FASCINATING, BUT UNANSWERED: A CHALLENGE FOR CONTEMPORARY LINGUISTS

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ABSTRACT. Fascinating, but Unanswered: A Challenge for Contemporary Linguists. This paper aims at pointing out some difficulties and problems of descriptive linguistics under practical research situations. After briefly reviewing the history of descriptive linguistics, especially about synchronic and diachronic approaches in Section 1, Saussure’s treatment of “time duration” in synchronic linguistics is discussed in the following Section. In Section 3, the restriction of the scope of Saussure’s approach to linguistic research will be discussed, and Martinet’s functional view of diachronic phonology will be introduced. In the following Section, the issue of descriptive and explanatory approach is discussed on the basis of Martinet’s and Arisaka’s frameworks on phonology. Both linguists regarded explanation as important elements in phonological researches. Finally, the problem concerning the distinction between “synchrony” and “diachrony” in descriptive linguistics is mentioned, and the complicated issue of language change, which is still unanswered, will be revealed.

Keywords: descriptive linguistics, historical linguistics, diachronic phonology, language changes

REZUMAT. Fascinant, dar fără răspuns: o provocare pentru lingviștii contemporani. Această lucrare își propune să evidențieze câteva dificultăți și probleme ale lingvisticii descriptive în contextul situațiilor de cercetare practică. După o recapitulare succintă a istoriei lingvisticii descriptive, mai ales în ceea ce privește abordările sincrone și diacronice în secțiunea 1, în secțiunea următoare este discutat modul în care Saussure tratează „durata timpului” în lingvistica sincronică. În secțiunea 3 va fi discutată restricția razei de acțiune în abordarea lui Saussure a cercetării lingvistice și se va introduce viziunea funcțională a lui Martinet asupra fonologiei/foneticii diacronice. În secțiunea următoare este discutată problematica abordării descriptive și explicative pe baza teoriilor cadru despre fonologie/fonetică ale lui Martinet și Arisaka. Ambii lingviști au considerat explicația un element important în cercetările fonologice/fonetice. În final, este menționată problema ce privește distincția dintre „sincronic” și „diacronic” în...
lingvistica descriptivă și va fi dezvăluită problema complicată a schimbării limbii, ce rămâne încă nerezolvată.

Cuvinte-cheie: lingvistică descriptivă, lingvistică istorică, fonologie/fonetică diacronică, schimbările limbii

1. Introduction: Descriptive Linguistics as an Explanatory Science

1.1

When we analyze language structures in descriptive linguistics, we encounter a variety of practical difficulties and problems. At the same time, there still exists a fundamental issue whether descriptive approaches follow the traditional descriptive frameworks, which simply focus on the description per se, or descriptivism should also be an explanatory discipline which explains how and why the structures of the language exist in those ways.

Since descriptive linguistics inquires the hidden system and structure of the language by analyzing apparently observable language phenomena; this approach is somewhat similar to anatomy, which dissects the body into pieces and consequently finds out a skeleton, or a framework, of the body. Once the framework of the body was made clear, it was natural that the discipline of analyzing the human body alive with flesh and blood became flourished. This development of anatomy is analogous to the reaffirmation of geo-linguistics and the development of sociolinguistics.

1.2

The call for treating linguistics as an explanatory science, however, was more deeply recognized by historical linguists, rather than by descriptive linguists. From descriptive linguists’ viewpoint, it is the history itself that explains the states of language phenomena described, and what “to explain” the states of language phenomena means to them is to make the processes through which each language phenomenon undergoes explicit. Historical linguistics should not be confined within the description of the processes of language changes, but also need to explain why and/or how those changes occurred. It is a challenging problem for present-day historical linguists.

The distinction between “synchronic linguistics” and “diachronic linguistics,” named by Saussure, is now treated as “descriptive linguistics” and “historical linguistics,” respectively. Diachronic linguistics is now called historical linguistics, and at the same time, targets and approaches of the discipline went through changes too. While Saussure excluded the concept “system” and focused on “phonological changes” in his diachronic researches, present-day historical linguistics includes researches of historical changes of language “system.” This is where we can find the fundamental reason for linguistics to be treated as an explanatory science.
2. Some Remarks on Synchrony and Diachrony of Language

2.1

The distinction between “synchrony” and “diachrony” raises some problems. In fact, Saussure himself mentions the problem of this distinction in his *Course in General Linguistics*. For example, when we talk about the synchronic state of a language, we cannot dissect the language at one moment and grasp the state of the language without the notion of time. According to Saussure, synchronic state of a language is logically analyzable; in practice, synchronic state includes some time duration, which could be ten years, one generation, or one century. Within certain time duration, languages change; however, those language changes are small enough to be neglected in practical analysis. Compared with language changes in synchronic state, language changes observable in pre and post state are far larger and cannot be neglected. The relation between synchronic state of the language and time duration stands this way.

2.2

In order to pursue practical researches, the simplification of data processing is unavoidable. Some scholars say that even in one of the most elaborating research fields, like in mathematics, logarithm calculates the $n^{th}$ decimal place and omits smaller decimals. Although Saussure advocated the significance of spoken languages as the main research subject of linguistics, his view of this simplification is deeply rooted in his image of the language as static and fixed state of written languages. Consequently, this talented comparative Indo-European linguist did not launch a research on spoken state of the language.

While the written language exhibits its fixed and uniform states, the spoken language shows its aspects of diversity and dynamism. Recognizing those unstable aspects of spoken language, Saussure claims that people’s will to share a common language makes each person have a dictionary, which metaphorically explains how “*langue*” exists.

2.3

Historical approach is implemented to “explain” synchronic states of the language when the instability of the language should be elucidated; furthermore, the idea that historical viewpoint should also be necessary in describing language as a system is now prevailing. At the same time, diachronic approach to the language, or historical linguistics, has undergone modifications of research targets and contents. This may sound too simplified a view, but it has been interpreted that Saussure simplified his explanations to meet the situations of his university lectures.
3. Foundation of Diachronic Phonology

3.1

For simplicity, Saussure set phonetic changes at the center of diachronic linguistic researches, and commented that there exist many cases where changes of grammatical systems can also be explained as consequences of phonetic changes. This does not necessarily mean that phonetic changes are the only observable diachronic facts. Although we have to consider “history of grammar,” we have to be careful about that issue since it is too complicating to distinguish between chronological and diachronic aspects about grammatical phenomena. In addition, Saussure treats every issue which has no direct relationship with language system as external factors. He distinguishes internal linguistics from external linguistics, which leads to the restriction of the scope of Saussure’s approach to linguistic research. Language changes caused by racial migration and/or contact with different languages, or sociological effects on languages are some of the issues excluded as external linguistics.

3.2

Saussure considers phonetic changes as regular rules observable in each sound, and phonological system has no direct relationship in the changes. Saussure views “system” of language as the system of linguistic signs. Linguistic signs consist of the connections of sound and meaning, and system is formed due to competing relational network of each sign. The notion “phonetic system” was just about to appear and needed further clarification and elucidation at that time.

After the disciplinary separation of phonetics and phonology, and the introduction of the notion “phonetic system,” quite a few scholars have tried to seek the foundational concept of their distinction upon “parole” and “langue,” respectively. Saussure’s phonetics deals with historical changes of sounds, while his phonology excludes historical, or diachronic, viewpoints in analyzing linguistic sounds. Generally speaking, phonology, in Saussure’s sense, deals with sound units, i.e. sound [p] or sound [t]. Only when these sound units are studied with adjacent sound units within word forms, Saussure used the technical term “phoneme.” Therefore, we should keep in mind that Saussure’s term “phoneme” does not perfectly correspond with the term phoneme used in modern linguistics.

3.3

Martinet, from functional point of view, proposed the notion “double articulation,” where utterances are first divided into “monemes” consisting of minimum units of meaning as the primary articulation. Monemes are further divided into “phonemes” consisting of minimum units of sound as the secondary articulation. These phonemes form a certain system. Therefore, phonological changes are treated as
changes of a system, and then causes of phonological changes become able be explained within a system. This is where diachronic phonology was founded.

4. Diachronic Phonology as an Explanatory Science

4.1

Regarding the issue of “description” and “explanation,” there still remain some problems as follows: (1) whether descriptive linguistics should be contended with simply describing language phenomena or not, (2) how and why languages now exist like the way they are, and (3) how language history can be explained. Linguists in the 19th century found the regularity of sound changes and excitedly named them sound laws, but they never went further to try to explain the nature of the sound changes, but rather their interests oriented towards comparative linguistics. Bloomfield, who was largely influenced by European neo-grammarians, states that the reasons of phonetic changes are “unknown.” American structural linguistics, represented by Bloomfield, aimed at founding linguistics as an exact science; therefore, those linguists were contented with showing “how” languages existed those ways, but never advanced further to explain “why.” On the other hand, there was a dispute that since language is considered to be one area of human behavior, then linguistics should be able to explain “why” problems.

4.2

Martinet, in trying to establish his diachronic phonology, claims that linguistics should not be restricted only to be a descriptive science, but should aim at being recognized as an explanatory science. His idea was not totally novel, but was not recognized widely yet. In Japan in 1940, Hideyo Arisaka (1908-1952) in his doctoral dissertation *Phonology* explained the factors of phonological changes with abundant data. Arisaka’s phonology has the basis on the speaker’s phonological notions, and separates the causes of phonological changes as causes either related to the purposes of linguistic expressions or unrelated to them. Arisaka identifies the latter as changes and influences happening in adjacent areas outside linguistic expressions and activities, or physical and/or psychological changes. Regarding the former category, Arisaka mentions that human desires have something to do with phonological changes. Those desires can be divided into desires to make expressing measures easier and desires to make pronunciation clearer. Both desires function, in fact, contrarily: e.g. the desire to pronounce easily contradicts the desire to pronounce clearly. What makes the issue complicated is related to the fact that the contradicting desires work at the same time to force the language to change. Language changes are affected by those contradicting forces. The similar contradicting phenomenon can be seen in the issue of language differentiation and integration.
4.3

Martinet explains in his *Économie des changements phonétiques: Traité de phonologie diachronique* (1955) that when one element in the phonological system moves, the effect of its movement forces other elements to move; and consequently, the system itself changes. Each phoneme has its own range, or scope of coverage; among the ranges of each phoneme, safety zones exist. If one phoneme moves beyond its safety zone, confusion, or mixing-up, occurs. That is why each phoneme should be pronounced within its range. Under the circumstances, one phoneme moves; its movement influences other phonemes. One phoneme pushes others and others try to pull it back. This is why system change occurs.

5. Conclusion: On the Nature and Complexity of Language Changes

5.1

Considering utterances as manifestations of human language behaviors, we are conscious of meaningful word unit in language usages, but unconscious of each phonetic unit. Therefore, the existence of the range and safety zone of each phoneme seems controversial; however, we can find some interesting remarks on the reason why certain phonemes move. The laziness of human beings in pronunciation is involved; in other words, the idea of “economy,” i.e., trying to give maximum effects by using minimum efforts, works in human speech. Another explanation has something to do with asymmetrical structure of human speech organs. Unlike structural linguistic view that considers human speech organs to be symmetric, the frontal area of the mouth is wider, while the rear area becomes narrower. In addition, the front part of the tongue moves delicately, while the back part works rather dully. Some say that the asymmetrical structure of human speech organs also affects the phonological changes.

5.2

During the World War II, Martinet made questionnaire surveys to people from variety of regions in POW. After the war in 1973, he published *Dictionnaire de la prononciation française dans son usage réel*. Before this publication, in his *Économie* he frequently mentions the phonological system of the dialect of Hauteville, which is his mother’s hometown. In general, the changes in standard language are greatly influenced by conservatism of the written language, while dialects in rural regions have less direct connection with the formalism of the written language and have lesser forces to prevent the spoken language from changing. Dialects spoken in a large urban area, where the standard language is prevailed, are affected by migration of people from different regions and thus a variety of elements are mingled and different dialects coexist. It is a matter of vogue and popularity whether a certain dialect survives or not.
5.3

Unlike physical phenomenon in the nature, the language changes in which human beings are involved are affected by popularity. The old form and the new form coexist; the one which follows the fashion of the era will survive. The issue of language change is complicated. Saussure avoided mentioning whether the system is involved in phonetic changes or not in his Course; consequently, this leads to the question whether the distinction between synchrony and diachrony is possible or not in practical linguistic researches. The question is still unanswered. However, the fundamental question left for us is quite fascinating and attractive to the present-day linguists.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deep appreciation to Dr. Katsunori Fujioka for his time and efforts to translate this paper, originally written in Japanese, into English. Dr. Katsunori Fujioka is a professor at Ehime University and his major research interests include contrastive linguistics, cognitive linguistics and English education.

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