# Dynamic linguistics:
## Labov, Martinet, Jakobson and other precursors of the dynamic approach to language description

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Contemporary Studies in Descriptive Linguistics, Vol 28. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013. Pp. 589. ebook $106.00, £65.00, €81,00, paperback $106.00, £65.00, €81,00. ISBN 978-3-0343-1705-4 (paperback).

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Wmffre presents an accounting of the dynamic nature of language (and languages); "the adjective *dynamic* in this work has a specific meaning related to the inherent instability of language which results in change, variation and systemic interaction" (p. 453). This dynamic nature is "both cause and result of linguistic change [over time] and linguistic variation [dialect differences based on geography, gender, age, social class, etc.]" (p. 384). In much of the book, he traces in great detail the historical development of major concepts which relate to the notion of dynamic linguistics, particularly in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in Europe and North America. He concludes with a set of eleven principles which he proposes ought to guide descriptive linguistic field work (summarized below).

He begins with a thorough analysis of Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between diachronic and synchronic linguistics. Wmffre then demonstrates how this dichotomy influenced structuralist linguistics throughout the twentieth century. While reviewing many of the significant insights which have arisen through a structuralist perspective (especially in phonology), he points to Roman Jakobson as one (of many) who came to reject an excessively strict structuralist approach which too often tended toward absolutization and a neglect of pragmatics and the social and communicative aspects of language (p. 167).

With respect to the motivation for the dynamic nature of language, Wmffre cites Henry Schogt (1968:811–812) who proposes that language variation is a means of optimization responding to "two irreconcilable determinants: articulatory effort and communicative function.[1] The struggle to establish optimality between these two struggling structurations was one of the main causes of language dynamics" (p. 101).

In developing his description of dynamic linguistics, Wmffre defines three key terms: *dynamic synchrony*, *speech community*, and *language structure* (p. 486):

- temporal delimitation – 'dynamic synchrony' allows for a flexible delimitation of the temporal limits for an in situ linguistic description (see 4.3.8.). The distinction between a dynamic description and a diachronic one is that it [i.e., the dynamic description] approximates a description of *language as it is experienced in a human lifespan*.
- spatial delimitation – 'speech community' allows for a flexible delimitation of the spatial limits for an in situ linguistic description. The distinction between a dynamic description and a geolinguistic or typological one is that it approximates some *societal reality as it is experienced in a human community*.[2]
- structural delimitation – 'language structure' allows for a flexible delimitation of the structural limits for an in situ linguistic description. The distinction between a dynamic description and a static formal structuralist description is that it approximates the polysystemic, adaptive, interactive, open-ended nature of a *language as it is experienced by every interacting human*.

I found chapter 9, "Some problems of reification in linguistics", to be of particular interest, especially the conclusions of Bickerton (p. 417):

> …our metatheory breaks down the Saussurean dichotomy between synchronic and diachronic studies. Language is then seen as a dynamic process evolving through space and time; 'leaky' grammars, variants that fit no system, conflicting native-speaker intuitions – all the problems that vexed previous formulations are now seen as the inevitable consequences of spatial and temporal segmentation of what is really a seamless whole. It follows that to speak of 'dialects' or even perhaps 'languages' may be misleading; these terms merely seek to freeze at an arbitrary moment, and to coalesce into an arbitrary whole, phenomena which in turn are ongoing and heterogeneous. [Bickerton 1973a:642–43]

Wmffre has a refreshing "continua" approach to language and linguistics (as opposed to an approach which attempts to focus on supposed discrete categories). He even points out problems with regard to assumed distinctions between established disciplines such as "linguistics" and "sociolinguistics", quoting Labov (p. 82), "I have resisted the term sociolinguistics for many years, since it implies that there can be a successful linguistic theory or practice which is not social" [Labov 1972: xiii]. Closely related to this is an emphasis on the communicative function of language; Wmffre (p. 93) supports Martinet's insistence that "speech utterances are to be analysed with reference to the manner in which they contribute to the process of communication" (Martinet 1982:53), that the purpose of language is "to communicate to others one's experiences" (Martinet 1993:139).

Wmffre concludes this work by proposing the following eleven principles to guide field language description:

1. provide a [more] comprehensive description [than has typically been accomplished]; this would also mean that institutions associated with such

research must allow sufficient time for the research program (for example, a 3-year doctoral program would be inadequate);

2. "embrace an impressionistic approach…years of familiarity are a distinct advantage" (p. 501); "the use of quantitative and instrumental methods can only be useful as supplementing aids in solving problems of description" (p. 500); what is proposed here is that the researcher will have to "internalize" the language, develop a level of communicative fluency, more like a full "language and culture acquisition" approach than one in which an outsider collects samples;

3. "delimit target speech according to societal reality…there should be a certain amount of regular interaction between the members of the speech community thus chosen" (p. 503); (note that this principle reflects Wmffre's definition of "speech community", which is restricted to those community members who are engaged in regular interaction with one another);

4. compare immediately adjoining dialects;

5. establish a birth-date and locality matrix (i.e., systematically document such details for each member of the speech community who contributes data);

6. "distinguish expansive and recessive variants" (this applies primarily to contrasting the pronunciation of older generation and younger generation subjects);

7. prefer a broad (multi-generational) synchrony over a narrow (single-generation) one;

8. aim at supra-oppositional phonology (which enables one to better account for phonological changes which are ongoing);

9. give priority to "unaffected speech" (i.e., speech forms which occur when subjects are giving little or no attention to such formal features);

10. give due attention to "linguistic insecurity" (i.e., be aware that language informants in a structured situation may attempt to mimic what they consider to be "proper" speech);

11. include both analysis and a vast amount of inventory (including details about "who, where, and what").

In the above principles (and throughout the book), Wmffre gives a great deal of prominence to phonetic and phonological features, a few passing references to morphology and syntax, and virtually no attention to lexicon, semantics, and pragmatics. This strikes me as slightly odd, especially given his position that "*mutual* [author's emphasis] communication is the ordinary governing factor in language use, something which clashes with the most usual understanding of language by teachers and purists whether at school or university level and especially by formal linguistics theorists" (p. 489). Furthermore, if we understand "language" to be a form-meaning composite, it appears that Wmffre and the many scholars he surveys have amassed a great deal of evidence on the "form" side of language about the "leakiness" of linguistic structures,

inexplicable variants, lack of uniformity among native speakers, etc., Similar evidence pointing to language dynamics on the semantic-pragmatic side is notably lacking in this presentation.

Typographical errors (especially spelling and punctuation errors, and a few unfinished sentences) are rather numerous in this book (even to the point where comprehension in some cases is made difficult). In spite of this, Iwan Wmffre has made a significant contribution to our understanding of developments in linguistics (in Europe and North America), and of the nature of language.

## Notes

1 These forces are referred to elsewhere (e.g., p. 133) as *clarity* (which seeks maximum precision) vs. *economy* (which seeks minimum exertion).

2 Wmffre's "speech community" is restricted to those who actually have regular, ongoing interaction with one another (p. 503).

## References

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