Ser lingüista: un oficio diverso y polifacético.
Diez años de una Maestría en Lingüística

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Editores

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"El saber de mis hijos
hará mi grandeza"

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Linguistics past and present: A view from the Rhine

Robert D. Van Valin, Jr.

1. A PERSONAL JOURNEY INTO LINGUISTICS

I had never heard of linguistics when I graduated from high school in 1970. I had taken German, which I found extremely interesting, and in my English courses we had done lots of sentence diagramming of the Reed-Kellogg variety, which I absolutely hated, a curious thing given my eventual profession. I was interested in language, though. Two of my favorite novels back then were *1984* and *Brave New World*, and one of the things I found intriguing was the idea that language could be manipulated to affect the way people thought about things. I was also fascinated by the languages in *Lord of the Rings*, and I wrote my senior English paper on the use of Old English by Tolkien in it. I went to the University of California, San Diego, and in looking through the catalog for courses to take, I found linguistics, read up on it a bit, and decided to give it a try. I took my first linguistics class with Ronald Langacker and did not do particularly well. I really got going the following term in a course on historical linguistics taught by the late Margaret Langdon. Both Langacker and Langdon were extremely supportive and encouraging to me. I sat in on a graduate seminar on syntax taught by Langacker and found the ideas of generative semantics very appealing.

In 1972-73 I spent my last year as an undergraduate at the University of Göttingen in Germany. There I studied linguistics in the English Seminar and took seminars on Chomsky's *Aspects* model and Case Grammar as developed by Charles Fillmore (1968). Generative semantics was not the favored approach there, and the courses in syntax had primarily an orthodox Chomskyan orientation. During that year I read Wallace Chafe's book *Meaning and the Structure of Language* (1970), which had a profound impact on my thinking about grammar. It was my introduction to the Prague School and Hallidayan ideas regarding what we now call information structure. While thinking about these ideas, it struck me one day that perhaps transformational rules are not triggered by arbitrary markers in deep structure but rather by discourse-pragmatic factors like topic and focus, e.g., the passive transformation applies when the deep structure subject is focal and the deep structure object is topical. I also applied these ideas to the subject and object selection rules in Case Grammar, yielding a model in which a semantic underlying form is mapped into an overt syntactic form with discourse-pragmatic factors playing an important role. Moreover, following Fillmore, grammatical categories like

tense, aspect and modality were represented in a separate subtree from the predicate, the arguments and the adjuncts. I wrote a long term paper for a seminar laying all this out. These ideas would reemerge later in a more sophisticated form as core concepts of Role and Reference Grammar [RRG].

I applied to graduate school while in Göttingen, and there seemed to me to be only one place to go: Berkeley, the citadel of generative semantics. Chafe and Fillmore were there, along with George Lakoff. By the end of my first year there, however, generative semantics seemed to have reached a dead end, and Chafe and Fillmore had gone in directions away from their work in grammar. So I looked for a new direction. I audited a lot of philosophy courses and took a field methods class with Chafe on Lakhota. I had gotten interested in discourse particles while in Göttingen, and I started focusing on German *doch*, which eventually became the topic of my Master's Thesis.

In November, 1974, I met Bill Foley at Fillmore's house. Fillmore invited out-of-town graduate students who could not be with their families at Thanksgiving over to his house for Thanksgiving dinner. Foley and I were there, and once introduced we started talking and discovered that we had many interests in common. We were both interested in 'exotic' languages (he was an Austronesianist), and we felt that not enough consideration had been given to such languages in theoretical debates; for example, the 'linguistic wars' between generative and interpretive semantics had been fought with almost exclusively English data. Furthermore, that time period was the heyday of Relational Grammar, with its claim that the grammatical relations of subject, direct object and indirect object are universal primitives in the grammars of human language. This struck us as empirically very problematic, given what we knew about Austronesian languages, especially Tagalog, and about Lakhota; Dixon's grammar of Dyirbal (1972) had recently appeared, and it seemed to support our skepticism. About this time, too, there was a lot of typological work, which included work on grammatical relations (especially Schachter, Keenan, Comrie, Givón) and on topic and focus (Li, Thompson, Kuno).

The first paper we did using ideas that would later figure prominently in Role and Reference Grammar was 'On the viability of the notion of 'subject' in universal grammar' in 1977. In a paper I published in 1977, 'Ergativity and the universality of subjects', the name 'Role and Reference Grammar' was used for the first time; it was inspired by Schachter's paper 'Reference-related and role-related properties of subjects'(1977). That year I also finished my dissertation, *Aspects of Lakhota syntax*, which presented the nascent ideas of RRG and which introduced a couple of concepts that would later prove especially significant. The first was the idea of semantic macroroles, actor and undergoer. The second was the idea that in languages like Lakhota the independent NPs and pronouns agree with the coding on the verb, not the

other way around. (I later discovered that this idea goes back to von Humboldt (1836) and Boas (1911). It was later developed further within the typological distinction between head-marking and dependent-marking languages proposed in Nichols (1986)).

The next big development in RRG was the publication in 1984 of *Functional syntax and universal grammar*. I spent 1980-82 at the Australian National University working with Foley on the writing of this book. It laid out a version of a semantically based theory of syntax that addressed many theoretical issues as well as presenting a theory of the syntax and semantics of complex sentences. The theory has continued to be developed to the present with contributions from linguists from all over the world. In the late 1980's the layered structure of the clause was revised (Watters 1987 [1993]) and the projection grammar formalism proposed (Johnson 1987). Also at that time dissertations and Master's Theses began to be written which applied the theory of a range of grammatical phenomena. In *Advances in Role and Reference Grammar* (1993) the theory was applied to a wide range of languages, e.g. Mandarin, Nootka, Latin and Mparntwe Arrernte, and there were a number of theoretical advances, e.g. the incorporation of Lambrecht's (1986) theory of information structure, a first attempt at an explicit statement of the linking algorithms, a first attempt at extending the lexical decomposition system. Further contributions followed in the 1990's, and the first textbook on RRG appeared, *Syntax: structure, meaning and function* (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997), which spurred more work in the theory. RRG Conferences have been held all over the world, from Brazil to Taiwan to Mexico City. In the past 10 years the pace of work has accelerated, and the developments up through 2005 are summa-rized in *Exploring the syntax-semantics interface* (2005), a notable feature of which is a major revision and expansion of the theory of clause linkage, stimulated in part by Bickel (1993, 2003) and Ohori (2001).

Some of these contributors first learned about RRG from mini-courses that I have given on the theory in many countries. I gave my first course in Hermosillo in 1997, and since that time I have been affiliated with the Master's program in Linguistics, returning to do a second course in 2000. There were many excellent students in the courses, especially Lilián Guerrero-Valenzuela and the late Rolando Félix Armendáriz; Guerrero-Valenzuela went to Buffalo for her Ph.D. and wrote a superb dissertation on the syntax and semantics of Yaqui complex sentences (2004 [2006]).

2. CHANGES IN THE FIELD SINCE 1971

When I took my first linguistics class in spring of 1971, the great struggle in theoretical linguistics was between generative semantics and interpretive

semantics. By the time I finished graduate school in 1977, the battle was over, and interpretive semantics seemed to have won. One of the striking features of the 'linguistic wars' between 1965 and 1973 was something that is largely missing from the field now, namely vigorous cross-theoretical arguments and evaluative comparisons. In a series of papers ending with 'Some empirical issues in the theory of transformational grammar' (1971), Chomsky argued vigorously against generative semantics, case grammar and relational approaches. Moreover, adherents of all of these approaches weighed in, criticizing the others while attempting to advance their own approach. Chomsky abruptly withdrew from the debate late in 1971 with the appearance of 'Conditions on transformations' (published in 1973). This paper represented the first in a series of shifts that have characterized Chomsky's theoretical work. Two things are significant. First, he took generative grammar in a different direction, primarily in response to Ross (1967), *Constraints on variables in syntax*, and to concerns that transformation grammar of the *Aspects* variety was too powerful. Eventually it led to the Principles and Parameters version of generative grammar. Second, he stopped arguing with linguists outside his own group of followers. He would argue with philosophers or psychologists who held critical views or opposing positions, but no longer would he engage in theoretical debates with advocates of rival theories. For example, both Lexical-Functional Grammar [LFG] and Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar were developed in the late 1970's and early 1980's as alternative varieties of generative grammar, and the advocates of the theories offered serious critiques on previous and contemporary Chomskyan theories. No response from Chomsky was forthcoming; there was no vigorous debate like there had been in the late 1960's and early 1970's. This situation has continued to the present day. There are now vigorous debates among those working in a particular theoretical framework but very little across theories.

I feel that cross-theoretical debate is important and that the lack of it negatively affects both the field and its practitioners, and I have done a number of things to try to stimulate it. First, in Van Valin & LaPolla (1997), there are suggested readings at the end of every chapter, and they refer to work in many different theoretical approaches. Second, in Van Valin (2001) there is a comparison of five syntactic theories in the final chapter, comparing their analyses of clause structure, passive, dative shift and WH-questions, as well as the role of the lexicon in each. Third, I am the general editor of the *Oxford Surveys in Syntax and Morphology* series, which will eventually include volumes on all aspects of syntax and morphology; five have been published so far (Carnie 2008, Erteschik-Shir 2007, Farrell 2005, Fischer 2007, Roark & Sproat 2007). One significant feature of the series is that in each volume the author(s) must critically discuss the major theories in the domain under

consideration. Cross-theoretical comparison is an essential element in this series. Since the series is designed to be a research resource for both graduate students and faculty researchers, it is hoped that the inclusion of multiple perspectives will incite curiosity in readers about approaches other than the one they are working in.

One aspect of contemporary linguistic theorizing that is particularly striking for someone who entered the field when I did is the return of many of the central ideas of generative semantics as part of the Minimalist Program [MP], particularly the practice of doing lexical decomposition in the syntax. What is even more surprising is that some of the adherents of the Minimalist Program that I have talked to are unaware that these ideas are recycled from generative semantics and that Chomsky argued strongly against them back in the late 1960's and early 1970's, as noted above.

Another 'recycling' of a previously prominent idea is that of language description and documentation. During the era of structural linguistics in the USA, the normal topic for a doctoral dissertation was the description of a language with data obtained through work with native speakers, i.e. fieldwork. With the rise of generative grammar, theoretical work was valued much more highly than descriptive work, in part because description was associated with the *ancien regime*. Descriptive work continued, but in many US linguistic departments a descriptive grammar was no long acceptable as a PhD dissertation; something more theoretical was required. In the last ten or fifteen years or so, however, concern about the ever diminishing number of human languages has let to a revival in language description, documentation and revitalization. Significant amounts of funding for this kind of research has become available from public and private sources. This is a very good development indeed.

3. THE PLACE OF LINGUISTICS IN THE INTELLECTUAL LANDSCAPE

Linguistics is a field of extraordinary intellectual breadth, straddling the humanities, and social sciences and the natural sciences, with subfields ranging from semantics and pragmatics (related to philosophy, one of the most important humanities) to anthropological linguistics, sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics (related to core social science disciplines) and further to acoustic phonetics and neurolinguistics (related to physics and neurology and neurobiology). Within academia in the United States it is one of the few disciplines in which practitioners may apply for research funding either to the US National Endowment of the Humanities or to the US National Science Foundation, depending on the nature of the research.

In the early 1950's structural linguistics was hailed as the 'quantum mechanics of the social sciences' due to its perceived methodological rigor and

formal analysis. The lack of methodological rigor and the inadequacy of its formal analyses were laid bare by the Chomskyan revolution beginning in the late 1950's and early 1960's. An important part of this change was the rejection of Bloomfieldian behaviorism and the reorientation of linguistics as mentalist and thereby placing linguistics at the center of the newly emerging interdisciplinary field of cognitive science. It has remained there until this day.

The place of linguistics in the intellectual landscape looks somewhat different in Europe from the way it looks in the US. In both regions there is more and more work on the (neuro)cognitive aspects of language, esp. acquisition and processing. In Germany, for example, there are three Max Planck Institutes which have one or more sections devoted to these issues. The Max Planck Institute in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, is devoted to psycholinguistics, while there are sections in the Institutes for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences and Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig dedicated to neurolinguistics and language acquisition. While there are no such research institutes in North America, there has been a marked increase in the work on sentence processing and neurolinguistics in the past twenty years. This is related to the importance of the study of language for cognitive science. With respect to linguistic theory, there is in fact today significant theoretical diversity in theories of syntax and semantics, but its existence is sometimes obscured in the US by the continued dominance of Chomsky there. In Europe, on the other hand, there is considerable theoretical heterogeneity, and a wide range of theories is being taught in universities and serving as the basis for research. Some of these are theories that originated in the US, e.g. MP, RRG, LFG, Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar, while others developed in Europe, e.g. Discourse Representation Theory, Functional Grammar. One would hope that in the future this diversity will continue to develop and will be recognized by scholars in other disciplines interested in theoretical issues in linguistics.

4. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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