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.

2 Languages

Linguistics is said in dictionaries to be 'the branch of knowledge that deals with language' (*New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*) or 'the scientific study of language' (*Collins*). But for structuralists it has been much more the study of, in the plural, languages. This was true at the outset, for Saussure, and is still true for many as we enter the twenty-first century. What then constitutes 'a language'? It is easy to give examples: English is one, Japanese another, and so on. But what, in general, are they?

Let us look again at dictionaries. For the first editor of *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Murray *et al.*, 1933 [1884–1928]), the earliest sense of 'language' (§1) was that of 'the whole body of words and of methods of combination of words used by a nation, people, or race'; alternatively, 'a tongue'. The dictionary itself was thus an account of the 'whole body' of words that constitute the lexicon of English. The second definition (§2) adds a 'generalized sense': 'words and the methods of combining them for the expression of thought'. But where Murray saw a 'body', *The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary* speaks of a 'system'. Language is 'a system of human communication using words . . . and particular ways of combining them'; it is 'any such system', the definition adds, 'employed by a community, a nation, etc.' (§1a). In the *Collins* dictionary, it is 'a system for the expression of thoughts, feelings, etc. by the use of spoken sounds or conventional symbols' (§1); also in general (§2) 'the faculty for the use of such systems'. These accounts have much in common. In particular, a specific language is related, either by definition or by historical association, to a 'nation' or other 'community'. But a 'system' is potentially more than a 'body'. A 'body', in the sense that Murray must have had in mind, can be described by an inventory. A dictionary is thus an inventory of words, arranged for convenience in alphabetic order. A grammar is in turn an inventory of 'methods of combining' words, arranged perhaps by classes to which combinations can be assigned. But a 'system' is not simply a collection of individual components. Suppose that, from an inventory, we omit one item: say, from the inventory of words in English, we omit the word *we*. The remainder of the inventory is unchanged. But

if a language is a system then, as part of that system, *we* is related to other words: most obviously to *I*, *you*, *us* and others that are traditionally called pronouns. If *we* is omitted, the relations that the other pronouns enter into must in turn change.

It is with this basic insight that, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, structuralism began. It did not develop fully until later, according to most commentators with the publication of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. But by then this insight had already informed the study of sound systems, as we will see in the next chapter (3.1). We can also find at least one earlier and independent programmatic statement, in an introduction to linguistics of the early 1890s by the German Orientalist Georg von der Gabelentz. 'Every language', he writes, 'is a system all of whose parts interrelate and interact organically' ('Jede Sprache ist ein System, dessen sämmtliche Theile organisch zusammenhängen und zusammenwirken'). Thus, in our example, *we* relates to and interacts not just with *I* and *you* but, directly or indirectly, with all other elements of the wider system of which pronouns are part. 'One has the impression', Gabelentz continues, 'that none of these parts could be missing or be different, without alteration to the whole' ('Man ahnt, keiner dieser Theile dürfte fehlen oder anders sein, ohne dass das Ganze verändert würde') (Gabelentz, 1901 [1891]: 481). Thus, if there were no pronoun *we*, the repercussions would extend throughout English generally. In a famous Saussurean formula, a language is 'a system in which everything holds together' ('un système où tout se tient'). Change again one element, and the system is different.

The origins of this formula have been explored by Konrad Koerner, in an essay dealing with the connections between Saussure and the French Indo-Europeanist Antoine Meillet. It is not, on paper at least, Saussure's own. But Meillet was a young man in the 1880s; he had heard lectures by Saussure in Paris; and by 1893 he was saying already that the units of sound in each form of speech ('les divers éléments phonétiques de chaque idiome') form such a system. The point can be appreciated, he remarks, by anyone who has tried to learn the pronunciation of another language. But it must also apply to children learning their first language: 'A child, in learning to speak, assimilates not an isolated articulation, but the whole of the system' ('Or l'enfant, en apprenant à parler, s'assimile non une articulation isolée, mais l'ensemble du système'). The passage is cited by Koerner (1989 [1987]: 405), and Saussure was not mentioned. But the formula fits so beautifully with the ideas developed in Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* that, as Koerner points out, it was later cited as if it were his. For the Russian linguist N. S. Trubetzkoy, writing in the early 1930s, this conception of a language was one of the basic principles

that Saussure had proclaimed (Trubetzkoy, 1933: 241; also 243, with the formula cited as if it were a quotation).

Like Meillet, Saussure was a student of Indo-European, the vast family that links most languages in Europe with most of those from Persia to Southern India. It was established early in the nineteenth century that these had developed from a common prehistoric language; but it was not until the 1870s, when Saussure was a student in Leipzig, that, in Leipzig especially, the structure of that language was first satisfactorily reconstructed. It was not that of any ancient language historically attested: not that of Latin, nor of Greek, nor even, as had still been assumed in some important respects in the 1860s, of the ancient Indian language Sanskrit. Nor was its reconstruction simply a matter of comparing individual units. It was precisely the structure that was recovered. Saussure's first book was written in Leipzig, and was itself a striking contribution to this enterprise. It is therefore worth our while to glance at some of the details.

Let us begin with a specific problem that Saussure could take as solved. In Ancient Greek, for example, the accusative singular usually ends in *-n*: *hodó-n* 'road' or *oikíā-n* 'house'. Compare *-m* in Latin (*dominu-m* 'master' or *puella-m* 'girl') or in Sanskrit (*devá-m* 'god'). But in Greek it could also be *-a*: thus in the words for 'mother' and 'father' (*mētér-a*, *patér-a*). Is this simply an irregularity, by which some nouns in Greek decline aberrantly? At first sight it is: in Latin, for example, the corresponding forms again end in *-m* (*matre-m*, *patre-m*). But let us suppose, as a hypothesis, that in the prehistoric language the ending was throughout **-m*. It is marked with an asterisk, to show that this is a reconstruction and not, for instance, the historical *-m* of Latin. But phonetically the consonant had, we can assume, a nasal articulation, which is preserved in both the *-m* of Latin *dominu-m* and the *-n* of Greek *hodó-n*. Let us also suppose, as a further hypothesis, that the phonetic element **m* was neither simply a consonant nor simply a vowel. Instead it was one that could, in general, either accompany a vowel to form a syllable (consonant + vowel + *m*, *m* + vowel, and so on) or, itself, have the position of a vowel within one (consonant + *m*, or consonant + *m* + consonant). In that respect it is like, for example, the 'n' in spoken English, which forms a syllable with 't', again with no vowel sound, in a word like, in phonetic spelling, [bʌtn̩] (*button*) or [bʌtn̩həʊl] (*buttonhole*). The apparent irregularity will then make perfect sense. In the form that prehistorically underlay, for example, *hodón* the ending **-m* came after a vowel and developed in Greek into *-n*. In the form that underlay, for example, *mētéra* it came after a consonant (consonant + *m*). In that context it became, instead, *-a*.

For an account of this period I must defer to the masterly history of nineteenth-century linguistics by Anna Morpurgo Davies (1998 [1994]:

Ch. 9): the solution outlined is one facet of a wider hypothesis developed by Karl Brugmann and Hermann Osthoff (Morpurgo Davies, 1998: 242f.). But it is plain already that the argument does not affect a single unit. That the prehistoric language had a sound **m* was not new: it was obvious enough, at the beginning of a syllable, from sets of words like those for 'mother', 'honey' (Greek *méli*, Latin *mel*), and so on. What matters are the relations in which it is claimed to have stood to other units. They are wider than those borne by any unit, such as *m* in Latin, that has hypothetically developed from it. But, given its role as reconstructed, it was possible to explain, by different historical developments in different languages and in different positions in the syllable, what would otherwise remain puzzling.

The next step, or what with hindsight seems most logically to have been the next step, was to posit units in the prehistoric language that are not directly attested. In Greek, by the hypothesis we have outlined, **m* changed, in the position of a vowel, to *a*. To be precise, it merged with it; so that, from the direct evidence of *mētéra* and other such forms, we cannot know that anything other than an *a* had ever been there. But if a unit can lose its identity in one position, it can lose it in all. This can happen in just one member of the family; and, in that case, evidence for it will emerge when forms in which it had been present are compared with corresponding forms in other languages. But it could also happen, by a series of connected or independent changes, in all members known to us. Is it possible, in that case, that it might still be reconstructed?

It was Saussure who first showed how it might. In the case of **m* the evidence we cited is of an irregularity: between, in Greek itself, the *-a* of accusative singulars such as *mētér-a* and the *-n* of, for example, *hodó-n*; and, across languages, between the *-a* of *mētéra* and the *-m* of, for example, Latin *matrem*. But by essentially similar reasoning it is possible to explain a whole sheaf of irregularities, many at first sight unconnected, by positing what specialists in Indo-European call 'laryngal' elements. In Greek, for example, the verb for 'to put' has a long *ē* in some forms and a short *e* in others. Compare *tí-thē-mi* 'I put' (*thē-*) with adjectival *the-tós* 'placed' (*the-*). The historical explanation rests in part on the hypothesis that, in the prehistoric language, there were other elements that could appear in either position in a syllable. Some, like **m*, were directly attested: for example, in Greek *leíp-ō* 'I leave behind' the *i* derives hypothetically from a **y* which follows a vowel (**leyp-*), while in *é-lip-on* 'I left behind' it derives from the same unit **y*, but in the position of a vowel (**lyp-*). Of others there was, in the Indo-European languages as they were known in the 1870s, no direct trace. But suppose that, in the prehistoric language, the form for 'to put' had such an element. We have no evidence

of its phonetic character; all we are saying is that it fitted into a certain system of relations. So, in the form underlying Greek *thē-* this element (call it, for the sake of a symbol, **H*) came after a vowel: **theH-*. By a subsequent sound change, **eH* became, in Greek, *ē*. In the case of *the-*, the underlying form was hypothetically **thH-*; then, in the position of a vowel, **H* became *e*. The variation between **theH-*, changing to *thē-*, and **thH-*, changing to *the-*, is thus, so far as its form is concerned, precisely like that of, for example, **leyp-*, changing to *leip-*, and **lyp-*, changing to *lip-*.

Decades later, remains of the Hittite language were discovered at an archaeological site in Turkey; it was shown to be Indo-European, and in it, for the first time, there was direct evidence that 'laryngals' such as **H* had existed. But the seeds of most of what we have said in the last paragraph were sown by Saussure at the end of the 1870s, when such elements could be established only as terms in a prehistoric system. They could not, like **m*, be given a phonetic value. The hypothesis was simply that each was a unit and bore certain relations, in the structure of a syllable, to other units.

Saussure was twenty-one when this work appeared (Saussure, 1879). Unfortunately, he published very little after it, and from the 1890s, when he returned from Paris to a chair in his native Geneva, almost nothing. It is therefore unsafe to speculate too much about the route that might have led him from this early work on Indo-European to the ideas for which he is later famous. But what was reconstructed was a system of relations among units. Each of the historical languages had a different system. Therefore what changed, in the development of Greek, etc., from the prehistoric language, was in each case more than just an inventory of units. Now the historical languages were known to us through texts associated with specific communities. They thus had an identity in time and place, independent of the system that their units formed. Of the prehistoric language we otherwise know nothing. It is constituted solely by the system that we are able to reconstruct.

It is unsafe, I repeat, to speculate about a train of thought that we cannot document. But the view that Saussure in the end reached was not simply that a language has, or that its units form, a system. As in the passage cited earlier from Georg von der Gabelentz, it quite literally 'is' a system: 'Jede Sprache ist ein System'. Hence, at a long remove, the dictionary definitions cited at the beginning of this chapter. Hence also two immediate conclusions, both of which Saussure, in particular, drew.

First, if languages are systems they are, from an external viewpoint, closed. Each will have a determinate set of basic units, and a determinate set of relations among them, and will be distinguished sharply both

from other languages and from anything that lies outside such systems. Therefore the study of each individual language is separate from that of any other individual language; and within linguistics, if conceived more widely as the investigation of all aspects of human speech, that of individual languages must form a distinct science. In Saussure's terms this is a 'linguistique de la langue' (a 'linguistics of languages'), which is autonomous and whose object is limited to what we may call 'language systems'.

Secondly, if 'everything' in a system 'holds together', any change which affects it will result in a new and different system. In the prehistoric Indo-European language **m* entered, hypothetically, into one set of relations. In the development of Greek it changed, in one position in the structure of the syllable, to *a*. This may not have affected the inventory of elements; but, in consequence of this one change, *m* in Greek now entered into a new set of relations, the roles that *a* had in the structure of the language were different, the accusatives of distinct declensions of noun diverged, and so on. The study of systems must, accordingly, be separated strictly from that of historical relations between systems. As historians, we can describe the changes that relate, for example, the Indo-European system to the Greek, or, in historical times, the Greek system as it was in fifth-century Athens to that of Modern Greek as it is spoken now. In Saussure's terms, that is to practise 'diachronic linguistics', the study of languages on the time dimension. But, to be able to carry out such studies, we must first have established the systems that we are relating. Each system, as we have said, is different. Therefore, in investigating, for example, the system of Modern Greek, we are not concerned in any way with that of Greek in ancient Athens, or of Greek in any intervening period. We are concerned just with the system that exists now. We are thus practising what Saussure called 'synchronic linguistics': a pure linguistics of the language system, to which the dimension of time and history is irrelevant.

It is now time to look in greater detail at what Saussure's *Cours* said.

2.1 Linguistics as the study of language systems

It must be stressed at once that the book is not, in any strict sense, by him. He gave three series of lectures on general linguistics between 1906 and 1911; but, as his literary executors were to discover, he did not keep notes (Saussure, 1972 [1916]: 7). What we have is therefore a 'recréation' or reconstitution (9) using all the materials available, but, in particular, the notes of students who had followed the third course. At some points it is based on no tangible source.