

# The Object Called “Language” and the Subject of Linguistics

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The trajectory of linguistics in the coming decades is likely to be shaped by how it formulates its object of study (whether as language or as some narrowly defined aspect of language) and by the corresponding breadth or narrowness with which it articulates its own epistemic project within the twenty-first-century-academy. This article discusses two epistemic projects that have shaped linguistics in the previous century, both of which survive in rather distinct institutional zones of the academy today. I diagnose some of the assumptions underlying the narrower conception of linguistics in the first of these traditions. I argue that the “linguistic turn” within the academy is, by contrast, oriented to the study of language more broadly understood. This creates difficulties for any narrowly conceived linguistics, difficulties which a broader vision of language as an object of study—and of any discipline that studies it—must strive to overcome.

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I have been asked by the organizers of this conference<sup>1</sup> to address two rather paradoxical questions, namely (quoting now from the letter of invitation) to discuss “the future direction of linguistics” and to comment on “the possibility of an integrated discipline.” The paradox is posed jointly by their presuppositions: The first question assumes that a unified discipline called linguistics already exists and is going somewhere; but the second, by calling attention to its present-day lack of integration, implies multiple—perhaps mutually exclusive—destinations. We cannot approach these questions by taking a pre-constituted discipline as our topic, nor presume that questions about its future have any meaning independently of choices about destinations. And, we cannot understand (nor choose) *where* linguistics is going without a principled understanding of *why* and *when* something counts as “linguistics” or *what* “disciplinary integration” might mean, and *how* it comes about, or doesn’t.

Linguistics is not simply “whatever linguists do.” In fact most of the activities in which linguists engage (e.g., driving to work, paying taxes) *never* count as linguistics. Activities that count as linguistics are activities oriented to particular objects of study, institutionalized audiences (journals, conferences), units of affiliation (departments, associations), and traditions of inquiry (a reference literature). The referent of “linguistics” is a sphere of activities involving language study (and its products,

such as journal articles) in which no linguist engages except some of the time. Moreover, the referent of “linguistics” is an *institutionally organized* sphere of activities, and questions about its “future” and its “integration” concern several nested levels or scales of social organization. It is obvious that the “future”-question will have very different answers depending on whether we identify the sphere of “linguistics” with activities that take place in certain departments (such as present-day university departments bearing that name), or by the disciplinary orientation of its practitioners (such as those who identify themselves, or are identified by others, as linguists) regardless of their departmental affiliation, or by facts of membership in certain scholarly associations, or as any systematic attempt to study language. The “integration”-question is precisely the question of whether such spheres of activity come together as unified projects in a given period of disciplinary history, or don’t.

It is equally obvious that the referent of the noun “linguistics” is not an ahistorical given. Over the past century or so this sphere of activities has been reconfigured periodically—sometimes in rather violent ways—by disciplinary agendas that seek to open up or curtail the kinds of activities that linguists do, even to broaden or narrow the forms of language study that *count as* “linguistics” in one or more of the institutional spheres I have just described. It is critical, then, to consider the degrees of intellectual latitude that disciplinary agendas can acquire through the constitution of their objects of study, and the ways in which their *epistemic projects* can open up or close off certain destinations for practitioners, including the integration as a field of the forms of language study to which they are committed.

The epistemic project of a discipline is not the same as its epistemological commitments (for which the term *episteme* (Foucault 1994 [1966]) is more appropriate).<sup>2</sup> An epistemic project in my sense is a *social* project of inquiry. It is that aspect of a disciplinary agenda, conceived as a social project, which is organized by the mode of constitution of its object of study. In the pages that follow I am concerned with a single question about “linguistics”: how does the mode of constitution of its object of study organize its character as a sociological sphere of epistemic activity?

My more specific goal is to invite you to consider some problems that emerge when a certain kind of object that exists in our world—an everyday, social fact called “language”—is epistemically reconstituted by disciplinary agendas that focus on a select number of its features as extractable fractions, and, by taking them as objects of study, seek performatively to constitute themselves as unified disciplines. I argue that such an “extractionist” impulse—the impulse to replace the study of language with the study of a language-fraction—runs as a thread within disciplinary “linguistics” during much of the twentieth century, particularly in its dominant “departmentalized” forms; that along with certain corollaries (discussed below) such an impulse constitutes an ideology of language (and of disciplinary modes of its study) for many leading linguists of the period, including Saussure, Bloomfield, Chomsky, and their followers; that it has continued to re-direct the energies of practitioners caught in its grip toward smaller and smaller fractions of language as ordinarily understood, and

indeed, during the closing decades of the twentieth century, toward a fraction of language so much smaller than language itself as to make doubtful its own continuing relevance as an epistemic project. And I wish to locate these problems in relation to a specific claim about the present, not the future, which I elaborate below: if a history of linguistic thought in recent times were *now* to be written, it seems clear that what happens in departments of linguistics would form only a small part of the story.

It should come as no surprise that the more narrowly linguistic departments conceive the language-fractions they study, the more perfectly they self-minoritize themselves among the disciplines that study language. My intent in what follows is not to offer a history of linguistics but to diagnose the ailment that underlies this trend. And to suggest that, for those of us inclined to choose another course, a curious ideological strain that infects many—otherwise disparate—theories and schools of twentieth-century linguistics, and which dominates many departments even today, cries out to be understood, diagnosed, and cured.

### **The Object Called "Language" and Models for Its Study**

In what follows, I use the determiner-specific expressions "the language," "that language," "a language," "some language," "any language"—as well as the plural "languages"—to refer to one or more of the kinds of socio-historical formations that we ordinarily refer to as Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, or Tagalog. When I use the generic singular "language," my intent is to say: pick any language that you like. The term has no further technical or theoretical specificity.

Language in this sense is the business of everyone. All of our affairs are conducted in it, are organized by it, are shaped and enabled through its uses. This has the important consequence that the study of *any* aspect of human affairs can be illuminated by the study of language, provided that we have a useful set of models that serve analytically as "bridging constructs"—that is, provide a revealing link or connection—between some observable feature of language and the realm of human affairs that it informs. Thus, ways of modeling *grammatical categories* allow us to connect facts of formal constituency to semantic and cultural classifications. Models of *deixis* clarify the principles whereby utterance-acts pick out entities that exist (whether independently or performatively), and which, once picked out, come to populate discourse as its "referents." Models of *style* and *register* link features of discourse to matters of social identity, relative status, and to social relations within institutionalized spheres of every kind, including those defined by legal, medical, educational, ceremonial, or scientific practices of language use (Agha 2007). Models of how *language ideologies* work allow us to see how discourses reshape social formations—nationalisms, gender relations, and even the constitution of scientific

disciplines—reconstituting them periodically in ways that serve positional interests (Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998; Kroskrity 2000; Bauman and Briggs 2003). All analytical models of language are bridging constructs in this sense, constructs that connect some identifiable aspect of language to the domain of human affairs it enables.

How many such analytical models do we need?

One standpoint on the formulation and development of such models—viewed now as bridging constructs in my sense—is that the more such analytical models we have the wider our reach in understanding and studying diverse human affairs. During the twentieth century, a common response to this standpoint was: “Yes, but it isn’t linguistics.” This incantation is not an innocent dismissal. It is an ideological stance on the study of language that serves specific positional interests. It bespeaks a particular model of discipline formation, one which links the act of restricting a subject matter to the performative self-constitution of a unified “linguistics,” and to membership in its disciplinary ranks.

Let us begin with the most influential such proposal in the history of linguistics, and the justifications given for it.

### **Disciplining Language as the “Object of Linguistics”**

Near the beginning of the previous century, Saussure argued that language must first be redefined as one of its fractions before a particular mode of its systematic study can be constituted. The singular defects of the “object of linguistics” require, according to Saussure, a singular mode of self-constitution of the discipline that studies it. It is worth looking at his reasoning in some detail. Here for example is a famous passage from the opening pages of the *Cours de Linguistique Générale*:

Other sciences work with objects that are given in advance and that can be considered from different viewpoints; but not linguistics. Someone pronounces the French word *nu* “bare”: a superficial observer would be tempted to call the word a concrete linguistic object; but a more careful examination would reveal successively three or four quite different things, depending on whether the word is considered as a sound, as the expression of an idea, as the equivalent of Latin *nudum*, etc. Far from it being the object that antedates the viewpoint, it would seem that it is the viewpoint that creates the object. (Saussure 1959, 8)

According to Saussure, the object of linguistics is uniquely defective: it is defective because it lacks a pre-formed unity, uniquely so because *other* sciences study objects “given in advance.” Given the critical role that initial definitions play in defining the object sphere of every known physical or social science, this claim,

which Saussure takes as self-evident, can only be regarded as naïve. And, unsurprisingly, this naïveté quickly leads to anxiety.

The uniquely defective character of the "object of linguistics" is due, Saussure argues, to the fact that it "always has two related sides" (Saussure 1959, 8)—it is always encountered as a thing both acoustical and articulatory, formal and ideational, individual and social, synchronic and diachronic. And this, for Saussure, constitutes a double bind: if we attend to just one side, "we fail to perceive the dualities pointed out above"; but if we attend to several sides simultaneously, "the object of linguistics appears to us a confused mass of heterogeneous and unrelated things" (Saussure 1959, 9). Moreover—and here is the moment of anxiety—neither procedure can protect the "object of linguistics" from the encroachment of other sciences:

Either procedure opens the door to several sciences—psychology, anthropology, normative grammar, philology, etc. which are distinct from linguistics, but which might claim speech [*langage*], in view of the faulty method of linguistics, as one of their objects. (Saussure 1959, 9)

This anxiety leads Saussure to articulate a proprietary stance on discipline formation, a strategy that must stake out an object of study that is distinctively its own. Linguistics must overcome its "faulty method" by re-constituting its unity as a discipline through a restrictive re-constitution of its object of study, by orienting—epistemically—not to the study of language *tout court* but to a fraction of language.

Thus, whereas Saussure is an ontological pluralist when it comes to language, and speaks of three distinct objects of potential investigation—*langage* (historical languages), *langue* (language structure), and *parole* (discourse)—and whereas, as he puts it, "The subject matter of linguistics comprises all manifestations of *langage*, whether that of savages or civilized nations, or of archaic, classical or decadent periods" (Saussure 1959, 6), he nonetheless proposes that, given all of the difficulties with the nature of *langage* as an object—its lack of pre-constituted unity, its dualities, its vulnerability to encroachment from other sciences—discipline formation within linguistics must pursue a highly restrictive strategy:

From the very outset we must put both feet on the ground of *langue* and use *langue* as the norm of all other manifestations of *langage*. (Saussure 1959, 9)

As Saussure's famous equation—"langue is *langage* minus *parole*" (Saussure 1959, 77)—makes plain, *langue* is, definitionally, a fraction of *langage*. The act of extracting *langue* from the totality of *langage* leaves as its residue the domain of *parole*. But if linguistics is to be a study of fractions of *langage*, Saussure's definitions entail the existence of two very different kinds of linguistics, a linguistics of *langue* or language structure, and a linguistics of *parole* or discourse. Yet they are not on equal footing:

One might if really necessary apply the term linguistics to each of the two disciplines and speak of a linguistics of *parole*. But that science cannot be confused with linguistics proper, whose sole object is *langue*. (Saussure 1959, 19-20)

Here the appeal to a “linguistics proper” is an explicitly normative appeal. A linguistics of *parole* isn’t really linguistics. You may pursue it if you wish, but make sure you do it in some other discipline because a linguistics of *parole* just isn’t “linguistics proper.”

My interest in this epistemic project lies in the way in which the epistemic constitution of its object of study motivates the sociological boundaries of a discipline. I am not concerned with the question of whether a discipline ought to have boundaries; I take it for granted that it must. And I am not concerned with every aspect of the Saussurean epistemic project, nor, from the standpoint of the present discussion, with Saussure’s theories of how language works. My interest lies in the reflexive organization of Saussure’s epistemic project, his proposals regarding how the object of linguistics must be re-constituted to manufacture the horizons of a discipline. Three features of this project are apparent in Saussure’s proposals.

The project is, first of all, *extractionist*: It pulls out from the totality of *langage* a fraction called *langue*, singling it out for exclusive attention. The extraction of the object of linguistics is achieved by a metonymic reduction: a part replaces a whole.

Second, it is *restrictivist* in a specific sense: it reflexively equates the boundaries of a discipline with the study of the object extracted. A Saussurean linguistics is expressly not the study of language. It is the study of *langue*. A discipline can carve out its horizons in many ways. Yet the proposal that linguistics ought not to study language is surely peculiar. Moreover, Saussure’s argument for an exclusive focus on *langue* is not an argument from a sole claim to systematic method, but from the more fragile attempt to claim a proprietary domain. Indeed, the Saussurean project achieves a disciplinary unity for “linguistics” by carving out from among all the forms of study that engage *systematically* with language in his time (viz., psychology, anthropology, and philology; Saussure nowhere argues that these disciplines are unsystematic) the forms of study that more narrowly constitute—by his metonymic reduction—the proprietary sphere of his “linguistics.” A *langue*-centric constitution of an object sphere (and its associated episteme) now articulates the epistemic (social) project of a discipline by restricting tightly the sphere of epistemic concerns that count as “doing linguistics,” and hence delimits for its practitioners, within the larger sphere of their concerns with language, *the activities they do as linguists*.

And, third, it is *exclusionist* in a correspondingly *langue*-dependent sense: all those whose interests lie beyond the study of *langue*, or language structure, are excluded from the happy few upon whom the honorific title of “linguist” may be conferred.

Saussure explicitly confides these aspects of his project in a letter to Meillet (dated January 4, 1894) in the following remarkable passage:

. . . I see more and more both the immensity of the work which is necessary to show the linguist *what he is doing*, by reducing each operation to its previously specified category; and at the same time the very great vanity of everything which can ultimately be done in linguistics. (quoted in Benveniste 1971, 33, emphasis in the original)

Notice that the extractionist goal of delimiting an object sphere ("by reducing each operation to its previously specified category") leads to "the very great vanity" of restricting what counts as *doing* linguistics (indeed, of delimiting "*everything* which can *ultimately* be done in linguistics"); and this, in turn, supplies a definition of "linguist" as a title of affiliation in a profession where one is inducted to the object extracted (through practices that "show the linguist *what he is doing*" in relation to it), and, once inducted, turns away from language toward *langue* in a subsequent professional career.

It is worth noting that Saussure's letter to Meillet is despondent in tone. Two decades before he formulated the revolutionary program of the *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, Saussure himself was deeply conflicted between the study of language and its metonym—between the study of language as an ethnographic and historical phenomenon, and the study of the language-fraction he was later to call *langue*, and which he here calls "language in general" (meaning "what is extractable from each language," not "what each language is")—and, in turn, was deeply tormented at this time by these very conflicts.<sup>3</sup> Although he proposed to Meillet that his efforts of the period would "result in a book," Benveniste (1971, 33) notes that, in the years that followed, Saussure "gradually ceased completely to write." Benveniste reconstructs this inability as deriving from the conflictual character of Saussure's own goals. He adds: "The book was never written, but it survives in rough sketches, in the form of preparatory notes, remarks tossed out rapidly, and drafts; and when he had to give a course in general linguistics in order to fulfill his obligations to the university, he would take up the same themes and bring them to the point at which we know them" (Benveniste 1971, 35).

## Saussureanism in America

The Saussurean program came to America through the work, most prominently, of Leonard Bloomfield, who wrote an influential review of Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale* in the *Modern Language Journal* in 1924; the review concludes with the dramatic assertion that, with the *Cours*, Saussure had for the first time "given us the theoretical basis for a science of human speech" (Bloomfield 1924, 319). Two years later Bloomfield wrote a far more influential article, in which he acknowledges his debt to Saussure for his "steps towards a delimitation of linguistics" (Bloomfield 1926, 154, n. 4). I am speaking now of his landmark essay, "A Set of Postulates for the Science of Language," published in the journal of the

Linguistic Society of America, of which he had been a founding member the year before. Here Bloomfield delivered himself of a manifesto that aspired to fulfill the promise of a “scientific” linguistics.

My main focus now is not on what either Saussure or Bloomfield says about particular entities within the object sphere of linguistics (phonemes, morphemes, matters of formal constituency, meaning, etc.) nor on the particular methods they propose for their study. They have dramatically different accounts of these aspects of the program,<sup>4</sup> and both their accounts are now quite dated in the sense that subsequent linguistics has, in many respects, moved beyond them.

I wish to focus instead on the epistemic projects they bring to the sociological task of discipline formation. For it is clear that the epistemic project which animates Saussure in the *Cours*—the extractionist-restrictivist-exclusionist program I have just described—is precisely the same as that which animates Bloomfield in the “Postulates” and, through him, animates all institutionally dominant schools of departmentalized linguistics in the United States in the mid-to-late twentieth-century phase of discipline formation.

Bloomfield’s “Postulates” is an axiomatics—a series of logically nested and individually numbered definitions (and corollary assumptions) in the spirit of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* and Carnap’s *Aufbau*—which seeks to constitute the entire object sphere of linguistics by articulating, through its own architectonics, a point-by-point diagram of the architecture of the discipline for which it serves as a charter. In its expository form it is as different from the often repetitive and internally conflictual contents of Saussure’s *Cours* (or, rather, of his students’ lecture notes) as any text in the history of linguistic thought. At the same time, it accomplishes the goal Saussure confesses in his letter to Meillet of “reducing each operation to its previously specified category” more perfectly than the *Cours* itself. Yet these analogies and disanalogies—which concern matters of textual architectonics—are not of primary relevance to my argument.

To see the most relevant continuity with Saussure, we need to focus, instead, on the reflexive relationship between the mode of constitution of the object sphere of linguistics and the mode of constitution of the discipline that studies it.

In the preamble, Bloomfield is concerned, much like Saussure, with establishing a proper footing with what he calls the “other sciences.” He dispatches the Neogrammarians in a footnote; he allocates concern with the question of how “social groups [are] held together by language” (Bloomfield 1926, 154) to the proprietary domains of psychology and anthropology; and he borrows from the Weissean psychology of his day, his behaviorist definition of meaning as “stimulus-reaction,” leaving everything else to psychology proper.

Mirroring the step of disciplinary extraction—the extraction of linguistics from the “other sciences”—is the parallel step of extracting the object of linguistics from the larger heterogeneous object called language. Given the hierarchically nested organization of his “Postulates,” we need consider only the first two postulates—since

these are presupposed by all the others—to see what is involved. These postulates open the second section of his article, a section titled "Form and Meaning."

The first postulate is a definition: "An act of speech is an *utterance*" (Bloomfield 1926, 154). The second postulate is a corollary assumption that introduces a criterion of likeness ("Within certain communities successive utterances are alike or partly alike" [Bloomfield 1926, 154]), and is immediately followed by an illustrative contrast involving two scenarios for producing the utterance *I'm hungry* (uttered in the first scenario by a "needy stranger," in the second by a child). All of this is a preamble to the act of extracting the object of linguistics, which proceeds as follows:

Linguistics considers only those vocal features [i.e., features of sound] which are alike in the two utterances [i.e., phonologically invariant features of sound] and only those stimulus-reaction features [his term for "meaning"] which are alike in the two utterances [i.e., only context-independent features of meaning]. (Bloomfield 1926, 154)

The object of linguistics has been extracted from language as follows: linguistics studies not utterances but those features of utterance sound and meaning that are invariant across acts of utterance.<sup>5</sup> The project is also restrictivist and exclusionist. It is restrictivist in orientation because it restricts the concerns of disciplinary linguistics to that extracted object. Hence, all aspects of utterance sound and meaning that are connected to the context of utterance production, and which might therefore indexically reveal something about the kinds of activities that are being carried out through the act of utterance (by the needy stranger, say, or by the child), lie beyond the concerns of a linguistics so constituted. And it is exclusionist because it eliminates much of the scientific study of language in Bloomfield's time from the sphere of linguistics: We are told that "the physiologic and acoustic description of acts of speech belong to other sciences than ours" (Bloomfield 1926, 154); thus phonetics is excluded from linguistics. One can only wonder what the phonetician Daniel Jones, Bloomfield's contemporary in Britain, made of all this.

Given its brevity and concision, the "Postulates" is an enormously influential attempt (in a syllable-for-syllable sense, perhaps Bloomfield's most influential attempt) to delimit the field of linguistics by enumerating its entire object sphere and, more implicitly, its epistemic project. And it is done in precisely the same extractionist-restrictivist-exclusionist mode that we have seen in Saussure.

Through Bloomfield, the Saussurean epistemic project now moves outward and spreads within American linguistics. It animates the disciplinary concerns of the neo-Bloomfieldians,<sup>6</sup> including Zellig Harris, and through him, the work of his student at the University of Pennsylvania, Noam Chomsky. In contrast to its epistemic project, the object sphere of linguistics changes in critical ways in this tradition during this period, though mainly in the manner in which its internal phenomena are conceptualized, not in its boundaries. There is an expansion from Saussure's lexeme-centric conception of *langue* to a more encompassing sentence-centric view

(in which lexemic constituents are now incorporated as sentence-partials); a shift from Saussure's focus on lexemic sense to propositional semantics (in which units of lexemic sense are incorporated as semantic primes); and a clearer understanding of levels of *langue*-internal structure, types of constituency, and matters of recursion. The object of linguistics in this tradition is still calqued on *langue*, even if it is eventually re-baptized through a series of metaphors and tropes that give its ontological status a certain shiftiness within the object sphere of the linguistics that orients to it as its domain: It is sometimes called "Language-with-a-capital-L," conceived as a psychological object (although intractable to a processing account); sometimes conceived as a mental "Faculty" linked to a metaphoric mental "Organ" (metaphoric because, unlike Descartes' pineal gland, this organ is not physiologically locatable); or as "Competence" (a form of knowledge that sits as an abstracted inner homunculus within the sum total of what an individual knows); or as "Grammar" (conceived as a formal and even "Universal" object, though the theory that describes its universal aspect changes periodically with stunning rapidity). The calculus of grammar in this tradition is still the mapping of units of form (signifiers) onto units of sense (signifieds), even though the project comes to be described as a mapping from constituency-based units of lexico-syntactic form (following Bloomfield and Harris) onto logic-derived units of propositional sense (following Frege and Carnap) and, onto what Chomsky calls, their "notational variants" (namely units of D-structural and Logical Form).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the methods by which disciplinary linguistics proceeds in it disciplinary work shifts over this period from Bloomfield's largely inductivist behaviorism (Silverstein 2006) to Chomsky's pseudo-Cartesian deductivism, thus inverting the norm of restrictive reasoning through which the dominant school of late twentieth-century linguistics pursues an increasingly elusive—and ever more obscure—object of desire.

And yet, to return to the crux of my own argument, the epistemic social project—the reflexive relationship between the mode of constitution of the object sphere and the mode of constitution of a discipline—is much the same in each of the three respects I have just discussed.

First, the same extractionist impulse unfolds under the same metonymic logic. If Saussure metonymically narrows the object of linguistics from language to *langue*, Chomsky narrows it to "grammar," and eventually, even further, to "models of grammar." Recovering the object of linguistics from its metonym, we might say that, by eschewing language for *langue*, a Saussurean *linguistique* [lɛ̃gistik] is really a *langue*-istics [lãg-istik], already at one degree of remove from language. Correspondingly, a Chomskyan generative linguistics, which redirects practitioners from the study of language to the study of a formal object that it calls "grammar," must more accurately be called a "generative grammatistics"; and which, when it moves from the study of grammar to the study of *models* of grammar, operates at two degrees of remove from language. Given this feature of the project in this phase, a number of questions—such as whether the referent of the noun "grammar" in this

technical sense corresponds to any empirical phenomenon (and, if so, precisely what aspect of human affairs it illuminates, apart from the analyst's own intuitions) or whether it is merely a formal object (and, if so, what principles constrain the formalism, and whether this question is decidable within the framework of the theory itself)—all remain sources of great contention during this period.

Second, generative grammaticistics is characterized since its inception by extraordinarily strict restrictions on the kinds of activities that count as doing linguistics (e.g., the study of one's own intuitions, and related strictures) so that here the Saussurean project of "show[ing] the linguist *what he is doing*" turns away, paradoxically enough, from what began in the discipline-forming rhetoric of Saussure as a principled re-orientation of empirical attention to a defined fraction of the observable totality of linguistic facts to what becomes, in its Chomskyan phase, the extinguishment, or better, the displacement (in the Freudian sense) of the very empirical orientation itself: the object of (what remains of) empirical attention is now the behavior of our own formalisms, and how they "react" when subjected to the stress induced by the introduction of bits of "data" carefully chosen from among the things that bump around in the Cartesian theatre of intuitions.

And, third, in its orientation to *this* extracted object, this tradition is characterized by an exclusionist impulse of such astonishing ferocity that it is typically described in histories of this period as a series of "linguistic wars" (Harris 1993)—between teacher and students (Huck and Goldsmith 1995), between formalism and formalism (Seuren 1998)—in which the Saussurean proprietary anxiety, and the epistemic project that animates it, now unfolds—within the fold of departmentalized linguistics—as internecine war.

## The "Linguistic Turn" vs. Departmentalized "Linguistics"

If we consider the position of linguistics departments within the academy, especially those dominated by generative grammaticistics, we find that they exist within an institutional landscape populated by a great many other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences that are all oriented to the study of human affairs mediated by language, but are oriented to entirely different models of language, especially models of discourse, in several modes of disciplinary constitution. It is clear that the "science of *parole*" that Saussure sought to exclude from linguistics already exists as an inter-disciplinary orientation within the academy, and in a form far richer than anything Saussure imagined—though not as a single departmentalized discipline. And it is also clear that it draws its strength and vitality from its multi-sited character, and from its location outside the zone of internecine warfare in which battles about extractabilia are waged.

To speak of the so-called “linguistic turn” in the humanities and social sciences is to speak of a vast number of intellectual projects that take up particular aspects of human affairs mediated by language, in a variety of modes of departmental, disciplinary, and inter-disciplinary organization. We might think here of the study of referring—that is, of *acts of referring* to entities in the world (at the level of *parole*)—and its implications for ontology, organized as a “philosophy of language” in the post-Strawsonian, post-Quinean mode. Or of the multidisciplinary engagements with the micro-analytics of discourse in departments of anthropology, sociology, communication, applied linguistics, and Schools of Education, oriented to a concern with the moment-by-moment use of language, and its implications for the organization of social-interpersonal activities in different institutional spheres. Or a rather different kind of engagement with “discourse”—which speaks of “discursive formations” and “discursive practices”—in a macro-sociological sense, worked out in France by Foucault, Bourdieu, and others. Or the engagement with discourse in the Anglo-American “cultural studies” tradition, inspired by the work of Edward Said and Stuart Hall among others, which connects the concerns of scholars in many departmental and disciplinary sites—including departments of English, the various European literatures, ethnic studies, history, and others—and is oriented to the recuperation of a wide range of social and historical formations (forms of nationalism and colonialism, practices of consumption, the mass media, the public sphere) through a study of their discourses. Many more such traditions that study aspects of language in systematic ways from these and other points of view can, of course, be cited. My goal here is not to review these literatures, merely to point to their institutionalized existence.

Linguists of a certain type might well say, “That’s not linguistics.” But no one cares. For the reciprocal fact is this: the “linguistic turn” is an orientation to the linguistic aspect of human affairs not toward what happens in departments of linguistics.

The growing mutual irrelevance of departmentalized “linguistics” and the “linguistic turn” is not by any means an accident. It is a principled consequence of an epistemic project, a stance on how a disciplinary (and, later, a departmentalized) linguistics can be constituted in relation to its object.

This issue can be seen more sharply by considering a rather different epistemic project, an alternative conception of the place of linguistics within the sciences.

### The Boasian Synthesis

Two decades before the founding of the Linguistic Society of America, “linguistics” was institutionalized in the United States—within a disciplinary matrix, and under that name—through the creation of the American Anthropological Association, as a subfield of anthropology. This moment of discipline constitution is linked to an epistemic project substantially different from the one we have so far been considering.

My focus now is not on the history of American anthropology since Boas, but on the way in which a Boasian linguistics reflexively constitutes its epistemic project by establishing certain connections between its object of study, its disciplinary practices, and its relation to other disciplines. To make the contrast with the above case as clear as possible, I proceed by considering the three issues on which I have focused above: How is the object of linguistics constituted? How is the activity of "doing linguistics" conceived? What is the place of linguistics in relation to the other sciences?

The first and most striking feature of this epistemic project is that the object of linguistics is never segregated from the object called language. We do not find in Boas any attempt to cordon off a fraction of language as an object of proprietary disciplinary study. The emphasis, rather, is on the ways in which the study of language can illuminate diverse aspects of human affairs. A Boasian linguistics is oriented to all of the aspects of language that Saussure differentiates by name—what we might, more neutrally, call "language structure," "discourse," and "historical languages"—but approaches their systematic study in ways that emphasize their practical interconnection in moments of empirical study and their systematic integration in the task of theory building.

Thus, a Boasian study of language structure overlaps with Saussure's interest in *langue*, but does not correspond to it, since Boas, who never extracts a virtual object like *langue* from language, seeks, from the outset, to link language structure to discourse, to historical languages, and to culture in principled ways, while Saussure does not. The Boasian study of units of language structure is linked, through the lens of the problem of grammatical categories (Boas 1911; Jakobson 1971; Silverstein 1987), to the study of denotational-cultural classifications, so that the seemingly contingent variability of classifications across historical languages (what Saussure calls *langage*) can now be studied in relation to typological-universal frameworks for grammatical categories—absent the relativistic bias created by a commitment to the so-called "arbitrariness" of units of *langue*, and absent also both the heroic fanfare about "Language-with-a-capital-L" (when this construct is proposed as a solution to the relativism of *langue*) and the solipsistic tensions characteristic of the study of *intuitions about* this construct.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the Boasian study of grammatical categories is linked, originally through Boas' interest in the psychophysics of perception but now in more sophisticated ways (Lucy 1992), to the question of how perceivable entities are sorted into classes (as members of these classes) and thus to the question of how indivisible referents may be extended, or picked out, by the deployment of these units in discursive acts (at the level Saussure segregates as *parole*). The study of language structure is, moreover, ordinarily conducted by the Boasian field linguist alongside the study of contextualized discourse through the collection of texts in various genres (narrative, folklore, and myth are pre-eminent in the original Boasian repertoire), a practice which practically and theoretically makes plain that discourse is not the realm of mere contingency (as Saussure conceived *parole* to be)

but is itself configured by principles of organization (involving genres, cultural practices, and institutions) of a kind entirely unlike grammatical organization.

When language structure is approached at the intersection all of these points of view, it is readily seen that grammatical categories are merely “text-defaults” of discourse—that is, that they are intensional patterns of form and sense realizable as token-level defaults in discourse, but are also readily defeasible (partially cancelable in form and sense) through co-occurrence effects with other tokens at the level of discourse (Agha 2007, chs. 1-2); and, given these and other modes of their variability in discourse, that contrasts among them are readily linked through cultural-internal forms of re-analysis to models of conduct, including contrastive models of conduct that differentiate social-interpersonal registers of a language (Agha 2007, ch. 3). Indeed, the study of grammar in this tradition is a study of relationships mediated by grammatical patterning among different levels of the organization of language as discursive and cultural form, and differs essentially in all of these ways—as in every other, dependent respect—from a sterile grammaticistics of formalisms.

And, finally, the study of language is also the study of a historical formation in this tradition, a thesis which Boas elaborated initially in his arguments against racist forms of “evolutionism” in his time—demonstrating the incoherence of each element of the view that language-race-and-culture “co-evolve” as a bundle, that the mental evolution of a race may be said to correspond to the degree of evolution alleged to its language—thus formulating, as intrinsic to the epistemic project of linguistics in this mode, the question of how language is to be located within the larger orbit of social history, and the study of language connected to the study of sociopolitical frameworks that motivate projects of minoritization, dominance, and exclusion from spheres of participation in civil society.<sup>9</sup>

We can see that whereas the Saussurean epistemic project (continuously, through its Bloomfieldian and Chomskyan phases) restricts the activities of the linguist to the study of a language-fraction (indeed, that its restrictivist commitments emerge to protect its extractionist impulse, as I suggest, even though some have used the term “science” for such commitments), the Boasian project expands the forms of language study that count as doing linguistics (or, the forms of language study in which linguists engage *as linguists*) simply by treating different aspects of language not as proprietary objects of study but as levels of analysis to be integrated with each other in the course of “doing linguistics.” That this epistemic project is *expansionist* (in what counts as “doing linguistics”) follows from the fact that it is integrationist (in what counts as “language”).

Finally, from the standpoint of its sociological organization, this way of “doing linguistics” is intrinsically *collaborative*. Boasian linguistics is originally conceived as an intellectual enterprise within a “four field” conception of anthropology: Boas sought in his own time to bring four otherwise disparate fields—ethnology, linguistics, physical anthropology, and archaeology—together into a single disciplinary conversation by giving them common cause in the effort to understand, under the

caption of "culture," human custom and mentality as historically continuous yet geographically diverse patterns of sociability. These commitments entail that the epistemic project of a Boasian linguistics involves, from the outset, a collaborative enterprise that links the study of language to other forms of social scientific study. And given its expansionist commitments in the realm of what counts as "doing linguistics" such a project is, by its nature, an open project, always susceptible to extension, in each generation, to forms of the study of language in human affairs with which previous generations of practitioners have not focally engaged, without losing its unity as an epistemic project.

The epistemic project of a linguistics thus conceived seeks to bring about several forms of intra- and inter-disciplinary unity. It seeks theoretically to integrate diverse aspects of language with each other (unifying them as coherent objects of study); it seeks practically to expand the sphere of activities that concern the linguist (unifying them as a sphere of disciplinary, if not always departmentalized, study); and it encourages collaborative engagement both within and outside departmental boundaries (hoping thus to create common cause among diverse projects engaged with the linguistic aspect of human affairs).

## Conclusion

It is evident that the two epistemic projects I have just discussed both exist as forms of "doing linguistics" today, though in somewhat distinct institutional zones of the twenty-first century academy. If the "history of linguistic thought" orients to what has gone before, the historically informed "sociology of knowledge" that I have attempted here to sketch seeks to show that questions about the future of linguistics, far from being answerable through predictions, are questions about the kinds of choices available to its practitioners within the sphere of their disciplinary concerns, but also in the institutional context in which these concerns are located.

I have argued that this institutional context is defined partly by what practitioners in adjacent disciplines pursue as *their* objects of study. But it is also a context that unfolds as a future through the training of students. The referent of the expression "linguistics in the twenty-first century" is not something that can be discerned or decided by you or me, now, in the year 2007. For what is likely to be included or excluded from its sphere during this century and beyond depends critically on the kinds of epistemic projects that end up being reproduced through the training of scholars, serially, over generational time.

Although I have made plain where I stand in relation to these projects, it is evident that the question of whether linguistics has a future, and of what kind of future it has, is really up to all of us. It depends, in my opinion (and that is all this essay can attempt to be: an opinion), on how we (severally) engage in the training of our students and on where we (collectively) manage to strike a balance with respect to

the following question: Will we end up seeking “to show the linguist *what he is doing*” in a largely extractionist-restrictivist-and-exclusionist mode, or in the more frankly integrationist-expansionist-and-collaborative mode that I advocate. And here, it seems to me, we must look not to the specific ways in which Saussure or Boas made their choices in their time, but to ours in our own.

Meanwhile, in the sphere of the institutionally multi-sited disciplinary agendas that unfold as projects all around us—each a serious intellectual engagement with the object called “language,” whether you like it or not—and from the standpoint of the cycles of scholars that will issue *seriatim* from present-day choices and from choices made tomorrow, the real question—a question that the above discussion allows us to pose more clearly now—is this: to what extent will those who call themselves “linguists” (in these various zones) be participants in the conversations that ensue as the object called “language” reclaims its own?

## Notes

1. These remarks were originally written for a conference titled “Linguistics in the Twenty-First Century” at the University of Georgia, September 27-29, 2006, Athens, GA. I am immensely grateful to the organizers, Bill Kretzschmar, Csilla Weninger, and Claire Andres, for the invitation to present this material, and for their hospitality during the conference. In revising these remarks for publication, I have preserved the oral and informal tone of the original presentation in certain passages. I also wish to thank Robert E. Moore, whose very substantial comments on an earlier draft have improved the present version enormously.

2. An “episteme” is that aspect of an epistemic project that is organized by a discipline’s orientation to an object sphere (the entities it studies) through specific models, methods, research questions, and things that count as “data” in relation to those questions. Epistemic projects periodically reconfigure disciplinary epistemes because an “epistemic project” (in my sense) is characterized not merely by an orientation to an object sphere through an episteme, it is also organized as a social project involving the scholarly lives of people linked to each other through that object sphere, such scholarly lives themselves being characterized by participation in specific “units” of affiliation at different levels of social organization and by corollary facts of exclusion. Epistemic projects are promoted by schools of thought (e.g., as these find a foothold in particular departments, and especially when they come to dominate them) and, if successful as projects, are reproduced through the intake and training of students, for a time, as their ongoing disciplinary commitments. But the success or failure of such projects also depends on a number of other factors, such as the extent to which their discoveries are usable by others; on what scholars in *adjacent disciplines* are doing in relation to partly overlapping objects of study; and on the extent to which *their* epistemic projects succeed or fail in unifying (integrating) practices of language study through the mode of constitution of their objects of study.

3. Saussure’s torment is evident in the two sentences that immediately follow the one cited above:

It is ultimately only the picturesque aspect of a language, that which makes it different from all others in that it belongs to a certain people having certain origins—it is this almost ethnographic aspect which still holds an interest for me, and as it happens, I no longer can take any pleasure in devoting myself up to this study without remorse and in enjoying a particular fact which depends on a particular environment. The absolute ineptness of current terminology, the necessity to reform it, and, in order to do that, to show what sort of subject language in general is, come incessantly to spoil my pleasure in history, although I have no dearer wish than not to have to concern myself with language in general. (quoted in Benveniste 1971, 33-34)

4. There are profound differences and discontinuities in the entities that comprise the *object sphere* of linguistics for these writers, and in the manner in which these entities are defined and studied within a scientific (Foucauldian) *episteme*. Although Saussure is critical of the native speaker's "nomenclaturist" view of language, his own view of language is essentially word-centric, a view that Bloomfield rejects in favor of a sentence-centric conception of language in his review of the *Cours* and in his "Postulates." Saussure's own view of phonology in the *Cours* is extraordinarily simplistic (as Jakobson [1978] notes), and his phonetic notation inadequate (as Bloomfield notes in his 1924 review); indeed, it was only later that Bloomfield and Sapir (and their successors) built on a Saussurean framework of assumptions a more adequate conception of phonology, a structural phonemics, whose elegance and analytic power far exceeded anything Saussure had imagined. With regard to meaning, a Saussurean *signified* is essentially a word-concept defined in the *Cours* within the framework of an already antiquated associationist psychology; Bloomfield's own commitments with regard to meaning are anchored in the behaviorist psychology of Albert Paul Weiss (Bloomfield's colleague at Ohio State University), and the doctrine of operationalism derived from the work of the physicist Percy W. Bridgman. These differences make plain, in other words, that the object sphere and the scientific methods to which Saussure and Bloomfield are committed differ enormously, and these differences must be kept in mind as we observe that their "epistemic project"—as I have defined this term in the text—is much the same.

5. The condition of invariance is supplied, on Bloomfield's behaviorist and operationalist assumptions (see n. 4), by the idea that "meaning" is the series of sensoria observable as "reactions to stimuli," including sensoria such as utterances. Any notion of sound or meaning not reducible to a stimulus-response series belongs to what Bloomfield calls "non-linguistic shades of sound and meaning" (postulate 5) and is, thus, effectively eliminated from the object sphere of linguistics.

6. In his commentary in *Readings in Linguistics*, Martin Joos (1957, 18) offers the following remarks about Saussure's influence on American descriptive linguistics of this period:

His contribution is rather a whole mode of thought, a whole structure of interests and values, within which all the central discussions of linguistics today remain . . . On the other hand, most details of his doctrine have been replaced by others. Thus it is in general possible to say, of any single paragraph of a modern linguistic treatise, both "This is de Saussure" and "This is not de Saussure" with reference to the same doctrine.

Speaking of the authors whose work he has collected in this anthology, Joos adds: "At least half of these authors had read the *Cours*. The others got it second-hand: in an atmosphere so saturated with those ideas, it has been impossible to escape that. The difference is hard to detect, and it is generally unsafe to accuse a contemporary linguist of not having read the *Cours*, as has happened to me."

7. The series of metaphors, and contention around metaphors, through which this project unfolds for its practitioners need not concern us here. However, two things are worth noting in this connection. First, what Lakoff calls "the commitment to the central Chomskyan metaphor, namely, that a language is a formal symbol system (in the technical sense)" (quoted in Huck and Goldsmith 1995, 109) is rooted in the attempt to extend Carnap's proposals for a "logical syntax" (which Carnap [1937, §1] defines as "the system which comprises the rules of formation and transformation" of "artificially constructed symbolic languages") by Chomsky to naturally occurring languages (which, Carnap himself had argued, cannot be studied in these terms given their "unsystematic and logically imperfect structure") by cleverly defining "Language" as a formal symbol system of an analogous kind, and by re-defining the portion of "language" that "linguistics" studies as "Language." Here a metonymic re-definition is laminated on a metaphorical calque. Second, this tradition is characterized by a series of terminological equivocations through which new metaphors are used to justify old ones, and new cycles of contention arise when their metaphorical character is not grasped by critics. Paul Postal has this to say about Government and Binding theory:

They have no notion of semantics whatever. They have adopted some notations that look like the predicate calculus and use terms like "logical form," but in reality none of it has anything to do

with the representation of meaning. They're pretty explicit about that, that there is no requirement that sentences with the same meaning have the same logical form, for example. And their so-called logical forms are filled with all sorts of things that have nothing to do with logic, like actual words from particular languages. (quoted in Huck and Goldsmith 1995, 109)

8. When a discipline that studies intuitions lacks a theory of where its intuitions come from (see Agha [2007, 1-13] for a discussion of this point), conflicts among intuitions reportable as "data" readily devolve to interpersonal tensions. Ray Jackendoff describes a dispute between Noam Chomsky and Joan Bresnan regarding "unbounded deletions" as having taken the following form:

That's one that never got settled, really. It ended up with crucial examples that were completely weird, with Chomsky saying, "They're OK for me," and Bresnan saying, "They're bad for me." And that's where it sat. And nobody ever came back to that at all. (quoted in Huck and Goldsmith 1995, 105)

9. In contrast, Chomsky, who is widely known as both a political activist and a linguist, has long confessed that he sees no theoretical connection between the two spheres of activities in which he finds himself to be engaged. Whereas the study of the relation between language and sociopolitical formations is a central theoretical concern of a Boasian linguistics (see Bauman and Briggs 2003 for a recent example), the orientation of the "linguist" to a language-fraction in the other tradition ensures that a great portion of his own activities lie outside the sphere of his linguistics, simply because the bridge between language and politics cannot be located on any map consistent with his epistemic project, no matter how avid his desire to cross it.

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