

## **BRITISH LINGUISTICS IN THE CHOMSKYAN ERA**

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There is considerable literature on the history of linguistics, but as far as I am aware, there is nothing on the history of modern British linguistics.<sup>1</sup> By this term I mean British linguistics in the Chomskyan era. This seems a natural object of study. The Chomskyan revolution raised the profile of linguistics and the new universities of the 1960's provided an opportunity for expansion. Linguistics of some kind has a major presence at four of them: Essex, York, Lancaster, and Sussex (only since the mid 1970's in the last case). It also has a presence at East Anglia and Stirling and has had a presence at Kent. Those who were active at the start of the period have retired or are about to retire. Therefore, it is time something was done. There is a need to gather information, organize it, and draw whatever conclusions are warranted.

There are numerous questions that it would be good to have answers to. No doubt some are much harder than others to answer. Here are some fairly concrete ones:

Where has linguistics been taught? Where have there been linguistics departments? When were they established and in some cases when were they closed? (At least four departments have closed at one time or another: Aberdeen, Birmingham, Hull, and Liverpool.) Where else has linguistics been taught? Some sort of linguistics has been taught in a number of English language departments, e.g. UCL, Edinburgh, Birmingham, Manchester, and Nottingham. No doubt some linguistics has been taught elsewhere.

What degrees have been offered at various times? How many students did they have? What sorts of curricula were taught? No doubt various institutions at various times have offered just postgraduate degrees or just joint honours undergraduate degrees

How many linguists have been employed in UK institutions, in Linguistics departments and elsewhere? Obviously this depends on who counts as a linguist.

Who was where when? When did Frank Palmer, Peter Matthews and David Crystal move from Bangor to Reading? When did John Lyons move from Edinburgh to Sussex? When did Peter Matthews move from Reading to Cambridge? When did Gill Brown move from Edinburgh to Essex? And so on.

What sort of people have been appointed to posts in linguistics departments over the last seven or eight years? If it is true, as I suspect, that a majority have been trained wholly or partly outside the UK, what conclusions if any can be drawn from this?

There are obviously questions about the LAGB. A list of presidents is available on the web, but I am probably not alone in knowing very little about some of the early ones. What about the programmes for LAGB meetings? Some information is available in

*Journal of Linguistics*, but it is quite limited. How many members has the LAGB had at various times? Probably the records are quite sparse.

Basic information about *Journal of Linguistics* is readily available. The journal is probably more international in various ways than it was. A majority of the current editorial board are non-British and based outside the UK. In contrast, in the late 80's all were British and only one based outside the UK (Bernard Comrie). Interestingly too perhaps, two of the three current editors, Nigel Fabb and Caroline Heycock, were trained in the US (at MIT and University of Pennsylvania, respectively), as was another recent editor, Ian Roberts (University of Southern California).

There are all sorts of more general questions. Here are some:

How Chomskyan has British linguistics been at various points? Apparently, a Neo-Firthian linguistics associated with Halliday, Dixon and others was quite influential in the 1960's, but Chomskyan ideas became increasingly influential following early work by John Lyons (1963), Peter Matthews (1960, 1965, 1966) and James Peter Thorne (1965).<sup>2</sup>

How unified/divided has British linguistics been at various times? How homogeneous/heterogeneous?

How has the relation between theoretical and applied linguistics varied during the period?

What sorts of relation has British linguistics had with neighbouring disciplines, e.g. TEFL, modern languages, psychology, sociology, computer science, cognitive science, over the period?

What have the various linguistic departments been like over the period? Different departments have been more or less prominent at various times and more or less Chomskyan. Some have changed more than others. UCL has apparently changed relatively little over the last 25 years. Essex and York have probably changed much more.

How far has British linguistics suffered from a 'brain drain'? Among others, Dixon, Comrie, Halliday, Jack Hawkins, Huddleston, Pullum and Sells have spent most of their careers abroad, but as indicated above many recent appointments have been trained wholly or partly abroad.

How far has British linguistics been like and unlike linguistics of other countries, e.g. the US, the Netherlands, France?

Hopefully, I have highlighted most of the questions that arise about British Linguistics in the Chomskyan period. With reasonable answers to these questions we would have a fairly detailed picture of the changing character of British linguistics. However, answering them would probably require the efforts of a number of people, perhaps a large number.

## NOTES

1. Various aspects of British linguistics between the wars are discussed in Harris (1988), and Firth and his followers in the London School of Linguistics are discussed in Langendoen (1968) and Sampson (1980), but the former stops in the 1960's and the latter only touches on the 1970's. Stubbs remarks that 'A serious study of the sociology of ideas in British Linguistics is sadly lacking.' (1996: 78).
2. Neo-Firthian ideas were also subject to critical discussion from Paul Postal (1966, 1969) and Terence Langendoen (1967).

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