A Short History of Structural Linguistics

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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1   Introduction

What is 'structural linguistics'? Do most linguists still accept its principles? Or are they now believed in only by old men, clinging to the ideas that were exciting in their youth? Who, among the scholars who have written on language in the twentieth century, was or is a structuralist? Who, by implication, would that exclude?

It may seem, at the outset, that the first of these questions should be fundamental. We must begin by asking what, in general, we mean by 'structuralism'. There are or have been 'structuralists' in, for example, anthropology; also in other disciplines besides linguistics, such as literary criticism and psychology. What unites them, and distinguishes them from other theorists or practitioners in their fields? In answering this question we will identify a set of general principles that structuralists subscribe to; and, when we have done that, we will be able to ask how they apply to the study of language. From that we will deduce the tenets that a 'structural linguist' should hold; we can then see who does or, once upon a time, did hold them. But an inquiry in this form will lead us only into doubt and confusion. For different authorities have defined 'structuralism', both in general and in specific application to linguistics, in what are at first sight very different ways. There are also linguists who are structuralists by many of the definitions that have been proposed, but who would themselves most vigorously deny that they are anything of the kind.

Let us look, for a start, at the definitions to be found in general dictionaries. For 'structuralism' in general they will often distinguish at least two different senses. Thus, in the one-volume *Collins* (1994 edn; originally Hanks, 1979), 'an approach to linguistics' (sense 2) has one definition and 'an approach to anthropology and to other social sciences and to literature' (sense 1) has another; and, for a reader who does not know the problems with which the editor had to deal, it is not obvious how they are connected. In anthropology or literature, structuralism is an approach that 'interprets and analyses its material in terms of oppositions, contrasts, and hierarchical structures', especially 'as they might reflect universal mental characteristics or organising principles'. 'Compare', we are

told, 'functionalism'. In linguistics, it is an approach that 'analyses and describes the structure of language, as distinguished from its comparative and historical aspects'. The next entry defines 'structural linguistics' in terms that are in part different and in part supply more detail. It is, first of all, 'a descriptive approach to a synchronic or diachronic analysis of language'. But a 'diachronic' analysis is precisely one that deals with 'historical' and, where they are a source for our knowledge of the history, 'comparative' aspects. This analysis, to continue, is 'on the basis of its structure as reflected by irreducible units of phonological, morphological, and semantic features'. This seems to imply that the units that structural linguists establish are necessarily of these three kinds.

The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Brown, 1993) distinguishes two main senses of 'structuralism', one in early twentieth-century psychology (compare *Collins* under 'structural psychology'), the other covering all other disciplines, but with specific subsenses (2 *(a)*, 2 *(b)* and 2 *(c)*) in linguistics, in anthropology and sociology, and as 'a method of critical textual analysis'. In sense 2 in general, structuralism is 'any theory or method which deals with the structures of and interrelations among the elements of a system, regarding these as more significant than the elements themselves'. It is also, by a second or subsidiary definition, 'any theory concerned with analysing the surface structures of a system in terms of its underlying structure'. So, specifically in linguistics (sense 2 *(a)*), it is 'any theory in which language is viewed as a system of interrelated units at various levels'; especially, the definition adds, 'after the work of Ferdinand de Saussure'. There is nothing in this entry about synchrony or diachrony. But under 'structural' (*special collocations*), 'structural linguistics' is defined, in terms which recall the *Collins* definition under 'structuralism', as 'the branch of linguistics that deals with language as a system of interrelated elements without reference to their historical development'. Thus, by implication, structuralism in linguistics is again not diachronic. One is also left wondering about the reference to surface and underlying structure. The term 'underlying' is picked up, in the subdefinition for anthropology, with reference to the theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss ('concerned with the network of communication and thought underlying all human social behaviour'); but not specifically for linguistics. However, in the *Supplement* to the main *Oxford English Dictionary*, which is the immediate source of these definitions, the term 'structural' is also said to mean, under sense 5a, 'relating to or connected with the "deep" structures that are considered to generate "surface" structures'.

These are good dictionaries, and I am not out to criticise them. I can hardly claim that the entry in my own concise dictionary of linguistics (Matthews, 1997: 356f.) is more definitive. For the root of our difficulty is

that linguists themselves do not apply these terms consistently. In a leading survey of the subject, Giulio Lepschy suggests that 'structural linguistics' has at least three possible senses (Lepschy, 1982 [1970]: 35f.). But of these one, as he in effect remarks, is vacuous. Another applies so narrowly that most of what has generally been perceived as structuralism does not fall within it. The third remains, as a definition, tantalisingly general.

'In the widest sense', with which Lepschy begins, 'every reflection on language has always been structural'. In any grammar, for example, units are identified; units of any one kind are related to others of their own or of another kind; and through these relations, which will be in part hierarchical, successively larger 'structures' are quite clearly formed. In that sense, any 'synchronic or diachronic analysis of language' (*Collins*) cannot but be 'structural'. Hence, for Lepschy's and our purposes, this first use of the term 'is scarcely revealing' (1982: 36).

Lepschy's narrowest sense dates from the 1960s, when the American linguist Noam Chomsky was attacking what he called the 'taxonomic' methods of his predecessors. The charge was levelled against a specific school in the United States, who were also accused at the time, in apparent variance with a hint in one of our dictionaries, of a concern with no more than the 'surface structures' of language, to the exclusion of its 'deep structures'. For Chomsky and his followers, 'structuralists' were above all members of that school. Hence, in some accounts, like that of David Crystal in *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language*, the term 'structuralist' is used only of them and 'structural(ist) linguistics' only of a limitation of the subject in a way that they alone proposed (Crystal, 1997 [1987]: 412; glossary, 438).

The middle sense refers, in Lepschy's words, to 'those trends of linguistic thought in this [the twentieth] century which deliberately tried to gain an insight into the systematic and structural character of language'. This is indeed 'more widely accepted' (36) than the largest sense with which he began. But Lepschy's wording again leaves one wondering whether structuralism can be defined precisely. For no one will deny that language has a 'systematic and structural character'; and, as we move into a new century, many scholars are still seeking to understand it. Yet Lepschy refers to trends that 'tried', in the past tense, to do so. What is it that those trends specifically, which are by implication characteristic of the twentieth century, had in common? What were the particular insights, or the particular ways of trying to gain an insight, that lead us to distinguish them from other trends that are not 'structural'?

Lepschy's *Survey of Structural Linguistics* is the best book of its kind, and I am not seeking to pick holes in it. For what this makes clear is that structuralism has to be defined, in part, historically. The term 'structural

linguistics' dates, as we will see, from the late 1930s, and referred to an intellectual movement that was by then well established. But it had no single leader, and no wholly uniform set of principles. In the view of most continental Europeans, it had been founded by Ferdinand de Saussure, whose lectures on general linguistics (*Cours de linguistique générale*) had been reconstructed and published after his death in 1913. Hence the specific reference to him in *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. But 'structural' and 'structuralisme' were not terms that Saussure had used. Therefore he had not laid down the principles, by name, 'of structuralism', and the ideas that he had expounded were already being developed, by different scholars, all of whom could reasonably claim to be his followers, in varying directions. In the United States, by contrast, linguists who were young at the end of the 1930s were influenced above all by the American scholar Leonard Bloomfield, whose great book *Language* had appeared in the first half of the decade. But he did not talk of 'structuralism' either. Nor did the theory that he propounded agree entirely with Saussure's. By the time the movement had a name the 'trends' (plural) to which Lepschy refers could already be distinguished.

But, as a broad movement, it quite clearly existed. 'Structuralists' in general, of whatever more precise persuasion, came to be lumped together by their critics; and, among the structuralists themselves, there was a sense of unity. A political party, if we may take one obvious parallel, includes many shades of opinion. It would again be hard to say exactly what set of beliefs its members all have in common, from one time to another or even at any one time. But the trends within it form a network of shared interests and shared inspirations, in which all who belong to it have some place. With intellectual movements, such as structuralism, it is often much the same.

Or should we say, in this case, that it 'was' the same? Lepschy used, once more, the past tense; and it is now more than thirty years since he was writing. But on the next page he speaks of Chomsky's theories, which had by then come to dominate the subject, as from his perspective 'an heir to . . . structural linguistics' and 'one of its most interesting developments'. There is no doubt that, by the end of the 1960s, the sense of party unity had been lost, at least between Chomsky and the older generation in the United States. But the implication is that structuralism, in a broad sense, passed into a new phase. Has there, since then, been a real break? Or is the thinking of most scholars now, about what Lepschy called 'the systematic and structural character of language', still continuous with the tradition that was dominant earlier?

I will return to these questions in the final chapter. But first we have more than a hundred years of history, and the thought of some of the best minds that have studied language, to work through.