WHY A LINGUISTIC SOCIETY?

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Students of language do not need to ask *Why a linguistic society?* but many laymen have asked this question. The answer, to be sure, lies really in our work and in its results; but, for this very reason, it is desirable that our motives be understood.

The immediate answer is simple: of course, we seek the possibility of meeting and knowing each other. In our country are scholars who for a generation or more have worked in linguistics and have never met; some of them saw each other for the first time at our initial meeting on December 28th. For ourselves this is answer enough, but for the layman it is no answer at all, and leads him only to restate his question: Why should So-and-so want to meet So-and-so? and What have you, after all, in common? and Why will not the existing societies, Philological, Oriental, Modern Language, Anthropological, Psychological, and what not, serve you as meeting-places? The layman—natural scientist, philologian, or man in the street—does not know that there is a science of language.

Such a science, however, exists; its aims are so well defined, its methods so well developed, and its past results so copious, that students of language feel as much need for a professional society as do adherents of any other science.

The science of language, dealing with the most basic and simplest of human social institutions, is a human (or mental or, as they used to say, moral) science. It is most closely related to ethnology, but precedes ethnology and all other human sciences in the order of growing complexity, for linguistics stands at their foot, immediately after psychology, the connecting link between the natural sciences and the human. The methods of linguistics resemble those of the natural sciences, and so do its results, both in their certainty and in their seeming by no means obvious, but rather, in many instances, paradoxical to the common sense of the time.

This position of linguistic science appears at the very outset in its methods of observation. The work of directly observing and recording

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human speech is much like the work of the ethnologist; indeed, in our country, where such field-work has been best done, it has been performed chiefly by the ethnologic-linguistic school. But, linguistics demands, to mention a difference, the recording of speech-movements or of the resultant sound-waves. For this purpose a kind of simplified physiology of speech has hitherto been used; as it is in many ways unsatisfactory, methods of mechanical observation, both physiologic and acoustic, are being developed.

The layman usually has no conception of this task; he believes that languages which possess no written literature are mere "dialects" or "jargons," of small extent and subject to no fixed rule. Quite by contrast, linguistics finds, on the one hand, a similarity, repugnant to the common-sense view, between the languages of highly civilized people and those of savages, a similarity which disregards the use or non-use of writing. In every speech-community, certain combinations (morphemes) of a very limited number of types of vocal sounds (phonemes) are socially fixed as reactions to certain stimuli and as stimuli to certain reactions coordinated with the former stimuli (meaning). These habits—the structure and vocabulary of the language—are as exactly and firmly maintained, and their number and variety are as great in ruder societies as in our own. On the other hand, the differences are equally striking: the categories of Latin grammar, such as its parts of speech, are by no means universal, but represent merely one type of structure; other languages arrange the morphemes—sentences, clauses, phrases, words, compound-members, stems, affixes, and the like—upon entirely different patterns. It remains for linguistics to determine what is widespread and what little is common to all human speech.

For the speech of the past we depend upon written documents. Here we have the problem of interpreting into terms of language the written characters which never consistently symbolize these terms, and sometimes, as in Chinese, scarcely indicate them at all.

Without dwelling upon the difficult and peculiar technique of deriving the structural system and the lexicon from the record of actual speech-utterances—a technique which in some respects resembles the mathematical—we may mention rather the significance of its results. The structural features and the lists of words, stems, affixes, and the like which we here derive are in reality records of mass phenomena. Each item represents a limitless sequence of individual concrete acts of speech. As the physicist need not follow the path of each particle, but observes their resultant action in the mass, and their individual actions only when

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these in turn group themselves into a deflection of the mass condition (as in radio-active substances), and rarely has occasion to watch the impingement of a single particle, so in linguistics we rarely attend to the single utterance or speaker, but attend to the deviations of utterances and speakers only when they mass themselves into a deflection of the total activity (linguistic change); and it is this total activity, resultant of unnumbered units, which we for the most part observe. Moreover, as in the natural sciences, this resultant is immediately subject to our observation; we are not in the position of seeing only the individual occurrence and having to reach the mass phenomenon by endless registration and statistics—a state of affairs which has prolonged the infancy of such studies as economics.

Linguistics differs from the natural sciences in that its object depends upon those small and constantly altering groups of individuals, the speech-communities. Thus linguistics introduces into the order of the sciences the peculiar rate of change known as history—a rate of change more rapid than the biologic, and therefore more subject to observation.

Linguistic change is studied primarily by comparison of speech-communities which have diverged from a single older community. It is in this comparison that the science of language has achieved its greatest success and has most refined its method. The results here extend over periods of time and reach a degree of accuracy as yet unknown to the other historical sciences. With minute detail, including even features (such as the accentual) that may not be recorded in the written documents, linguistics traces the history of a language far beyond the earliest times accessible to other aspects of history. Where written documents exist they guide us a distance on the way; but, here again, as we have suggested, a peculiar and often ingenious technique is required, for the habits of writing become fixed independently of speech, and conceal as much as they tell.

In this phase too, the results of linguistics, far from being truisms, tend to run counter to the common sense of our time. To mention only the most far-reaching: language changes always and everywhere; this change goes on without deflection by secondary ("subjective") factors such as desire for intelligibility or euphony; linguistic change leads from greater to lesser complexity of the word-unit, from highly inflected to "simpler" languages; the writing of a language is not a model on which speech is formed, but merely a rough notation whose existence has only a very slight effect upon the primary activity, speech; standard and literary languages are not original forms from

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which dialects faultily deviate ("mistakes of language," "bad grammar"), but are only secondary creations on the basis of dialects, which latter root far more deeply in the past.

One need go no further to see that students of our science, however ready for alliance and cooperation with workers in related fields, have none the less a unique and common task which requires a highly specialized equipment, and well warrants the bond of a common scientific association. Let it not be taken invidiously, if we say, in particular, that linguistics cannot be properly viewed as a subsidiary discipline to the study of literature, or paired with it as "the linguistic side" of philology,[1] or even placed in any close connection with the study of fine arts, of which literary history and criticism form a part.

It would be superfluous to speak also of external conditions which add to our justification, were it not that these conditions are working great injury to the progress of our science and to the welfare of the public at large. Not only in the general public, but also in the academic system, linguistics is not known as a science. The notion seems to prevail that a student of language is merely a kind of crow-baited student of literature. Even the more personal and at first glance petty ill-effects of this situation are not always to be lightly dismissed. Unfortunately an instance lies at hand in the recent death of Carlos Everett Conant, one of our founders, the foremost student of Philippine languages; he died tragically, and the circumstances of his death indicate that he might have been spared, to the great benefit of science, had not his professional career been one of desperate hardship.[2]

The more direct harm to science is too obvious to need exposition; one may mention the American Indian languages, which are disappearing forever, more rapidly than they can be recorded, what with the almost total lack of funds and organization; or the case of American English, of which we know only that, both as to dialects and as to distribution of standard forms, it would present a complex and instructive picture, had we but the means and the equipment to study it.

To speak, finally, of the public interest, it is evident that a great and important, indeed the fundamental phase of our social life consists of

[1] Needless to say that that noblest of sciences, philology, the study of national culture, is something much greater than a misfit combination of language plus literature. It may be well to add in passing that the British use of "philology" for linguistics leaves no name for the former subject and ought not be imitated in this country; rather, the English would do well to adopt our usage.

[2] See his biography in *Who's Who*.

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linguistic activities, and that, in particular, elementary education is largely linguistic. Yet such movements as that for English spelling-reform or for an international auxiliary language are carried on, in principle and to a great extent in practice, without the counsel of our science. Our schools are conducted by persons who, from professors of education down to teachers in the classroom, know nothing of the results of linguistic science, not even the relation of writing to speech or of standard language to dialect. In short, they do not know what language is, and yet must teach it, and in consequence waste years of every child's life and reach a poor result.[3]

Not only the furtherance of our science, but also the needs of society, make it the duty of students of language to work together systematically and with that sence of craftsmanship and of obligation which is called professional consciousness. For this they need a Linguistic Society.

[3] As to foreign-language teaching, there are few schoolmen who realize that there is a large linguistic literature on this subject.

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