

# The Choice of A Paradigmatic Linguistics

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## LINGUISTICS, DESCRIPTIVE DISCIPLINE

Traditional grammarians have always and in every place considered their duty to protect *the literary language* from popular corruption. In the immediate term, any remark should be included within the framework of a differentiation - a priori lexicological - between *descriptive linguistics* and *normative linguistics*.

The purist problematic of language correction is all imbued with the ideology that there cannot be absolute standards of purity or correction in the language and that expressions have **meaning** only according to a predetermined norm.

The assertion that *a linguistic form* is correct or incorrect, simply because it differs from another form considered (explicitly or implicitly) as *the norm*, is de facto empirical. Precisely, it will have been established by sociolinguistics that *variation* is compatible with the correlative notions of language and community: each social or regional form of a language has of purity and correction.

It is on the basis of such a de facto postulate of analytical origin that it is logical to consider a language from the point of view of its description. In **this sense**, the essential work of *the linguist* is *to describe* the way humans speak and write *their native language*. In any case, it is not a question of prescribing to these natives, / wherever they come and wherever they are, their mode of oral or written language.

Consequently, and through another lexicon, it now seems possible, because of this succinct but complete reasoning, to consider above all and homogeneously *linguistics* as **a descriptive discipline**.

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## FROM RESEARCH INTO THEORY, FROM GRAMMAR TO DESCRIPTIVE LINGUISTICS

The sentence is controlled by the verb to which actants that are nouns or equivalents cling. These are integrated into classes and it is one that Lucien Tesnière in *Éléments de Syntaxe structurale* (Klincksieck, 1959, p 66) specifically considers among other nouns: the class of personal pronouns that he divides into two. He distinguishes precisely the personal nouns forming a first subclass and whose avatars are common in the French language: me, you, him. Precisely, for this other linguist, Emile Benvéniste, author of *L'antonyme et le pronom* (Volume II, p 197-204), these are comparable to proper names and are used behind a preposition; for example, "Marina Tsvetaieva goes without him..." (implying Boris Pasternak). Still according to Lucien Tesnière, the second subclass of the class of personal pronouns includes what he denotes personal clues, in other words adjuvants to the verb which are indicators of the person of the verb who have no autonomy; they simply aggregate to the verb.

In her thesis defended at the Université Paris 3 – Sorbonne nouvelle in 1973, published in Paris by Champion in 1975 and entitled *Recherches en vue d'une théorie de la grammaire française: essai d'application à la syntaxe des pronoms*, Claire Blanche-Benvéniste resumes, precise and systematic the ideas contained in the germ in the analysis of Lucien Tesnière. Moreover, and beyond her thesis, this linguist wants to preserve the idea that knowledge of the spoken language advances the grammatical description of the entire language. Apart from the people directly involved in this research, in France or in other countries, few people take this idea really seriously and can distinguish themselves essentially two reasons. On the one hand, grammar is no longer in fashion, neither for the choice between grammatical theories, nor for the taste for the meticulous detail of the description and many think that, since the time that the French language is described, everything has been said: morphosyntax no longer has good press. On the other hand, what interested "people" in the recent corpus of spoken language, it is above all exercises of language hitherto little studied, interactions, conversations, prosody, phenomena of variations that would indicate evolutions (without forgetting the theme of violations of the norm, which is still very successful), none of this seems to call into question the grammatical analyses carried out so far.

Moreover, the purpose of Claire Blanche-Benvéniste's more recent research is to characterize verbs by their combinatorial possibilities with pronouns and thus group them together. For example, in a trivial way, the clitoral pronoun is treated as an affix of the verb placed either on the left ("talk to him about it"), or on the right ("talk to him about it")... Precisely, to return to the thesis of Claire Blanche-Benvéniste defended at Paris 3, it seems interesting to insist on her idea that in their undertaking of comparison between French and Latin, some linguists of the early 20th century used to say that Latin was more «synthetic» and French more «analytical» (Vendryes 1921): passive expressed by a disincentive/passive spread over several words; relationships expressed by casuals or relations given by prepositions; or comparative and superlative disincentives, for example -ior, issimus expressed by plus, plus.

It is somewhat in the same sense that is now envisaged the description of the turns frequently attested in spoken French: development of going, power, duty as *modal verbs*, "he's going to be sad"; important role of the verb do causative, "I'll make him work" and do this passive, "he got hit by a car"; development of "I think, I think, I find" as epistemic verbs, "I think she's beautiful"; development of many nominal quantifiers such as "a bunch of, a bunch of, a mass of" that intervene in noun phrases while retaining their outward appearance of nouns. The result can be seen in the sometimes very long *verbal chains* in which five or six verbal forms may follow one another, which cannot be described by the relationship between complement and completed element: "He must have been able to get to work, I'm going to have to have her examined, I think she could have continued to pretend to love him." Similar phenomena are seen in large nominal chains. What, in other types, could be said by disincentives, prepositions or conjunctions, here passes through these «analytical» type organizations.

As a result, the basic units are no longer the same; we see it for example for the plural noun marks, which tend to spread over an entire syntagm, with - z - of connection to all the joints, rather than to stick to isolated words.

My partial analysis focused on the most effective aspects of Claire Blanche-Benvéniste's research makes it possible to achieve the objective of this modest report, namely the paradigmatic characterization of descriptive linguistics. In this sense, I attended more than twenty years ago a conference of this language scientist entitled "descriptive linguistics in the 20<sup>o</sup> century": on 13 February 2000, it explained that "descriptive" linguistics, a discipline that gives itself the task of describing the different languages spoken by men in the world, has been at the centre of major controversies during the 20th century. As in other disciplines, the specialists sought methods to account for both the great diversity of phenomena attested by languages ("Languages can differ without limit", Mr. Joos said in 1966 about the Indian languages of the Americas) and the universal characteristics that could be detected there (for example "the formal properties of any possible human language", as Chomsky wrote in 1957).

To emphasize the value of his speech, I can highlight his problematization:

- Is it possible to reconcile field description and cognitive research?
  - Have we not already in the past the science of language described all languages?
- Are there still blank areas, like the white spots in the old geography maps?

Or is it just a matter of starting over with new methods, including for languages already so often described in past centuries, such as French?

In this sense, these are the ins and outs of this conference of Claire Blanche-Benvéniste of February 13, 2000 as well as her previous thesis, Research for a theory of grammar, which gave me the idea of my unpretentious essay entitled THE CHOICE OF A PARADIGMATIC LINGUISTICS.

Phonetics, phonology, diglossia, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, etymology, lexicology, lexicography, theoretical linguistics, comparative linguistics, sociolinguistics, dialectology, descriptive linguistics, psycholinguistics, linguistic typology, computer linguistics, semiotics, writing, natural language consistency: The fields of research in the science of language and linguistics are plethora and it is difficult to understand the problems in an exhaustive way because each field inducing a linguistic approach it is logical not to be able to analyze a text under all angles of study and an eclectic choice is required.

More generally, the study of language initially involves working from the fundamentals of what is called grammar in high schools where the French language is studied. Hence the idea of understanding this universal language according to a standard chosen in advance, that of grammar, in other words, to be in line with a normative linguistics. The universalist

conception of the language of “la francophonie” suggests in this first part of the study that regional, social, stylistic and diachronic variations be taken into account according to a very general concept of language and community. In a second step, linguistics will be put into exhaustive perspective by extrapolating the French language to languages in general; this will enable a pragmatic and scientific conception of the science of language and linguistics proper.

## **I - Historicist approach to the science of language**

According to this text recognized as the founder of the science of language and linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure’s Cours de linguistique générale in 1916, in the 1971 Payot edition, pages 12 and 13: “The science that has developed around the facts of language has passed through three successive phases before recognizing what is its true and unique object.

We started by doing what we called “grammar”. This study, inaugurated by the Greeks, continued mainly by the French, is based on logic and devoid of any scientific and disinterested view on the language itself-even; it aims only to give rules for distinguishing correct forms from incorrect forms; it is a normative discipline, far removed from more observation and whose point of view is necessarily narrow.

Then came the philology. There already existed in Alexandria a «philological» school, but this term is mainly attached to the scientific movement created by Friedrich August Wolf from 1777 and which continues before our eyes. Language is not the only object of philology, which above all wants to fix, interpret and comment on texts; this first study also leads it to deal with literary history, morals, institutions, etc.; everywhere it uses its own method, which is criticism. She deals with linguistic issues mainly to compare texts from different periods, to determine the particular language of each author, to decipher and explain inscriptions written in an archaic or obscure language. No doubt this research prepared historical linguistics: Ritschl’s work on Plaute can be called linguistic; but in this field philological criticism is lacking on one point: it attaches too slavishly to the written language and forgets the living language; Moreover, it is Greek and Latin antiquity that almost completely absorbs it.

The third period began when it was discovered that languages could be compared with each other. This was the origin of comparative philology or «comparative grammar». In 1816, in a book entitled *Système de la conjugaison du sanscrit*, Franz Bopp studies the relationship between Sanscrit and Germanic, Greek, Latin, etc. Bopp was not the first to note these affinities and to admit that all these languages belong to the same family; this had been done before him, in particular by the English orientalist W. Jones ( † 1794 ); but some isolated statements do not prove that in 1816 the significance and importance of this truth had been generally understood. Bopp therefore does not have the merit of having discovered that Sanskrit is the parent of certain idioms of Europe and Asia, but he understood that the relations between parent languages could become the subject of an autonomous science. To enlighten one language by another, to explain the forms of one by the forms of the other, is what had not yet been done. “

This historicist approach to the science of language by Ferdinand de Saussure makes it possible to arrive at a fundamental point of view as to the scientific approach that is required in linguistic matters. It is a question of describing through the history of all the languages it can reach, which amounts to reconstituting the history of the language families and to reconstitute as far as possible the mother languages of each family; it is a question of seeking the forces at stake in a permanent and universal way in all languages, and of identifying the general laws to which all the particular phenomena of history can be brought back; in this sense linguistics exposes in itself even its way of delimiting and defining itself.

## **II - Language and standard chosen in advance**

Upstream of the plethora of research areas of language science and linguistics, it is always possible for the record to recall to which more general set this science is attached and thus characterize the humanities by their complicated position relative to the epistemological problem of abstraction. It is a trivial way to state the problem of abstraction in the natural sciences. There are, on the one hand, tangible phenomena and, on the other hand, knowledge of these phenomena. The problem of abstraction consists in comparing the two; the resulting problematic conceals multiple philosophical questions and solutions: rationalism, empiricism, nominalism are the best known. In the case of the humanities – and therefore of linguistics in particular – an additional element must be introduced, the intellectual approach, which must be considered according to a set of elements: the psychophysiological characteristics of speech development in a person; the conscious characterizations that the person has of his linguistic activities.

The characterization of the relationships between these different types of elements determines the form conferred to the solution of the abstraction problem.

“Languages, in fact, record some of the social characteristics of the peoples who speak them. The importance of the taboos of vocabulary, of the hierarchy of words and of the towers corresponding to that of the classes has long been emphasized; the language, on the other hand, can maintain for a long time in its structure the traces of a state of ancient and outdated civilization.”

Thus emerges from this observation of WAGNER R.L (March 1948) initially published in the journal *Les Temps modernes*, quoted in SAUSSURE F., 1971, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, Payot, the idea of a language subject to a standard chosen in advance. This is confirmed by the University of Cambridge, which highlights a focus on international linguistic standards in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (C.E.C.R.L) This is an international standard that makes it possible to describe language proficiency. This work of description is de facto universal and has as its subject the learners of any country: The aim is to list the skills of the learners and thus to describe them according to an assessment scale of the mastery of a language on six levels that go from the elementary level to an experienced level.

Moreover, the norm in a language is conceived as "a prescription of grammatical rules "relating to the uses to which it belongs to achieve a relative balance in terms of aesthetic and socio-cultural ideal. Precisely, in sociolinguistics, this concept is concretized from a statistical rule of occurrences and frequency; it is then the objective norm translating the praxis of speakers in a linguistic community.

According to this founding text of structuralism, Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* in 1916, in the 1971 Payot edition, cited above, at pages 12 and 13:

“If, in relation to the idea it represents, the signifier appears freely chosen, on the other hand, in relation to the linguistic community which employs it, it is not free, it is imposed. The social mass is not consulted, and the signifier chosen by the language could not be replaced by another “.

And Saussure to consider how the linguistic sign escapes the will of everyone and draw the consequences.

First, the arbitrariness of the sign itself “protects the language from any attempt to modify it. In this regard, precisely, the multitude of signs necessary to form a language reinforces this arbitrariness because of the complexity that follows. In addition to this central idea of language subject to a predetermined norm, there is an established sociological phenomenon of all times: “The resistance of collective inertia to any linguistic innovation”.

### **III - Variations and notions of language and community**

The organization of the elements of the statement - certainly at the basis of the structure of a language - is precisely not exhaustive and can in no way be self-sufficient. It is de facto necessary to consider the idea that the essential part of language is correlated with the human subject of enunciation and the community - or society - of which it is a part. With *Communauté linguistique*, an article published by Aude Bretignie of the University of Le Mans in a special issue of the journal *Langage et société*, a language is defined according to an abstract and homogeneous conception of “language community” as Léonard Broomfield (1887-1943) calls it in his theory of distributionalism.

Linguists all recognize the universal fact of the intralinguistic variability of texts, which is complemented by inter-linguistic diversity. In this sense, the term “variation” supports the phenomenon, which has been recognized since the post-war period as a concept of language science. Precisely, the researches of the American sociolinguist William Labov 4 retain the attention insofar as they are part of the variationist current of the researchers in linguistics which refers to the method of the same name consisting in putting in direct relation language variables (for example, the partial or non-exhaustive use of the “don’t...” negation, the use of tutoring, etc.) and extralinguistic variables (gender, age or social class of individuals) in a quantitative way.

Beyond the sociolinguistics, the distributional linguistics or the variationist linguistics that characterize for the moment - and in part - this reflection, we can always agree with the variationist method to which the American Labov, considered as one of the founders of modern sociolinguistics, particularly in its quantitative component, will have devoted his research. Its considerable contribution allowed a redefinition and a better description of the linguistic variation 5, and takes several major

orientations already mentioned in this article: regional, social, stylistic or diachronic variations. His research has thus supplanted the notion in sociolinguistics where there are two areas of research on variation: one focused on the systemic and the other on discourse.

Linguistic variation is a sociolinguistic notion that incites precisely to description, contrary to Saussure's structuralist conception that buttresses on this idea that there is only one way of saying what one wants to say; Hence the Saussurian problem: is modern linguistics able to understand languages not as homogeneous systems but as systems that vary in time and space? And then, more generally, depending on situationist contexts, the descriptive conception of linguistics takes on its full meaning in the manifestation of variation at all levels of the language: lexical, morphological, phonetic or syntactic.

Beyond sociolinguistics, distributional linguistics or variationist linguistics, it is also necessary to better take into account the description that I advocate in this discipline, to the extent that it is already fundamental in the related disciplines of literature and comparative literature. For this purpose, it is a question of differentiating "variation by user" (diachronic, diatopic, diastratic variation) and "variation by use" (situationist or stylistic variations). It is also a question of describing the memory places of variation: phonetics and syntax, prosody, lexicon and morphology.

In this regard, and this is fundamental, language – whether French or otherwise – is in fact the sum of all the variations, which should be described because that is what allows a language to exist. It is therefore a matter of describing the artifacts of the existence of a language, whether universal or regional, aboriginal or indigenous. It is a question of de facto describing the artifacts of the existence of a language as can be described the artifacts of the existence of a community, in the absence of a society: the Alsatian, Basque, Bavarian, Breton, Corsican, Flemish, Occitan, Blackfoot, et cetera; French, German, British, et cetera. The artifacts under examination are - it should be remembered - related to regional, social, stylistic or diachronic variations.

#### **IV - From the French language to languages in general**

The question of the forms of the description of the French involved in its teaching is apparently sufficiently analyzed in the journals "French Language 131: Grammar of Teachers and Grammar of Foreign Language Learners" (Beacco & Pasquier, 2001) and "Language 156: Ordinary Metalinguistic Representations and Discourse" (Beacco, 2004). These studies retain a definition of grammar, they are "modes of use of languages" to provide answers to the difficulties encountered by users, but they also articulate descriptions and explanations according to a coherence that is specific to each.

Beyond the titles of the aforementioned works as examples within this set of contributions that has been part of the research space explored by the G.R.A.C team since 2010 - either "GRAMmary and Contextualization" 6 - it must be remembered that the acquisition of languages as knowledge to be transmitted requires the description of this "object-language" and its transposition aimed at passing from declarative skills to procedural skills. "Grammar activities" are guided by normative, structuring and discursive functions.

In this sense, to a study of syntactic relations are superimposed associationist operations, so that the French text is only a sum of elements susceptible to manipulations as elementary as arbitrary. In fact, Paul Claudel, a playwright, poet and essayist, wrote, "Poems are about like canons. We take a hole and put something around it. In this sense of the Latin word, the text is nothing but ruin and we conceive in this perspective that the notion of description is not advanced. Nevertheless, the idea underlying the descriptive approach is that of a natural existence of structures "in ambush".

On June 21, 2019, the Indigenous Languages Act 7 received Royal Assent, with the overall objective of helping Indigenous peoples reclaim, revitalize, maintain and strengthen Indigenous languages. This legislation was developed jointly with first nations people, the Inuit and the Métis Nation. It provides for an obligation for the Government of Canada to consult with Aboriginal peoples on a number of topics, such as funding and the appointment process for the Office of the Commissioner of Aboriginal Languages, and regulations.

Beyond this North American paradigm, it should be remembered that human language is conceived according to several modalities that are the development, acquisition, maintenance and use initially of a vocabulary and a syntax (to remain simple). De facto, this refers to the human capacity to work on linguistic processes. It is precisely these who allow a precise description of language and languages. Thus the oral languages, gestural and tactile contain a phonological system that governs how symbols are used to form sequences such as words or morphemes and a syntactic system that governs how these words and morphemes are combined to form sentences and expressions.

But even more, languages, their grammar, vocabulary, shape the way their speakers think. For example, how can we talk about the concepts of “left” and “right” with members of certain Oceanian tribes who do not have these words or ideas in their language?

## V - Linguistics as a descriptive scientific discipline

In 1916, in his *Cours de linguistique générale*, Ferdinand de Saussure was the first to take language as an object of study. He then defines linguistics as “a science whose object is language itself and for itself”. It is in this sense that a descriptive linguistics emerges because Saussure defines in his sentence the interest of linguistics: the real use of language. Thus he does not want to remain confined in the state of mind of the grammar which consists just in distinguishing the correct uses from the incorrect uses of the language. It is not really a question of locking oneself in relations of opposition or equivalence between signs linguistic. That said, I agree to recognize a language production as a sequence of signs and that is what must be described, in other words analyze: it is a question of decomposing this sequence into fragments of sentence more and more minimalised until they are not decomposable.

The enumeration of the different segmentation units thus obtained is then described and it is precisely this one that makes it possible to highlight the different descriptive levels of the language.

In this sense, the various descriptive levels in question may be listed in synchronous and diachronic studies, theoretical and applied studies or independent contextual studies:

- Phonetics: description of the sounds or phones produced by the human phonetic apparatus; phonetics is in this sense a branch of linguistics that studies phones as smaller segments of speech, from the physical point of view, physiological, neurophysiological and neuropsychological;
- Phonology: description of the sounds or phonemes of a language; phonology is the branch of linguistics that studies the organization of the sounds of language within the different natural languages. It is complementary to phonetics, which is interested in these sounds themselves, regardless of their use;
- Morphology: description of the typology and shape of lemmas; from the point of view of the stages of a language it studies, one distinguishes the descriptive (synchronic) morphology, which describes the morphological structure of the language at a given moment of its development, and historical morphology (diachronic), which studies the evolution of the morphological structure of language and its development perspectives. There is also comparative morphology, which deals in parallel with the evolution of the morphological structure of two or more languages (mainly related), trying, for example, to establish criteria that determine the typological relations between languages;
- Syntax: description of the combination of monemes to form statements and sentences; syntax is originally the branch of linguistics that studies how words combine to form sentences or statements in a language;
- Semantics: description of the meaning of lemmas, phrases and utterances; semantics is a branch of linguistics that studies signifies, what we talk about, what we want to convey through a statement, either all the processes contributing to the construction of a meaning in the expression;
- Stylistics: description of the style of a literary statement or not; can be used everywhere without ever compromising, the welcoming notion of style gave substance to an academic discipline whose status remains in debate. The work of an author, Hjelmslev considered, is the greatest linguistic unity. Traditionally obsessed with the word and the sentence, most linguists have not paid attention to this subject, because restricted linguistics, seeking to describe rules, if not to enact them, cannot conceive of describing the particular, first, the specificity of a text and a work. A return to the notion of style could allow linguistics to deepen its epistemological knowledge: would it not, like other social sciences, be a descriptive discipline, capable of thinking about the particular? Could it not pose the problem of the specificity of the texts, and for example describe, at the level of analysis that remains his, what distinguishes the work of Balzac from that of Céleste de Chabrillan? If we agree on the heuristic interest of this question, it becomes useless to declare the notion of style as preteritic, by wrapping oneself in a declamatory scientificity. It has the merit of synthetically posing two problems that linguistics must face: that of idiolectal norms, and that of the aesthetic characters of a text;

- Pragmatic: description of the use - literal, figurative or not - of utterances; pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that focuses on elements of language whose meaning can only be understood by knowing the context of their use;
- Consistency: description of consistency factors in natural language processing.

While synchronic linguistics focuses on describing languages at a given moment in their history, diachronic linguistics focuses on describing languages in the course of their evolution. It is certain that theoretical studies of language systematically seek to describe: the empirical enumeration is described. Applied studies seek instead to apply these descriptive models to other fields such as language didactics, language pathology or lexicography. Contextual studies form a field in which linguistics is interactively with other scientific disciplines. For example, it lists the ways in which language interacts with the rest of the world. Among other disciplinary derivatives resulting from this interactivity, sociolinguistics, anthropological linguistics are obviously contextual linguistics where the links between language and society are precisely enumerated and described.

In this article on language science and reflection on linguistics, it is understood that the fields of research of this discipline are plethora and it is difficult to understand the problems in an exhaustive way because each field inducing a linguistic approach it is logical not to be able to analyze a text from all angles. The European Commission has made a number of proposals. It is in any case obvious that linguistics in general is the study of languages, not to learn to speak them, as in the common sense of this expression, but to study how they work and/or how they evolve. In this sense, the descriptive linguistics considered in the last part of my reflection is interested in describing (therefore analyze) the structure of languages according to a given specific theory while so-called theoretical linguistics aims to defend a given theory using arguments based on linguistic description. But in this definition of "theoretical linguistics", its last words "knock on the glass": "using arguments based on the linguistic description "... This goes in the direction of my own study which ended on this postulate, "linguistics as a descriptive scientific discipline". The dimensions to describe linguistics in this sense include phonetics, phonology, syntax, lexicology and semantics. This is why I advocate to consider now the science of language and linguistics according to this choice of descriptive linguistics as paradigmatic linguistics.

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