

FAITH AND OBJECTIVITY IN LINGUISTIC SCIENCE

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One of the die-hard myths of modern thought is the so-called neutrality or objectivity of our subjective theorizing. It is a dogma of scientific endeavour that has survived almost every major shake-up in the history of Western thinking. But it is nonetheless recognised today more than ever before that the dogma of objectivity is exactly that: an unverified and unverifiable dogma. It has remained as much an illusion as the intellectual mirage of the attendant belief in the progressive discovery of truth: "It is tempting, and flattering to one's contemporaries," Robins remarks,

"to see the history of a science as the progressive discovery of truth and the attainment of the right methods. But this is a fallacy... 'The facts' and 'the truth' are not laid down in advance, like the solution to a crossword puzzle, awaiting the completion of discovery. Scientists themselves do much to determine the range of facts, phenomena and operations that fall within their purview, and they themselves set up and modify the conceptual framework within which they make what they regard as significant statements about them." (R.H.Robins, 'A Short History of Linguistics', p.3)

A theory always fits into a framework of ideas that is never neutral or objective, but related to the subjective human thinking process of which it is the outcome.

Not only is philosophy "bound to be unproductive if it is not done in cooperation with the special sciences," as Carnap believed, (R.Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language*, p.332) but the reverse is just as true: the various scientific disciplines, including the special field of linguistics, are always implicitly or explicitly informed by some philosophical trend. It is sheer foolishness to ignore this in one's specialist field today.

An image might be useful to clarify further the exact relation between linguistics and philosophy. If we compare our scientific endeavour with a house, then the foundations would be the philosophical perspective that underlies our theory of what is happening in the various rooms, one of which may be called 'linguistics'. The various special sciences are necessarily founded upon philosophical presuppositions.

Perhaps one's acceptance of the foundational character of philosophy is only possible if, with many other theorists, one has been persuaded that the goal of objectivity in academic studies is unattainable, and that any theory, even though it depends on facts, implies a selection and sifting of those facts that are relevant to the theory. Robinson correctly assumes that unless "one knows what one is looking for, there is nothing to find, and such knowing is not the result of objective observation." (I. Robinson, *'The New Grammarians' Funeral*, p.7)

The language philosopher today need make no apologies for his interest in the field of philosophical linguistics. One reason for this may be that, after Chomsky had written a study entitled *'Cartesian Linguistics'*, philosophy and the philosophical assumptions on which linguistics is based have once more become topical in linguistic studies. Another reason is that linguistics, if it is to assume a critical attitude, needs philosophical perspectives from which it can answer at least some of the perplexing questions raised by the history of linguistic thought. How is one to understand, from a purely linguistic perspective, the different approaches known as 'structuralism', 'transformationalism', 'behaviourism', and 'mentalism', for example? All claim to be purely 'linguistic' approaches,

and most would call the empirical facts or some aspect of language as witness that theirs is the most objectively verifiable linguistic description; and yet it cannot be denied that all these approaches are either essentially, or at the very least in broad outline, different. This is the point where the linguist needs a consistent philosophical groundwork against which he can test and evaluate the theoretical perspectives upon which all linguistic descriptions are based.

The third reason why philosophical linguistics has once more become topical in our time is the academic disillusionment with all the linguistic studies that have claimed either to be or to have been founded upon purely linguistic perspectives. The 20th century linguist cannot in all honesty claim to have found this purely linguistic approach. It may be true that linguistics may have wrested itself free from the grip of 19th century positivism and from other philosophical or historical approaches to language, but the fact remains that this development away from certain philosophical assumptions in the study of language has been influenced by other, opposing philosophical theses. In fine: the claim that linguistics has freed itself from philosophy is, ironically, itself no purely linguistic statement, but a philosophical one. If linguistics is to comment theoretically on language, it cannot simultaneously be competent to comment on itself. When linguists comment upon linguistics, such commentary is either implicitly or explicitly based upon a theoretical perspective. In view of this, we must face the crucially important task of examining the philosophical and religious roots that lie at the heart of the issue, and without which the diversity of linguistic opinion cannot adequately be accounted for. Linguistics is not merely a question of method and technique, but has roots in a diversity of philosophical perspectives that are in their turn related to the sometimes unformulated assumptions of a particular world-view.

Perhaps, too, linguistic theory must begin to state not only what its unquestioned assumptions are, but also to examine the thesis that "a scientific methodology cannot, as a matter of logic, be shown to be right or wrong, it can only be held as a matter of faith." (G. Sampson, 'Liberty and Language', p.191) The kind of explicitness that linguistics needs is thus not simply of a formal nature, as linguists have been led to believe, but a clear understanding of its own unquestioned assumptions. A systematic linguistic framework is never philosophically neutral. No linguistic theory is. Neither is the philosophical framework upon which my own work in linguistics is based neutral in respect of a world-view. In an academic way it confesses that reality is a created order, and that the fundamental principles that underlie language use are creational ordinances. Since all linguistic theory grows out of particular world-views, to take an approach thus founded upon an explicitly acknowledged Christian world-view does not compromise linguistic study; it is rather a question of working with a set of basic assumptions which are at variance with many of those most commonly held, and of fully and explicitly acknowledging this different basis instead of chasing a mythical objectivity.

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