodies of material which lent themselves readily to the types of study he planned to pursue, so was he quick to sense the linguistic projects which needed to be undertaken and to devise a means of getting them under way. The original meeting between representatives of the Linguistic Society and the Present-Day English Group of the Modern Language Association, called for the purpose of laying plans for a linguistic atlas of this country, was sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English at a time when Fries was its president. It was largely due to his determination to help realize Sir William Craigie's plans for a series of period dictionaries that the Middle English and Early Modern English Dictionary projects were set into motion at the University of Michigan. As the war years approached, Fries was one of the first to sense how large a part the teaching of English as a foreign language would play in the furtherance of our cultural relations in Latin America. He was equally sensitive to its importance in the post-war period as an inevitable by-product of our new role in international affairs.

The English Language Institute at the University of Michigan, founded by Fries and directed by him for a number of years, is an enduring monument to his work along these lines. It was, of course, the pioneer effort in this country. But quite as important as the size of the operation and the successful methods it developed was the training program for teachers and administrators. Any gathering of TEFL leaders today will be sure to include a large number who received their initial experience at Michigan, or are the products of someone who did.

The Linguistic Society is particularly indebted to Charles Fries for his successful revival of the Linguistic Institute. The Institute was originally organized as a kind of summer center for advanced studies, a format which was highly satisfactory to the few in attendance but which, in the light of the state of linguistics in the late 1920's, was bound to run into practical difficulties. After its fourth session it was moribund. Fries had the imagination to see that the only way to make it work was to make it a part of the summer graduate program of a university willing to invest something in this new graduate discipline. He was sufficiently persuasive to get the University of Michigan to underwrite it for a number of years. In short, he established the operational pattern which brought it back to life.

It has already been suggested that Fries's impact upon the profession was by no means limited to his direct service to this organization. It is doubtful that anyone whom we can remember ever did more in bringing linguistics to bear upon

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0097850768015225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

every kind of language-teaching activity, in insisting that linguistics was not merely for the linguists but that it belonged in every curriculum designed for students who were preparing for a professional career in which language activities play a significant role. This was not an easy task. Often he ran squarely into prejudice and vested interest. He tackled it with incredible patience and persistence, and in so doing provided a model for the scores of students whom he trained.

A list of such students constitutes in itself a significant tribute to the man. It includes Kenneth Pike, Harold Allen, Frederic Cassidy, Joseph Yamagiwa, and Robert Lado—to name only a few. These and dozens of others, in their own professional dedication, their constant concern with the application as well as the development of the science, are the most telling evidence of the vigor and originality with which Charles Fries carried on his own work, influencing the study of language in so many ways.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0097850768015225 Published online by Cambridge University Press