JOHN RUPERT FIRTH'S MODEL OF LINGUISTICS: A CRITICAL STUDY

Basel Al-Sheikh Hussein[1]

[1]Associate Professor, Faculty of Arts/Department of English, Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Amman-Jordan

ABSTRACT

The attempt was made to clarify Firth's main interests in linguistics. His writings show that the study of 'Meaning' and 'Context' should be central in linguistics, in addition to the development of a model called 'Prosodic Analysis', where he laid out his views as to how language works and how linguists should approach its analysis. For Firth, the analysis of language comes within the range of a social theory. A general linguistic theory should then study language as a social behavior, and context within the context of culture. Firth also advocated the investigation of corpora of written texts, which can be strategically selected to exemplify a restricted language.

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Contribution/ Originality

This study contributes to the existing literature in which J. R. Firth has developed his original brand and many exciting new ideas, in addition to many concepts used in academic works on linguistics.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of Firth's fundamental ideas is his rejection of merely phonemic analysis, as practiced, for example, by Bloomfield (1933) and Trubetzkoy (1939). Some kind of segments still exist in the approach called 'phonematic units', but the phonologist can also assign features of phonetic form to 'prosodies' which are nonsegmental entities that can be tied to any piece of phonological structure. Phonematic units can be almost empty of distinctive phonological specification, if this is analysed as prosodic. 'Prosodic Analysis assumes a clear separation between 'phonetics' and 'phonology'. Phonematic units and prosodies are not assumed to have intrinsic or obvious phonetic context. They must be accompanied by statements which state and explain formally how a particular piece of phonological structure maps onto the phonetics. This means, phonologists are free to recognize a phonological system in any piece of linguistic structure, rather than needing to provide a coherent account for the whole phonological system of a language. There are no necessary expectations that the same phonological entities and systems should be relevant in, for example, both syllable onsets and in syllable rhymes, function words and lexical words, noun phrases and adverb phrases; this also illustrates the countenanced mixing of linguistic levels.

Firth also strongly attacked both mentalism and the philosophically pretentious nature of traditional grammatical categories, the reliance on logic and metaphysics, and the notion of universals. Firth's strong criticism of the traditional grammatical categories is because of the vagueness of logico-philosophical terms used in dealing with form and meaning, and because "traditional logic shows no connection with or understanding of language, or rational use of words and sentences in everyday life" (Firth, 1964). Firth also attacked the comparative- historical philosophy because of its relation to evolutionism, since, for him, the study of the origins of language only means escaping from the way we learn and use language in our everyday life.

Firth (1968) wants linguistics not to be dependent on such disciplines as logic, philosophy, and biology, because linguistics as a social science is ahead of all these sciences in theoretical formulation and technique of statement, and its findings are basic and must be carefully studied. But Firth admits that the techniques of linguistics are not advanced yet to be concerned with language in general terms. Consequently, what we need, according to him, is a general linguistic theory applicable to particular linguistic descriptions and language problems, not a theory of universals for general linguistic description. In other words, Firth wants general linguistics to adopt a psycho-somatic approach to mind and body taken together and acting in specific living conditions. In this way, the human body is the primary field of human experience and expression, still continuous with the rest of the world. Both the body and the world are a set of structures and systems that can be discovered in the whole of our linguistic behavior viewed as a network of relations between people, things, and events. If human knowledge is a function of the action of the body from within, then, Firth says, "We need to know a good deal more of the nervous and endocrine systems" (1957). Speaking, then, is an act that results not only from the function of the brain, but also from the function of the speech centers with all their connected processes and movements of the face, head, hands, plus general bodily gesture.

The author of this paper will have the attempt to reconstruct Firth's principles of linguistics from his published writings, since his position in the study of language remained fairly consistent during many decades after his death.

2. FIRTH'S LINGUISTIC PRINCIPLES

It is obvious that Firth is strongly concerned with the bodily system, personality and language through life, and so he excludes the mental side, and rejects any kind of distinction between 'Langue' and 'Parole', or 'competence' and 'performance', since language is not an autonomous entity. Linguists should focus on speech events themselves (Champman and Routledge, 2005). Consequently, general linguistics should not study language as an instrument of thought or an organ of the mind, because linguists have no technical language for mentalistic treatment. Language is a mode of action, a way of doing things and getting things done, of behaving and making others behave in relation to surroundings and situations. Consequently, the study of language is limited "to what is objective and observable in the group of life. The language behavior observed in the actual context of situation may be regarded as a manifestation of the sets, which tune themselves automatically to link selected input with appropriate output" (Firth, 1957). Linguistics then is mainly interested in persons and personalities as active participators in the creation and maintenance of cultural values. So, the human being is to be regarded not as an individual, but as a person acting in his many social roles, whose interaction is a conservative force in personality and society. Firth (1964) therefore, suggests that general linguistics should place more emphasis on our activities, drives, needs, desires, and tendencies of the body than on mechanisms and reflexes, although it recognizes them indirectly.

3. FIRTH'S POLYSYSTEMIC HYPOTHESIS

Firth is an advocate of the 'Polysystemic Hypothesis', namely a synthesis of contemporary theories, because, according to him, it may render the highly complex patterns of language clearer than the monosystemic analysis. This basic principle of Firth's Polysystemic approach, as stated in his 1957 published book, is a dispersion of meaning at a series of congruent levels of analysis, at each one of which statements of meaning are made in linguistic terms.

For Firth, linguistics must then be 'Polysystemic' and should not accept the monosystemic principle stated by linguists as a pretext for static structural formalism and mechanical materialism in linguistics. (cf. Meillet and Cohen (1952)).

As a first principle for his model of linguistics, Firth differentiates structure from system. Structure is syntagmatic and horizontal, whereas system is paradigmatic and vertical. Firth's support for this principle is clearly expressed in his words: "since systems furnish values for elements of structure and since the ordering of systems depends on structure, the exponents of elements of structure and of terms in systems (the actual shape of words or parts of words) are always consistent, though not of the same order. Elements of structure share a mutual expectancy in an order", and such an "expectancy is not only between elements of discourse", but also between "words and surrounding living space" (cited in Firth (1968)). Accordingly, a linguistic theory must be practical, since it derives its usefulness and validity from the aggregate of experience to which it must continually refer. We are participants in those activities which linguistics gets to study, and all linguists rely on common human experience to make abstractions.

Firth (1968) stresses the point that scientific facts can only exist in a theory within a system of related statements, all arising from a theory and its application. He makes this point clear through distinguishing three methods of stating linguistic facts: language under description (exemplified by texts), language of description (technical terms), and language of translation. The language of description is of necessity, since linguistics can contribute to the progressive standardization of the universal languages of science and the internationalizing of terms. Sciences try to frame international languages to serve their special needs. Thus, an orderly language is necessary to discuss language which is clearly based on orders relations, and the accurate formal description of the constituents of a language demands a highly specialized technique. For a systematic study of the languages of linguistics, Firth proposes to use the term "semantics" to describe his whole approach to language, which is to link all levels of linguistic analysis, from phonetics to lexicography, with their contexts of situations. In this way, Firth (1957) presents his approach as the means by which the processes and patterns of life and experience can be generalized in contexts of situation. Because a speech-event is an expression of the language system from which it arises and to which it is referred, we can only arrive at some understanding of how language works if we take our facts from speech sequences operating in contexts of situation which are typical, recurrent, and repeatedly observable.

Firth's linguistic approach continuously emphasizes the inevitability of the sociological component of language studies, and to make it sure, he says, each context should be placed in categories within the wider context of culture. Firth sees great possibilities for research and experiment to group contexts into types of usage and social categories applying the principle of relative frequency, or we can refer contexts to a variety of known frameworks of a more general character: economic, religious and other social structures; types of linguistic discourse such as monologue, choric, narrative, recitation, age, and sex of the participants; speech functions such as address, greetings, direction, control, drills, orders, flattery, blessing, cursing, praise, blame, concealment, deception, social pressure and constraint, and verbal contracts of all kinds. A situation is a patterned process conceived as a dynamic and creative complex activity with internal relations between its various factors. The relations in a situation may be among the participants as persons and personalities, their verbal, and non-verbal actions, and the effects of these, plus relevant objects and events. The text is seen in relation to the non – verbal constituents and the total effective or creative result. Thus, the text in contexts of situation is, for Firth, the main concern of the linguist. In whatever way, the context of situation would be a schematic construct, to be applied to language events as technical abstractions from utterances and occurrences. Since science deals with large average effects via observation, we should generalize typical texts or pieces of speech in generalized contexts of situation. We study the flux of experience and suppress most of the environmental coordination, looking for instances of the general categories of the schematic constructs. The elements of the situation, including the text, are abstractions from experience and are embedded in it. Firth

acknowledges the importance of meaning in the study of language. According to Firth, meaning must be included as a fundamental assumption and main concern: "Linguistics can attain no unity or synthesis unless we all turn to the second front of linguistic meaning" (Firth, 1968). However, meaning, for Firth, is a complex of relations between component terms of a context of situation. Only a contextual theory of meaning employs abstractions which enable us to handle language in the interrelated processes of personal and social life. The statement of meaning for whole texts is doubtless a vast subject. Therefore, Firth suggests that meaning should be split up into a series of component functions: phonetic, lexical, morphological, syntactic and situational. And so, semantic study becomes the place where the work of the phonetician, grammarian, and lexicographer is integrated. The study of meaning can then advance only if phonetics, morphology and syntax are sound. Firth emphasizes the fact that descriptive or structural linguistics deals with meaning throughout the whole range of the descriptive and at all levels of analysis. To ensure an analysis in terms of linguistics, we first accept language events as integral in experience, whole, repetitive and interconnected, and then apply theoretical schemata and make statements in terms of structures and systems at a number of levels of analysis. Firth (1968) imagines a spectrum of linguistic analysis whereby the total meaning of a text in situation is dispersed at a series of levels. Such spectrum analysis makes sure of the social reality of the data before breaking down the total meaningful intention. A theory of analysis dispersed at a series of levels must require synthesis and congruence of levels, and that all levels are mutually requisite. But the levels are only connected in that the resulting statements relate to the same language text, and the levels must be congruent and complementary in synthesis on renewal of connection with experience.

So far, it is uneasy to determine what the units of speech are. Firth remains undecided about whether the sentence and not the word is the main concern of linguistics. However, for him the sentence is neither the lowest unit of language nor a self-contained or self-sufficient unit. When we speak, we use a whole sentence. The technique of syntax is concerned with the word process in the sentence.

The indecision between word and sentence naturally carries over to Firth's views on organizing the levels of morphology and syntax. He points out that morphological categories are to be related syntagmatically and only appear in paradigms as terms or units related to elements of structure. The study of syntactical categories should consider how subordinate constituents are expressed and integrated, and how the utterance analyzes or synthesizes the aspects of a complex situation in the social conditions of employment. Firth was not in favors of general or universal grammar, because grammatical meanings are determined by their interrelations in systems set up for that language and those grammatical forms of a language are never in a strict sense parallel in another. Every analysis of a particular language must determine the values of the ad hoc categories to which traditional names are given.

Firth's own plan for a new approach to grammar turns out to be another dispersal of inquiry and statement at a series of levels. Accordingly, the description of grammatical systems entails graphematic, phonological, morphological, and syntactic criteria or functions. Instead of grammatical analysis which deals with relations of the individual words, our study should look for verbal characteristics in the sentence as a whole; after all, the categories of a grammar are abstractions from texts, from pieces of stretches of discourse. Regarding criteria for nominal or verbal categories, for example, we usually find that verbal features are distributed over a good deal of the sentence. Similarly, such categories as voice, mood, tense, aspect, gender, number, etc., if found applicable to any given language should be abstracted from, and referred back to, the sentence as a whole.

Firth (1968) excludes formal and notional criteria from grammatical or phonological levels, because he considers such criteria as fostering confusion of grammatical and semantic thinking. Instead, he introduces the 'colligation' for a 'syntagmatic relation' and 'mutual expectancy' among elements of grammatical structure. Colligations cannot be of words as such. Colligations of grammatical categories related in a given structure do not necessarily follow word divisions or even sub-divisions of words. For example, English has a category of syntactical operators like 'was', 'were', 'have', 'has', 'do', 'does', etc., which function in negation and interrogation; all negative finite verbs are

colligated with one of the operators. Syntactic analysis must generalize beyond the level of the word isolate. And since the relations of the grammatical categories in colligation do not necessarily have phonological shape, we are once more discouraged from segmental analysis of the phonemic type. The investigation of words, pieces, and larger stretches of text leads to the prosodic approach, which emphasizes synthesis and refers features to the structure taken as a whole. So far, it is obvious that Firth's approach is not as limited as traditional word studies, since it can treat issues such as syllable, structure, stress, intonation, quality, and grammatical correlation in phrase, clause, and sentence. Firth's approach also fits the view that syntax is the dominant discipline in grammar. Lexical meaning was later developed under the name of 'meaning by colligation', which is closely related to Firth's 'polysystemic approach' of meaning. According to Firth (1957) meaning by colligations is an abstraction at the syntagmatic level and is not directly connected with the conceptual or idea approach to the meaning of words. One of the meanings of 'night' is its collocability with 'dark', and of 'dark', of course, with 'night'.

Meaning by collocation clearly then implies mutual expectancy and that Firth's argument is based on words. Meaning by collocation is a syntagmatic phenomenon, which means that it should be analyzed at text level. However, collocations are not merely the juxtaposition of words: "the collocation of a word or a 'piece' is not to be regarded as mere juxtaposition, it is an order of mutual expectancy" (Firth, 1968).

Collocation then does not only concern words but phrases, compounds, or any expressions. It could be said that the meaning of any stretch of text results from the collocation with any other stretch in the same text: "An approach to the meaning of words, pieces, and sentences by the statement of characteristic collocations ensures that the isolate word or piece as such is attested in established texts. The characteristic collocations of 'key' or 'pivotal' words may be supported by reference to contexts of situation, and may constitute the material for syntactical analysis and provide citations in support of dictionary definitions" (Firth, 1957; Leon, 2007).

The collocations of selected 'key' or 'pivotal' words should then be searched in whole attested texts. In order to circumscribe the field within which collocations should be studied, Firth advanced the idea of 'restricted languages' statements of meaning at the collocational level that may be made for the pivotal or key words of any restricted language being studied. Such collocations will be found to be characteristic and help justify the restriction of the field. The words under study will be found in 'set' company and find their places in the 'ordered' collocations. In the study of selected words, compounds and phrases in a restricted language for which there are restricted texts, an exhaustive collection of collocations must first be made. It will then be found that meaning by collocation will suggest a small number of groups of collocations for each word studied. The next step is the choice of definitions for meanings suggested by the groups. Accordingly, the restricted language must be exemplified by texts, because the linguist's object of study is the language and his object of observation is the text: he describes language, and relates it to situations in which it is operating (Halliday, 1971; Butt, 2001; Brown and Law, 2002).

The investigation of words, pieces, and larger stretches of text leads to the prosodic approach, which emphasizes synthesis and refers to the structure taken as a whole. In order to state prosodic features and isolate prosodic groups, Firth favors the use of the technical resources of phonetics, both descriptive and instrumental. He argues that the systematic study of sounds is far more advanced in modern linguistics than that of prosodies. In exchange, phonological analysis, such as for the features of positions and junctions, can more profitably proceed via prosodies of words, pieces, or sentences: "Phonetics is the foundation of all study of language, whether theoretical or practical. Phonetic analysis has made possible a grammar of spoken language. Phonetics is one of the most practical of the social sciences, providing techniques for the study of utterance, systemic analysis, statement of linguistic facts, and establishment of valid texts. So morphology, syntax, descriptive grammar, and descriptive semantics must all rest on reliable phonetic and intonational forms" (Firth, 1968).Then, adequacy in the higher levels of linguistic analysis requires the same rigorous control of formal categories as in all phonological analysis; and that phonetic description should serve primarily as a basis for the statement of grammatical and lexical facts. Phonology states the phonematic

and prosodic processes within word and sentence and the phonetician links all this with the processes and features of utterance. The differential values represented in phonetic notation may have morphological, syntactical, or lexical function; and the identification and contextualization of the phonemes is important for studying forms in morphology and syntax. Grammatical classification limits and groups the data in parallel with phonological analysis: the components of some phonological categories may serve also for syntactical categories, and those of grammatical categories may require phonetic description or notation. The interrelations of the grammatical categories stated as colligations form the unifying framework, and the phonological categories are limited by the grammatical status of the structures (Firth, 1957; Beaugrande, 1993). Sounds, for Firth, only direct and control, but do not hold or convey meaning; in the normal contexts of everyday life, the sounds of speech are a function of social situations, from which meaning is largely gathered by applying an assumed common background of bodily habits.

4. CONCLUSION

Firth argued that a restricted language is sufficient to state coherent grammatical structures. His interest was in a general theory that should be made useful in describing particular languages, in dealing with specific language problems, in guiding analyses and providing principles for synthesizing the useful results of linguistic studies of the past, in understanding a serial contextualization of our facts, and in providing the main structural framework for the bridges between different languages and cultures (Firth, 1968). To meet all these tasks, Firth calls for a linguistically centered social analysis; a description of speech and language functions with reference to effective observable results; and a study of conversation to seek the key to understanding what language really is and how it works. Firth acknowledges that linguists are still far from understanding how language functions, and that the task of linguistics is increasing in responsibility (cf. Firth (1957)).

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