1 Introduction

Many readers will be familiar with the classic historiographic study by Walter Carruthers Sellar (Aegrot. Oxon.) and Robert Julian Yeatman (Failed M.A. etc. Oxon.), in which they set out 'all the parts you can remember' of the History of England (Sellar & Yeatman, 1930). What 'Every student can remember' of the history of linguistics is not perhaps so bad, and sadly less hilarious. But it would not be difficult to put together an account of '1957 and All That', in which developments in the twentieth century are quite seriously garbled.

It would contain at most two 'memorable dates'. One is that of the publication, in 1957, of Chomsky's Syntactic Structures, in which Structuralism, or (according to some authorities) American Descriptivism, was overtaken. The other date, which careful research might well reveal not to be memorable, is that of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*. Before this, at the beginning of the century, linguists were only interested in the history of languages. But according to Saussure, who is known as the Father of Modern Linguistics, the subject had to be synchronic, and we had to study 'la langue', which is just an arbitrary inventory of signs. This was at first a Good Thing, since it led to a lot of important work especially on American Indian languages. But in the long run structuralism was a Bad Thing. One reason is that the structuralists did so much work with American Indians that they came to believe that languages could differ from each other in any way whatever. Therefore they were interested only in techniques for classifying data. Another reason is that the American descriptivists ignored meaning. This is mainly the fault of Bloomfield, who was the First to Make a Science of Linguistics. But he decided that meaning could not be studied scientifically. It also has to do with their work on American Indian languages, which were so strange that one could not get at them reliably unless one paid no attention to what the words meant.

All this was swept aside by the Chomskyan Revolution. This was the
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Best Thing that has happened to linguistics in the past 2500 years, since, as soon as Chomsky became top linguist, anyone who was anybody worked in an entirely New Paradigm. From the beginning Chomsky has seen language as a Window on the Mind. Therefore he insisted that a grammar had to be generative, and should include meaning. He is the first linguist since the eighteenth century to be interested in Universal Grammar, which he has shown to be innate. He is therefore a Rationalist and not an Empiricist, and this is a Good Thing because it explains why any child learns any language equally fast. He was also famous at one time for his theory of Deep Structure and Transformations. But this turned out to be not such a Good Thing, and according to some authorities may even have been a Bad Thing, because transformations were too powerful.

Of some of the statements that make up this pastiche it might perhaps be said with charity that they are no worse than gross over-simplifications. Others are nonsense, or can easily be proved wrong. But assertions like them do appear in students' essays; and, what is worse, although they are in part perversions of the account in sources that are broadly reputable, much of this story could be cited in inverted commas from other books that are, unfortunately, quite widely read. Nor am I confident that there are no teachers and examiners who will not give an 'A' to more specious versions of it.

One of my aims in writing this book is to try to bring home to colleagues who teach the subject what the currents of ideas in twentieth-century American linguistics have in reality been. I am not sure that I can reach their students directly, since, despite the admirable work of Hymes and Fought (1981 [1975]), which has exploded many of the myths that are told about the period up to 1960, we will still need to discuss in detail texts that are sometimes difficult and not always on students' reading lists. I shall also offer some interpretations that may be genuinely contentious. But I hope that, even in so doing, I will persuade my readers that the recent history of linguistics is a serious topic; that it can be treated as more than just a chronicle of individuals and schools; and that, in going beyond this, we can do better than to trust the official histories of dominant theories, or the polemics of one faction against another, or the haphazard comments of compilers of books of readings, or the attempts by middle-aged scholars to disguise what they believed when they were young, or any of the other sources that are often uncritically followed.

My main purpose, however, is to trace the development and continuity
of three dominant ideas. One is that the study of formal relations can and should be separated from that of meaning. It has appeared in many variants: in the insistence that a description of a language must be justified by distributional criteria; in the belief that there are syntactic facts or syntactic arguments for syntactic rules that are distinct from semantic facts or semantic arguments; in a theory of levels in which one component of a grammar accounts for the grammaticality of sentences and another supplies their semantic interpretation; in other weaker concepts of the autonomy of syntax. Not every scholar I will refer to has subscribed to such ideas. But it is a motif that runs through American linguistics from the 1940s onwards, and where similar views are current elsewhere it is largely under American influence.

The second idea is that sentences are composed of linear configurations of morphemes. Strictly, this involves three propositions: firstly, that relations are basically of sequence; secondly, that they hold within and between the units in a hierarchy of constituents; thirdly, that morphemes are the elementary units in this hierarchy. But these propositions usually go together, especially in the potted expositions of grammatical theory that are read by students. They have in consequence become so widespread, at least or above all in English-speaking countries, that many scholars have to be reminded forcibly that there might, in principle, be arguments against them. But their origins, as we will see, lie in the specific preoccupations of American theorists earlier in this century.

The third idea is that many aspects of grammar are determined genetically. This is more recent, and has arisen independently of the others. But, like them, it is widely held, and all three are commonly held by the same people. It is not, of course, my business as a historian to say whether these ideas are right or wrong, or to discuss any criticisms of them that are not themselves part of their history. But I would be disingenuous if I did not confess that my account will be in part what might be called an 'anti-Whig' interpretation. I have selected these ideas because they have come to dominate grammatical thought in the late twentieth century, because their history fascinates me and because existing accounts are partly misleading. But the dominance of the first two, in particular, is not (to return to the language of Sellar and Yeatman) a Good Thing, and I would not be disappointed if my study of their origins were to lead more scholars to question them.

The time span of this study runs approximately from the appearance in 1911 of the first part of the Handbook of American Indian Languages to the
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late 1980s, but will deal in greatest detail with the middle of this period. Its geographical scope will be limited to the United States. This has in practice been an easy decision, since the main stream of American linguistics has for much of this century had few tributaries. It will also concentrate on Bloomfield and Chomsky, who, if nothing else, are the most influential figures in our story. But they are, of course, much more; and the reading and rereading undertaken for this book has only increased my admiration for their subtlety, originality and ingenuity of mind. They are therefore the only scholars whose contributions to grammatical theory will be studied systematically over their whole lifetime. Others have played a dominant role at various times; in the term used in the ancient analysis of the Iliad, there is an ἀπορεία or moment of glory of one group in the 1940s, of another in the late 1960s, and so on. The contribution of Harris, in particular, is central to the history of American linguistics for nearly twenty years, and, over that period, will be discussed in the same detail. But neither for him nor for others will I attempt a rounded intellectual biography.

For, finally and most importantly, this is a history in which ideas will generally loom larger than people. In that respect the echo of Ranke, which may have been detectable some paragraphs back, was serious. Particular ideas will often be seen to persist as the personnel who hold them change, and as other ideas change also. This is especially the case, and especially understandable, when an idea is not itself the immediate focus of debate. There is no doubt, for example, that Bloomfield’s views on meaning and the psychology of language changed radically between his first book (1914) and the one for which he is best known (1935 [1933]). But as I will try to show in Chapter 2 (§§2.1–2), much of his detailed concept of grammar survived, in a new form and with a new justification. There is also no doubt that the goals of American linguistics were transformed in the early 1960s, when Chomsky’s partial critique of Post-Bloomfieldian work sank in. But that did not affect ideas which he did not criticise, such as the concept of constituency structure (see §2.3); or that of the morpheme, which, as we will see in §§2.4–5, most American scholars have continued to take for granted; or a commitment to distributional criteria (§3.2). There is nothing odd about this, nor, in the illustrations I have given, anything that will not be accepted at once by anyone who has read the primary sources. But the secondary sources tend to deal in schools and individuals, and emphasise the discontinuities between them. They also tend to treat the thought within each school as a
1.1 American linguistics 1900–1990

Let us begin with a general historical survey. This will include some statements that either need or deserve more detailed discussion and documentation, which, where the leading scholars are concerned, will be reserved for later chapters. But the main stream of American linguistics is naturally not the only stream. I will therefore have to allude briefly to the work of other schools, good or in its day important, to which I will not be able to return.

Our history may conveniently begin around 1910. This is just before the publication of the first part of the *Handbook of American Indian Languages* (1911), which included Boas’s ‘Introduction’, and four years before Bloomfield’s first book; it is also the date when Sapir took up his first post, in Ottawa. Insofar as it is possible to divide the century into periods, the first might then be said to run from 1910 to the foundation, at the end of 1924, of the Linguistic Society of America. No division can serve as more than a skeleton for the exposition of ideas. But the latter date is also chosen by Andresen (1990) to end a survey of American
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linguistics that begins in the mid-eighteenth century. It is also worth remarking that, although he was active until much later, Boas had by then reached a normal age of retirement; and that in 1925 Sapir moved from relative isolation in Ottawa to a chair in Chicago. This led to new contacts and a new role, and, as Darnell’s recent biography makes clear, an accompanying shift in his interests (Darnell, 1990).

In the light of what was to come, the most important intellectual trend is the emergence of what we now call structuralism. The term itself was not used until later; but, in reviewing Sapir’s Language in the early 1920s, Bloomfield spoke already of the ‘newer trend of linguistic study’ with which Sapir’s work was associated (Bloomfield, 1922: L[eonard] B[loomfield] A[nthropology] 92). Its ‘theoretic foundation’ had, he said, been given by Saussure, and in the following year, in a review of the second edition of the Cours de linguistique générale, he stressed the value of Saussure’s work as a ‘clear and rigorous demonstration of fundamental principles’ (Bloomfield, 1923: LBA 106). ‘Most of what the author says has long been “in the air” and has been here and there fragmentarily expressed’; but, he adds, ‘the systematization is [Saussure’s] own’. The precise contribution of Saussure is still a topic of debate, into which we need not enter. But some of these ideas had been ‘in the air’ especially in America, and American structuralism thus had partly native origins. It also had some biases and characteristics of its own, which were to set American linguistics on a distinct course.

One central structuralist idea is that every language has a structure of its own, in which individual elements have a role distinct from that which superficially similar elements have in other languages. For example, a [θ] in English does not have the same role as a phonetically similar [θ] in Spanish. In phonology, this point was definitively made in Sapir’s classic paper on sound patterns (1925); and in his major review of Sapir’s posthumous Selected Writings, Harris speaks of the ‘patterning of data’ as the ‘greatest contribution’ of Sapir’s linguistic work. The ‘fact of patterning’ he sees as ‘the overshadowing interest’ from ‘de Saussure to the Prague Circle and Sapir and Bloomfield’ (Harris, 1951b: 292, 297). In semantics, Boas had laid great emphasis, at the beginning of our period, on the very different principles of classification to be found in the vocabularies of different languages, and the striking ways in which grammatical categories may vary (n.d. [1911]: 19f., 28ff.). Earlier in his chapter on ‘The characteristics of language’, Boas too had shown how distinctions made in one ‘phonetic system’ may be quite foreign to another (n.d.: 11ff.).
Boas’s ‘Introduction’ was written with such good judgment that much of what it says, on these and other matters, now seems simply obvious. It would therefore be tiresome for a commentary such as this to do more than remind readers of his contribution and influence. The same is true of much of Sapir’s work. Many will acknowledge the brilliance of his classification of grammatical concepts, and the typology based on it (1921: 101f.; Ch. 6); many more will highlight passages in which he talks of ‘the relativity of the form of thought’ or of ‘no two languages’ representing ‘the same social reality’ (Mandelbaum, ed., 1949: 159 [1924]; 162 [1929]). But for the history of linguistics generally what matters most is not the part that is controversial, but the basic finding that languages do differ radically in phonology and grammar, in ways that make sense only when they are analysed in their own terms. This was shown most strikingly by Boas and Sapir, and went hand in hand with the greater understanding of native American languages that Boas inspired.

Another central structuralist idea is that the scientific study of language could be, and in the first instance had to be, synchronic. For Bloomfield, this was one of two ‘critical points’ that the ‘newer trend of linguistic study’ affected; and for a historian it stands in particular contrast with the view of Paul (1920 [1880]: 20). In Bloomfield’s words, ‘we are coming to believe that restriction to historical work is unreasonable and, in the long run, methodologically impossible’ (1922: LBA 92). The other ‘critical point’ concerned the autonomy of linguistics. As Bloomfield put it, ‘we are casting off our dependence on psychology, realizing that linguistics, like every science, must study its subject-matter in and for itself . . .’. In other words, we must study people’s habits of language – the way people talk – without bothering about the mental processes that we may conceive to underlie or accompany these habits. This is again from his review of Sapir’s Language, in which Sapir had made clear, in a passage that Bloomfield cites at length, that it is desirable and profitable to study language ‘as an institutional or cultural entity, leaving the organic and psychological mechanisms back of it as something to be taken for granted’ (n.d. [1921]: 11).

Bloomfield is talking of a broad trend in linguistics, for which Saussure had given a foundation, and not of the Cours directly. Nevertheless the singling out of these points is of interest for what is omitted as well as what is included. To most structuralists in Europe, other aspects of Saussure’s thought were to seem at least as important – in particular, his distinction between ‘langue’ and ‘parole’, and the concept of a language
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as a system of signs. In Europe these have been and still are very influential. But structuralism in America was to develop differently, and although there was little published discussion, both ideas were often implicitly rejected.

The notion that words and other units are signs did not, of course, begin with Saussure; and something in part resembling the relation between the two sides of the Saussurean sign is naturally implied by any account in which distinct forms are associated with stable meanings. In that sense, I will talk later of a ‘sign relation’ in Bloomfield’s mature work. But the term ‘sign’ has not been general in American linguistics (or, for that matter, in linguistics in other English-speaking countries), and the principle of parallel substitution of both forms and meanings, which is familiar in Europe from its formulation by Hjelmslev, was not American either. According to Sapir, the ‘question of form in language’ might be addressed independently either by looking at ‘the formal methods employed’ (at the types, for instance, of morphological process) or by ‘ascertain[ing] the distribution of concepts with respect to formal expression’ (n.d. [1921]: 57). From a European viewpoint, one is reminded more of scholars who were not structuralists, like Jespersen. For Bloomfield, it became a central principle that distinctions of meaning were established by the analysis of form. ‘Linguistic study’, as he put it in words which were to be the inspiration of his successors, ‘must always start from the phonetic form and not from the meaning’ (1935 [1933]: 162).

The concept of ‘langue’ is mentioned by Bloomfield in his review of the Cours, but there was to be nothing truly resembling it in his own theory or that of his leading followers. In Bloomfield’s writings, linguistic units have a status like that which they had in ancient accounts of language: that is to say, they were recurring units of speech. A ‘phonetic form’ is a ‘combination of phonemes that occurs in a language’ (Bloomfield, 1935: 138). It is thus the equivalent of what the ancients called an ‘articulate vocal sound’ (in Latin ‘vox articulata’), made up of the minimal units that they called letters. Where such a form has meaning it is a ‘linguistic form’: as I have pointed out in an account of ancient models, this is the equivalent of what the Stoics called in Greek a logos – a phonetic form or one ‘pronounceable in [a] language’ (Bloomfield, 1935: 162) that in addition has meaning (Matthews, 1990b: 222, 293). Linguistic forms are thus in turn recurring units of speech, from the sentence, which is the largest, to the smallest, which is Bloomfield’s ‘morpheme’. It may or may not have been clear to Bloomfield how far this diverged from
Saussure’s view. But in a critique of Saussure in the late 1940s, Wells picks almost unerringly on passages in the *Cours* which can be read as saying something similar. In Wells’s account of Saussure’s theory, ‘speech (la parole)’ is ‘made up . . . of two linear sequences’, one composed of ‘*tranches de sonorité . . .* which are in turn sequences of one or more phonemes’, the other ‘a sequence of meanings’. A *signifiant* is a ‘*tranche de sonorité . . .* which is associated with a concept’; this concept, which is an element in the other sequence, is a *signifié*. The implication is that the sign is basically a unit of speech: ‘words, word-groups, and sentences are all signs’ (Wells, 1947a: 7f.). Wells’s paper cannot be recommended for its exegesis of Saussure, but for a student of American views in its own time it is very revealing.

A final, more specific feature of structuralism as it developed in America is that the sentence remained a central unit. The sources of this view are evident in Bloomfield’s first book, and will be discussed later (§2.1); it is also clear in Boas’s ‘Introduction’ (1911: n.d. 21f.). In his review of Saussure, Bloomfield says that ‘in detail, I should differ from de Saussure chiefly in basing my analysis on the sentence rather than the word; by following the latter custom de Saussure gets a rather complicated result in certain matters of word-composition and syntax’ (1923: *LBA* 107f.). For Bloomfield, a crucial stage in the emergence of an autonomous linguistics, which he refers to several times in writings from the early 1920s onwards, was the formulation by Meillet (1912) of a definition of the sentence which was not grounded in psychology. This primacy of the sentence is, of course, linked to the implicit rejection of Saussure’s distinction between ‘language’ and ‘parole’. For the Saussurean tradition, sentences (since the range of combinations was unlimited) could only be units of ‘parole’. But in one line of thought in the United States, which runs from Bloomfield in the 1920s through to Chomsky in the 1950s, the notion of a sentence or utterance is the basis for the definition of a language. As Bloomfield put it in a paper that stands at the beginning of our next period, ‘the totality of utterances that can be made in a speech-community is the *language* of that speech-community’ (1926: *LBA* 130, Def. 4).

*The late twenties and thirties*

If the period up to the mid-1920s saw the initial growth of structuralist ideas, the next fifteen years are distinguished in particular by the
emergence of structural linguistics as a distinct discipline. From a modern viewpoint, these years are dominated intellectually by Sapir, who taught many of those who were to become the leaders in the 1940s, and by Bloomfield, whose new book (1933) was taken as a unique guide to linguistics almost as soon as it appeared. The influence of these scholars has been assessed by Hymes and Fought (1981 [1975]), Anderson (1985) and Darnell (1990: Ch. 14), among others. But it is perhaps important to underline their role in successive Linguistic Institutes in the late 1930s, and that of the Institutes in general, in bringing scholars together and fostering a common view of the subject. In looking back on the first twenty-one years of the Linguistic Society, Bloomfield was to suggest that its existence had saved American linguistics from ‘the blight of the odium theologicum and the postulation of “schools”’ (1946: LBA 493). But when we look at matters in a wider perspective, there was very clearly an American school, of which he was the acknowledged leader, by the beginning of that decade.

The Linguistic Society of America was not founded, of course, to promote structuralism. In his address to the inaugural meeting, its first president divided the domain of linguistics into three subdivisions. One is concerned with the ‘permanent conditions’ of language and includes, in particular, general phonetics and general or ‘philosophical’ grammar. The second deals with history and evolution, and includes both comparative study and that of single languages, of dialects, of single authors, of ‘special grammatical topics’. As examples of works which survey both subdivisions, he cites ‘the well known lectures of Max Müller and of W. D. Whitney’, von der Gabelentz’s Die Sprachwissenschaft (1891), and the more recent books by Bloomfield (1914) and Jespersen (1922). The third subdivision might be called ‘practical’ or ‘applied’ linguistics. It includes the practical study of grammar; also topics such as the relation of speech and writing, or the construction of artificial languages (Collitz, 1925: passim). The first number of Language begins with an essay by Bloomfield (1925) which is much better known. But, despite a different view of the subject and a very different emphasis, he too is describing a united science of language to which each of these branches belongs.

The true scope of the society is revealed most clearly by its journal. Of the 172 papers published in the first ten volumes of Language, about twelve can be said to deal with general topics, and of these twelve, two by Bloomfield (1925, 1926), two by Sapir (1925, 1929) and one by Swadesh (1934a) are well known from reprintings. Of the other seven, a cautiously