J. R. FIRTH

LANGUAGE and LANGUAGE LEARNING

The Tongues of Men & Speech

Oxford University Press

L L L

CHAPTER 10

Context of situation

SAY WHEN!

Quite a number of readers will have lively recollections of the very practical use of those two words. Many Englishmen will at once place themselves in a pleasant situation with good glass, good drink, and good company. The two words fit into the situation. They have their 'psychological' and practical moment in what is going on between two people, whose eyes, hands, and goodness knows what else are sharing a common interest in a bit of life. What do the words 'mean'? They mean what they do. When used at their best they are both affecting and effective. A Martian visitor would best understand this 'meaning' by watching what happened before, during, and after the words were spoken, by noticing the part played by the words in what was going on. The people, the relevant furniture, bottles and glasses, the 'set', the specific behaviour of the companions, and the words are all component terms in what may be called the context of situation. Meaning is best regarded in this way as a complex of relations of various kinds between the component terms of a context of situation.

Such a situation is a 'patterned process conceived as a complex activity with internal relations between its various factors'. These terms or factors are not merely *seen* in relation to one another. They actively take one another into relation, or mutually 'prehend' one another as Whitehead would say. Even within the language system itself what is said by one man in a conversation prehends what the other man has said before and will say afterwards. It even prehends negatively everything that was not said

but might have been said. This 'inter-related pr
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but might have been said. This 'inter-related prehensiveness' must be taken as a fundamental principle even in phonetics and formal grammar.[1]

The patterned processes of situations in which language behaviour is dominant are dynamic and creative. Here we are back at 'the beginning' again. The Word is Creation.

In common conversation about people and things present to the senses the most important 'modifiers' and 'qualifiers' of the speech sounds made and heard are not words at all, but the perceived context of situation. In other words 'meaning' is a property of the mutually relevant people, things, events in the situation. Some of the events are the noises made by the speakers. But it is important to realize that 'meaning' is just as much a property of the people, their 'sets', their specific behaviour, the things and events of the situation as of the noises made. Quite often the human noises made are comparatively ineffectual. People 'create' and nothing happens but row. In fact, one of the most primitive types of speech behaviour is making some sort of noise as the only thing we are able to do in a situation. Such noises are usually exclamatory and often involuntary. They spell failure to cope with your situation. Or rather, that your way of 'coping' is first to make a mess and then make a lot of noise. You hit your thumb instead of the nail and say 'Blast!' Many people spend quite a lot of their energy in verbal outbursts resulting from irritation, failure, loss of temper, and in such cases that is all their words mean.

PRACTICAL SPEECH

'Say when!' is intended to epitomize the practical use of speech —a kind of bodily behaviour in adjustment to surroundings, vocal action in the handling of situations. Such practical applications of language are common in all sorts of co-operative work and in team activities of all kinds. Orders, directions, guiding signs, and signals are rather the same sort of thing, whether they be spoken or written.

[1] See p. 34.

THE LANGUAGE OF PLANNING

All public works and public enterprises which need the guidance of language before, during, and after accomplishment give practical meaning to the words which serve them. Such language may be called the language of public guidance, the language of planning. It needs strong practical men to keep it to its job. The other day Sir Thomas Inskip said, 'There are three stages in almost every great work—talking, planning, and doing. . . . It is certainly a relief to know that the talking stage is over.' The sort of talking he referred to was not the practical kind we are noticing —the talk that begins to matter is in the planning stage and then, of course, in the actual doing. The preliminary talk is usually vocal interchange in promoting common feelings among those interested. They divide themselves into four communions—the ayes, the noes, those who make up their minds at the last moment, and those who have no minds to make up.

'SHARING'

The promotion, establishment, and maintenance of communion of feeling is perhaps four-fifths of all talk, but it is not what we should call immediately practical, and quite often we do it just for fun. Most conferences and congresses, even of men of science, fall into this category. Sharing a common feeling with your fellows is a deeply satisfying experience. Attendance at communal worship of any kind or at any public sharing of patriotic or other sentiments of a general character satisfies something fundamental in human nature. And such communion is enhanced by conventional language formulae laid down by custom.

It is not so much what you say as how you say it

In the give and take of a great deal of conversation, far more than most of us realize, it is the key, mode, or mood—perhaps I ought to say 'keys' and 'moods'—of the interplay of this 'choric' behaviour which matters, rather than what is loosely called the exchange of ideas.

Quite often the *raison d'être* of the conversation is never explicitly

mentioned at all, or, if it is, it *comes out* at the e
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As soon as he opened his mouth . . .

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LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

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mentioned at all, or, if it is, it *comes out* at the end, sometimes bluntly and clumsily, sometimes beautifully timed and with great effect. Equally important is what is taken for granted, left unsaid—the unmentioned and unmentionable. All such features of behaviour should be carefully studied. And why not careful sociological studies of the lie, of concealment, deception, and fraud, as well as of all forms of linguistic propriety?

As soon as he opened his mouth . . .

Very little conversation deserves the description given to it by a Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Education (*à propos* of modern language teaching) 'a formless, inexact, and inelegant sort of Morse code'. On the contrary, the conversation of social groups called together by the routine life of the community is very narrowly determined by social conditions and the culture of the groups. The varieties of pronunciation, intonation, and usage are so significant that people with social experience can place the men, if not the women, as soon as they hear them speak. Our everyday speech is as important as our everyday lives. Full of banalities and clichés it must be. Good manners require it.

LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

Most people, I suppose, regard the meaning of a word as something at the back of their minds which they can express and communicate. But the force and cogency of most language behaviour derives from the firm grip it has on the ever-recurrent typical situations in the life of social groups, and the normal social behaviour of the human animals living together in those groups. Speech is the telephone network, the nervous system of our society much more than the vehicle for the lyrical outbursts of the individual soul. It is a network of bonds and obligations.

A common language is a sort of social switchboard which commands the power grid of the driving forces of the society. The meaning of a great deal of speech behaviour is just the combined personal and social forces it can mobilize and direct. The power and magic of speech, as we noticed in an earlier

chapter, is strongest when it mobilizes either our own most primitive feelings or gives us such command of the forces of nature as the triumphs of science. Many examples of the forces which language commands today will be found in the 'revue' which follows immediately.

CHAPTER 11

Revue: 1937 and aft

PROLOGUE

The gulf which separates the pre-War and post- commonplace of our time. Men who fought throu even tell you that it is not easy to bridge the g cuts them off from the young men who knew War and have grown up in the post-War w Germany, and Italy there have been revolutio America, both great powers in this changing w through difficult times and are still in labour. Sin 'crisis' has become a vice. The millions of words written which have accompanied and follow are to be interpreted as proclamations of failure from everyday experience people first make a make a lot of noise. If the only thing you can d situation is to make a noise you have failed. Pe noise in England just now than for a long time. sign.

As we have seen, language can be regar switchboard, and wiring in control of our so power. It is the nervous system of our society. It surprise you to be told that in the opinion of co Russian, Italian, German, and even English ha during the past twenty-five years than in the pr which events moved at a greater pace than ever history. The spoken language of the educated c today is moving further and further away

J · R · FIRTH

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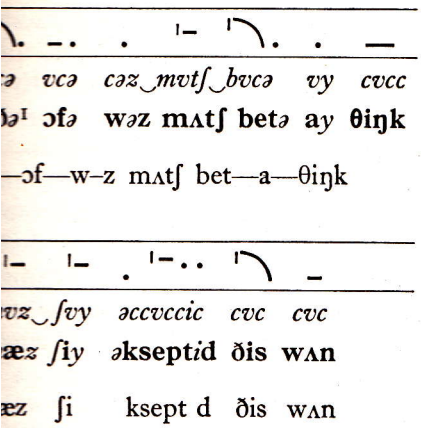

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10

THE SEMANTICS OF LINGUISTIC SCIENCE

SYNOPSIS

Any new attempt at synthesis in linguistics must consider the origins of our theories and terminology. That necessitates the application of the technique of semantics, both historical and descriptive, to the language used about language. To begin with, such terms as speech and language must be examined. Speech as the expression of language and personality. Semantic links with the biological and social sciences. Outline of a new approach in phonetics and phonology involving a rectification of terms and technique.

On the first page of the first article in the first number of the international review *Lingua*, Professor Reichling made a summary general statement which all linguists must recognize as a fair description of the situation in general linguistics. The study of linguistics 'has renewed itself. It has looked back on a past of often a thousand years and more; and, retaining and bringing to full development the many good things, has incorporated these old things and many new ones in a new attempt at synthesis'. The purpose of my comment is to supplement what I conceive to be his general intention by adding a little emphasis and an amendment which will serve to introduce the subject of the present chapter.

First the emphasis: it is all to the good that we should look back on a couple of thousand years of linguistics[1] 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. The hold and prestige was such that I once heard it said a certain distinguished scholar gave his lifetime to prove that a Frenchman could be as great a master-philologist as a German.

To dismiss two thousand years of linguistic study in Asia as well as in Europe as negligible except in so far as it contributed to comparative grammar is just plain stupid. The semantics of 'grammar' in English takes us back to Ælfric, which, as they say in '1066 and all that', is 'a good thing'.[2]

Second, the amendment: 'the many good things' old and new have not yet been 'incorporated' in anything that deserves the name of synthesis. The words 'system', 'systematic', and other cognates have been much used, but what is really needed in our present situation is the systematic study of the 'languages' of linguistics from the semantic point of view. With a view especially to the enrichment of our science by the contributions of

[1] See my *Tongues of Men*, pp. 59–83, Watts & Co., 1937.

[2] See 'The English School of Phonetics', Chapter 8, pp. 95–120; and 'What is a Letter?' by David Abercrombie, *Lingua*, i. 4.

are 'multi-dimensional', and though it is difficult to imagine a mathematical system adequate for the solution of the problems before us, something may be gained by applying the principles of mathematical philosophy.

The coupling of language and personality necessitates a re-examination of those two words. For his first entry of the word *person*, Dr. Johnson uses a citation from Locke. 'A person is a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places.' In defining *personality* he again quotes Locke: 'This personality extends itself beyond present existence to what is past, only by consciousness whereby it imputes to itself past actions just upon the same ground that it does the present.' It is quite obvious if we accept even this most general notion of personality, language must be considered with it. Language, like personality, is a *binder of time*, of the past and future in 'the present'. On the one hand there is habit, custom, tradition, and on the other innovation, creation. Every time you speak you create anew, and what you create is a function of your language and of your personality. From that activity you may make abstraction of the constituents of the context, and consider them in their mutual relations. In the process of speaking there is pattern and structure actively maintained by the body which is itself an organized structure maintaining the pattern of life.

At this point we must secure the foundations by reference to the physical basis of personality and of language. We may summarize the genesis of personality and language under the two general terms *nature* and *nurture*, nature being biological endowment and heredity, and nurture the learning or educative process during which the biological individual is progressively incorporated into his social organization, learns his languages, and acquires personality. You weave *nurture* into *nature*, and language and personality partake of both and are the expression of both.

In support of this basis for a semantic reconsideration of such terms as language, a given language, an author's language, speech, a speech event or speech item, I would refer the reader to the general views of our physiologists, neurologists, and anatomists, especially Sherrington. Professor J. Z. Young, in his inaugural lecture[1] as Professor of Anatomy in University College, London, emphasized 'this continuously maintained pattern of activity which is life' rather than the reflex hypothesis to which the sophisticated more often turn. Through all the active changes we call metabolism, the central fact is 'the maintenance of the general pattern of the system', the power of *self-maintenance* of a *dynamic pattern*. Regarding the pattern of activity within the central nervous system, Professor Young remarks: 'we are only just beginning to know anything about it,' and to explain the absence of any reference to psychology he adds 'because any attempt to include it involves great difficulties in the present primitive state of our language'.

[1] *Patterns of Substance and Activity in the Nervous System*, 28 February 1946. Lewis & Co. Ltd., London, 1946.

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We may now suggest the systemat
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event, *speech events*, *speech*.[4]

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The kind of humanism with which general linguistics is most advantageously linked places more emphasis on our activities, drives, needs, desires, and on the tendencies of the body, than on mechanism and reflexes.

The linguistic sciences will find a sure semantic basis in alliance with concepts such as these on the biological side, and the development of proper semantic relationships with the other sciences of man is now vital. Linguists and sociologists have to deal with *systems*, but systems very different from physical systems. Personal systems and social systems[1] are actively maintained (with adaptation and change) in the bodily behaviour of men. Most of the older definitions (and de Saussure's must fall in this category) need overhauling in the light of contemporary science. We need to know a good deal more of the action of the body from within and especially of the nervous and endocrine systems. But from what we already know it is clear that we must expect human knowledge to be a function of that action. Language and personality are built into the body, which is constantly taking part in activities directed to the conservation of the pattern of life. We must expect therefore that linguistic science will also find it necessary to postulate the maintenance of linguistic patterns and systems (including adaptation and change) within which there is order, structure, and function. Such systems are maintained by activity, and in activity they are to be studied. It is on these grounds that linguistics must be systemic. On these grounds the phonetic and also the systematic phonological study of one person at a time is not only scientifically justified, but in fact inevitable.[2] The persons studied may of course be regarded as types. In emphasizing the personal as well as the systemic and typic character of descriptive linguistics, there is no implied neglect of the sociological approach and synthesis.

A great deal of abstract sociology is of doubtful value to the linguist because of the sociological neglect of persons, consequently of language also. Not so, however, Malinowski, who gave us an ethnographer's theory of language. He was a close student of persons and people. In his preface to *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, he pays handsome tribute to the Trobriand personalities who helped in the study of themselves, and especially to Bagido'u.[3] He made a thorough study of Bagido'u, the leading garden magician, in action.

We may now suggest the systematic use of the expressions *language*, *a language*, *the language*, *languages*, *a speech event*, *a speech item*, *the speech event*, *speech events*, *speech*.[4]

[1] Analogous views in sociology are expressed in Znaniecki's *The Method of Sociology*, 1934, and *Social Actions*, 1936.
[2] Firth, Scott, Carnochan, Henderson, op. cit., *supra*.
[3] B. Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, London, 1934, Preface, vol. i, pp. x–xi.
[4] Dr. Johnson's entries under *language* are interesting, and relevant.

I. Human Speech.

'We may define *language*, if we consider it more materially, to be letters, forming and producing words and sentences; but if we consider it according to the design thereof, then language is apt signs for communication of thoughts.' (Holder, 1669.) [*Cont. overleaf*

14

PERSONALITY AND LANGUAGE IN SOCIETY

THE Belgian sociologist Waxweiler once said it was not the task of sociology to explain what 'society' is. May I venture in the same direction and say it is not the task of linguistics to say what 'language' is. 'Personality' is perhaps more manageable, though I do not propose to say in existential terms what that is either. Some understanding of the relations suggested by the title, however, is attainable in the light of sociology, psychology, biology, and descriptive linguistics.

Descriptive linguistics is deserving its place more and more as an autonomous group of related disciplines—such as phonetics, phonology, grammar, lexicography, semantics, and what may be called the 'sociology of language'. Like the countryman telling you the way, I shall first mention the direction I am *not* taking, by giving an outline sketch of how language and languages have been studied from quite a different point of view, especially in Western Europe during the nineteenth century. That is mainly in the form of what we call comparative linguistics and comparative grammar. We begin, then, with a kind of linguistic science which is not very helpful for our present subject.

In the nineteenth century the only kind of linguistics considered seriously was this comparative and historical study of words in languages known or believed to be *cognate*—say the Semitic languages, or the Indo-European languages. It is significant that the Germans, who really made the subject what it was, used the term *Indo-germanisch*. Those who know the popular works of Otto Jespersen will remember how firmly he declares that linguistic science is historical. And those who have noticed the fly-leaves of the volumes of the *New English Dictionary*—generally referred to as the *Oxford Dictionary*[1]—will remember the guarantee, 'on historical principles', which explains the N. in *N.E.D.*

Everyone knows the name of Sir William Jones and has heard of the famous paragraph in his 1786 lecture in Calcutta on the obvious relationship of Latin, Greek, Persian, and the Germanic languages with one another and with Sanskrit, and the probability of their all being derived from a *common parent language*.

The notion of an original parent language and of an ancient and present underlying linguistic *unity* was as old as the Bible—the Flood, Noah and his sons, the confusion and all that. Indeed, Jewish rabbi grammarians in the tenth and eleventh centuries in North Africa and Spain had compared Aramaic, Arabic, and Hebrew and declared them to be related forms of one language. These Jewish rabbis were the first comparative philologists.

[1] See Chapter 3, p. 8, footnote 2.

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ce the Russian objection that this theory leads

to static structural formalism, to mechanical structure, to mechanical materialism in linguistics, which is according to them clearly superseded by the dialectical materialism given to the world in the name of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin.

The Russian critics understand de Saussure and represent his theory quite fairly as static mechanical structuralism. Moreover, they are right in believing that true Saussureans, like true Durkheimians, regard the structures formulated by linguistics or sociology as *in rebus*. The structure is existent and is treated as a thing. As Durkheim said, such social facts must be regarded 'comme des choses'. This is structural realism, or social realism.

In this country such theory has not taken root in professional linguistics. Even Malinowski pursued what I call *personality studies* in his ethnographic work.[1] For my own part and for a number of my colleagues, I venture to think linguistics is a group of related techniques for the handling of language events. We regard our group of disciplines as designed for systematic empirical analysis and as autonomous in the sense that they do not necessarily have a point of departure in another science or discipline such as psychology, sociology, or in a school of metaphysics.

In the most general terms we study language as part of the social process, and what we may call the systematics of phonetics and phonology, of grammatical categories or of semantics, are ordered schematic constructs, frames of reference, a sort of scaffolding for the handling of events. The study of the social process and of single human beings is simultaneous and of equal validity, and for both, structural hypotheses are proved by their own social functioning in the scientific process of dealing with events. Our schematic constructs must be judged with reference to their combined tool power in our dealings with linguistic events in the social process. Such constructs have no ontological status and we do not project them as having being or existence. They are neither immanent nor transcendent, but just language turned back on itself. By means of linguistics we hope to state facts systematically, and especially to make *statements of meaning*.

A key concept in the technique of the London group is the concept of the *context of situation*.[2] The phrase 'context of situation' was first used widely in English by Malinowski. In the early thirties, when he was especially interested in discussing problems of languages, I was privileged to work with him. He had also discussed similar problems with Alan Gardiner, now Sir Alan Gardiner, the author of that difficult book, *The Theory of Speech and Language*. Sir Alan Gardiner, by the way, dedicated his book to one of the earliest users of the notion of a situational context for language, Dr. Philipp Wegener, who thought there might be a future for the 'Situa-

[1] See his *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, preface, vol. i, pp. x and xi, for the central importance of his study of Bagido'u, the garden magician.

[2] See my *Speech*, Benn, 1930, pp. 38–43; 'Linguistics and the Functional Point of View', *English Studies*, xvi, pt. 1, February 1934; Chapter 4, Chapter 3, pp. 27–33; *The Tongues of Men*, Watts & Co., London, 1937, Chapter x.

tionstheorie'.[1] Malinowski's context of situation is a bit of the social process which can be considered apart and in which a speech event is central and makes all the difference, such as a drill sergeant's welcome utterance on the square, '*Stand at—ease!*' The context of situation for Malinowski is an ordered series of events considered as *in rebus*.

My view was, and still is, that 'context of situation' is best used as a suitable schematic construct to apply to language events, and that it is a group of related categories at a different level from grammatical categories but rather of the same abstract nature. A context of situation for linguistic work brings into relation the following categories:

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.

Contexts of situation and types of language function can then be grouped and classified. A very rough parallel to this sort of context can be found in language manuals providing the learner with a picture of a railway station and the operative words for travelling by train. It is very rough. But it is parallel with the grammatical rules, and is based on the repetitive routines of initiated persons in the society under description.

When I was consulted by the Air Ministry on the outbreak of war with Japan, I welcomed the opportunity of service for the Royal Air Force because I saw at once that the operating of reconnaissance and fighter aircraft by the Japanese could be studied by applying the concept of the limited situational contexts of war, the operative language of which we needed to know urgently and quickly. We were not going to meet the Japanese socially, but only in such contexts of fighting as required some form of spoken Japanese. A kind of operational linguistics was the outcome, and from those practical war-time endeavours we learned a good deal about language and personality in society, both British and Japanese.

If I give you one brief sentence with the information that it represents a typical Cockney event, you may even be able to provide a typical context of situation in which it would be the verbal action of one of the participants. The sentence is:

'Ahng gunna gi' wun fer Ber'.'
(I'm going to get one for Bert.)

What is the minimum number of participants? Three? Four? Where might it happen? In a pub? Where is Bert? Outside? Or playing darts? What are the relevant objects? What is the effect of the sentence? 'Obvious!' you say. So is the convenience of the schematic construct called 'context of situation'. It makes sure of the sociological component.

[1] See Dr. Philipp Wegener, *Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen des Sprachlebens*. Halle, 1885, especially pp. 21–27.

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The context of situation is a convenient abstraction at the social level of analysis and forms the basis of the hierarchy of techniques for the statement of meanings. The statement of meaning cannot be achieved by one analysis, at one level, in one fell swoop. Having made the first abstraction and having treated the social process of speaking by applying the above-mentioned set of categories grouped in the context of situation, descriptive linguistics then proceeds by a method rather like the dispersion of light of mixed wavelengths into a spectrum.

At this point, linguistics treats the verbal process of a speaking personality by writing down, let us say, a *sentence*. The technique of syntax is concerned with the word process in the sentence. The technique of phonology states the phonematic and prosodic processes within the word and sentence. The phonetician links all this with the processes and features of utterance. The sentence must also have its relations with the processes of the context of situation. Descriptive linguistics is thus a sort of hierarchy of techniques by means of which the meaning of linguistic events may be, as it were, dispersed in a spectrum of specialized statements.

We are now a long way from de Saussure's mechanistic structuralism based on a given language as a function of a speaking mass, stored in the collective conscience, and from the underdog, considered merely as the speaking subject, whose speech was not the 'integral and concrete object of linguistics'. The unique object of Saussurean linguistics is '*la langue*', which exists only in the *collectivité*. Now it is at this point that I wish to stress the importance of the study of persons, even one at a time, and of introducing the notions of personality and language as in some sense vectors of the continuity of repetitions in the social process, and the persistence of personal forces.

The greatest English philologist of the nineteenth century was, I think, the Oxford phonetician, Sweet. He was never weary of asserting that language existed only in the individual. Others would say that all the essentials of linguistics can be studied in language operating between two persons. I am not subscribing to any theories of 'existence', and one must abandon the individual and look to the development and continuity of personality born of nature and developed in nurture. Language is part of the nurture, and part of the personality.

Before making any further use of the word 'personality' and its cognates, I propose briefly to review some of the contexts of its occurrence, and indicate the limitations within which it may be profitably employed in general linguistics.

Let us begin with Johnson's dictionary. For his first entry on *person*, he uses a citation from Locke: 'a person is a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places.' In another entry Johnson emphasizes the idea of being 'present in person', not through a representative. There is also the notion of responsibility which is made explicit in the phrase 'a responsible person'.

The meaning of *person* in the sense of a man or woman represented in fictitious dialogue, or as a character in a play, is relevant if we take a sociological view of the *personae* or parts we are called upon to play in the routine of life. Every social person is a bundle of *personae*, a bundle of parts, each part having its lines. If you do not know your lines, you are no use in the play. It is very good for you and society if you are cast for your parts and remember your lines.

To 'personate' in Johnson's sense is not so good. It is to feign. We must not personate unless it be professionally as a performer. The word 'impersonate' is not entered by Johnson in his dictionary. I have the impression that in England there has been a certain amount of impersonation in the matter of what is called public school pronunciation and what is wrongly described as the Oxford Accent.

In America the Schools of Speech use the dramatic method and presumably train people to produce themselves better, which is useful education. Happily only a few persons need become impersonators.

In defining *personality*, Johnson again quotes Locke: 'this *personality* extends itself beyond present existence to what is past, only by consciousness whereby it imputes to itself past actions just upon the same grounds that it does the present.'

If we accept the view expressed in Johnson's citation of Locke, we must consider language, like personality, as a systematic linking of the past with the present and with the future. Just as life itself is directed towards the maintenance of the general pattern of the bodily system, so also personality and language are usually maintained by the continuous and consistent activity of the bodily system, personality and language through life, language through the generations.

There is the element of habit, custom, tradition, the element of the past, and the element of innovation, of the moment, in which the future is being born. When you speak you fuse these elements in verbal creation, the outcome of your language and of your personality. What you say may be said to have style, and in this connexion a vast field of research in stylistics awaits investigation in literature and speech.

The continuity of the person, the development of personality, are paralleled by the continuity and development of language in a variety of forms. Human beings do vastly more than this. By means of language we can pass on our acquired learning and experience through the generations. We can now see two very different streams linking the generations and linking people.

For the earliest relevant use of *personality*, the *N.E.D.* goes back to Wiclif (1380) for the citation: 'All the personality of man standeth in the spirit of him.' I do not exclude the characteristic *modern* meaning given by the *O.E.D.* 'that quality or assemblage of qualities which makes a person what he is as distinct from other persons—distinctive personal or individual character especially when of a marked kind'. The important words in this

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Selected Papers of J. R. Firth 1952-59

Edited by
F. R. Palmer

Eleven

A synopsis of linguistic theory, 1930–55†

'Das Höchste wäre zu begreifen, das alles Faktische schon Theorie ist.'
GOETHE

I

The theory of general linguistics here presented in outline, has some of its roots in India[1] but it also has links with the laboratory of today. It is anticipated that the elements of the theory will be found consistently interrelated though the building-up process has been gradual during the last twenty-five years, and however idiosyncratic it may appear, owes much to constant collaboration with my colleagues at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London, especially during the last seven years.

Though retrospective in genesis, the theory as a whole starts from the present situation, taking into account the amplitude of our empirical knowledge. Again it must be pointed out that the excessive use of method and procedures is avoided so that theoretical relevance may not be hidden or obscured. The passion for the accumulation of so-called 'facts', the piling-up of trivialities to be treated statically, perhaps with defective theoretical principles, are all too common symptoms among the 'scientistic technicians' multiplying in our midst. It is the view of the writer that linguistics must not be allowed to become more deeply engaged in methodology, but that a special effort is needed to keep it to theoretical order.

A theory derives its usefulness and validity from the aggregate of experience to which it must continually refer in renewal of connection.

† *Studies in linguistic analysis* (Special volume of the Philological Society, Oxford, 1957, 1–31).

'Under otherwise equal circumstances o
which covers a larger field of phenomena, o
view appears to be simpler'—or as I should
doubt that 'intuition' or 'hunch' is the kind
serves the scientific theorist, but it has very
day common sense of our common sens
employs a very useful notion of *the degree*
extent to which our knowledge can be ex
terms. According to this view, science may
either to lower the degree of empiricism or t

'Every scientific discipline must necess
guage adapted to its nature, and that develo
part of scientific work.'[3] It is especially
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In the following exposition, such technic
include the expressions *level or levels of*
collocation and *extended collocation*, *colligat*
unit, *prosody*, and *prosodies*, to name a few
over, these and other technical words are
restricted language of the theory, and by
quoted works. 'Many people think that i
are being scientific, as though science w
dictionary definitions.'[4] Where would me
as point of departure an explanation of wha

In linguistics, as in other social sciences
participation in the world we are theorizing
pants in those activities which linguistics se
listening, writing and reading, are simply
human life in society. In brief, linguistics
texts as related to the living of, and theref
and applies its theory and practice as far as
such 'meaning' in strictly linguistic term
restricted language of linguistics[5] set in its

In the most general terms, the approach

syntax is concerned with the word process in the sentence. Phonology states the phonematic and prosodic processes within the word and sentence, regarding them as a mode of meaning. The phonetician links all this with the processes and features of utterance.[25]

To make statements of meaning in terms of linguistics, we may accept the language event as a whole and then deal with it at various levels, sometimes in a descending order, beginning with social context and proceeding through syntax and vocabulary to phonology and even phonetics, and at other times in the opposite order, which will be adopted here since the main purpose is the exposition of linguistics as a discipline and technique for the statement of meanings without reference to such dualisms and dichotomies as word and idea, overt expressions and covert concepts, language and thought, subject and object. In doing this I must not be taken to exlude the concept of mind,[26] or to imply an embracing of materialism to avoid a foolish bogey of mentalism.[27]

Descriptive linguistics handles and states meaning by dispersing it in a range of techniques working at a series of levels.[28]

The above extracts are conveniently arranged to present the main principles of the theory, embracing a series of congruent analyses at a range of abstracted levels, which has been well tried since 1930. The use of the term *levels* in the phrase *levels of analysis* is not to be confused with other uses—for example, its use by Bloomfield in *Language*.

III

The basic assumption of the theory of analysis by levels is that any text can be regarded as a constituent of a *context of situation*[29] or of a series of such contexts, and thus attested in experience, since the categories of the abstract context of situation will comprise both verbal and non-verbal constituents and, in renewal of connection, should be related to an observable and justifiable grouped set of events in the run of experience.

The important thing to remember in this approach is the abstract nature of the context of situation as a group of categories, both verbal and non-verbal, which are considered as interrelated. Instances of such context of situation are attested by experience. The context of situation according to this theory is not merely a setting, background or 'backdrop' for the 'words'. The text in the focus of attention on renewal of

connection with an instance is regarded as an integral part of the context, and is observed in relation to the other parts regarded as relevant in the statement of the context.

Malinowski[30] regarded the context of situation as a sort of behaviour matrix in which language had meaning, often a 'creative' meaning.[31] The context of situation in the present theory is a schematic construct for application especially to typical 'repetitive events' in the social process. It is also an insurance that a text is attested as common usage in which the occasional, individual and idiosyncratic features are not in the focus of attention.

Nonsense can, of course, be repetitive and referable to generalized context. Such nonsense language may be referred to literary, didactic or pedagogical context, treated serially—that is quasi-historically.

The present writer illustrates what is termed 'grammatical meaning' by concocting such sentences as 'My doctor's great grandfather will be singeing the cat's wings',[32] or 'She slowly rushed upstairs to the cellar and turned the kettle out to boil two fires'. Lewis Carroll's nonsense provides excellent illustrations of grammatical meaning, but it is now met with so frequently that it can be referred to quotation situations. Grammatical and 'prosodic' meaning in German is similarly amusingly exemplified by such lines as[33]:

> Finster war's, der Mond schien helle, schneebedeckt die grüne Flur, als ein Wagen blitzesschnelle langsam um die Ecke fuhr, . . .
>
> Da sah ich vier Stühle auf ihren Herren sitzen, da tat ich meinen Tag ab und sagte: 'Guten Hut, meine Damen.'

To make statements of meaning in terms of linguistics, we first accept language events as integral in experience regarding them as wholes and as repetitive and interconnected, and then we propose to apply theoretical schemata consisting of a consistent framework of categories which are given names in a restricted language and in which all such specialized terms and expressions have their setting. The 'meaning' in this sense is dealt with at a mutually congruent series of levels, sometimes in a descending order beginning with the context of situation and proceeding through *collocation*, syntax, including *colligation*, to phonology and phonetics, even experimental phonetics, and sometimes in the opposite order.

Such an analytic dispersion of the statement of meaning at a series of levels, taking the fullest advantage of all our traditional disciplines and techniques consistent with the theory, and drawing on the aggregate of

experience, does not imply that any level i
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   (b) The non-verbal action of the pa
2. The relevant objects and non-verbal a
3. The effect of the verbal action.

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with the theory, and drawing on the aggregate of

experience, does not imply that any level includes or constitutes a formal prerequisite of any other. The levels of abstraction are only connected in that the resulting statements relate to the same language texts in the focus of attention in experience, and the theory requires them to be congruent and consequently complementary in synthesis on renewal of connection in experience.

No hard and fast lines can be drawn at present to form a strict classification for contexts of situation. Some might prefer to characterize situations by attempting a description of speech and language functions with reference to their effective observable results, and perhaps also with reference to a linguistically centred social analysis.

The technical language necessary for the description of contexts of situation is not developed, nor is there any agreed method of classification. At this level there are great possibilities for research and experiment. It will be maintained here that linguistic analysis states the interrelations of elements of structure and sets up systems of 'terms' or 'units' and end-points of mutually determined interior relations.[34] Such interior relations are set up in the context of situation between the following constituents:

1. The participants: persons, personalities and relevant features of these.
   (a) The verbal action of the participants.
   (b) The non-verbal action of the participants.
2. The relevant objects and non-verbal and non-personal events.
3. The effect of the verbal action.

No linguist has yet set up exhaustive systems of contexts of situation such that they could be considered mutually determined in function or meaning. There is some approximation to this, however, in Malinowski's *Coral gardens and their magic*, and here and there in special studies of contexts of personal address and reference, and of well-defined technological activities such as fishing or weaving or making war, and of rituals of various kinds.

In classifying contexts of situation and in describing such contexts as wholes, a language of 'shifted-terms', that is to say a vocabulary and phraseology of descriptive definition involving notional elements is probably unavoidable. It is, however, a clear scientific gain if such notional language only appears at this level and is rigidly excluded from all other levels such as the collocational, grammatical and phonological levels. But even the use of such notionally descriptive terms as *deictic*

situations, or *onomastic situations* or *situations of personal address* or of *personal reference*, either in the presence or absence of the person mentioned, does not involve the description of mental processes or meaning in the thoughts of the participants, and certainly need not imply any consideration of intention, purport or purpose.

The description of the context of situation by stating the interior relations of the constituents or factors,[35] may be followed by referring such contexts to a variety of known frameworks of a more general character such as (a) the economic, religious and other social structures of the societies of which the participants are members; (b) types of linguistic discourse such as monologue, choric language, narrative, recitation, explanation, exposition, etc.; (c) personal interchanges, e.g. mentioning especially the number, age and sex of the participants and noting speaker-listener, reader-writer and reader *or* writer contexts, including series of such interchanges; (d) types of speech function such as drills and orders,[36] detailed direction and control of techniques of all kinds, social flattery, blessing, cursing, praise and blame, concealment and deception, social pressure and constraint, verbal contracts of all kinds, and phatic communion.[37]

Statements of contexts of situation may be presented in tabular form under headings selected from the above list. One method of tabulation would comprise ten entries as follows: (i) type of context of situation; (ii) type of speech function; (iii) the language text and language mechanism; (iv) the restricted language[38] to which the text belongs; (v) the syntactical characteristics of the text (colligation); (vi) other linguistic features of the text and mechanism, including style and tempo; (vii) features of collocation; (viii) the creative effect or effective result; (ix) extended collocations and (x) memorial allusions, providing serial links with preceding or following situations.

Situations in which the text is egocentric are not without formal interest. Diaries, engagement books, personal notes and memoranda and perhaps most manuscripts are egocentric in this sense. If a man finds nothing worth saying to himself, in monologue or soliloquy, he has nothing to say to anyone else. The reading situation[39] is full of interest and has been dealt with by Wittgenstein.

Choric contexts of the 'Sieg heil' type were terrifying to listen to in Nazi Germany, but they are pleasant enough in 'Are we downhearted?' 'No!!!' Chorus is a very common linguistic form in phatic communion or 'sharing'. Contextual studies of the linguistic recognition of social differences, of social hierarchy, of inferiority or superiority, of feelings

of conformity and non-conformity, of class gain in force by more precise formulation.

A vast field of research in 'biographical plored. The language of social control in th ing all forms of apprenticeship, and not o systematically studied and stated by situati *don't* texts and all the interrogatives an adolescence lend themselves to such analys must be entered for the restoration in sch which children can talk about their lang experience.

The contextualization of narrative is formulation. Traditional narrative empl language or having other characteristic for traditional forms less fixed, news, fiction, ary observance and finally free personal in in almost all societies.

Even in the study of vocabulary[42] whe presented, such as kinship terms, parts of t in time and space, numerals, calendrical proper names of persons as well as of pla be separately and severally attested in co ever, necessary to present them also in thei

IV

The *placing* of a *text* as a constituent in a c to the statement of meaning since situatio As Wittgenstein says, 'the meaning of w day-to-day practice of playing language g rules. It follows that a text in such est sentences such as 'Don't be such an ass! ass he is!' In these examples, the word *a* company, commonly collocated with *you s such an—*. You shall know a word by the meanings of *ass* is its habitual collocation w above quoted.[45] Though Wittgenstein problem, he also recognizes the plain fac words. They look at us! 'The sentence is that is enough.'

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ch as monologue, choric language, narrative,
exposition, etc.; (c) personal interchanges, e.g.
he number, age and sex of the participants and
, reader-writer and reader *or* writer contexts,
interchanges; (d) types of speech function such
letailed direction and control of techniques of all
lessing, cursing, praise and blame, concealment
pressure and constraint, verbal contracts of all
munion.[37]

ts of situation may be presented in tabular form
d from the above list. One method of tabulation
tries as follows: (i) type of context of situation;
tion; (iii) the language text and language mechan-
l language[38] to which the text belongs; (v) the
ics of the text (colligation); (vi) other linguistic
nd mechanism, including style and tempo; (vii)
; (viii) the creative effect or effective result; (ix)
and (x) memorial allusions, providing serial links
owing situations.

the text is egocentric are not without formal
gement books, personal notes and memoranda and
ripts are egocentric in this sense. If a man finds
to himself, in monologue or soliloquy, he has
one else. The reading situation[39] is full of interest
ith by Wittgenstein.

the 'Sieg heil' type were terrifying to listen to in
ey are pleasant enough in 'Are we downhearted?'
very common linguistic form in phatic communion
tual studies of the linguistic recognition of social
hierarchy, of inferiority or superiority, of feelings

of conformity and non-conformity, of class, religion, nationality or race, gain in force by more precise formulation.

A vast field of research in 'biographical' linguistics[40] still lies unexplored. The language of social control in the whole of education, including all forms of apprenticeship, and not only schooling, might well be systematically studied and stated by situational formulation. The *do* and *don't* texts and all the interrogatives and jussives of childhood and adolescence lend themselves to such analysis. In this connection, a plea must be entered for the restoration in schools of a suitable language in which children can talk about their language as a vital part of their experience.

The contextualization of narrative is another obvious case for formulation. Traditional narrative employing 'fixed' or 'correct' language or having other characteristic formal features as in fairy tales, traditional forms less fixed, news, fiction, free narrative within customary observance and finally free personal invention[41] can be exemplified in almost all societies.

Even in the study of vocabulary[42] when ordered series of words are presented, such as kinship terms, parts of the body, terms of orientation in time and space, numerals, calendrical terms, names of social units, proper names of persons as well as of places,[43] it is essential that they be separately and severally attested in contexts of situation. It is, however, necessary to present them also in their commonest collocations.

IV

The *placing* of a *text* as a constituent in a context of situation contributes to the statement of meaning since situations are set up to recognize *use*. As Wittgenstein says, 'the meaning of words lies in their use.'[44] The day-to-day practice of playing language games recognizes customs and rules. It follows that a text in such established usage may contain sentences such as 'Don't be such an ass!', 'You silly ass!', 'What an ass he is!' In these examples, the word *ass* is in familiar and habitual company, commonly collocated with *you silly—*, *he is a silly—*, *don't be such an—*. You shall know a word by the company it keeps! One of the meanings of *ass* is its habitual collocation with such other words as those above quoted.[45] Though Wittgenstein was dealing with another problem, he also recognizes the plain face-value, the physiognomy of words. They look at us! 'The sentence is composed of the words and that is enough.'

From the preceding remarks, it will be seen that collocation is not to be interpreted as *context*, by which the whole conceptual meaning is implied. Nor is it to be confused with *citation*. When a lexicographer has arbitrarily decided how many 'meanings' he can conveniently recognize in the uses of a given word, he limits his entries accordingly and, after definitions of the 'meanings' in *shifted terms*, he supports them by *citations*, usually with literary authority. Lexicographical citations are keyed to the definitions, intended to exemplify a series of different 'meanings' arbitrarily selected and defined, and also to illustrate changes of meaning. The habitual collocations in which words under study appear are quite simply the mere word accompaniment, the other word-material in which they are most commonly or most characteristically embedded. It can safely be stated that part of the 'meaning' of *cows* can be indicated by such collocations as *They are milking the cows*, *Cows give milk*. The words *tigresses* or *lionesses* are not so collocated and are already clearly separated in meaning at the *collocational level*.

Situations of calendrical reference in which, for example, the names of the days of the week and of the month are a feature would attest the systematic use of the series of seven and twelve. But that is not by any means the complete cultural picture. In English, for instance, typical collocations for the words Sunday, Monday, Friday and Saturday furnish interesting material and would certainly separate them from the corresponding words in Chinese, Hebrew, Arabic or Hindi. The English words for the months are characteristically collocated: March hare, August Bank Holiday, May week, May Day, April showers, April fool, etc.

It is true that *Alice in Wonderland* is a world classic but foreigners must allow it to remain in English. An Italian colleague, commenting on the Italian attempt to render 'March hare', felt embarrassed by *lepre marzaiolo*—'non si usa!' And though there is *marzolino*, it is not collocated with *lepre*—'ma non significamente, unito a lepre'.

Statements of meaning at the collocational level may be made for the *pivotal* or *key words* of any *restricted language* being studied.[47] Such collocations will often be found to be characteristic and help justify the restriction of the field. The words under study will be found in 'set' company and find their places in the 'ordered' collocations.

The collocational study of selected words in everyday language is doubly rewarding in that it usefully circumscribes the field for further research and indicates problems in grammar. It is clearly an essential

procedure in descriptive lexicography. It i
regard each word separately at first, and not a
The collocations of *light* (n.s.) separate it f
n.adj.) from *lighter* and *lightest*. Then there
collocations for *light*/*dark* and *light*/*heavy*.

The collocational study of such words as
only of profit in that it dictates the necess
treatment of words and raises the problem
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terms of syntactical relations is clearly indis

Collocations of a given word are statement
ary places of that word in collocational or
contextual order and emphatically not in ar
collocation of a word or a 'piece' is not to
position, it is an order of *mutual expectancy*
expectant and mutually prehended. It is also
the name of a collocation is the hearing, r
'meaning' at other levels must not be direct
The statement of collocations and extend
mutually expectant orders of words and pie
focused on one word or one piece at a time.

In the study of selected words, compounds
language for which there are restricted texts,
collocations must first be made. It will then
collocation will suggest a small number of gr
word studied. The next step is the choice
suggested by the groups.[48]

V

The statement of meaning at the grammatic
and sentence classes or of similar categorie
of those categories in *colligations*.[49] Gramm
be regarded as relations between words as s
him in 'I watched him'—but between a pe
singular nominative, the past tense of a tr
person pronoun singular in the oblique
grammatical abstractions state some of the i
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with operators would be necessary to deal w

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procedure in descriptive lexicography. It is important, however, to regard each word separately at first, and not as a member of a paradigm. The collocations of *light* (n.s.) separate it from *lights* (n.s.) and *light* n.adj.) from *lighter* and *lightest*. Then there are the specific contrastive collocations for *light/dark* and *light/heavy*.

The collocational study of such words as *and*, *the*, *this*, *for*, *one*, *it*, is only of profit in that it dictates the necessity of a more generalized treatment of words and raises the problem of the general and grammatical classification of words. Grammatical generalization of word classes and the setting up of categories for the statement of meaning in terms of syntactical relations is clearly indispensable.

Collocations of a given word are statements of the habitual or customary places of that word in collocational order but not in any other contextual order and emphatically not in any grammatical order. The collocation of a word or a 'piece' is not to be regarded as mere juxtaposition, it is an order of *mutual expectancy*. The words are mutually expectant and mutually prehended. It is also an abstraction, and though the name of a collocation is the hearing, reading or saying of it, its 'meaning' at other levels must not be directly taken into consideration. The statement of collocations and extended collocations deals with mutually expectant orders of words and pieces as such, attention being focused on one word or one piece at a time.

In the study of selected words, compounds and phrases in a restricted language for which there are restricted texts, an exhaustive collection of collocations must first be made. It will then be found that meaning by collocation will suggest a small number of groups of collocations for each word studied. The next step is the choice of definitions for meanings suggested by the groups.[48]

V

The statement of meaning at the grammatical level is in terms of word and sentence classes or of similar categories and of the interrelation of those categories in *colligations*.[49] Grammatical relations should not be regarded as relations between words as such—between *watched* and *him* in 'I watched him'—but between a personal pronoun, first person singular nominative, the past tense of a transitive verb and the third person pronoun singular in the oblique or objective form. These grammatical abstractions state some of the interrelated categories within an affirmative sentence. Different categories of the negative conjugation with operators would be necessary to deal with 'I didn't watch him'.

Six

Linguistics and Translation†

The two words in the title of my lecture are common enough but I suppose that most people feel they know more about translation than about linguistics. Perhaps they do. You may not have 'done' linguistics, as they say, but most of you will have 'done' translation. Do you really know what you translate or how you translate? We know a good deal more about why we translate than about the 'what' or the 'how', just as we all speak and write English but do not know very much about the processes. We can learn the use of our own language without knowing very much about the language itself. We learn foreign languages in rather a more orderly manner. And so, we may become quite wonderful translation machines—I wish we knew more about how it is done.

Let me turn first to the question of what we translate, from a source language to a target language. Most people would say in the most general terms that we translate the meaning; but we cannot just stop there, taking it for granted that we all know the meaning of meaning. Even if you read the well-known book bearing that title, you will be no nearer the solution of your problem. In any case, that book is a contribution to the theory of knowledge, or an enquiry into how we know and how we state our knowledge. Most people in the West since Descartes would refer all problems of meaning to an analysis of thought, so that the problems of philosophy have been logical, psychological and, nowadays, even linguistic. Corresponding, I suppose, to the two-sided relation of mind and body, we have also the two-sided relation of thought and its expression. Recently in this country, philosophy—perhaps more especially in Oxford as the result of the influence of Cambridge—has become principally a study of meaning by what is

† Read to an audience at Birkbeck College in the University of London, June 1956.

called analysis, and a good deal of this analy
expression or language. This is not, ho
properly so-called as practised by present-da

I hope it will be already clear to you that I
of linguistics on translation without consi
whole problem of meaning is bedevilled by li
by the use of the word 'meaning' and all its
them. The word 'meaning' itself, the book t
of the word which as Professor Gilbert Ryle
plural noun', and we have such embarra
meaning, basic meaning, generic meaning, s
ferred meaning and many others of the same
of logic and rhetoric. Logic is concerned, I s
of truth or falsity of propositions—and so is
regard to views such as those held by Skeat, r
ing of a word is its original meaning. I ar
insuperable difficulties if I turn to translat
find out what becomes of all these meanings.
something without bothering about theory
and getting the main ideas, and with a lo
inspiration and even perhaps flashes of ger
language something deriving from the sou
between the two would consist of ideas,
naked—without any form expressed or rather
one in the source language and the other i
translator being the creator of the bridge, wit
whatever.

So let us turn to linguistics to examine the
some breaking-down of the problem in the h
a framework of interpretative theory with it
process should lead to useful criticism and t
of meaning by making statements about it in

I have often said that the main concern
is to make statements of meaning in its ow
that the main attention of the linguist is co
is to say the material, the 'what'. In Americ
to exclude meaning from linguistic analysis
exclusion of all psychological—or, as Bloor
references. They have concentrated, and sti
'basic code' of the language, upon particul

that technically employed in linguistics, without introducing a brief survey of recent developments in linguistic analysis in this country.

Though I do not wish to lay too much stress on the derivative nature of written language, and fully subscribe to the view of Archbishop Trench in the early nineteenth century that a word exists as truly for the eye as for ear, I must nevertheless remind you that the sounds and prosodies of speech are deeply embedded in organic processes in the human body, most of them intimate and secret. As Whitehead once said, 'voice-produced sound is a natural symbol for the deep experience of organic existence'. The notion of pure thought in abstraction from its expression is not one of the most useful figments of the learned world. The disastrous separation of body and mind fixed on European thought by Descartes is responsible for much blindness in certain sciences and especially in linguistics. Again, Whitehead realized that to see order in the mush of general goings-on, it was necessary to state the finding of structure and system. To be human, he once said, requires the study of structure. Animals enjoy structure. What has this to do with translation? you may ask. Before I can answer that, I must explain my position.

From my own point of view, first stated in 1930, maintained and developed since, the whole of our linguistic behaviour is best understood if it is seen as a network of relations between people, things and events, showing structures and systems, just as we notice in all our experience. The body itself is a set of structures and systems and the world in which we maintain life is also structural and systematic. This network of structures and systems we must abstract from the mush of general goings-on which, at first sight, may appear to be a chaos of flux.

Such an approach requires no dichotomy of mind and body, thought and its expression, form and content. It does, however, recognize the distinction between the language texts which are the linguist's main concern and the matrix of experience in which they are set. Meaning is, therefore, a property of all systems and structures of language. At the highest level of abstraction, it may be possible to maintain that the meaning of language may be stated in two sets of relations, the interior relations within the language and the exterior relations between structures and systems in the language, and structures and systems in the situations in which language functions. This monistic view of meaning shows us why some pedants are able to maintain that complete translation is impossible.

As I have so often said, the most important modifiers of words are things and events and, if we are not to refer structures and systems of

language to structures and systems of thoug
of regarding language as embedded in the
and the human body as the primary field o
continuous with the situations of life. Indeed
cannot define where the body begins and whe
external nature ends.

Whether we begin with situations or the
characteristic of them is immaterial as long
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meaning only at the level of spelling or at the
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and *the sun rises* and structure begins to be e
history and we can identify the word *sun* and
there is *the setting sun* and *the rising sun, th*
rising of the sun. I have not moved into those
compounds such as *sundown* and *sun-up* are
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this stage, it would be impossible to deal
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I want to make it clear that the linguistic
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the most important modifiers of words are
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language to structures and systems of thought, we have the alternative of regarding language as embedded in the matrix of living experience and the human body as the primary field of human expression and as continuous with the situations of life. Indeed, if we are fussily exact, we cannot define where the body begins and where what we erroneously call external nature ends.

Whether we begin with situations or the language texts which are characteristic of them is immaterial as long as we realize that they are intimately wedded. If I start with the word *sunset*, by itself it can have meaning only at the level of spelling or at the level of pronunciation with its stress pattern. I can from common experience decide that this word *sunset* belongs to a certain situation involving tables of times including such abbreviations as a.m. and p.m., perhaps lighting-up time too. We can perhaps find linked situations in which the two words *sunset* and *sunrise* occurred together and, indeed, the phrase *from sunrise to sunset* can easily be found. Eventually, one can connect these with *the sun sets* and *the sun rises* and structure begins to be evident without reference to history and we can identify the word *sun* and the word *set*. In due time, there is *the setting sun* and *the rising sun*, *the setting of the sun* and *the rising of the sun*. I have not moved into those situations or contexts where compounds such as *sundown* and *sun-up* are to be met with, least of all *sundowner*. These belong to other restrictive languages altogether. At this stage, it would be impossible to deal with *the Rising Sun on the corner which one can see on the darkest night* and, as for *sunflower*, we are again in a set of situations which would take time to connect with what I have just stated.

I want to make it clear that the linguistic systems and structures are related to the systems and structures in the events, relevant objects and people and what they are doing. You have the option of connecting structures and systems of language with structures and systems of thought or with structures and systems in situations comprising the human participants, their non-verbal behaviour, the relevant objects and other events and of these two alternatives, I suggest—difficult though it may appear—that the situational matrix is the more manageable one and more easily related to problems of translation.

As you will now realize, a translator has frequently to introduce in the target language, specific references to the situation; indeed, he may have to describe some of it, though in the source language these references would not appear. Mrs Atia Husain in a recent broadcast on the problems of an Indian novelist writing in English, made constant reference

to her Indian language Urdu with special reference to the pronominal system and to terms of personal address and reference for which no parallel equivalents are at her disposal in English.[1]

Some of you may already have some idea of what some of my students have called the spectrum of linguistic analysis whereby the problem of what I may call total meaning of a text in situation is broken down and dispersed at a series of levels such as the phonological, the grammatical and the situational levels. One can never expect the modes of meaning in a given language to be translatable into parallel or equivalent modes of meaning in a foreign language. This is clearly true at the phonetic or phonaesthetic level. How should we translate the meaning of alliteration or assonance in English into a language with no such consonant clusters as *sl*, *cl*, *cr*, *str*. These are prosodies of the sentence or piece or of the verse, but other prosodies, I dare say, may sometimes find equivalents such as quantity, number of syllables to the line and certain regular features of stress, accent or prominence. It is not, of course, possible on any considerable scale to carry grammatical structures across the bridge of translation. For example, the English constructions such as *your having done that will spoil your chances*: the non-finite *your having done that* would require a separate clause with a finite verb in most European languages, but it is an important contribution to the technique of translation to know that this must be done. (On the other hand—*that goes without saying*, *impress* and *express*.)

I have previously referred to translations from the Chinese and have mentioned Mr Arthur Waley and Mr Ezra Pound. Let us compare these two. Arthur Waley presents us with this sentence based on Chinese—*to learn and at due times repeat what one has learnt, is not that after all a pleasure?* Ezra Pound's version runs *study with the season's winging past, is not this pleasant?* In this case, situational and other non-linguistic elements have found their way into Waley's sentence which is not communicating the Chinese but giving us comprehension of the Chinese. Ezra Pound, however, especially in his translation of the Confucian Analects, endeavours to translate the structure of written Chinese characters by a constant search for metaphor in English—that is to say, finding a mode of meaning in Chinese writing, endeavouring to carry it across the bridge of translation into English metaphor: thus the Chinese character, the translation meaning of which is usually given as *proud* has the character *high* written with the radical *horse*—and so Ezra Pound uses *high-horsey*. The Chinese character *fearful* includes *two eyes*, so a man who is fearful when approaching an action becomes in Pound's

version *a man who keeps both eyes open whe*
previous example quoted, *study with the se*
upon the character usually given the transla
character has the *wings* radical but it is n
wings here, nor is the mode of meaning of
help towards an English version.

Finally, we come to a subject about whi
by machines. It is, of course, true that a hum
of as a machine—the trouble is that we do
did, we could tell the engineers what to
neurologists' hopes are in the opposite dire
have invented a machine which can reall
discover what we translate and how we t
view meet, it seems to me, in linguistics
approach in statements of meaning and, so
those who feel able to follow me, the long
statements we can make. I do not believe
some American linguists that we must fi
code and translate on the basis of the small
I try to meet this need by suggesting a trans
the more restricted they are, the more c
translation can be investigated. I believe th
invent a writing machine than a translati
toyed with the idea of sketching a plan for
fiction by machinery—thrillers or detecti
of the highly-coloured paperbacks that
could easily be produced by machinery
by the author. Indeed, Edgar Wallace use
taries busy dealing with a number of storie
methods almost automatically. There is n
a linguist, I should like to refer you to *Gul*
Swift describes the Professor in a very la
quote:

> Every one knew how laborious the u
> Arts and Sciences; whereas by his C
> Person at a reasonable Charge, and w
> write both in Philosophy, Poetry, Poli
> Theology, without the least Assistan

He describes the machine as twenty feet s

nited States which has the books, has the men,
Russia which has a gospel and creed and also
summarize what we have got nowadays—but
omething the others haven't got, so that all of

and interaction of linguistic forces and the
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ance he can.

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ot in any spatio-temporal sense. Distribution of
successive segments, of time or of space for that
on a string, is an entirely different matter. There is
id inconsistency in the use of the word *distribution*
cs. Distribution of *what*? *where*? and *how*?
aph of a recent article in *Language* 33.1, 35 (1957),
cal implication of these studies is that the analysis
eatment of structural phonological units larger than
stive types on each level of the hierarchy. A phono-
ate to portray the structure and functions of these
contrastive features, if it attempts to squeeze such
rchical linear sequence of chopped up disparate
quasi-segmental juncture phonemes.'
n has reminded us, de Saussure long ago warned
uistique la caricature d'une autre discipline'. (Frei,

Ten

Ethnographic analysis and language with reference to Malinowski's views†

In the field of linguistics, it has been said with some truth that the English have excelled in phonetics and in lexicography. They have always been interested in the spelling of their language, which has the longest literary tradition in Western Europe. The English were the first to make use of their native language in law, chronicle and translation. The first grammar of Latin in a Western European language was written by the Anglo-Saxon Aelfric in the tenth century. I have elsewhere (1946) given some account of the English interest in spelling and pronunciation, culminating in an appreciation of our greatest philologist, Henry Sweet.

It is, therefore, a matter of some satisfaction to an Englishman, writing an appreciation of the linguistic work of Bronislaw Malinowski, to be able to quote him as follows (1923, 495n.): 'I quote from H. Sweet (*Introduction to the history of language*), because this author is one of the cleverest thinkers on language'. Malinowski notices Sweet's statement that language and logic 'often diverge from one another' and that they are constantly at loggerheads. In Section 4 of the same Supplement, he mentions his concern with the

> definition of single words and with the lexicographical task of bringing home to a European reader the vocabulary of a strange tongue. And the main result of our analysis was that it is impossible to translate words of a primitive language or of one widely different from our own, without giving a detailed account of the culture of

† *Man and culture: an evaluation of the work of Bronislaw Malinowski* ed. R. W. Firth, London, 1957, 93–118.

ved from the context. In many cases the sub-
tioned, is represented merely by a verbal
e gathered from the situation.
(1935, II, 36)

ith the interrelation of categories, not of the
be derived from any context other than that
In referring to the subject of the situation,
in to Wegener.[24]

ard his grammatical treatment of texts (1935,
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ter of the verb'. He connects it with what he
'very roughly' and adds that it 'conveys the
present or future; or at times it is simply
of all levels of analysis is well exemplified in
s a fixed meaning distinguishing verbs thus
b I have chosen the English auxiliary verb
Levels are again confused and vagueness
wing:

tinge of definiteness; at times it places the
ast, accomplished state; at times it only gives
le it is best to regard it as an implement of
nplishment. The letter *l* I have rendered by
d', *luku-gis*, 'thou didst see'. (1935, II, 32)

tegories are obviously accepted as universals
(a) that the distinction between the transitive
t easy to make, and (b) that the passive does
r on the classificatory particles, to which he
article previously quoted, and in his intro-
f *Coral gardens* he specifically refers those
o this article (1935, II, 78). He did not
of lexical entry, but attempted more or less
, II, 115, 150–5).[26]
conscious of his shortcomings in phonetics
s his transliterations of the texts—they are
scriptions—and confesses that his phonetic
ot go as far as they ought to, and he very
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phonetics carried too far is unprofitable. However, he appreciated the need to connect sound of the language in some way with what he regarded as meaning but had no technique of analysis at his command nor language of statement. He had to be content with such observations as 'alliterative symmetry so dear to Kiriwinian magic'; 'a heavy thumping rhythm indicated by sharp and circumflex accents'; 'the manner of reciting these parts is more perfunctory, with fewer melodic modulations and phonetic peculiarities'; 'this phonetically very expressive word is used with very great sound effect'; 'this sentence, giving the vowels a full Italian value, such as they receive in the Melanesian pronunciation, does certainly have an impressive ring' (1922, 441, 444, 447, 450).

The abundance of the linguistic materials would justify revision in the field by a linguist since, as Malinowski says, 'belief in the efficiency of a formula, results in various peculiarities of the language in which it is couched, both as regards meaning and sound' (1922, 451). It would be of considerable linguistic interest to know more of the 'effects of rhythm, alliteration and rhyme, often heightened and accentuated by actual vocal accent' (1922, 452; 1929, 304).

The use of synoptic tables in presenting at a glance the consecutive progress of work and magic as inseparables, is a useful example of the ethnographic method of analysis and justifies the expression 'systematic magic' with its formulae, rites and spells (1922, 414 ff.).

As I have already pointed out (p. 148, n. 15), Malinowski was fully aware that as his work became better known, it was easier for him to expand his linguistic documentation to great lengths. But he was also apparently conscious of the possible danger of his ethnographic apparatus becoming too obvious and wished to get beyond the field-worker's notebook (1935, II, 45).

A critical appreciation of his contribution to linguistics may be summarized under the following four heads:

1. General theory, especially his use of the concepts of context of situation and of types of speech function (1935, II, 53; 1923, 475–7).
2. The statement of the meaning of a word by definition with reference to culture context.
3. The statement of meaning by translation.
4. The relations of (i) language and culture; and (ii) linguistics and anthropology.

1. As we have seen, the situational approach in linguistic theory can

be regarded as beginning with Wegener's work (1885), which has the merit of general theoretical abstraction with no trace of 'realism'. My own development of the situational approach has been of this kind.

In the work of Gardiner[27] and Malinowski there are distinct traces of the realist approach, which is in strange contradiction, in Malinowski's case, to his repeated insistence on the need for theory. He seems to imagine that there is such a thing as the 'existence' of the brute 'fact', independent of and prior to any statement of fact. 'To us', he says, 'the real linguistic fact is the full utterance within its context of situation.' There is belief in the 'concrete situation', the 'situation of action' in which the utterance is 'directly embedded' and he even used the phrase 'environmental reality' (Malinowski, 1935, II, 57). The word 'utterance' seems to have had an almost hypnotic suggestion of 'reality' which often misleads him into the dangerous confusion of a theoretical construct with items of experience. The factors or elements of a situation, including the text, are abstractions from experience and are not in any sense embedded in it, except perhaps in an applied scientific sense, in renewal of connection with it. In one place, however, he seems to have realized that if a sound film could be taken of a Trobriand gardening activity, so that the 'visual part of it would be self-explanatory', 'the accompanying sounds would remain completely incomprehensible' and would have to be explained by a long and laborious linguistic analysis (1935, II, 10, 26).

It was perhaps in order to avoid giving 'a disproportionate amount of space and attention' (1935, II, 10) to language that he adopted the not altogether satisfactory methods we have just reviewed.

In my own work, I first turned to the context of situation in 1930[28] and, more recently, have held to the view that the context of situation and the notion of types of speech function are best used as schematic constructs to be applied to language events and that they are merely a group of related categories at a different level from grammatical categories but of the same abstract nature. The linguist sets up interior relations[29] of three main kinds:

(a) the interior relations of elements of structure, words and other bits and pieces of the text;
(b) the interior relations of systems set up to give values to elements of structure and the bits and pieces;
(c) the interior relations of contexts of situation.

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as follows (see Firth, 1950, 7):

1. The relevant features of participants: pe
   (a) The verbal action of the participar
   (b) The non-verbal action of the parti
2. The relevant objects.
3. The effect of the verbal action.

The situational approach, I believe, requi
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The interior relations of the context of situation may be summarized as follows (see Firth, 1950, 7):

1. The relevant features of participants: persons, personalities.
   (a) The verbal action of the participants.
   (b) The non-verbal action of the participants.
2. The relevant objects.
3. The effect of the verbal action.

The situational approach, I believe, requires also the classification of types of speech function, in which Malinowski pioneered the way in his Supplement[30] and in *Coral gardens and their magic.*[31]

A great deal of the linguistic work we have noticed deals with studies of the magical word in the sociological sense; but language can be regarded as magic in the most general sense. Malinowski's treatment suggests many possibilities of research for all students of words in action. It was perhaps this magic which led him to regard speech in infancy and childhood as sources of magical meaning for all of us (1935, II, 62). The creative functions of language which he always emphasized are indeed miraculous.

These aspects of his general theory, which were first sketched in the Supplement, are more clearly stated in *Coral gardens*[32] and are his weightiest contributions in the sociological approach to the statement of meaning.

He pointed out the 'richest field of modern verbal magic'—advertisements—and his amusing parallel of Trobriand beauty magic and the advertisements of Helena Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden he commends to any young anthropologist interested in modern as well as primitive savagery. He concludes this interlude in a light vein with the remark: 'In my opinion, the study of modern linguistic uses side by side with those of the magic of simple peoples would bring high rewards.'[33]

2. His attitude to words as such is curiously unsatisfactory when we remember his concern with institutions[34] and customs. There is no doubt that, in literate societies such as our own, words and other elements of language are institutionalized, and statements about them in dictionaries and even in common talk are treated with a respect felt to be due to some sort of authority. He says, for instance, that words do not exist in isolation and adds that they 'have no independent existence in the actual reality of speech' (1935, II, 23). The descriptive linguist does not work in the universe of discourse concerned with 'reality' or what is 'real', and is not concerned with the ontological question

of whether his isolates can be said to 'have an existence' or 'to exist'. It is clear that one cannot deal with any form of language and its use without assuming institutions and customs. It has long been a commonplace of linguistics, as Malinowski himself says (1935, II, 22), that the sentence and not the word is its main concern, but it is not the lowest unit of language, nor is it a 'self-contained or self-sufficient unit'. Let us again emphasize that 'facts' do not 'exist', they are *stated*, and it may indeed be a better guide to the handling of facts to regard them as 'myths' in which we believe, and which we have to live with.

I should agree that 'the figment of a dictionary is as dangerous theoretically as it is useful practically' and, further, that the form in which most dictionaries are cast, whether unilingual or bilingual, is approaching obsolescence, partly on account of the arbitrariness of the definitions and preoccupation with the historical value of the citations. In his method of definition (see above, pp. 138–9), Malinowski makes some approach, though rather vaguely it is true, to the tendencies in modern linguistics to use contextual definitions and make statements of meaning at a series of levels. He does, however, pay great attention to systems of words having mutually exclusive uses in a given field of application—for example, the six words for 'garden' in Kiriwina. He fully appreciates what we might describe in technical linguistic terms as 'distinctive meaning' (see below, p. 165, n. 36). Throughout his work he is at great pains to describe in English sociologically important distinctions in use (see 1929*a*, 58, 388, 422).

Perhaps the most interesting full-length commentary on the use of a common word is to be found in his *Freedom and civilization*, which is an analysis of the 'multiple meanings' of 'freedom in its universe of semantic chaos'. The whole work he himself describes as the semantics of freedom, and his treatment I find not only more sophisticated but more stimulating than similar general semantic studies which have appeared in the United States. Two remarks in this work are of central importance: first, 'all mental states which are postulated as occurrences within the private consciousness of man are thus outside the realm of science' (1947, 84); and secondly, 'we have completely to throw overboard any meek acquiescence in dictionary meanings, in the dictates of epigram, metaphor and linguistic vagary. We have often stressed that in science we must run counter to linguistic usage. This is even more important in social science than in the study of matter or organism' (1947, 80).

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There are signs that in this work his general theory had so developed as to make consideration of primary meaning and fixed equivalents obsolete. While recognizing, as a social fact, that most people do take up attitudes towards words, he sounds the very necessary warning that the 'physicist does not inquire through universal suffrage or a Gallup Poll what the meanings of his concepts are' (1947, 81).[35] We know how obsessive is the desire to define the 'core of meaning' (1947, 68) of such a word as 'freedom'. His final decision is a 'complete rejection of this core of meaning'. At the same time, as we have already pointed out, he recognizes the influence of such beliefs on human behaviour. In science, however, as he rightly warns us, we are to beware of the tendency to reify and hypostatize such general words as representing valid general concepts (1947, 77). Such words are often conceived anthropomorphically. In the language of description in linguistics, we refer chiefly to structures, systems and relations. Our task is observation, analysis, synthesis and renewal of connection. Words such as 'freedom' and 'law' he regards—in accordance with sound tradition in linguistics —as polysemic and the words themselves as summaries of homonyms and homophones.

3. Whatever shortcomings we may find in Malinowski's analysis of texts, we must concede his realization of the central importance of the statement of meaning by what may be termed 'systematic translation'. He presents in his synoptic tables the consecutive progress of work and linguistic magic as inseparables (see above, p. 153). His statements by double translation with commentary bring into the focus of attention the whole question of what may be called 'translation meaning'[36] in linguistics.

Comparative linguists have perhaps not fully realized the technical implications of the translation meanings by means of which they identify words, let us say, by employing in English such translation equivalents as 'horse', 'sheep', 'father', etc. Translation meanings as identification names require careful consideration in all descriptive work. Translation meanings consisting of pieces of phrases in analytical languages, set against words in other types of languages, are all too often carelessly conceived and often quite haphazard in application. But translation meanings, however systematic, do not in themselves constitute linguistic analysis.

It is perhaps useful in this connection, to apply the two words 'use' and 'mention' to our procedures. A distinction must always be maintained, even in unilingual descriptions, between the word, piece or