

XXIV. LINGUISTICS

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The ultimate objective of our research is to gain a better understanding of man's mental capacities by studying the ways in which these capacities manifest themselves in language. Language is a particularly promising avenue because, on the one hand, it is an intellectual achievement that is accessible to all normal humans and, on the other hand, we have more detailed knowledge about language than about any other human activity involving man's mental capacities.

Scientific descriptions of language have for a very long time followed a standard format. A number of topics are almost invariably discussed; for example,

(XXIV. LINGUISTICS)

pronunciation, the inflection of words, word formation, the expression of syntactic relations, word order, and so forth. Moreover, the manner in which these have been treated has also been quite standard. While traditional grammars have many shortcomings, their great practical utility is beyond question; generations of students have acquired adequate command of innumerable languages with the help of grammars of the standard type. A plausible inference that might be drawn from this fact is that languages are somehow not very different from one another and the traditional standard format has succeeded in capturing essential aspects of what all languages share in common. Accordingly, much of the research of our group has been devoted to studying the common framework that underlies different languages, the general principles that are exemplified in the grammar of different languages. Results strongly indicate that this assumption is indeed correct as far as the linguistic evidence is concerned.

The preceding discussion leads quite naturally to the question, "What evidence from outside of linguistics might one adduce in favor of the hypothesis that all languages are constructed in accordance with a single plan, a single framework?" It seems to us that the most striking evidence in favor of the hypothesis is, on the one hand, the rapidity with which children master their mother tongue, and, on the other hand, the fact that even a young child's command of his mother tongue encompasses not only phrases and utterances he has heard but also an unlimited number of phrases and utterances he has not previously encountered. To account for these two sets of facts, we must assume that in learning a language a child makes correct inferences about the structural principles that govern his language on the basis of very limited exposure to the actual sentences and utterances. In other words, we must assume that with regard to matters of language a child is uniquely capable of jumping to the correct conclusions in the overwhelming majority of instances, and it is the task of the student of language to explain how this might be possible.

A possible explanation might run as follows. Assume that the human organism is constructed so that man is capable of discovering only selected facts about language and, moreover, that he is constrained to represent his discoveries in a very specific fashion from which certain fairly far-reaching inferences about the organization of other parts of the language would follow automatically. If this assumption is accepted, the next task is to advance specific proposals concerning the

devices that might be actually at play. The obvious candidate is the theoretical framework of linguistics, for while it is logically conceivable that the structure of language might be quite distinct from that of the organism that is known to possess the ability to speak, it is much more plausible that this is not the case, that the structures that appear to underlie all languages reflect quite directly features of the human mind. To the extent that this hypothesis is correct – and there is considerable empirical evidence in its favor – the study of language is rightly regarded as an effort at mapping the mysteries of the human mind.

Additional detailed information on various projects connected with this research is available through inquiry to the department head, Dr. Samuel J. Keyser, Room 20D-105, Ext. 4141.

1. RESEARCH RESULTS

Roman Jakobson

My research during 1977-1978 was directed toward the analysis of the ultimate constituents of language, the smallest discriminative properties of speech sounds. The chief results of this research are summarized in the book, The Sound Shape of Language;¹ included is a short supplement entitled "An Instance of the Interconnection between the Distinctive Features."

My present research is primarily devoted to the interaction of brain and of language, to the unconscious factor in language, and to the metalinguistic operations in the life and development of language. In 1979 this work was conducted in cooperation with Professor Stephen Rudy (Yale University), Miranda Mengis (MIT), and Kathy Santilli (MIT).

I reported on this research during 1979 at the Universities of Jerusalem, Copenhagen, and Moscow, and at the Georgian Academy of Sciences, Tbilisi. A colloquium on this topic was held at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum on January 24, 1980, and the proceedings will appear in a special publication of that University.² I discussed this research on March 13 at the University of Minnesota, on April 23 at an interdepartmental meeting of Yale University, and on May 6 at New York University. A volume³ of studies closely linked to this research has just appeared.

(XXIV. LINGUISTICS)

My research work in 1979 also dealt with the earliest Slavic verbal and musical arts, for which I received a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The results of this research will appear in a forthcoming volume of my Selected Writings.⁴ My Selected Writings V (edited by Professor Stephen Rudy with the assistance of Martha Taylor, Mouton, The Hague, 623 p.) appeared in 1979. Still another, further volume is to appear in 1980 (Mouton, The Hague, c. 900 p.).

My current publications, including books, papers, and lectures, are listed in the references.⁵⁻¹³ Items 7-12 are all translations of my writings.

References

1. R. Jakobson and L.R. Waugh, The Sound Shape of Language (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, and Harvester Press, Brighton, Sussex, 1979), 308 p.; French translation, La Charpente phonique du langage (Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1980); other versions in preparation: Italian translation (Il Saggiatore, Milan), Japanese translation (Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo), Spanish translation (Neuva Imagen, Mexico City), German translation (Mouton, The Hague).
2. R. Jakobson, "Cerebral Hemispheres and Language in Mutual Light," to be published in German translation (Ruhr-Universität, Bochum, 1980); the English original is scheduled to appear as a pamphlet published by New York University.
3. R. Jakobson, The Framework of Language, Prof. Ladislav Matejka (Ed.) (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), 132 p.
4. R. Jakobson, Selected Writings VI (Mouton, The Hague; in preparation).
5. R. Jakobson and K. Pomorska, Dialogues (Flammarion, Paris, 1980), 176 p.; other versions in preparation: English translation (Harvester Press, Brighton, Sussex, and The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass.), Italian translation with an introduction by Prof. Cesare Segre, University of Pavia (Laterza, Bari), and German translation (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt).
6. R. Jakobson, "Einstein and the Science of Language," address delivered at the Einstein Centennial Symposium, March 16, 1979, to appear in the Acta of the Symposium (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J.; in press); the German translation of this address, along with R. Jakobson's "Der grammatische Aufbau der Kindersprache," delivered at the Rheinisch-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften, appeared in Prof. E. Holenstein's Von der Hintergebarkeit der Sprache (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt).
7. R. Jakobson, "Hölderlin, l'arte della parola" (il Melangolo, Genova, 1979), 81 p.
8. R. Jakobson, "Linguistiek en poetica" and "'Les Chats' van Baudelaire" (with Claude Lévi-Strauss) in Bronzwaer, Kokkema, and Kunne-Ibsch (Eds.), Tekstboek algemene literatuurwetenschap (Ambo, Baarn, Holland, 1979).

(XXIV. LINGUISTICS)

9. R. Jakobson, Elementer, funktioner og strukturer i sproget, with an introduction by Prof. Eli Fischer-Jørgensen of the University of Copenhagen (Nyt Nordisk Forlag, Copenhagen, 1979), 325 p.
10. R. Jakobson, Ogledi iz Poetike, with an introduction by Leon Kojen (Prosveta, Belgrade, 1979), 395 p.
11. R. Jakobson, A költészet tudo mányaért, with a commentary by Prof. Ivan Fónagy, Paris (Gondolat, Budapest; in press).
12. R. Jakobson, a 2-volume selection of writings in Hebrew translation, Professors I. Even-Zohar and G. Toury (Eds.) (Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, Tel Aviv; in preparation).
13. R. Jakobson, papers to appear in Festschriften for Professor Altbauer (Jerusalem), Prof. Coseriu (Tübingen), Prof. Dinekov (Sofia), Prof. Georgiev (Sofia), Prof. Mayenowa (Warsaw), Prof. Seiler (Köln), Prof. Stankiewicz (Yale), and Prof. Toporov (Moscow); all in press.

