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ROZHLEDY – ОБОЗРЕНИЯ – SURVEYS

JOSEF VACHEK

THE LONDON GROUP OF LINGUISTICS

The Philological Society of London has recently published a “special volume”¹ the appearance of which may justly be regarded as a notable event in the context of world’s general linguistic thinking. The importance of the volume lies in the fact that it provides the general public with the first collective publication of a group of younger English linguists, centred round their teacher John Rupert Firth, until very recently Professor (now Professor Emeritus) of General Linguistics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, affiliated to the University of London.

Not that the activities of the London Group of Linguistics should have been unknown before the publication of the volume; quite a number of papers by its members have already been printed in various periodicals (especially in the Transactions of the Philological Society, in the Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, and elsewhere). But these papers could only give a partial, incomplete idea of how the group approaches crucial problems of linguistics, not to mention the small accessibility in this country of most of such periodicals. The more welcome to our reader will be the systematic “Synopsis of Linguistic Theory, 1930—1955”, opening the volume (pp. 1—32), written by Firth himself; the papers of other contributors to the volume provide specimen illustrations of how some points of the theory may be applied to concrete language materials.

Unfortunately, almost all of the papers discussing concrete linguistic issues are concerned — as Prof. Firth himself admits in the Introduction — with “rather unfamiliar languages”, such as Hārautī (an Indian language, dealt with here by Prof. W. S. Allen of Cambridge), Sundanese (of Java), Burmese, Tigrinya (of Erytrea) and Hausa (spoken in Nigeria). This may not be surprising in a publication so closely connected with the activities of the School of Oriental and African Studies, but at the same time places the reviewer, hopelessly incompetent in these languages, in a rather awkward situation. All he can do is to concentrate on the general aspect of the proposed theoretical views and to outline the relations of these views to those of some other main currents of linguistic thought, especially of what has been usually called the Prague group.²

Prof. Firth’s “Synopsis”, in view of its highly abstract statement, clad in unusual terminology and phraseology, makes no easy reading, especially for those readers who are unacquainted with Firth’s previous papers of which the Synopsis may be called a synthesis. Fortunately, most of the previous papers have now been reprinted in book form³ and so made more easily accessible. It should be noted that *in nuce* Firth’s conception of language and linguistics has already been expressed in his little book which was published in the popular Benn’s Library⁴ eighteen years ago; the present theoretical views of the leader

of the London group do not differ from his views of 1930 in principle. Differences can be established, however, in the detailed consistency with which the original line of thought has been developed, as well as in the wider background of the theory and in the universality of its outlook. Undoubtedly it is exactly these qualities which have proved able to secure for Prof. Firth's views an appeal so wide as to make them representative of what may certainly claim to be the most typical, and probably also the most original, system of present day British linguistic thinking.

Pragmatism and mistrust of great philosophical conceptions have regularly been, for good or bad, characteristic of English studies of language, and in this point Prof. Firth's approach of his subject can justly be denoted as typically English. Not only he scorns the historical positivism of the Neogrammarians but he is also deeply opposed to the *langue* — *parole* dichotomy of F. de Saussure's, as well as to the Hjelmslevian parallelism of *expression* and *contenu*. If Firth's conception were to be classed with any of the current philosophical or psychological trends, the choice should fall on behaviourism. Here again, however, Prof. Firth's attitude is vastly different from that of the Bloomfieldian group, the main difference lying in the fact that — unlike his American colleagues of that group — Firth is wise enough not to exclude the factor of meaning from his considerations. He rightly insists on the fact that "in terms of living, language activity is meaningful" (SLA 29).

What the author understands by meaning is best shown by a parallel taken from biology. Admittedly, as long as a man lives, he strives to preserve, by means of the processes of metabolism, the "pattern of life", characteristic of any living organism. As now "using language is one of the forms of human life" (ib. 29), the use of language is essential for a man if he wants to survive in all the multi-form situations in which he finds himself placed. Indeed, his acquiring and constant adaptation of language patterns shows a remarkable parallel to the biological processes of metabolism referred to above. Viewed in this light, meaning can be defined "chiefly as situational relations in a context of situation and in that kind of language which disturbs the air and other people's ears", or — more intelligibly, if much more roughly — as a relation between an utterance and the situation in which it was uttered.

It should not be overlooked that Prof. Firth's approach of language is decidedly a functionalist one. He stresses the multiform character of situational patterns, and — which is even more important — is profoundly aware of the conventional character of one and any of these patterns. In another place (SLA 19) he justly acknowledges the existence of a variety of ways in which individual languages can, and actually do, refer to one and the same situation. He says, e. g. that "each language has its own means of handling 'experiential' time, has its own 'time-camera' so to speak, with its own special view-finders, perspectives, filters, and lenses" (ib.). He is deeply conscious of the difficulties arising from this kind of multiformity for the practice of translation.

In all these points (and in a number of others which lack of space does not allow to analyse here) the London group is in virtual accord with the group of Prague. In a number of important issues, however, the standpoints of the two groups are at variance. The differences concern matters both of theoretical conception and of practical procedure in analysing concrete language materials. In the former of the two categories, perhaps the most important thing is the different conception of the systematic character of language. As is commonly known,

the Prague group bases its work on a hypothesis that any language constitutes a more or less balanced system of vocal means of communication; this system exists as a social value (better, as a network of such values), and the duty of the analyst is to find out how and how far this hypothesis can be verified by the examination of concrete contexts of language. More recently, some emphasis has been laid on the composite character of the system of language (the fact has been pregnantly expressed by V. V. Vinogradov's reference to language as "a system of systems") and a number of inter-relations were established among the different planes (i. e. sub-systems) of one and the same language. — Contrary to this, for the London group the systematic (or, as Firth often puts it, systemic) character of language is not of ontological nature. It is simply due to the fact that "language and personality are built into the body which is constantly taking part in activities directed to the conservation of the pattern of life" (PIL 143; note the above-mentioned parallelism of biological and linguistic processes in every human individual). This being so, "we must expect... that linguistic science will also find it necessary to postulate the maintenance of linguistic patterns and systems... within which there is order, structure⁵ and function" (ib.).

It is then in a round-about way, *via* biology, that Prof. Firth arrives at the recognition of the systematic nature of language. This biological *détour* also accounts for one of Firth's methodological maxims: "On these grounds the phonetic and also the systematic phonological study of *one person at a time* [italics mine, J. V.] is not only scientifically justified, but in fact inevitable" (PIL 143). This is, however, not irreconcilable with the conventional (i. e. socially binding) character of language phenomena: "The persons studied may of course be regarded as types", so that "there is no implied neglect of the sociological approach and synthesis" (ib.). The comparison of the above-described approaches of the problem of the systematic nature of language seems to suggest that while both of them undoubtedly lead to analogous results, the approach of the Prague group appears to be the more appealing of the two, on account of the greater straightness of argument and smaller complicacy of its procedure.

Should it be argued that in the Prague view the systematic nature of language is an aprioristic assumption whose demonstration is exacted from analyses of concrete utterance contexts, the argument may be easily met by pointing out, as above, that the said assumption must not be regarded as a sort of dogma but as a working hypothesis (and as one that appears to be well-founded both philosophically and pragmatically), and that concrete linguistic research is only expected to verify, not necessarily to prove it. Besides, the Prague group have repeatedly laid stress on the obviously open, not closed (i. e. not absolutely balanced) structure of the system of language.⁶ This may suffice to dispel any suspicion that may have lingered on as to the non-dogmatic approach of language by the Prague group. The approach is aprioristic only in so far as is necessarily implied by the use of any working hypothesis.

Another important difference that can be established between the theoretical views of the two groups is concerned with the problem of the unity of language in the individual speaker. Prof. Firth rightly points out that "the multiplicity of social roles we have to play as members of a race, nation, class, family, school, club... involves also a certain degree of linguistic specialization" (PIL 29), or, in Prague terminology, that any language must necessarily be differentiated into what is often called the functional styles. Prof. Firth's own conclusion drawn from this fact is, however, just as striking as it is radical. "Unity is the last con-

cept that should be applied to language... There is no such thing as *une langue une* and there never has been" (ib.). In our opinion, only most stubborn nominalists could subscribe to this conclusion. Apart from the fact, duly brought into prominence during the Soviet linguistic discussion in 1950, that all such functional styles, despite their léxical and phraseological differences, undoubtedly have in common what is most essential in language, i. e. the grammatical structure and the basic stock of words (to which may be added the essential identity of the phonematic stock in all such styles), there are other arguments that can be quoted in favour of the thesis asserting the unity of language despite its functional differentiation. At least one of them, a decidedly functionalist one, should be advanced here.

It will be admitted that the various functional styles ascertainable, e. g., in English, are mutually exclusive as regards their applicability to different types of social situation. In other words, for one and any type of social situation English has at its disposal only one of its stylistic varieties which is capable of an optimum functioning in that situation, while other varieties, though perhaps utilizable, would certainly be found less suitable for the given occasion. To put the matter differently, all the existing varieties of English can be said to be mutually complementary with regard to the types of social situation in which a speaker of English may find himself placed. Still differently, all the varieties of English taken together can supply the speaker with a full equipment of language means enabling him to meet any type of social situation he may be faced with. Obviously, the mutual functional complementariness of the discussed varieties constitutes a very persuasive argument in favour of the unity of the concerned (and analogously, any) language: not only that this unity cannot be jeopardized by the discussed differentiation, but — in view of what has been pointed out here — it can rather be confirmed by the existence of such differences.

The nominalist attitude towards facts of language also emerges from another point in which again the London group is opposed to the group of Prague. This time the difference can be found in matters of practical procedure applied to the analyses of concrete language utterances. The difference can be best seen on the phonic level. Prof. Firth may justly be denoted as an adherent of the functionalist conception of the phoneme idea (for him, the phoneme is essentially "a phonetic substitution-counter", i. e. a sound whose substitution by some other sound may be responsible for a change of meaning), and in this matter his standpoint is virtually identical with that of the Prague group. He differs from that group, however, in his refusal of an "over-all pattern of phonemes", taken to be valid in the given language considered as a systematic whole. Instead, he establishes separate systems of phonemes for each of the existing types of places within the syllables and words of the examined language. In this way he obtains, e. g., a separate system of consonant phonemes for the initial prevocalic position, another separate system for a final postvocalic position, etc.

This kind of approach consistently results in the abolishment of the concept of phonematic neutralization.⁷ Still, it appears rather doubtful whether this nominalistically-minded isolationism is really so expressive of the situation in the phonematic pattern of language as the London scholars are inclined to suppose. If the Londoners did not lay so much stress on the exclusively synchronistic, non-historical study of language, and if they tested their theory in the light of the development of language, they would probably find that the strict barriers they are establishing between individual positions in words and syllables are

not always as marked as their theory supposes. Thus, e. g., in very many languages initial prevocalic consonants develop in the same manner as their final postvocalic counterparts: in all probability, this seems to point to an equal functional evaluation of the phonemes established in the two word-positions. Such identity of evaluation can hardly be explained away by the interference of letters, as it can also be found in languages unrecorded in writing (also E. Sapir's well-known experiences with the natives speaking such language appear to point in the same direction). The splitting up of the phonematic pattern into a number of partial patterns, as practiced by the London group, does not, therefore, seem particularly convincing; the "traditional over-all pattern" of the Prague group will still be found more feasible.⁸ So will be the acceptance of the phenomena of neutralization (though of course not the idea of "archiphoneme" which has by now been wholly abandoned by the Prague phonemicists).

Of considerable interest and unquestionable importance, on the other hand, is the distinction established by Prof. Firth between Sounds and Prosodies. By the latter term the London scholars mean "those features which mark word or syllable finals or word junctions", abstracted from "the word, piece, or sentence" (PIL 122—123). As instances of prosodies may be found (in this or that particular language) stress, quantity, melody, sounds or sound groups otherwise not occurring in the given language, such as [ʔ] in German or Czech, [h-] in Modern English, etc. It will be easily seen that much of what comes under the heading of prosodies was referred to by N. S. Trubetzkoy in his "syntactic phonemics" by the term "Grenzsignale".⁹ The importance of prosodies (including the Grenzsignale) lies especially in the link they provide between the phonic and the grammatical plane of language. In Firth's conception, however, particular stress is laid on the extension of some prosodies over the whole of a syllable (or of an even larger unit). And it is exactly in such instances that the idea of prosodies appears to be carried rather too far.

We will not discuss here the problems of polytonic oppositions in vowels. As is well known, according to the current opinion "inherent and prosodic features... are lumped together into phonemes";¹⁰ this problem is certainly too delicate to be adequately dealt with within the narrow limits of a brief review. We only want to single out one concrete instance which can reveal with particular clearness to what extremes a basically sound and useful conception can be pushed. In W. S. Allen's paper on the "Aspiration in the Hārauṭi Nominal" what is usually evaluated as a phonematic opposition of the type $p - ph - b - bh$ (and other, analogous cases) is very cleverly interpreted — in some positions at least — as p plus a "prosody of aspiration" of the kind non- h , h , non- \tilde{h} or \tilde{h} , respectively. In addition to this, however, a bold attempt is made to incorporate also the Hārauṭi fricatives into the said prosodical pattern: The author manages to do this — though with a slight amount of hesitation — on the assumption of a "cumulation" of aspiration with the articulation of the basic sound according to the following equation: [occlusion + breathiness = friction] (SLA 78). In the reviewer's opinion, this thesis appears to be rather too obviously prompted by the effort to fit facts of language into a pre-arranged theoretical pattern. It is also worth pointing out that the assertion of the requirements of economy does not necessarily guarantee the validity of phonematic interpretations (this fact has often been stressed with regard to the interpretations of long ModE vowels, especially to the theses of the Yale group). — All that has been said here should be taken, of course, as criticism directed not against the sound and useful con-

ception of "prosodies", but only against some of its applications in concrete contextual analyses.

The London group, naturally, insists on the necessity of analysing utterances on higher levels as well. In Prof. Firth's words, "we must split up the whole integrated behaviour pattern we call speech, and apply specialized techniques to the description and classification of these so-called elements of speech we detach by analysis" (PIL 20). This kind of analysis, often referred to as "spectral", then confronts the results obtained on different levels, and so arrives at what is regarded as a reliable description of the concerned idiom. Here one should warmly applaud to Prof. Firth's demand that in examining the morphological level of a language only such grammatical categories should be established as are necessarily prompted by the analyses of contexts, and that the values of any categories so established (especially of such as are denoted by traditional grammatical terms) must be specifically determined (SLA 21). Only this procedure can protect the analyst from the "universalist fallacy", consisting in the "personification of grammatical categories as universal entities." One can heartily approve of Prof. Firth's basic methodological approach, revealed in his statement that he is presenting "*a general linguistic theory applicable to particular linguistic descriptions, not a theory of universals for general linguistic description* (SLA 21, italics of the author).

One can only regret the fact that the members of the London group have so far concentrated their attention mostly on problems of phonematic (and especially prosodical) analysis of concrete — mostly exotic — languages,¹¹ and that, as far as the present reviewer is aware, grammatical issues of concrete languages have received very little attention (J. R. Firth's *Synopsis* and M. A. K. Halliday's paper *Some Aspects of Systematic Description and Comparison in Grammatical Analysis*, SLA 54—67, are no exceptions to this rule because they mostly confine their attention to general programmatic statements interspersed with illustrative examples taken from concrete languages). A praiseworthy exception to the above rule is, however, W. Haas' paper on *Zero in Linguistic Description* (SLA 33—53), written with clearness and logical consistency, in which the author argues that in concrete language contexts the presence of the "element zero" can only be admitted on the morphological level where its existence can be established on the grounds of "contrastive omission" (e. g. in p. p. *cut*, which is contrasted with *cutting*), but that there are no good reasons for the establishment of phonological (i. e. phonematic) zero elements, as e. g. in *stable* : *table*. Such establishment cannot be thought of because zero has no allophones, and therefore cannot alternate with any overt (i. e. actually implemented) phoneme, so that no contrastive omission can take place. The author's argument would sound convincing if it were not for instances like Czech nom. sg. *pes* 'a dog' — gen. sg. *ps-a* 'of a dog', in which the presence of the phonematic (though morphologically conditioned) zero element between *p* and *s* appears obvious. In the reviewer's opinion, the author's views will require some modification in order to be applicable to instances just quoted.

Considerations of space do not allow the reviewer to enter into an additional number of most interesting, often highly original as well as provocative, points of the theory of the London group. Based on the old-established tradition of the English school of phonetics (on whose history and pre-history Prof. Firth wrote a fascinating paper, reprinted in PIL 92—120) and on an equally respectable tradition of British research in Oriental and African languages, the London theory

can undoubtedly throw a new, penetrating light on many linguistic issues vexing students of language all over the world. The decidedly functionalist outlook of the group guarantees that, despite a number of grave divergences on matters of principle, the linguists of this country will always follow the work of their London colleagues with ready and sympathetic, if critical, attention.

NOTES

¹ *Studies in Linguistic Analysis, 1930—1955* (further abbreviated as SLA), Oxford 1957, pp. vii + 206. Price 70s.

² Most recently, the theses of the Prague group were summarized by B. Trnka et al.: *Prague Structural Linguistics*, Philologica Pragensia 1, 1958, pp. 33—40. The Russian version of the paper was published in: *Voprosy yazykoznanija* 6, 1957, No. 3, pp. 44—52.

³ J. R. Firth: *Papers in Linguistics, 1925—1951* (further abbreviated as PIL), London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1957, pp. xii + 233. Price 35s.

⁴ J. R. Firth: *Speech*, London, Benn, 1930, pp. 79. Price 6d. (Reviewed by V. Mathesius in: *Slovo a slovesnost*, Prague, 1, 1935, pp. 44—46.)

⁵ It should be pointed out that by *structure* Firth means syntagmatic relations within an actual utterance, while the term *system* is reserved for paradigmatic relations.

⁶ This conception also shows through the papers read at the Prague conference, held in November 1956 and discussing the methods of research of contemporary languages (the evaluation of the conference was given by B. Havránek in his final address, reprinted in the volume *O poznání soudobých jazyků*, Prague 1958, pp. 281—289). For a short English account of the conference, written by J. Krámský, see the *Časopis pro moderní filologii* 39, 1957, Suppl. Philologica, pp. 51—55.

⁷ This is duly noted in Prof. W. S. Allen's paper on aspiration in Hārautī, contained in the reviewed volume.

⁸ This "over-all pattern" typical of one idiom with firm phonematic inventory should not be identified with the over-all pattern of the Yale group, obtained from a number of idioms and so lacking any real linguistic foundation.

⁹ See Trubetzkoy's *Grundzüge der Phonologie*, Prague 1939, esp. pp. 243 ff.

¹⁰ Cf. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Acoustic Laboratory, Rept. 13, Cambridge, Mass. 1952), esp. p. 13; refuted by W. S. Allen in SLA 86. — See also an earlier treatment of the problem (phonematic interpretation of polytony) in *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague* 4, 1930, pp. 164 ff.

¹¹ This is true of most of the papers contained in the SLA-volume. Apart from W. S. Allen's above-mentioned paper on Hārautī, it includes the following papers dealing with phonematic and prosodic problems: R. H. Robin's *Vowel Nasality in Sundanese* (87—103), R. K. Sprigg's *Junction in Spoken Burmese* (104—138), F. R. Palmer's *Gemination in Tigrinya* (139—148), J. Carnochan's *Gemination in Hausa* (149—181), and T. F. Mitchell's *Long Consonants in Phonology and Phonetics* (which, despite its general title, is concerned with the situations in Bedouin Arabic in Cyrenaica and in the Berber dialect of Zuara; pp. 182—205).

LONDÝNSKÁ ŠKOLA JAZYKOVĚDNÁ

Londýnská škola jazykovědná, soustřeďující hlavně orientalisty a afrikanisty, žáky prof. J. R. Firtha, přistupuje k jazykovým faktům z hlediska funkčního. Tento přístup však není vyvozen ze sdělovací funkce jazyka, nýbrž vyplývá spíše z úvah rázu biologicko-behaviouristického. Toto stanovisko Londýnských je také příčinou některých jejich vyhraněných nominalistických sklonů: tak např. neuznávají jazykové jednoty pojící různé funkční styly daného jazyka. Zvláštní pozornost věnují tzv. prosodiím (jež zhruba připomínají Trubeckého Grenzsignale): při konkrétních aplikacích tohoto pojmu však někdy zacházejí do zámezí, obětují jazykovou skutečnost teoretické koncepci. — Při analýze vyšších jazykových plánů zdůrazňují Londýnští právem nutnost vyvarovat se zevšeobecnování gramatických kategorií, hlavně tradičních; bohužel v jejich konkrétních jazykových rozbořech se problematice vyšších plánů věnuje zpravidla mnohem menší pozornost než plánu zvukovému.

ЛОНДОНСКАЯ ЯЗЫКОВЕДЧЕСКАЯ ШКОЛА

Лондонская языковедческая школа, в которую входят, главным образом, востоковеды и африканисты, ученики профессора Дж. Р. Ферта, подходит к языковым фактам с точки зрения их функции. Этот подход, однако, не основан на коммуникативной функции языка, а вытекает скорее из заключений биологическо-биохимического характера. Такая точка зрения лондонских языковедов и является причиной некоторых их ярко выраженных номиналистических тенденций: так напр., они не признают языкового единства, связывающего разные функциональные стили данного языка. Особое внимание они уделяют т. наз. прозориям (напоминающим в общих чертах Grenzsignale Трубецкого); применяя это понятие конкретно, они, однако, в некоторых случаях утрируют и жертвуют языковыми фактами в угоду теоретической концепции. Анализируя высшие языковые планы, лондонские языковеды правильно подчеркивают необходимость избегать огульного обобщения грамматических категорий, главным образом традиционных. В их конкретных языковых анализах, к сожалению, посвящается гораздо меньше внимания проблематике высших языковых планов, чем звуковому плану.

Перевел С. Жажга