

I am working on a new, up-to-date edition of my textbook *Schools of Linguistics*, first published in 1980 and translated into several languages. I have already placed a draft replacement for what was chapter 1 on lingbuzz, under the title “Linguistics begins: the biological paradigm”; here is a draft of a largely new introductory chapter, which is largely about how the constraints on all scholarship have changed since 1980. As always, any comments would be very gratefully received at my e-mail address sampson@cantab.net, and the eventual published book will acknowledge any such help I use.

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Introduction

The study of linguistics has grown up in many widely separated parts of the Western world. Often one individual or a small group of original minds has founded a tradition which has continued to mould approaches to language in the university or the nation in which that tradition began; between adherents of different traditions there has usually been relatively limited contact. Nowadays contacts are far easier than they were before the introduction of the Internet – but that “before” covers all but a tenth or less of the period when linguistics has existed as a distinct discipline, generating the ideas that we’ll examine in the following pages. And anyway, the Internet may have made it easy for scholars who want to communicate with one another to do so despite distance, but it has not abolished their propensity to link themselves into in-groups who talk and message a lot to one another but little to members of other groups, even if in-group members are geographically more scattered these days.

Hence this book. It cannot fail to be an advantage to any student of linguistics (whether a “student” in the formal or the amateur sense) to learn something of the ideas that have been current in traditions other than the one with which he is most familiar. This is not only because some of the ideas he has been taught as received truth may be wrong (though that may well be so). But also, in many cases one school has directed its attention to issues which simply have not been considered by another school, so that one can gain by studying other orthodoxies without necessarily rejecting any elements of one’s own. Furthermore, it is impossible fully to appreciate a scholar’s ideas without some understanding of the intellectual atmosphere within which, and in reaction to which, those ideas were evolved; so that one needs to learn something about past theories if only, in some cases, to see why they were wrong. I have had the fortune, during my time as a student and later as a teacher at many different universities in Britain, America, Europe, and Africa, to be exposed perhaps more than most academic colleagues to a variety of linguistic orthodoxies in their respective native habitats. (In case partisans of one school or another should feel tempted to refer to the proverb about Jack of all trades, let me say that to my mind by far the greater danger in scholarship is not that the individual may fail to master the thought of a school but that a school may succeed in mastering the thought of the individual.)

I have limited this book to “core” linguistics, excluding various branches of the field which seem to me peripheral. Subjects such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology are discussed when they are particularly relevant (as they often are) to

the linguistic theories of given schools. But there also exist brands of “hyphenated linguistics” (socio-linguistics, psycho-linguistics, and the like) which involve investigating the relationships between, for example, sociology and a current linguistic theory irrespective of whether that particular version of linguistics forces one to think in sociological terms. Such studies can be quite legitimate, but I ignore them here. And in a book of this size it is not possible to do more than sketch broad, general tendencies of thought shared, more or less, by sizable groups of linguistic scholars. Happily, scholars do not come in well-defined categories. Some individuals mentioned here conform more clearly than others to the tendencies I ascribe to their “schools”; even those who seem easiest to categorize will often be found to have made remarks at some point in their careers which, taken in isolation, might appear to place them in a different camp altogether.

I have not hesitated to allow my own views about the various issues treated in the book to become apparent, although I hope to have avoided the danger of confusing my views with those of the various writers I discuss. A book of this kind does its readers more service by offering reasoned judgements with which they may agree or disagree, than by treating each figure and each school at their own self-evaluation and thus leaving the reader no wiser than if he had been given a bibliography and left to read the sources for himself. Furthermore I have not striven, as scholars often do, to eradicate all expression of the personal tastes, foibles, and unscientific prejudices which may have affected my judgement of the issues discussed. As an admirer of the philosophy of Imre Lakatos, I regard such a procedure as positively undesirable, serving only to lend to the writer’s work the appearance of an impartial authority which no product of a human mind possesses in reality. It goes without saying that the reader should feel free to disagree frequently and strongly with my opinions.

The original edition of this book appeared in 1980. Down the years, readers who have found value in it have more than once asked me whether I had plans to bring it up to date, but for a long time that idea seemed to me premature. Now, more than forty years later, the field has developed sufficiently, with new schools of thought emerging, to make putting together a new edition worthwhile. But this means I need to say something about developments since 1980 in academic life in general. When one looks at a topic as broad as the various currents of opinion and ideas holding sway at different times within an academic discipline, one needs to be aware that those intellectual currents are likely to be heavily influenced by changes in the material circumstances that academics find themselves in. And it happens that, over recent decades, two very significant changes in those circumstances have occurred.

One highly positive change has already been mentioned: the creation of the Internet, which has been a huge benefit to scholarship in every discipline – it is hard these days to remember how difficult it used to be to gather together all the pieces of evidence on which scholarship depends. But the other is much less happy: a radical, once-in-a-lifetime transformation in the nature of universities, which is very familiar to any professional academic who has lived through it, but much less so to members of the general educated public, or to the present generation of students. When I wrote the 1980 edition, universities everywhere had been doing much the same kind of work under similar conditions for several generations past, and I could assume that readers were broadly familiar with the nature of scholarly activity. That assumption

has ceased to hold; readers will not understand some of the developments in linguistics which we'll meet in later chapters unless they have some awareness of the nature of this change.

In essence it was a response to the fact that university systems had greatly expanded in the prosperous 1960s, and had begun to look unaffordable as financial stringency set in at the end of the 1970s. In Britain, the country I know best, the response can be dated precisely to 1985, though its full effects took years to work themselves out as dons used to older ways gradually retired and were replaced by younger academics who took the new régime for granted. Elsewhere the timing was different – American universities had undergone similar developments earlier, in continental Europe they seemed to occur rather later than in Britain – but everywhere in the Western world higher education followed essentially the same trajectory during my working life.

The British response to the financial squeeze was to set up a committee chaired by a businessman, Sir Alex Jarratt, to look into the workings of universities and to recommend reforms.¹ The Jarratt Report was published in 1985; for the ordinary academic, the most significant passage was sec. 3.41, which observed that some dons' primary loyalty was to their subject while others' was to their institution, and urged that all must learn that the former stance was wrong and the latter right. "We stress that ... universities are first and foremost corporate enterprises to which subsidiary units and individual academics are responsible and accountable." To maximize the value they produce for society from the resources allotted to them, universities must be made to compete with one another in the same way as commercial firms compete.

And so it came to pass. A present-day British university will still have an academic as Vice-Chancellor, since that is what the outside world expects to see, but immediately below him or her the institution is in effect run not by senior academics, as was the case before, but by a cadre of professional managers, who care about balance sheets rather than academic concerns, and who see the professors and lecturers as employees to be used to improve the balance sheets. This has transformed all aspects of university work, and (as always when new policies are introduced) the Law of Unintended Consequences has kicked in so that the changes are not always anything that Sir Alex's committee is likely to have wanted.

For present purposes, what matters is the effects on what academics write and publish.

In the first place, they write far more. Not everyone who makes a good teacher is also inspired to develop original ideas about his discipline. Plenty of fellows of Oxbridge colleges used to have very satisfying careers, spending long hours teaching undergraduates one-to-one, but publishing little or nothing. That kind of career is no longer available. Published research is one measurable "output" from academic institutions, so academic staff are pressed to publish; every editor of a learned journal nowadays is faced with a tsunami of submitted manuscripts. But if someone who would not have chosen to write spontaneously puts together an article because his employers require it, the article is not likely to be valuable. Identifying significant new developments in linguistics (or in other disciplines) these days involves searching for rare nuggets of gold amid a fair amount of dross.

1 Sir Alex was chairman of Reed International, a magazine and trade book publisher; it later merged with Elsevier, and in 2015 the merged company was renamed RELX.

Furthermore, academics now write for each other rather than for the outside world. At least in the humanities and “social sciences”, it used to be fairly clear that pursuing the disciplines was scarcely worthwhile unless the ideas that emerged said something to people who were not themselves professional academics – students (most of whom came to university to learn to think systematically more than to learn a specific subject), educated readers among the general public, and in relevant cases policy-makers. But writing for these audiences is about disseminating existing ideas rather than unveiling new ideas, so it barely counts as “research”; it is given little weight when the research prowess of institutions is being assessed. The writing which a modern academic is pressed to produce is writing intended to be read only by professional colleagues in the same discipline.

And not even all of that writing “counts”. One of the most important services which learned journals provide used to be printing reviews of new books, enabling scholars to keep up with developments beyond the narrow boundaries of their particular special subject. It was not unusual for a book review to contain more intellectual value than the book reviewed. But writing reviews is not a competitive activity (editors choose who to send review copies out to, the recipients have not competed for scarce space in the journal), so it is discounted when scholars and their institutions are assessed; and consequently academics take the task less seriously. Fewer reviews appear, often written by very junior academics who are glad for any chance to get into print but are not yet experienced enough to produce an insightful response to the book they review. But then, why would a modern academic want to keep abreast of work in areas adjacent to his own? What his employers want from him is a stream of writing on his special subject: academics are encouraged to become people who know more and more about less and less.

So long as some particular style of research is accepted as valid by a narrow community of colleagues, the system encourages it, irrespective of what outsiders would make of it should they encounter it (they won't). When a university department periodically shows up its recent research outputs, to be assessed as evidence justifying future allocations of public funding, the assessors are academics pursuing the same subject in other institutions – who else could do it? So we find coterries of academics pursuing ideas that intelligent outsiders might find too far-fetched or silly to take seriously. So long as the academics agree with one another that the kind of work they are jointly doing is worthwhile, the system will smile on them. Nothing here is about linguistics in particular. This kind of problem arises in many humanities subjects (though far less in the sciences, where criteria for valuable research are more objective) – many cases are discussed e.g. by Sampson (1989), Sokal and Bricmont (1998), and Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020). But it certainly does arise in linguistics. Reading later chapters in this book, it will be worth bearing in mind that just because some approach to linguistics has attracted the loyalty of professional academics in various institutions and countries, we are not bound to believe that there is necessarily much substance in it.

Again, the nature of academic publication is influenced more heavily than it used to be by student numbers. Established humanities dons are teachers as well as researchers, and their writings are connected with what they teach; how many teaching staff are employed in a given discipline, or a given branch of a discipline, is determined by the ability of that area to attract students, in a market where institutions are competing to fill student places. In linguistics it happens that there is

a flourishing market for degrees in the teaching of English as a foreign language. All over the world speakers of other languages need or want to learn English, and their societies are happy to pay for teachers to gain professional qualifications in that area of pedagogy. Consequently many staff in linguistics departments teach “applied linguistics” – linguistics applied to language-teaching. Like all university teachers, they are expected to publish on their specialism. A glance down a list of new books suggests that a very high proportion of the linguistics books coming out these days are about this branch of the subject.

But there is obviously no logical reason why special subjects which attract plenty of students must coincide with specialisms that are proving fertile in new research ideas. Some of the work that has come out from the applied-linguistics area is certainly interesting; I think for instance of the mother-and-son team Frances Syder and Andrew Pawley on the difference between grammatical accuracy and native-like naturalness (Pawley and Syder 1983), or Henry Widdowson (1993) analysing complications in the concept of linguistic correctness, or Kenneth Hyland and John Milton (1997) on differences in the degree of assertiveness with which written arguments are expressed in various languages. But individual findings like these do not add up to a well-defined overall “school” of linguistics (which is no criticism of the applied linguists). If I had considered just the quantity of published writing emerging, I would have been more than justified in devoting a chapter of this edition to the applied linguistics area, but in practice I have not found an adequate basis there for a separate chapter.

One particularly serious consequence of the new academic régime has been a certain degradation of the ethical climate in which academic work takes place. Before, a don with a pet theory might be tempted to exaggerate the evidence for it, or not to search too hard for counter-evidence, but this was too weak a motive to lead many into consciously bending the facts. The institution of academic tenure was deliberately set in place to protect dons from the fear that the content of their teaching or their research might endanger their livelihood. But tenure has been weakened; and in any case the traditional scenario, of a learned academic burying himself in the library stacks for several years before emerging to publish a single-author book which is greeted as an important advance in his discipline, if not yet entirely dead has certainly been moribund for decades. Nowadays much of the research work occurring in a university is carried out by research assistants on temporary contracts, whose continuity of employment is entirely dependent on the ability of the leader of their research group to go on winning grants from a finite pot, in fierce competition with his peers in other institutions. And to be taken seriously by those peers, the leader needs to interact with them regularly at international conferences, the costs of which come out of the same grants or research contracts. The leader’s own responsibility often has more to do with searching for funding and with writing up the results of work done than with doing the actual research. If one’s department or professional grouping is heavily involved with some particular theory or intellectual approach, there is now a strong motive for suppressing any development that risks undermining that particular theory or approach. Priorities have tended to shift away from “Discover the truth” towards “Ensure our side wins its intellectual debates, right or wrong”.

That is not to say that modern academics have forgotten about respect for the truth, of course; but it is now just one consideration to weigh in the balance against

others, and individuals differ in the weights they attach to various considerations. Surveying changes he had witnessed in the academic profession since the years around 1980 when he was vice-chancellor of London University, at the end of the twentieth century Noel Annan remarked bluntly “The dons had become liars” (Annan 1999: 294).

That was a sweeping generalization which I imagine Lord Annan intended to be taken as hyperbole, in a book which aimed to entertain as well as to instruct. Nevertheless, some examples of the new standard of professional ethics have been extreme. When the Covid-19 pandemic began in 2020, some experts thought it likely that a man-made virus had accidentally escaped from a lab, but a chorus of leading scientists insisted that it was ignorant scaremongering to suggest that the virus could be man-made. An open letter in *The Lancet* (Calisher et al. 2020) by 27 public health scientists (one of whom had links with the lab in Wuhan seen as a possible source) announced “We stand together to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin.” For several months Facebook banned posts mentioning the lab-leak idea as “fake news” (Hern 2021). But in 2022 e-mails came to light from two years earlier between the heads of the British Wellcome Trust and the U.S. National Institutes of Health and National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, showing that they recognized from the beginning that the virus was likely to have been man-made, but suppressed the idea because it would “do unnecessary harm to science” (Knapton 2022). In other words, the interests of their profession took precedence over discovering the truth about an event that was to turn all human life upside-down across the planet.

Nothing in linguistics has been as ethically contentious as that: nothing in linguistics matters as much as a global pandemic. But we too have had our scandals.

In 2002, an evolutionary biologist at Harvard, Marc Hauser, collaborated with two linguists, Noam Chomsky and Tecumseh Fitch, to co-author an article on the biological bases of human language (Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch 2002) which became one of the most-quoted contributions to linguistics: in January 2022 Google was listing it as “cited by 6592”, a very high number. A central issue for linguistics in recent decades, which we shall be looking at in chapter 00, is how far the human ability to master language depends on specific inherited neural structures evolved for that purpose, as opposed to general mechanisms for learning anything. One way to approach this question is to ask whether such language-like behavioural abilities as are found in other species are concentrated in species which are close to Man in the evolutionary tree. Hauser was regarded as an authority on that: his lab at Harvard was involved in cognition experiments with monkeys, and the 2002 article drew heavily on those findings.

A few years later, some of Hauser’s researchers found the courage to complain to the authorities at Harvard that their professor seemed to be grossly falsifying the results of his monkey experiments. The university mounted an investigation which took several years; its detailed findings remain secret, but in 2011 it announced that Hauser had been found responsible for multiple instances of scientific misconduct. Hauser resigned from Harvard and found work in the private sector. (On this episode see e.g. Gross 2012.)

The significant thing about this scandal is not that it happened, but that it does not seem to have affected attitudes to Hauser’s research as much as one might have supposed. There has been no lessening of the rate at which academic authors quote

the 2002 paper – if anything the rate has increased.² Hauser and others went on to co-author a new article on the same general topic which was published in 2014 (Hauser, Yang, et al. 2014), and it too is being used by later researchers.

Both these cases, the one relating to Covid and the Hauser episode, are of course extreme examples, which is why they are publicly known – extreme enough to have cost Hauser his job. But while cases like these may be rare, there are plenty of less blatantly dishonest ways in which academics give themselves and their allies improper advantages in the battle of ideas (see e.g. Sampson 2005: 127–9, 2017: 17–18).

The lesson we need to take from all this is not to assume that everything written by academics is self-serving rubbish: of course that isn't so. But we should read modern academic writing with a measure of the gentle scepticism that we take for granted when reading commercial companies' descriptions of their products. If I am choosing a new car, I will look with interest at different brands' write-ups, but I shall bear in mind that these are not neutral, disinterested descriptions: they are trying to sell me their offerings. The public still sometimes sees academics as hieratic figures in white coats, above the commercial fray, and perhaps that was reasonable when they had little motive to be anything else. But it is not reasonable these days. Academic authors are often trying to sell you their theories just as energetically as car makers are trying to sell you their cars. We should not assume, just because one or another school of academics are trumpeting their ideas as clearly right, that the authors themselves are necessarily as certain as they make out, still less that we have to believe those ideas.

I am sorry to have had to discuss issues which many may find depressing. Indeed, it is difficult for a don of my generation not to look back at the academic world before 1985 as a lost golden age. (That year happened to be the halfway point in my own university career – though ceasing to draw a salary did not mean that I retired from researching and writing.) But if universities have grown greyer, language has not. It continues to be what it always has been, a source of endless fascination and intellectual nourishment. If worthwhile items are more sparsely distributed nowadays in a swollen flood of academic writings about language, then perhaps readers will find all the more use for a book which, I hope, may help them to find their way to the good stuff which is still there, and give them the confidence to distinguish it from the rest.

Finally, I acknowledge with sincere thanks all the help by many individuals which has gone into the making of this book. The original edition listed several names – though I wonder how I came to omit the late Steve and Sylvia Coultas, whose frequent hospitality within striking distance of the British Museum Library (as it then was) was crucial to my ability to put that manuscript together, long before the Internet. The debts which that edition owed to those I named then are inherited by this edition. But, more than forty years later, there have been innumerable further individuals – students, colleagues, audience members, and correspondents – to whom I owe similar thanks. It would be quite impractical, I'm afraid, to identify them all by name. But I know how much I owe you, and I am grateful.

2 See the year-by-year citation counts displayed by the U.S. National Library of Medicine at pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?linkname=pubmed_pubmed_citedin&from_uid=12446899, accessed 12 Jan 2022.

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