JOHN RUPERT FIRTH

JOHN RUPERT FIRTH died quite suddenly on 14 December 1960. It is far more than the complimentary tribute expected on these occasions to say that his death marks the end of an era in the study of linguistics in Great Britain.

Firth was born on 17 June 1890, and graduated with first-class honours in history at Leeds University in 1911, taking his M.A. degree there two years later. He lectured in history at the City of Leeds Training College for a short period thereafter, but before the outbreak of war in 1914 he had joined the Indian Education Service. Military service in the 1914–18 war took him to Afghanistan and Africa, as well as to places in India—service which, from his own accounts, he mostly enjoyed.

All his life he had cultivated a keen interest in the study of language, and Henry Sweet's system of shorthand, which he mastered and for whose author he always retained the greatest veneration, was one of his earliest introductions to questions of phonetics and phonology. Soon after the war, in 1920, he became Professor of English in the University of the Punjab at Lahore, a post he held until 1928. He achieved a considerable personal and academic reputation in Lahore, and looked back on his time there with pleasure, but he was happy to return to England in 1928 when he took up the post of Senior Lecturer in the Department of Phonetics at University College, London, under Professor Daniel Jones. He remained on the staff of University College until 1938, but during these years he held a number of part-time appointments elsewhere, as Assistant in the Sociology of Languages at the London School of Economics and Political Science, as Special Lecturer in the Phonetics of Indian Languages at the Indian Institute in Oxford, and as Lecturer in Linguistics at the School of Oriental Studies (the title School of Oriental and African Studies dates from 1938). These part-time appointments all influenced the development of Firth's thought and academic personality, and his close association and mutual friendship with Bronislaw Malinowski at the London School of Economics played a very considerable part in the formation of Firth's theory of meaning and of his attitude to the place of meaning in linguistic analysis.

A Leverhulme fellowship in 1937 gave Firth fifteen months back in India, where he worked mainly on the Gujarati and Telugu languages. On his return in 1938 he became for the first time a full-time member of the academic staff of the School of Oriental and African Studies, as Senior Lecturer in Linguistics and Indian Phonetics in the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics, at that time under the headship of Professor Lloyd James. In 1940 the University conferred on him the title of Reader, and in 1941 he succeeded Lloyd James as head of the department.

Almost as soon as Japan entered the Second World War at the end of 1941, Firth's department, like other departments at the School, became almost exclusively occupied with successive short intensive training courses in Japanese

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to fill needs long foreseen by the School authorities but not recognized until the last moment by the Services. The nature of the courses conducted in his department, which required the application of particular linguistic techniques to specific purposes and restricted language material, appealed to Firth, and he found great satisfaction in devoting to them his energies and those of his soon considerably increased staff. In fact the staff of his department, two in number when he first became head, had grown to fourteen by the end of the war, through the creation of additional posts and by the temporary appointment of Royal Air Force and Naval Officers, themselves students in the first armed services courses, as Instructors. Several of these latter (including the present writer) returned to Firth's department after completing their interrupted university degree courses on demobilization, as permanent members of the academic staff of the School.

It was during the war period, in 1944, that the University of London established the Chair of General Linguistics, and Firth was appointed to it, thereby becoming the first occupant of a chair of this title in Great Britain. For his services in connection with the wartime language courses he was awarded the Order of the British Empire in 1946.

From his taking over the headship of his department until his retirement in 1956, Firth used all the strength of his position and authority to foster linguistics and phonetics as academic subjects both in London and in Great Britain as a whole, and to develop and propagate his own views on the place of language in human life and society and his theory and methods of linguistic analysis. He was one of those consulted by the Scarbrough Committee on the study of Oriental, Slavonic, East European, and African studies, whose report was issued in 1947 and accepted by the British government, and largely determined the lines on which Oriental and African Studies, and therefore the School devoted to those studies, expanded and developed in the first post-war decade. Firth was active in pressing the claims of phonetics and general linguistics as an essential part of such studies at all levels of scholarship.

He took pride in the growth in numbers both of his own department and of university teachers of phonetics and linguistics elsewhere in Great Britain during the tenure of his professorship. When he became head of his department in 1941 there was, in addition to himself, one Lecturer in Phonetics on the established staff; on his retirement in 1956 the department contained, besides Firth, a Reader in General Linguistics, two Readers in Phonetics, three Lecturers in Linguistics, and six Lecturers in Phonetics, and posts in linguistics or phonetics had been established or increased in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, and Manchester.[1] On Firth's retirement from his chair, the title of Professor Emeritus was conferred on him by the University, and that of Honorary Fellow by the School of Oriental and African Studies.

During his active years at the School, teaching, supervision, publication, and administration kept him fully occupied, but he visited and gave lectures at a number of British and European universities. In 1947 he spent three months as

[1] Subsequently, and shortly before his death, a chair and department of linguistics were created at the University College of North Wales, at Bangor.

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Visiting Professor at the University of Alexandria, and in the summer of 1948 he was appointed to the staff of the Linguistic Society of America's Linguistic Institute at the University of Michigan. In 1951 he took part in the Colloquium on Semantics held at Nice under the auspices of the Société de linguistique de Paris. In Great Britain he served on the Linguistics Committee of the Colonial Social Science Research Council and on the Linguistics Panel of the English Studies Advisory Committee of the British Council. He was a member of the Linguistic Society of America from 1948, and of the Philological Society of Great Britain from 1933. Always active in the Philological Society's affairs, he was a member of its Council from 1934, President from 1954 to 1957, and Vice-President from 1957 up to the time of his death.

From the time of his taking over the headship of his department, academic affairs dominated Firth's life, and filled it largely to the exclusion of other interests or hobbies. Consequently, and despite increasing bouts of ill health, he faced a life of retirement reluctantly, and was glad to spend part of 1957 in Pakistan by invitation of the British Council, as adviser on various practical problems in linguistics.[2] In 1958 he much enjoyed spending two terms as Visiting Lecturer in the University of Edinburgh, and returned with pleasure the next year to receive from that university the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws.

Though in academic life Firth was at the center of linguistic studies and linguistic interests in Great Britain, doctrinally he stood rather outside the stream of contemporary linguistics, both by his general approach to the subject and by the particular directions in which he sought to advance linguistic theory.

He was second to none in his insistence on the autonomy of linguistics as an independent academic discipline devising and employing its own terms and concepts, and not merely serving the needs of other studies or of the practical teaching of languages; but at the same time, and perhaps just because of his devotion to his subject, he always saw it and tried to make others see it in the wide context of its own history and of successive intellectual and cultural developments. He maintained the distinction between linguistic and literary studies, but applied his linguistic methods to literature, particularly English literature, as well as to colloquial discourse, and after his retirement he had been working on the linguistic analysis, in his own terms, of certain parts of Shakespeare's plays. His residence in India, and his devotion to the language and scholarship of that country,[3] gave him a reverence for Pāṇini and the long tradition of Indian linguistic studies; but elsewhere too he refused to assume that linguistics started with de Saussure or with the Neogrammarians, and he stressed, in his writings and his lectures, the contributions of European classical antiquity, medieval scholasticism, and Renaissance and post-Renaissance lexicography and orthoepy to the study and understanding of language. Notwithstanding the innovations that he sought to introduce in linguistic theory and methods, he liked to think of himself as a traditionalist, and he strove to communicate to his pupils a sense of the continuity of their work with that of a

[2] Referred to in Applications of General Linguistics, *TPS* 1957.1–14.

[3] India as he first knew it, before the political separation of Pakistan within the subcontinent.

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long line of predecessors. With particular pleasure he traced the British contribution to phonetics through several centuries,[4] and a number of studies by others in the history of linguistics stem directly from his inspiration and encouragement.

The two developments in linguistics that will always be associated with Firth's name are his theory of context of situation or, more generally, the contextual theory of meaning, and prosodic analysis in phonology. These two are not perhaps necessarily or intrinsically connected, but both were cherished equally by Firth.

The first, which he made the basis of his whole theory of language in so far as he formulated one, demonstrates his refusal to cut language off from its contacts with the rest of human life and culture. While his American contemporary Leonard Bloomfield was saying that the study of meaning lay outside the proper realm of linguistics, or at least of contemporary linguistic competence,[5] Firth insisted that meaning constituted the heart of the study of language as meaningful activity, and that so far from its being peripheral to linguistics or even outside it, all linguistic analysis and statement was the analysis and statement of meaning.

This, to be sure, involved a considerable and, as he saw, at first sight a paradoxical extension of the term MEANING beyond its usual limits, and the startling collocations GRAMMATICAL MEANING and PHONOLOGICAL MEANING. He justified his usage, and indeed claimed support for the underlying theory, by its 'monistic' attitude to language as a totality of meaningful activity in which several component levels, each with its own meaning, are distinguished and analysed. The unifying theme, that Firth claimed avoided the charge of mere equivocation and empty inflation of the term MEANING, was that of function in context. Firth had worked closely with Malinowski and was thoroughly familiar with his publications and teaching,[6] and adopted and developed Malinowski's use of context of situation as the key to the analysis and explanation of the meaning of sentences and of words in sentences, whereby one described the function they fulfilled in the various contexts or environments in which they were uttered rather than the entities, real or conceptual, which they were alleged to stand for or denote.

While Firth was developing this line of attack on the problems of meaning, linguists in this country (and elsewhere) were still happily content with such definitions of language as 'the expression of ideas by means of speech sounds combined into words'.[7] Firth and Bloomfield, each in his own way and despite the opposite views they took up on the place of meaning in linguistics, were essentially fighting the same battle against the dogmatic slumber of traditional mentalism, though Firth was not prepared to banish or restate in physical

[4] The English School of Phonetics, *TPS* 1946.92–132.

[5] L. Bloomfield, *Language* 140 (London, 1935).

[6] See further on this Firth's contribution, Ethnographic Analysis and Language with Reference to Malinowski's Views, *Man and culture: An evaluation of the work of Bronislaw Malinowski* 93–118 (ed. R. W. Firth; London, 1957).

[7] Henry Sweet, *New English grammar* 1.6 (Oxford, 1891).

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terms all references to 'feelings' and the like in explaining the functioning of some language utterances.[8]

In Firth's scheme of analysis, semantic or situational meaning was stated (and for linguistics he insisted all the time that 'what was there' was equivalent to what could be stated within the technical language of linguistic analysis) as the function or interrelations of the utterance and its component words in the social and environmental reality around it.[9] Grammatical meaning was stated as the function or interrelations of grammatical elements in the grammatical context of what preceded or followed them (not necessarily contiguously) in word or construction and of comparable grammatical elements in paradigms.[10] Phonological meaning, or function, was likewise stated as the function or interrelations of phonological elements in the phonological context of syllable structures and syllable groups and, paradigmatically, of other comparable elements that could function in similar contexts.[11]

Essentially, the equation 'meaning = function in context' was extended through the different levels of linguistic analysis, so that, as Firth claimed, the analytical processes and the theory of language involved in them maintained a fundamental unity all the time. This doctrine was first put out in any detail in 1935,[12] and was developed and extended, but not materially altered, in subsequent writing and teaching. The difficulties it presents are obvious. Too little application of context-of-situation analysis has as yet been made on varieties of language material for us to be sure that it can in fact cope with all that is generally comprised by the term MEANING as ordinarily understood;[13] and there is more difference than Firth perhaps saw between the contexts of the interrelations within the closed systems of phonological and grammatical categories and those of the interrelations between the utterance and the external world, wherein linguistics can scarcely claim the ability to compass the relevant environment in comparably closed categorial systems. But Firth's way of tackling meaning certainly seeks to keep it within a comprehensive linguistic theory, and one may say that it is at least as successful as any other so far proposed, and more promising than some, and that the difficulties are no greater. Meaning is a notorious trouble-maker in linguistics, but it surely deserves better treatment than relegation to other sciences or the mere equation with a one-one word and denotatum relationship. Meaning and the relationship of language to the world are clearly

[8] Modes of Meaning, *Essays and studies* 1951.121.

[9] A typical framework for such a statement is suggested in Personality and Language in Society, Sociological review 1950.43: 'A. The relevant features of participants: persons, personalities. (i) The verbal action of the participants. (ii) The non-verbal action of the participants. B. The relevant objects. C. The effect of the verbal action.'

[10] Thus the grammatical meaning of a particular case in a language like Latin or Sanskrit is to be explained not by a sort of translation gloss ('by, with, or from a door'), but by stating its place in the paradigms of cases in the language and the various grammatical contexts or syntactic structures in which it operates.

[11] The Technique of Semantics, *TPS* 1935.55.

[12] The Technique of Semantics, *TPS* 1935.36–72.

[13] Reference may be made to the following: H. Straumann, *Newspaper headlines* (London, 1935); T. F. Mitchell, The Language of Buying and Selling in Cyrenaica: A Situational Statement, *Hespéris* 1957.31–71.

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a problem for philosophers as well as linguists, and it is interesting to see how Ludwig Wittgenstein, working quite without contact with Malinowski and Firth, arrived at a very similar attitude towards meaning as function: 'The meaning of a word is its use in the language.'[14]

In detailed linguistic analysis, as against general theory, Firth devoted more attention to phonology than to grammar, and prosodic analysis will always be thought of as his particular creation and interest. In much of his scholarly work Firth's way was to put forth challenging and original ideas, obviously offering a stimulus to fruitful investigation, elaboration, and application, but to leave all these to others; and nowhere is the lack of a full exposition of his method more to be regretted than in his prosodic approach to phonology. Members of the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics well remember the excitement aroused by the publication of his Sounds and Prosodies,[15] and the eagerness with which colleagues and students seized on the outlines of prosodic analysis there sketched out (and it was little more than that) to apply and exemplify in the languages they were studying or with which they were acquainted. Articles on the prosodic analysis of parts of the phonology of several languages followed from various hands in subsequent years, but little was done then or later, either by Firth or by anyone else, to set down systematically and make explicit the principles of prosodic analysis and the fundamentals of prosodic phonological theory. Nor was sufficient attention paid to questions about the relations between prosodic theory and phonemic theory (or theories), and indeed the opinion gained ground that to anyone at all sympathetic to prosodic analysis the phoneme and all its works were dead and probably damned as well. This attitude, which Firth himself, though arousing in others, never espoused seriously himself,[16] is much to be deplored, as giving a mistaken appearance of insularity to Firth and those influenced by him, encouraging in some a purblind neglect of the important developments in phonemic theory in recent years, and perhaps fatally delaying the time when a full statement and evaluation of prosodic analysis compared and contrasted with the varieties of phonemic analysis would be attempted.

Firth never claimed that his way of dealing with language was the only way, or the true and proper way; such statements had no meaning for him, and for this reason he cheerfully arrogated to himself the title of 'hocus-pocus' linguist as against the 'God's-truth' linguists when this contrast came to his notice. He simply claimed that he was making useful and systematic statements of the analysis of languages, based on a thorough examination of language material and employing suitable terms and categories, and that by this means he was able, as he put it, to 'renew connection', or validate his statements against fresh material of the same sort. There could be more than one method of analysis available, and he chose to exploit prosodic analysis.

[14] Ludwig Wittgenstein (tr. G. E. M. Anscombe), *Philosophical investigations* 120 (Oxford, 1953).

[15] *TPS* 1948.127-52.

[16] Deliberately provocative remarks pour épater les bourgeois, in appropriately informal contexts, should not be weighed in the same scales as views expressed in serious publications.

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Firth's opinion on the phoneme concept was simply that it was an excellent and even indispensable means to an adequate broad transcription, wherein the need to segment all the relevant phonic material was paramount, but that transcription and phonological analysis were two different things and not best served by the same methods. Phonological analysis, he claimed, was better undertaken by postulating two types of phonological entity, segmental consonant and vowel elements, or 'phonematic' units, and 'prosodies', which (very broadly and briefly) were the features or properties of structures longer than a single segment, either by reason of phonetic extension (like the suprasegmental phonemes, but including features like nasalization, glottalization, and retroflexion not normally treated suprasegmentally in phonemic analysis[17]), or by their phonological relevance in demarcating structures such as syllable or word; the latter category of prosodies includes place-bound features such as initial or final types of articulation, fixed-place word stress, and the like. Furthermore, in contrast with most phonemic procedures, the same phonetic feature or element could be an exponent of different phonological (phonematic or prosodic) categories in different places in word or syllable structure.

Here one may point out the consonance of this analytic procedure with Firth's objections to what he attacked as the 'monosystemic' view of language. He liked to assert, as has been said above, that his general linguistic theory, by integrating meaning into the whole process of linguistic analysis, was 'monistic'; but he was always stressing the complexity of language itself, to be explained only in terms of several overlapping systems at all levels. Meillet's famous 'un système où tout se tient' as the characteristic of language is only part of the story; language is systematic or systemic, but always polysystemic.

Within each language there coexist several different styles, each socially institutionalized: colloquial, familiar, literary, formal, religious, and so on, each with its own grammatical, lexical, and perhaps phonological systems; and within the grammatical or phonological system of any one style one should recognize that different systems may require different analyses even though at first sight some of the terms of each appear to be the same. The same sound or phonetic feature can be differently classifiable phonologically according to whether it appears in syllable-initial or in syllable-final position; and one of Firth's particular objections to the adequacy of the phoneme as a phonological abstraction (not, be it repeated, as a transcriptional device) was the 'overall' nature of phonemic analysis, by which the same sound, phonemic anywhere, retains its status everywhere else in the language, irrespective of the different systems of relevant contrasts into which it may enter. Thus the distinction labeled 'voiced/voiceless' (though involving much else) that applies to plosives in English in initial position (*toe*, *doe; pin*, *bin*; *cot*, *got*) is inapplicable after /s/, where only the place of plosion is relevant (*stow*, *spin*, *Scot*), and Firth considered it phonologically undesirable to have to assign the sounds concerned to one or the other of the contrastive pair set up elsewhere. Of course phonemic analysis is aware of all this, and handles it in terms of distribution (in America)

[17] K. L. Pike, *Phonemics* 63 (Ann Arbor, 1947).

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or of neutralization (in Europe); but Firth preferred to set up entirely separate systems, at separate places in structures, both of phonematic and of prosodic elements, without identifying at the phonological level of analysis the terms of one system with those of a different one.[18]

In linguistics Firth's interests were catholic, and his reading was astonishingly wide, and to a strict structuralist (a term that Firth disclaimed) irrelevant to the subject narrowly conceived. His regular Wednesday morning lecture at the School was a university institution, attracting students and colleagues from many departments and colleges. There was no discussion on or near linguistic matters in which he would not intervene with zest, often imparting a new twist to an argument or shedding an unfamiliar light on an old question. Indeed informal conversation, supervisions, and seminars were his favourite academic grounds.

He took his full share of 'academic politics', and on committees and elsewhere he could on occasion cause no small offence to opponents, as he seldom cared to mitigate differences of opinion with the conventional politeness expected of members of academic bodies. But in convivial moments Firth was always good company, and his love of life seemed in no way diminished by several periods of illness in his later years that necessitated operations and fairly severe dietary restrictions. At dinners he was eventually forbidden alcohol in any form, but his conversational performance on orangeade outshone that of most other people on good red wine.

Not only on personal grounds is his sudden death a loss to his friends, both colleagues and pupils—and we all were his friends in a very real sense, and most of us recall the pleasure he obviously had from the visit of any of us to his house at Lindfield in Surrey after his retirement, when he remained as alert mentally and as involved in his subject as ever. We might have looked forward to a number of books he projected and had begun preparing but for which he never allowed himself time during his professional life. His *Principles of linguistics* has been announced as a title for publication and may be in a fairly advanced state; and a grammar of English was promised, to be written on the lines he advocated and had sketched out in lectures. Indeed, unfulfilled publication must be our main regret. His only two books, *Speech* and *The tongues of men*, both brief, popular, nontechnical works, were published relatively early in his career; during his most active period, from the late 1930's to his retirement in 1956, he put out numbers of articles, all readable and all 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. Happily the bulk of these has been republished together in a single volume,[19]

[18] On a similar nonidentification, in phonemic terms, see W. F. Twaddell, *On defining the phoneme* 49 (Baltimore, 1935). A recent example of phonemic and prosodic analysis of the same material set side by side may be found in J. T. Bendor-Samuel, Some Problems of Segmentation in the Phonological Analysis of Tereno, *Word* 16.348–55 (1960). Some attempt to summarize Firth's prosodic theory was made by the present writer in Aspects of Prosodic Analysis, *Proceedings of the University of Durham Philosophical Society* 1.B.1.–12 (1957).

[19] J. R. Firth, *Papers in linguistics 1934–1951* (London, 1957).

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and short of some unexpected discoveries among his posthumous papers this must serve, tantalizingly, as the fullest available statement of Firth's linguistic position.

Fortunately he was not a recluse among scholars, and though we would gladly have had him leave a full and explicit account both of his contextual theory of linguistic analysis and of his prosodic phonology, we may be happy that in many parts of the world of linguistic scholarship, and especially in Great Britain and in his beloved India, former students and colleagues are developing in every aspect of linguistics ideas whose origin they owe to the inspiration derived from working in personal association with J. R. Firth.

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