

## SOCIAL AND LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE

“Language is eminently a social phenomenon.”<sup>1</sup> From the outset one should expect an interdependence of linguistic and social phenomena, as well as extremely complex relationships of action and reaction. In such matters, oversimplification can only lead to a dead end. On the other hand, a criticism of data that respects their true nature within the framework of their extreme complexity can pave the way for researches from which one may expect solid results so far as future progress is concerned. These researches are necessarily bound up with linguistics (the first human science which, while still very young, assumed a rigorous form), with psychology (better and better equipped and yet disarmed in the face of so many problems), and with sociology, that latecomer in developing well-based techniques, whose theorists still confront each other with diverse points of view.

An initial and essential observation was made by André G. Haudricourt

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1. A. Meillet's preface in *L'Etat actuel des Etudes de Linguistique générale*, opening lecture. Collège de France, Feb. 1906; reprinted in *Linguistique historique et Linguistique générale* 1921 (2d ed., 1926; new ed., 1948), p. 16.

and Georges Granai:<sup>2</sup> language is intrinsic to society. Enclosed in an evolving society, language does not, of certainty, evolve independently, since it is part of this society; but rather, because of conditions proper to the “thing” that it is, modern linguistics must not be defined as an organism, but must be recognized as a structural system. Experts describe the structure as an agency of certain systems seen as a whole, with relationships that give rise to very subtle and engaging studies. An example of solidarity between the phonetic system of language and the grammatical system follows: if the phonetic evolution is such that the final syllables of words are weakened to the point of confusion or disappearance of certain vowels and consonants, the morphological distinctions cannot be made by means of different word endings (as for example in Latin declensions) unless, precisely at a given moment, the need to distinguish between certain cases, genders, or numbers brings about a strengthening of weakened vowels or consonants. (Such was the case of the *s* which denotes the plural in French. It is now mute, yet in Spanish it is always pronounced.)

Vocabulary itself is not amorphous. We must likewise mention lexicological systems—thus far inadequately studied. Many languages, for example, countenance only words of a strictly limited length, which is partly a consequence of phonetics. As a result, words that were originally long are only accepted in abbreviated form.

These few paragraphs are perhaps sufficient to make clear the risks that one inevitably runs in attempting to demonstrate a detailed relationship between social and linguistic data. This does not mean that we should limit ourselves to essaying general comparisons. On the contrary, it is quite probable that such a method would yield nothing solid. But if it seems useful to attempt a detailed study, we must be aware, before undertaking it, that a few partial results cannot justify any generalization.

To express this warning in practical terms, we might say that though it may be desirable to perceive how all linguistic data are contained within the framework of the history of social phenomena, in order to compile a rich catalogue resembling a small encyclopedia, yet, given the present state of linguistic, psychological, and sociological studies, it would be unwarranted to claim that one can achieve a manual of linguistic sociology.

We will now concentrate our efforts on research into structures. With some idea in mind of what is meant by linguistic structure, we should

2. “Linguistique et Sociologie,” *Cahiers internationaux de Sociologie*, July–Dec., 1955.

like to define social structures briefly as being concerned essentially with the distributions of groups (families, clans, tribes, for example) and their hierarchy and order (matriarchal, patriarchal, elective authority, etc.).

In the course of the evolution of ethnography and sociology during the twentieth century, some comparative studies of structure have been attempted.

Wilhelm Schmidt, pioneer ethnographer, contributed greatly to the formulation of a doctrine on "areas of civilization" (*Kulturkreise*) defined by the concomitant existence of a small number of phenomena considered characteristic. He excluded the hypothesis of convergence in analogous situations. He wanted to take languages, with their internal characteristics, into account; hence the twin parts of his work on families and language areas.<sup>3</sup> In the second part he had no hesitation in relating to each other details about the make-up of languages and societies. For example, the construction in which a determinative noun (complement) is placed before the determinate noun (*someone—house*), would belong to the oldest type of societies without a determinate agriculture or government. In a matriarchal, agricultural society a construction such as *house—appurtenance—someone* would be used. In a patriarchal society of conquering warriors, the following order would be adopted: *house—(of someone)*. This ambitious attempt met with very little approval.

Another abortive effort was made by N. Marr, who, with others, was erroneously accused of conforming to the principles of dialectical materialism. He arbitrarily contrasted types of languages which he termed "stadiaux" (of different stages) and to which, in defiance of any good historical approach, he attributed various survivals in modern or historically known languages. Marr's doctrine enjoyed prestige for a while, then it became the subject of a public discussion in the Soviet Union. It was rejected by various linguists as well as by Stalin, who added some general observations on sociology, and has now been entirely discarded.<sup>4</sup>

Like Ferdinand de Saussure, A. Meillet, the great linguist, was attracted to the study of language as a social phenomenon. He enrolled very early in the French sociological school of Durkheim and published in *Année Sociologique* a very important work which we will discuss later. He also gave precious counsel on prudence, but, we must state with regret, al-

3. P. W. Schmidt, *Die Sprachfamilien und Sprachenkreise der Erde* (Heidelberg, 1926), see in particular pp. 464-65. Review by Marcel Cohen in *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique*, Vol. 28, No. 84, 1928, pp. 10-21.

4. Columbia University Slavic Languages, *The Soviet Linguistic Controversy* (New York, Kings Crown Press, 1951); Stalin, *A Propos du Marxisme en Linguistique* (Paris, 1951).

lowed himself to be persuaded by an apparently seductive idea, one, in fact, that should have served as an example of imprudence. At the close of his history of Latin,<sup>5</sup> after having remarked that in Indo-European languages in general and in Latin in particular, “the nominal notion did not have a fixed and definitive expression,” he adds: “This can be accounted for by the important fact that the Indo-European language, serving as a medium for aristocrats anxious above all to be independent leaders, functioned with words which themselves possessed as much autonomy as possible.” Should we believe that if the subjects or slaves of the aristocrats employed the same “autonomous” words, it was because they identified themselves with their masters or hoped to take their places? Or should we believe that many centuries later the feudal lords or the conquering explorers of Africa and America had such an attenuated spirit of authority that they were satisfied from that time on with substantives belonging to a fixed order in Spain and Portugal as well as in France?

Alf Sommerfelt, who has consistently been interested in defining and developing sociological linguistics, published a tremendously valuable essay on the language of the *Aranta* (or *Arunta* or *Aranda*) Australians in 1938.<sup>6</sup> He decided upon a relative simplification of the phonetic system, one that seemed to correspond to the low level of Australian civilization. He noted the absence in the grammar of indications for such things as the quality of an object; this was also connected with the lack of subtlety in regard to abstract matters, but not specifically with social divisions. Only in the distribution of meanings in the vocabulary is there a certain relationship with institutions, particularly family institutions, but there are no characteristic relationships between institutions and the constitution of words. In his conclusion, the author warns that in any case there can be no question of characterizing socially either the phonemes themselves, the aggregations of phonemes of which words are composed, or, consequently, their transformations, should one study their evolution.

One problem, that of nominal classes, is deserving of a brief, special study. When the Melanesian languages were known, in which there are no indications of gender (masculine-feminine) but more complicated classifications into a certain number of categories according to the variations of grammatical characteristics, these categories were entitled “classes,”

5. A. Meillet, *Esquisse d'une Histoire de la Langue latine* (1st ed.; Paris, Hachette, 1928; 3d ed., 1933), Conclusion.

6. Alf Sommerfelt, *La Langue et la Société: Caractères sociaux d'une Langue de Type archaïque* (Oslo, Aschehoug, 1938).

and this very terminology immediately created a certain confusion with social divisions.<sup>7</sup> The first studies of the Bantu language called particular attention to the grammatical “classificatory” phenomenon; one observes, actually, categorical affixes, repeated by grammatical pleonasm with all the elements of a sentence. For example, *ba*—“people in the plural”—in a sentence like: *baleke bana ba mfumu, bankaka ba mbote bankaka ba mbi, bafwiidi bau baakulu*—those boys of the leader—some good, the others bad, all of them died. (“The boys of the leader all died, the good as well as the bad.”)<sup>8</sup> The linguists concerned with the Indo-European languages were helped by these studies to perfect the notion of gender. A. Meillet in particular claimed that ancient Indo-European was essentially an animate-inanimate distinction, the sexual distinction representing a secondary division of the animate. Moreover, he as well as others believed that this rather simple division ( $[1[a-b]-2]$ ) might be the remnant of an ancient and more complicated one. Among the Africanists, Liliás Homburger (who cannot be followed in all of her comparative studies) was the first to observe correctly that the divisions indicated by different affixes in the African languages possess at least as much abstract as concrete value; for example, distinctions between singular, collective plural, diminutive abstract nouns, nouns of manner, alongside of human, animal, object. She does not speak of classes but of “multiple asexual genders.”<sup>9</sup> Other Africanists finally began to wonder whether the multiplicity in this system might not be secondary, following in the wake of a more ancient simplicity. In any case, nothing remains that suggests a correspondence between grammatical distinctions and social divisions.

In a recent article, which demands discussion and amplification, E. Benveniste writes “that as one tries to compare language and society systematically, discordances appear.”<sup>10</sup>

It is therefore legitimate to say that so far as a direct comparison be-

7. *Langues du Monde* (1st ed., 1924), p. 443 (according to A. Thalheimer). Also see p. 428 on the functioning of “numbers” of categories in the same languages.

8. *Langues du Monde* (2d ed., 1952), p. 860.

9. Liliás Homburger, *Les Préfixes nominaux dans les Parlers peul, haoussa et bantous* (Paris, Institut d’ethnologie, 1929); *Les Langues négro-africaines* (Paris, Payot, 1941), especially pp. 232–34. Besides the African languages see particularly E. Benveniste, “Remarques sur la Classification nominale en Burusaski” (langue du nord d l’Inde), in *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique*, Vol. 44 (1947–48).

10. E. Benveniste, “Tendances récentes en Linguistique général,” *Journal de Psychologie normale et pathologique*, Jan.–June, 1954 (see especially p. 142 where, following the sentence cited in the text, the matter of “diffusions” is discussed).

tween linguistic and social structures is concerned, one comes up against a negative conclusion. This conclusion is further reinforced by the fact that no one has been able to determine typical linguistic constitutions which would correspond to limited use in a clan or tribe, or, on the contrary, to extensive use in a confederation of tribes, in a people more or less solidly organized, in a firmly constituted nation.

Linguists are in agreement on this point: if circumstances are favorable, uncultivated speech can become a cultural language without greatly changing its character even if it borrows many elements of its vocabulary and is more or less influenced in its syntax by languages of a civilization enjoying prestige in the same region of the globe.

Amid the extreme diversity of linguistic developments in the course of evolutions that constituted within each group or subgroup a particular language more or less profoundly differentiated from its neighbors, one frequently encounters, for example, diverse types of languages which correspond to societies that are on the whole of the same species, for example, in Europe, Hungarian, or Finnish between Germanic or Slavic. Inversely, singular resemblances can link languages belonging to civilizations that are distant both in time and space and that differ in many of their essential characteristics. A striking and picturesque example of this is the similarity of the periodic sentence in literary Latin and in Amharic, the official language of Abyssinia, which only recently has reached the written stage.

In order to get a better idea of the natural complexity of the phenomena that must be taken into account, we have only to remember that in regions where dialect is still spoken—countries that have mass education, of which France is a natural example—the linguistic fragmentation is such that villages a few miles apart in a homogeneous dialect area maintain their own linguistic individuality. This individuality is indicated by a few phonetic, morphological, syntactical, or lexiconological characteristics. Moreover, when one realizes that the evolutions under way are spread over a long period and that they have been consummated in some individuals or entire families whereas they have been retarded in others, it is certain that even a small milieu like a village is not homogeneous and that careful study will culminate in statistics dividing conservatives and innovators into diverse proportions. The French language furnishes very clear examples of this. Thus the articulation of the liquid *l* was rivalled by the simple *y* in Parisian working-class circles as early as the seventeenth century and only disappeared completely among well-spoken French people toward the end of the nineteenth century (it was recommended by Littré

in 1870 and yet he was a liberal); in some Poitevin villages it is still retained by a few people. In the same way, one can study the progressive and uneven transition in the provinces from the front or rolled *r* to the rear *r*, called Parisian or thick.

It is a good thing to remember that complications are not less frequent in other social phenomena, if one takes the trouble to observe them. Everyone finds it easy to think of the differences between the habits of city and country life, the clothes and the headdresses where there are survivals of this kind. But only a few ethnographers know (in the absence of detailed lists) the differences of equipment and gesture which they dictate throughout all the cantons of France. Furthermore, when one thinks in terms of evolutions, one can also see that old and new conditions are closely interrelated. An immediately striking example of this: a man driving his wife with a club, a normal sight in rural France during the seventeenth century, in our day can connote nothing other than exceptional brutality. But in this same contemporary world, although clubs are no longer in use and martinets have become very rare, parents who absolutely forbid each other to whip their children are still in the minority. Just as under all circumstances the smallest linguistic details should be observed and registered as much for our own use as for the sake of historical posterity, so the little facts of "microsociology" or detailed ethnography deserve to be collected, provided, however, that statistical appearances do not lead to the composition of falsified pictures—a disaster against which Maxime Rodinson has opportunely warned us.<sup>11</sup>

As for the inconsidered coupling of detailed facts that are heterogeneous, we have already said that this must be resolutely avoided if one does not wish to hinder rather than facilitate research.

Are we up against such difficulties that we shall be forced to assume an entirely negative attitude about the whole problem? Not at all. But we must define with prudence the positive possibilities and their present limitations. External study (without indulging in what are, properly speaking, linguistic descriptions), demonstrates clashes between languages that often culminate in the disappearance of a number of them. Thus, the expansion of the French language at the expense of dialects is the consequence of well-determined social conditions.

In studying phenomena such as these in their totality it is advisable to think about how they can be understood and used significantly: a study of

11. Maxime Rodinson, "Ethnographie et Relativisme," *Nouvelle Critique*, No. 69, Nov., 1955.

this kind would constitute a chapter on linguistic sociology, or a way of viewing it, as Haudricourt and Granai have shown in the article previously cited.

The consequences of A. Meillet's famous work<sup>12</sup> have not yet been fully realized through the development of more advanced studies of this kind. His book delves deeply into both vocabulary and social divisions. If sailors did not have a special language of their own, words like *to arrive*, *to land*, would doubtless never have materialized; they have become part of our general vocabulary because sailors as a group were not isolated but were in constant contact with the larger community.

And so, if the linguist employs all his ingenuity and remains extremely cautious, he can achieve many small partial triumphs by examining social conditions in detail, just as the sociologist, by examining various linguistic data, can see certain social articulations assume concrete form before him. But this is not the way we can clarify the whole of social constitutions on the one hand, or of linguistics on the other.

Another avenue of research exists which we deliberately neglected in the preceding pages, although it was not possible to conceal it completely because of the diverse examples cited in which sociology seems to appear as a very young and fragile venture in comparative psychology.

We must go beyond the framework which the title of this article suggests in order to test precisely the validity of certain notions. On the one hand we must remember that language, that instrument of communication which lends itself to all the needs of society, and primarily to the needs of work in the production of those resources necessary to life, is also an expression of reasoned thought in its successive evolutions. On the other hand, when we envisage societies in large areas of civilizations, when we perceive them across the ages and the continents, we can speak of species and of levels of civilization in terms of concepts (in colloquial language: ways of seeing) which change perceptibly in the course of their evolution and which often have well-determined linguistic, or more precisely, grammatical expressions.

We must make one point very clear at this juncture: concepts are reflected in grammatical systems and imitate them more or less; it is not the grammatical systems that give rise to concepts.<sup>13</sup>

12. A. Meillet, "Comment les Mots changent de Sens," *Année sociologique*, 1905-1906; reprinted in *Linguistique historique et Linguistique générale*.

13. Marcel Cohen, "Faits linguistiques et Faits de Pensée," *Journal de Psychologie*, 1947; reprinted in abridged form in *Cinquante Années de Recherches*, 1955.



However, since languages are subject to special conditions of evolution in the midst of societies, linguistic systems do not become modified according to the rhythm of changing ideas, which themselves are never simple. Specifically, it can happen that the lexicon is basically renovated while the grammatical system shows only slight modifications; one must take the whole of the expression into account.

An initial example which has attracted attention is that of Melanesian languages and others in which different determinatives distinguish between what is part and extension of the person and what is possession of a distinct object: the result of an old conception of possession.<sup>14</sup> This is the place for the more or less numerous classifications of “genders” which we discussed earlier: we are speaking of certain views about men, beings, and things.

Another important example is that of the counting of objects: in backward societies numbering practically does not exist nor does the abstract distinction between the singular and the plural; but grammatical techniques enable us to decipher pairs, trios, and groups of four in this unique whole.

As for conjugations, Meillet in particular helped to demonstrate that the grammatical distinction between the divisions of time in relation to the moment when one speaks (past, present, future) is secondary. This is especially true of Indo-European languages and it corresponds to a progress in abstraction comparable to the expression of more concrete notions of finished or unfinished, momentary or permanent action.<sup>15</sup>

We see how data of this nature can be related in a general way to the important data of civilization—not in simple relationships, because in observable systems there is always great complexity, particularly in regard to the intricacies of the old and the new.

Now that the field of investigation is wide open, we come back again, after a detour, to problems of structure. If we should say, for example, that advanced mathematical notions and a sense of time are to be found only in rather large societies where industry is well-developed, we would also be referring to societies that inevitably possess certain characteristics, like the division of labor and separate classes.

We must hope that both linguists and sociologists will obtain results

14. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, “L’Expression de la Possession dans les Langues mélanésiennes,” *Mémoires de la Société de Linguistique*, XIX, 1916.

15. Marcel Cohen, “Aspect et Temps dans le Verbe,” *Journal de Psychologie*, 1927 (with observations by A. Meillet).

from large, general studies as well as from more detailed ones such as we have undertaken in the preceding pages. But their achievements will be solid and fruitful only if they abstain from seeking simple relationships which cannot correspond to the complexity of true conditions.

#### GENERAL NOTE

The ideas developed here are to be found in less condensed and also less explicit form in a section of the author's book, *Pour une Sociologie du Langage*, which has just been published by Albin Michel (Second part: "Les Langages et les Groupes sociaux." Chapter II: "Constitutions et Transformations de Groupes et de Langages"). In this chapter will be found various references with rather long quotations; in the foregoing pages the documentation was reduced to a minimum. Moreover, certain of the ideas touched upon here, and some of the examples, appear in other chapters of the book.

A comparison could be made with two other works on the same subject. In 1953 Alf Sommerfelt gave a series of lectures at the University of Michigan; they were put together in book form: *Language, Society and Culture*, and will soon be published (Oslo, Norsk Tidsskrift for Sprogvidenskap, Vol. XVII, pp. 1-81).

B. A. Serebrennikov published in Russia a study on "Le Problème des Rapports des Faits linguistiques avec l'Histoire de la Société," in *Voprosy jazykoznanija* ("Questions de Linguistique") (Moscow, 1953), I, pp. 34-51; translated into German in *Sowjetwissenschaftliche Abteilung* (Berlin, 1953), 5/6, pp. 848-68.

These three studies, undertaken independently at about the same time, agree upon essential points. It would be interesting to study certain of their divergences at some future date.

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