

Book reviews

Peter Matthews: *A Short History of Structural Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. x þ 163 pp. Hardback ISBN 0-521-62367-7, USD 59.95; Paperback ISBN 0-521-62568-8, USD 21.95.

This book is less a history than an attempted expose´ of structural linguistics, and a strangely biased one at that. Since the author, who until a few years ago was professor of linguistics at Cambridge University, conceives of structural linguistics as largely a thing of the past, the treatment had, of necessity, to be colored by some historical perspective, but that is all there is in the way of historiography. The book is, in fact, a loosely structured collection of not very coherent lectures purporting to relate or summarize what other authors, most of them dead or no longer active, have said about various linguistic matters. Apart from the introduction, the chapters are entitled “Languages,” “Sound systems,” “Diachrony,” “The architecture of a language system,” “Internalised language,” “Structural semantics,” and finally “Structuralism in 2000.”

The question of what structuralism actually is, is broached in the introduction but not answered. The same fate befalls the question of what a language is in Chapter 2. The question of what constitutes language in general is not raised at all. The book is thus about (the history of) an undefined way of studying an undefined object or collection of objects.

The selection made from structuralist linguistic authors is heavily biased in favor of Europe. But even so, the treatment of European authors is fragmentary. Important French structuralists like Benve´niste, Guillaume, or Tesnie`re are not mentioned. Some American authors are discussed, but, alas, poorly. Bloomfield, for example, is mentioned a few times, but nothing at all is said about his system of grammar, which revolves around the notion of immediate constituent analysis. This is curious, to say the least, since it is this core notion in Bloomfield’s work that shaped American structuralism and led directly to Zellig Harris’ distributionalism and its natural sequel, early generative grammar (Seuren

1998: 203–233). In general, grammar is badly neglected in the book, the emphasis being on early phonology and lexical forms and meanings.

The treatment of phonology is again haphazard and woefully inadequate on the developments in America. Sapir and Bloomfield are still mentioned, though in bleak and uninspiring terms, but there is nothing on the American classics of the 1930s such as Swadesh, Chao, or Twaddell, to mention just three. Chomsky and Halle's 1968 *The Sound Pattern of English* is mentioned only once (p. 93). Here one is unbelievably told that in this book "the features of which [linguistic signals] were said to be composed refer . . . to postures of the vocal organs by which speech is produced," a form of representation that the author, without further comment, classifies as being "in the tradition of Saussure's 'acoustic images' "!

It would be easy to carry on in this vein. The main point, however, apart from the baffling lack of organization, is that the author has failed to take the necessary distance from his object. There is no critique of the positions discussed: all one gets is summaries. But above all, none of the developments is placed in a wider intellectual or cultural context. There is not even an attempt at investigating the nineteenth century roots of European and American structuralism. Behaviorism is never mentioned, despite its crucial role in American structuralism. Introspection as a method of verification does not occur in the book, despite its crucial role in European structuralism. There is total silence about the mathematical turn initiated by Harris during the 1940s and taken over by his student Chomsky. The cognitive revolution that took place in America, especially at Harvard, during the 1950s and 1960s, with its swing to a computational notion of the mind, is painfully absent, though that is where Chomsky found his main inspiration after he had been taught by Harris. And so forth.

One wonders what made the author write this erratic and insignificant book.

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Reference

- Seuren, Pieter A. M. (1998). *Western Linguistics. An Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.