

Review: History of Linguistics; Linguistic Theories: Wmffre (2013)

AUTHOR: Iwan Wmffre

TITLE: *Dynamic Linguistics*

SUBTITLE: *Labov, Martinet, Jakobson and Other Precursors of the Dynamic Approach to Language Description*

SERIES TITLE: Contemporary Studies in Descriptive Linguistics – Band 28

PUBLISHER: Peter Lang AG

YEAR: 2013

REVIEWER: Deli Lara Peña, Université Paris Sorbonne – Paris IV

LINGUIST List: Vol-25-3517

Editor for this issue: Malgorzata Cavar <gosia@linguistlist.org>

URL: <https://linguistlist.org/issues/25/25-3517.html> (posted 06.09.2014)

INTRODUCTION

How shall descriptive linguistics deal with the heterogeneity and the instability of linguistic forms? This book proposes an answer to this question, namely an approach to descriptive linguistics based on the concept of dynamic synchrony (after Jakobson and Martinet) and on a field-work methodology inspired mainly by Labov's and Martinet's studies. The 'dynamic approach', as the author designates it, consists of describing a dialect as a whole and as it is actually spoken, without ignoring observed variants which reveal that language in use undergoes variation and change. The question of how a dialect should be described as a whole then arises. The author addresses this question by discussing the concepts of speech community, structure and system, among others. But the book does not focus solely on the theoretical discussion, for it is designed to provide a historical framework for the dynamic approach, where Jakobson, Martinet and Labov are the main references. In the last chapter, the author also suggests some practical principles for a linguistic description.

SUMMARY

The book is divided into twelve chapters and a preface.

Chapter 1 is a two-page long introduction, where the reader finds some explanations for the choice of the term 'dynamics' instead of 'variation and change'.

Chapter 2, 'Structuralism's neglect of dynamics', presents a biography of Saussure, and some concepts from the *Cours de Linguistique générale*, published in 1916. These concepts refer to language and speech (langage, langue, parole), system, synchrony and diachrony. The author observes that the idea of a system refers to a 'bound static structure' (p. 20), where dynamics are ignored.

Chapter 3 presents Labov's main field investigations and methodology as contributions to the study of linguistic dynamics. This contribution consists chiefly of the way it brought attention to observed variation and change in progress, and in the correlation of variations with the social characteristics of the informants. But the author also describes some results of Labov's which he believes are important to phonetics.

Chapter 4 shows through quotes how Martinet stated more and more clearly through the years that it is possible to study languages from the point of view of 'dynamic synchrony'; that is, to note the residual features as well as the innovations of a described language in order to make its dynamic nature appear. Martinet also recommended combining dynamic synchrony with diachrony.

Chapter 5, 'The Prague School and Jakobson's contribution to dynamics', introduces some of the linguists related to the history of the Prague Linguistic Circle and some writings of Jakobson's about the advantage of studying language from a synchronic or from a diachronic point of view, and his conception of a dynamic synchrony. We find also here an exposition of Martinet's, Weinreich's and Coseriu's insights.

Chapter 6 discusses some concepts related to variation, as allophones, archiphonemes, stylistic variation, speaker's insecurity, and others. The reader will notice that, as a decisive question is how to carry out field investigations in order to make appear linguistic change in progress, it is important to determine to what extent observed variations are relevant and whether variants are individual or societal.

Chapter 7. Martinet's and Labov's teachings are presented as complementary for the dynamic approach. The discussion focuses here on the communicative function of language, and on intrinsic and extrinsic factors which determine the form of language, as well as on the distinction between variation and change in progress. Martinet's insights allow to explain the evolution of linguistic forms by the needs for economical communication. Extrinsic factors he thought overestimated, even though he insisted on the correlation of age with linguistic variation. On the other hand, we see that societal factors which Labov recognizes (gender, class, education...) are concepts or even reifications which may be regarded as cultural constructions. The reader will note that variation is an intrinsic propriety of language, and appears even within groups which one might think of as socially homogeneous. Dynamic synchrony is advocated as an approach which should be useful to appreciate the degree of stability or instability of structures in a given language.

Chapter 8, 'Dynamics: Martinet's precursors' deals chiefly with some dialectologists as Rousselot, Duraffour or Gauchat, whose works show intradialectal variation within speech communities, before Martinet's studies and long before Labov's investigations. The author also acknowledges Meillet's conception of language as a societal phenomenon, and relates it to the early North-American research on languages which presaged sociolinguistics (Furfey, Putnam, O'Hern, Sapon, Fischer). W. von Humboldt's concepts of *energeia* and *ergon* are briefly mentioned at the beginning of the chapter.

Chapter 9 tackles the problem of defining some theoretical concepts for language description. The main issues addressed here are the delimitation of dialects and speech communities, and the plurality of systems within a same language ('polysystemicity'). The author proposes a terminology where 'language structure' refers to an overall architecture open to changes, in which several 'systems', or sets of oppositions, take place. This distinction should allow one to distinguish between changes at the level of 'systems' and language shifts, which occur when a 'language structure' is replaced by another one. The author associates the concept of dialect with that of speech community, and he cites some cases when, in his opinion, one may use the term of 'dialect'. The end of the chapter cites briefly some cognitive linguists and semioticians who have developed a theory of linguistic dynamics based on neuroscience and mathematics, which despite its name has little to do with the approach explained in this book.

Chapter 10, under the title 'Conclusion', discusses more in depth the differences between Martinet's and Labov's ways to address issues related to linguistic dynamics. The author criticizes the neglect of Martinet's pioneering contribution to the dynamic approach by most English-speaking scholars and the general overestimation of the originality of other linguists (Labov, Diver), caused by the ignorance of the history of linguistics. According to him, English-speaking linguists tend to ignore important works when they are not published in English. He argues that Labov's work has a linguistic background which includes Weinreich, Martinet and others, and must not be thought of as the work of an outsider.

After the conclusion come two supplementary chapters. Chapter 11 places the dynamic approach in relation to different ways of working in linguistics (typology, dialectology, historical linguistics). In this chapter, the author tries to give an idea of the dynamic approach in a concise way. It will be noted that dynamic synchrony, as the author understands and promotes it, would demand to carry out field investigations on contemporary states of languages (p. 480).

Chapter 12 sets out eleven principles for the investigator willing to describe a particular speech. These practical principles are based on the author's experience of describing Celtic languages.

EVALUATION

The audience of this book will hopefully include enthusiastic young linguists, disposed to develop the understanding of the dynamic nature of language through the study of actual languages. To them, this book will provide an introduction with useful insights, from the author himself, or from the various linguists whose writings are quoted. But since for most issues addressed here, there is no example given or discussed in detail, the reading may be difficult for beginners and even more for those 'lay persons' who are said to be part of the intended audience (Preface, xvii).

Reading the chapters in the original order might not be the best option for this book, whose form reflects a plurality of aims. On the one hand, the author means to explain that natural languages have a dynamic nature, and how field work could be conducted for a valid description of this dynamics. On the other hand, he intends to cite the linguists who have contributed to making clear the necessity of describing linguistic dynamics, and also to set out some material which may be not well known by an audience who reads — 'only', one should say — English (Preface, xx). Thus, some chapters deal with the work of linguists and their conception of linguistic dynamics, while others deal with concepts. Unfortunately, this order brings forth repetitions and hinders deep reflection. For instance, the question of the closeness of systems is broached in chapter 2, which is meant to deal with Saussurean concepts and structuralism. But the author discusses and defines the notions of system and structure much later, in chapter 9, without really benefiting of explanations already given in chapter 2. In fact, several quotes from one of these chapters might have appear in the other, without any consequences (see, for example, pp. 377, 378, 380, 382).

Some terms are thus used before they are defined: for instance, 'language', 'dialect', and 'language structure' appear in chapter 6, p. 221 but are defined in chapter 9. For this reason, a second reading might be necessary. The index may be useful, but many pertinent items are missing. If the content of this book had been divided into a historical part and a thematic one, that might have allowed a more concise presentation of the relevant ideas. It would also have been convenient to provide more examples; these are very few in the book, most of them about phonological features, and the discussion remains at times rather abstract, indeed even vague.

The intention to mention a large number of concepts which are pertinent to the topic, even without defining them nor discussing them at depth, is quite perceptible throughout the book. Admittedly, this enables the reader to do further research by himself. But the book gives also the impression of an unfinished work. One finds more than once some recognition of such a shortcoming, like 'Unfortunately I am not able to develop further here (...)' (p. 152), especially in some sections devoted to concepts developed by Martinet for which the author does not give any proper definition. Thus the quite odd content of the section '4.4.3. Chain shifts', which is only six-lines long, and where the author tells us: 'Unfortunately I cannot give an account of the chain shifts of vowels in vowel space which Martinet illustrated in his 1952 'Function, structure and sound change' and, more fully, in his 1955 *Économie des changements phonétiques*. Thankfully this is a fairly well-known achievement of Martinet's, one of his 'claims of fame' (p. 132).

Some readers might be discouraged by the careless presentation of this work. Quotes in French are accompanied with a translation which is generally correct, even if, now and then, there is some inaccuracy in them (for instance, p. 16, 'on s'y attache' does not mean 'they persevere', but 'they focus on them'). But one finds numerous typographical errors, and even grammatical errors in this book, which seems to have been published without any proofreading (for instance: 'Labov seems to relegating variation and favouring change' (p. 285). Also, some sentences seem to have been dictated to a facetious computer. For example: 'One of Sapir's students, Benjamin Whorf made a nem for himself by applying himself to discover the way in which language affected thought' (p. 454). For that matter, the author's writing style confers on this book a certain originality. For instance, a section's title reads 'The elderly Martinet bites the bullet and adopts dynamic synchrony' (p. 104).

A large part of the material is neither new nor really unknown by many specialists, interested in descriptive linguistics and especially in dialectology, so that the book looks at times more like a textbook than like an innovative research. Furthermore, the way in which the author relies on others' works to summarize and interpret the writings of great linguists sometimes gives the impression of a second-hand reading. But as the book cites many concepts and offers interesting quotes from a wide range of linguists on fundamental issues, it might nevertheless be useful reading. Moreover, it reminds the reader of the importance of studying and discussing the work of significant linguists such as Martinet, Jakobson and others.

However, the author writes a selective history of the understanding of linguistic dynamics. Among living linguists, Labov is the most cited for his investigations. The author states that Brian Ó Curnáin's study of Irish published in 2007 is an example of the dynamic approach in descriptive linguistics. But in spite of this recognition, Ó Curnáin's work is only mentioned without a title a few times, and never discussed in detail nor used as an illustration to make the reader understand better what an approach of linguistic dynamics should be. Furthermore, Brian Ó Curnáin does not appear in the bibliography, and the reader is left to guess that the cited work must be "The Irish of Iorras Aithneach, County Galway." At any rate, the author announces his own forthcoming publication on Lampeter Welsh, which he claims to have conducted with the dynamic approach proposed here.

The usage of the term 'structuralism' remains till the end of the book rather imprecise. For instance, in the section on the development of structuralism (p. 34), instead of presenting a definition of structuralism and citing names of structuralist linguists, the author merely states that the label 'structuralism' was given (by whom?) to an approach where 'synchronic emphasis in linguistics went hand-in-hand with an emphasis on a more holistic analysis of linguistic patterns, structures and systems present in a particular language' (p.3). Such wording is characteristic of the book, and might lead the uninformed reader to confuse systems and structures with mere patterns. The author claims to propose a structuralist approach, but with this loose definition, the term is ineffective in distinguishing between all the various approaches in contemporary linguistics: 'What I am advocating in this book is a structural-dynamic approach to linguistics, but what linguist these days is not a structuralist?' (p. 474)

It is worth noting that despite the numerous pages and quotes devoted to the concepts of system and structure, the concepts of 'differentiation' and 'value' are left aside, and 'oppositions' are hardly ever mentioned. None of these terms is listed in the index, which proves how little importance they have in the definition of this 'structural dynamic' approach (p. 474). As a matter of fact, the reason why the concept of system is so largely discussed in this book is that in the author's perspective, the study of language dynamics is incompatible with a conception of languages as coherent and closed entities. The synchronic point of view is also criticized as inadequate to the description of linguistics dynamics, and replaced by dynamic synchrony. The notion of opposition is then left out of the discussion, although a crucial question in an actual structuralist approach of linguistic dynamics should be to determine how oppositions are reconfigured to form new systems in linguistic change.

This book may be more suitable for dialectologists with little theoretical background than for specialists of linguistic change. It doesn't provide the reader with an updated discussion of the existent theories of

linguistic change, and some important concepts in that productive field are not taken into account. For instance, ‘grammaticalization’ does not appear here, although many contemporary linguists use this concept to study change in progress. The term was coined by Meillet (1912), but strangely enough, the author seems to ignore Meillet’s originality and importance as a working linguist. After three pages and a half of uninterrupted quotes from Meillet’s articles (pp. 350-353), and even reminding us that Labov cites the French linguist as his precursor, the author still seems unwilling to fully recognize him as a precursor for a dynamic approach, referring to Meillet’s ideas as ‘what can only be described as mainstream French linguistic thought by 1920’ (p. 354). For him, ‘Meillet’s importance for the advancement of a dynamic approach does not lie in any research he undertook, but in his inspiration as a teacher and in his reputation as a leading linguist of the historical-comparativist school (pp. 354-355).’ His last statement about Meillet, ‘His importance [for the dynamic approach] lies solely in the beneficial influence his reputation gave to the worth of a dynamic approach to language description (...)’ (p. 371), is similarly unfounded.

If there had been a synthetic and yet detailed and rigorous presentation of the main concepts, and also a careful editing, this book could have been a better introduction to the topic. That might be the result of a revised edition. In the meantime, as it is presently, this book will surely make readers acknowledge that the dynamic nature of language is an important and interesting issue which descriptive linguists ought to address empirically as well as theoretically.

REFERENCES

Martinet, André. 1955. *Economie des changements phonétiques. Traité de phonologie diachronique*. Berne: Francke Verlag.

Meillet, Antoine. 1912. ‘L’*évolution des formes grammaticales*’. *Scientia (Rivista di Scienza)* 12, No. 26, 6. (Reprinted in Meillet, Antoine. 1921. 130–148).

Meillet, Antoine. 1921. *Linguistique historique et linguistique générale*. Paris: Champion.

Ó Curnáin, Brian. 2007. *The Irish of Iorras Aithneach, County Galway*. Vols. I–IV, with audio CD. Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (School of Celtic Studies).

Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1967 [1916]. *Cours de linguistique générale*. Publié par Charles Bally et Albert Séchehaye, avec la collaboration d’Albert Reidlinger. Edition critique préparée par Tullio de Mauro. Paris: Payot.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Deli LARA PEÑA is currently a PhD candidate in Linguistics at the University of Paris-Sorbonne, working on the linguistic expression of sensory perception, as it is displayed in medieval texts written in Latin, French or Germanic languages. Her areas of interest include semiotic theories and historical semantics, history and epistemology of linguistics.