Language, its nature, development and origin

Jespersen Otto
BY THE SAME AUTHOR


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AND ORIGIN

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to

VILHELM THOMSEN
Glæde, når av andres mund
jeg hørte de tanker store,
Glæde over hvert et fund
jeg selv ved min forsøn gjorde.
The distinctive feature of the science of language as conceived nowadays is its historical character: a language or a word is no longer taken as something given once for all, but as a result of previous development and at the same time as the starting-point for subsequent development. This manner of viewing languages constitutes a decisive improvement on the way in which languages were dealt with in previous centuries, and it suffices to mention such words as 'evolution' and 'Darwinism' to show that linguistic research has in this respect been in full accordance with tendencies observed in many other branches of scientific work during the last hundred years. Still, it cannot be said that students of language have always and to the fullest extent made it clear to themselves what is the real essence of a language. Too often expressions are used which are nothing but metaphors—in many cases perfectly harmless metaphors, but in other cases metaphors that obscure the real facts of the matter. Language is frequently spoken of as a 'living organism'; we hear of the 'life' of languages, of the 'birth' of new languages and of the 'death' of old languages, and the implication, though not always realized, is that a language is a living thing, something analogous to an animal or a plant. Yet a language evidently has no separate existence in the same way as a dog or a beech has, but is nothing but a function of certain living human beings. Language is activity, purposeful activity, and we should never lose sight of the speaking individuals and of their purpose in acting in this particular way. When people speak of the life of words—as in celebrated books with such titles as _La vie des mots_, or _Biographies of Words_—they do not always keep in view that a word has no 'life' of its own: it exists only in so far as it is pronounced or heard or remembered by somebody, and this kind of existence cannot properly be compared with 'life' in the original and proper sense of that word. The only unimpeachable definition of a word is that it is a human habit, an habitual act on the part of one human individual which has, or may have, the effect of evoking some idea in the mind.
of another individual. A word thus may be rightly compared with such an habitual act as taking off one’s hat or raising one’s fingers to one’s cap: in both cases we have a certain set of muscular activities which, when seen or heard by somebody else, shows him what is passing in the mind of the original agent and what he desires to bring to the consciousness of the other man (or men). The act is individual, but the interpretation presupposes that the individual forms part of a community with analogous habits, and a language thus is seen to be one particular set of human customs of a well-defined social character.

It is indeed possible to speak of ‘life’ in connexion with language even from this point of view, but it will be in a different sense from that in which the word was taken by the older school of linguistic science. I shall try to give a biological or biographical science of language, but it will be through sketching the linguistic biology or biography of the speaking individual. I shall give, therefore, a large part to the way in which a child learns his mother tongue (Book II): my conclusions there are chiefly based on the rich material I have collected during many years from direct observation of many Danish children, and particularly of my own boy, Frans (see my book *Nutidssprog hos børn og voksne*, Copenhagen, 1916). Unfortunately, I have not been able to make first-hand observations with regard to the speech of English children, for the English examples I quote are taken second-hand either from notes, for which I am obliged to English and American friends, or from books, chiefly by psychologists. I should be particularly happy if my remarks could induce some English or American linguist to take up a systematic study of the speech of children, or of one child. This study seems to me very fascinating indeed, and a linguist is sure to notice many things that would be passed by as uninteresting even by the closest observer among psychologists, but which may have some bearing on the life and development of language.

Another part of linguistic biology deals with the influence of the foreigner, and still another with the changes which various individuals are apt independently to introduce into his speech even after he has fully acquired his mother-tongue. This leads up to the question whether all these changes introduced by various individuals do, or do not, follow the same line of development and whether mankind has on the whole moved forward or not in linguistic matters. The conviction reached through a study of historically accessible periods of well-known languages is finally shown to throw some light on the disputed problem of the ultimate origin of human language.

Parts of my theory of sound-change, and especially my objections
to the dogma of blind sound-laws, date back to my very first linguistic paper (1886); most of the chapters on Decay or Progress and parts of some of the following chapters, as well as the theory of the origin of speech, may be considered a new and revised edition of the general chapters of my *Progress in Language* (1894). Many of the ideas contained in this book thus are not new with me; but even if a reader of my previous works may recognize things which he has seen before, I hope he will admit that they have been here worked up with much new material into something like a system, which forms a fairly comprehensive theory of linguistic development.

Still, I have not been able to compress into this volume the whole of my philosophy of speech. Considerations of space have obliged me to exclude the chapters I had first intended to write on the practical consequences of the ‘energetic’ view of language which I have throughout maintained; the estimation of linguistic phenomena implied in that view has bearings on such questions as these: What is to be considered ‘correct’ or ‘standard’ in matters of pronunciation, spelling, grammar and idiom? Can (or should) individuals exert themselves to improve their mother-tongue by enriching it with new terms and by making it purer, more precise, more fit to express subtle shades of thought, more easy to handle in speech or in writing, etc.? (A few hints on such questions may be found in my paper “Energetik der Sprache” in *Scientia*, 1914.) Is it possible to construct an artificial language on scientific principles for international use? (On this question I may here briefly state my conviction that it is extremely important for the whole of mankind to have such a language, and that Ido is scientifically and practically very much superior to all previous attempts, Volapük, Esperanto, Idiom Neutral, Latin sine flexione, etc. But I have written more at length on that question elsewhere.) With regard to the system of grammar, the relation of grammar to logic, and grammatical categories and their definition, I must refer the reader to *Sprogets Logik* (Copenhagen, 1913), and to the first chapter of the second volume of my *Modern English Grammar* (Heidelberg, 1914), but I shall hope to deal with these questions more in detail in a future work, to be called, probably, *The Logic of Grammar*, of which some chapters have been ready in my drawers for some years and others are in active preparation.

I have prefixed to the theoretical chapters of this work a short survey of the history of the science of language in order to show how my problems have been previously treated. In this part (Book I) I have, as a matter of course, used the excellent works on the subject by Benfey, Raumer, Delbrück (*Einleitung in das Sprachstudium*, 1st ed., 1880; I did not see the 5th ed., 1908, till
my own chapters on the history of linguistics were finished.
Thomsen, Oertel and Pedersen. But I have in nearly every case
gone to the sources themselves, and have, I think, found interesting
things in some of the early books on linguistics that have been
generally overlooked; I have even pointed out some writers who
had passed into undeserved oblivion. My intention has been on
the whole to throw into relief the great lines of development
rather than to give many details; in judging the first part of my
book it should also be borne in mind that its object primarily
is to serve as an introduction to the problems dealt with in the rest
of the book. Throughout I have tried to look at things with my
own eyes, and accordingly my views on a great many points are
different from those generally accepted; it is my hope that an
impartial observer will find that I have here and there succeeded
in distributing light and shade more justly than my predecessor.

Wherever it has been necessary I have transcribed words
phonetically according to the system of the Association Phonétique
Internationale, though without going into too minute distinction
of sounds, the object being, not to teach the exact pronunciation
of various languages, but rather to bring out clearly the insuf-
ciency of the ordinary spelling. The latter is given throughout
in italics, while phonetic symbols have been inserted in brackets.
I must ask the reader to forgive inconsistency in such matters
as Greek accents, Old English marks of vowel-length, etc., which
I have often omitted as of no importance for the purpose of this
volume.

I must express here my gratitude to the directors of the
Carlsbergfond for kind support of my work. I want to thank
also Professor G. C. Moore Smith, of the University of Sheffield,
not only has he sent me the manuscript of a translation of
most of my Nutidssprog, which he had undertaken of his own
accord and which served as the basis of Book II, but he has
kindly gone through the whole of this volume, improving and
correcting my English style in many passages. His friendship and
the untiring interest he has always taken in my work have been
extremely valuable to me for a great many years.

University of Copenhagen,
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