

THE LINGUISTIC THOUGHT OF J.R. FIRTH

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"The study of the living voice of a man in action is a very big job indeed."

--- J.R. Firth

John Rupert Firth was born in 1890. After serving as Professor of English at the University of the Punjab from 1919 to 1928, he took up a post in the phonetics department of University College, London. In 1938 he moved to the linguistics department of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, where from 1944 until his retirement in 1956 he was Professor of General Linguistics. He died in 1960. He was an influential teacher, some of whose doctrines (especially those concerning phonology) were widely propagated and developed by his students in what came to be known as the "London school" of linguistics.

"The business of linguistics", according to Firth, "is to describe languages".¹⁾ In saying as much he would have the assent of most twentieth-century linguistic theorists. Where he parts company with many is in holding that this enterprise is not incompatible with, or even separable from, studying "the living voice of a man in action"; and his chief interest as a linguistic thinker lies in his attempt to resist the idea that synchronic descriptive linguistics should treat what he calls "speech-events" as no more than a means of access to what really interests the linguist: the language-system underlying them.

Languages, according to many theorists, are to be envisaged as systems of abstract entities. These entities are units of linguistic "form". Units of linguistic form are of two

fundamentally different types (i.e. belong to two "levels of articulation"): those which have "meaning", and those which, although in themselves meaningless, serve as the carriers or markers of distinctions of meaning. Both types comprise units of different kinds, and the kinds may be hierarchically ordered (for example, "distinctive features", "phonemes" etc. on the one hand, and "morphemes", "sentences" etc. on the other). Units of all kinds and of both types are recurrently instantiated in the first-order linguistic activities of users of the language in question: an actual utterance "in the language" is treated as a concrete manifestation or representation of some portion of the underlying abstract system; and such an utterance, if suitably recorded in writing or otherwise, may be analysed in terms of that system. That is, it can be described by a set of statements about units of different kinds and types and how they are combined. An exhaustive set of statements about all the units and the possibilities of combining them open to users of a particular language would constitute a complete description (or "grammar") of the language.

An influential subset of linguists would assent to the further proposition that the abstract system is "psychologically real", and that language-use is a matter of implementing "tacit knowledge" of it. In this view, to describe a language is not just to impose an *ex post facto* structural analysis on utterances (which is then generalised and projected on to a hypothetical totality of possible utterances), but is, rather, to identify a structural analysis actually constitutive of (that is, unconsciously appealed to in) acts of producing and understanding utterances. What it is to use a language may be broadly characterised as follows. Producing an utterance involves selecting forms with appropriate meanings, and uttering representations of those forms. Understanding an utterance involves perceiving representations of forms and matching them up with corresponding meanings. Embodied in this account is an answer to the question how communication by use of language is possible. It is an answer so widely accepted that communi-

cation itself is often *defined* as a matter of making use of an abstract system of the kind envisaged by descriptive linguists.²⁾

Firth formulated his objections to parts of the doctrinal nexus outlined here with reference to Saussure's distinction between *langue*, *langage* and *parole*. Firth observes that Saussure's theory may be described as Durkheimian structuralism, whereby a language is treated as a set of "social facts", on a different plane from the phenomena observable as the individual language-user's linguistic behaviour on particular occasions. These social facts constitute a "silent system of signs existing apart from and over and above the individual as *sujet parlant*";³⁾ and it is this system of signs (the *langue*) that the Saussurean structuralist takes as his object of study, not the speech-events brought about by particular *sujets parlants* on particular occasions of speech. The language-system, in the Saussurean view, is "a function of *la masse parlante* stored and residing in the *conscience collective*"⁴⁾ of a community. In contrast, Firth takes linguistics to be primarily concerned with the speech-events themselves. These speech-events are, in a sense, "concrete"; whereas the Saussurean *langue* is "a system of differential values, not of concrete and positive terms. Actual people do not talk such 'a language'"; and since Firth is primarily interested in actual people and their linguistic behaviour, his treatment of language assumes that it is "a form of human living rather than merely a set of arbitrary signs and symbols".⁵⁾

Not that Firth objects to the idea of language-systems *per se*. Dealing with speech-events will involve the systematic deployment of analytical constructs and categories, which may in practice turn out to be rather similar to the constructs and categories involved in the analysis of abstract systems underlying speech-events. Indeed, Firth maintains that "such 'events' are expressions of the language-system from which they arise and to which they are referred".⁶⁾ The difference lies in the ontological status accorded to the constructs and

categories and, by extension, to the language-system itself. Firth observes that the "static mechanical structuralism" that Saussure elaborated on the basis of Durkheimian sociology involves regarding the structures as *realia*. "The structure is existent and treated as a thing. As Durkheim said social facts must be regarded as 'comme des choses';⁷⁾ and instances of *parole* (actual speech-events) are relegated to the role of providing evidence for the structure. In contrast, the "systematics" of a Firthian description are invoked in the course of trying to explain speech-events. "Our schematic constructs have no ontological status, and we do not project them as having being or existence".⁸⁾ For the psychologistic structuralist, speech is the result of implementing knowledge of an underlying abstract structure. For Firth, the abstract structure is a linguist's fiction, resulting from his attempt to understand speech.

If the language-system to which speech-events are referred is a linguist's construct set up in the course of, and for the purpose of, analysing speech-events, it follows that for Firth, unlike many psychologistic structuralists, the object of linguistic description is not to provide an exhaustive account of a language "as a whole". Such an aim makes no sense for someone who refuses to reify language-systems. Instead, what constitutes "a language" can be left to be determined by what it is convenient for the analyst to include within the scope of a particular description. And very often it will be convenient for the analyst to deal with what Firth calls "restricted languages":

".... descriptive linguistics is at its best when dealing with such languages. The material is clearly defined, the linguist knows what is on his agenda, and the field of application is sufficiently circumscribed for him to set up *ad hoc* structures and systems. Such restricted languages would be those of science, technology, politics, commerce, a particular book, a particular form or *genre*, a characteristic type of work associated with a single author or type of speech function with its appropriate style."⁹⁾

Again, if the abstract structure is a linguist's fiction, it follows that Firth rejects the theory of communication implied by psychologicistic structuralism, according to which communication is transference of thoughts in virtue of shared knowledge of an abstract code. He endorsed Malinowski's view that it is a mistake to envisage language as "a process running parallel and exactly corresponding to mental process, and that the function of language is to reflect or duplicate the mental reality of man in a secondary flow of verbal equivalents",¹⁰⁾ and maintained that it is "a false conception of language" to see it "as a means of transfusing ideas from the head of the speaker to that of the listener".¹¹⁾ In accordance with his rejection of this conception, linguistic forms are not, for Firth, in themselves containers of ideas or meanings.¹²⁾ "To be linguistically solvent", he observes, "you must be able to exchange your terms somewhere and somehow for gold of intrinsic social value".¹³⁾ Foreigners learning another language from books are often linguistically insolvent in this sense, in as much as they may become quite fluent, but persist in trying to use the foreign language as a mere abstract code of form-meaning correspondence. Hence the often-discussed Firthian judgement that the example-sentences linguists use to illustrate points of grammar are "meaningless":

"I have not seen your father's pen, but I have read the book of your uncle's gardener", like so much in grammar books, is only at the grammatical level. From the semantic point of view it is just nonsense.

The following gives perfectly satisfactory contexts for phonetics, morphology and syntax, but not for semantics: My doctor's great-grandfather will be singeing the cat's wings. We make regular use of nonsense in phonetics, and so also do most grammarians. Even the anthropological Sapir offers an example like The farmer kills the duckling; Jespersen gives us A dancing woman charms and A charming woman dances; and Dr Gardiner makes shift with Pussy is beautiful; Balbus murum aedificavit; and Paul's example of The lion roars."¹⁴⁾

This passage has puzzled commentators, who tend to take Firth as saying merely that it is difficult to imagine a context in which these might be uttered.¹⁵⁾ But if that had been his point Firth could surely have contrived more decisive illustrations of it than, for example, the farmer kills the duckling. There is more to it than this. Firth's point is that *any* sentence, as such, is an abstraction, and abstractions do not in themselves have meaning. Meaning is to be sought in actual speech-events embedded in particular "contexts of situation". Moreover, it is not just that *part* of the meaning of an utterance is the context in which it is uttered. One cannot, in Firth's view, allow for the effect of context on meaning by tacking something on to a statement of the meaning of an abstraction, for what abstraction we are dealing with depends on the context. A context of situation is not a static background to speech-events, but

"a patterned process conceived as a complex activity with internal relations between its various factors. These terms or factors are not merely *seen* in relation to one another. They actively take one another into relation, or mutually 'prehend' one another ... What is said by one man in a conversation prehends what the other man has said before and will say afterwards. It even prehends negatively everything that was not said but might have been said."¹⁶⁾

All this must be taken into account in analysing the meaning of a speech-event.

For Firth, analysing the meaning of speech-events is the ultimate task of descriptive linguistics. (Involved here, as will emerge presently, is a different sense of "meaning", alongside that in which linguistic forms do not have "meaning" in the abstract.) Although all speech-events are unique, they nonetheless have features in common with other speech-events: "it is clear we see structure as well as uniqueness in an *instance*, and an essential relationship to other *instances*";¹⁷⁾ and the quest to state the meaning of instances starts with this perception. "We must separate from the mush of general goings-on those features of repeated

events which appear to be parts of a patterned process, and handle them systematically by stating them by the spectrum of linguistic techniques".¹⁸⁾ "Descriptive linguistics is a sort of hierarchy of techniques by means of which the meaning of linguistic events may be dispersed in a spectrum of specialised statements".¹⁹⁾

Meaning is a function of a linguistic form in a context. However, there is a sense in which forms have "meaning" at various different descriptive levels: phonological and grammatical, as well as semantic. "Semantic meaning" (an unfortunate phrase, but perhaps necessary, given Firth's recognition of phonological and grammatical meaning as well) is a function of an utterance and its parts in a context of situation. In phonology and grammar the elements and categories set up to describe the patterns of utterances function (that is, have their meaning) in terms of their relations with other elements belonging to (abstracted at) the same level. Phonological meaning is the function of phonological elements in relation to other phonological elements. Grammatical meaning is the function of grammatical elements in relation to other grammatical elements. Thus speech-events are split up for analysis and description into a series of separate functions of elements and forms abstracted by the appropriate criteria at each level.

How in practice is this "hierarchy of techniques" employed? Firth offers a demonstration of their application to an English form transcribable as [bɔ:d], as abstracted from some potential utterances as [wɪt(bɔ:d)] , [bɔ:davstədɪz] , [bɔ:di] , [bɔ:diŋ] , [bɔ:dtædθ] .

What is the phonological meaning of the sounds of which [bɔ:d] consists? Simply their use in that context in opposition to the other sounds that might have substituted for them. Thus, between initial [b] and final [d] fifteen other vowels are possible, as in: [bi:d], [brɪd] , [bæd] , [bæd], [ba:d] , [bu:d] , [bʌd] , [bɜ:d] , [beɪd] , [boud] , [baɪd] , [baud] , [bɔɪd] , [bræd] , [bɛəd] . Similarly, the meaning

of [d] in [bɔ:d] is its use there instead of other possibilities such as [t], [l], or [n] in [bɔ:t], [bɔ:l], or [bɔ:n]. And one can state the meaning of [bɔ:d] as a whole, on the phonological level, as being its difference from the total set of trilateral forms arrived at by exhaustively substituting for one, two or all three of its component parts. But, Firth insists, as it stands [bɔ:d] has no more meaning than that. It is what he calls a "neutral".²⁰⁾

Establishing its grammatical meaning involves considering the contrast it offers with other forms in different series, each series of forms being related to [bɔ:d] in such a way as to isolate its grammatical status in that series. Firth offers three examples:

- (1) (a) [bɔ:d], [bɔ:dz] ;
 (b) [bɔ:d], [bɔ:dz], [bɔ:dɪd], [bɔ:dɪŋ] ;
 (c) [bɔ:], [bɔ:z], [bɔ:d], [bɔ:ɹɪŋ] .

Contemplation of these series reveals that in (1a) [bɔ:d] is a singular noun, in (1b) the uninflected form of a verb, and in (1c) the past-tense form of a verb. However, there is a sense in which [bɔ:d] in (1a) remains a "neutral". The neutrality here can be resolved by extending the series of forms in two different ways:

- (2) (a) [bɔ:d], [bɔ:dz], [bɔ:du:m], [bɔ:dsku:l] ;
 (b) [bɔ:d], [bɔ:dz], [bɔ:di] .

"All this sort of thing", says Firth, "can be arrived at merely by recollection, or by asking the native speaker, or by collecting verbal contexts".²¹⁾

Establishing semantic meaning requires contextualisation in an utterance. Imaginé an utterance of the question "[bɔ:d]?"

In different contexts this might elicit such replies as "not really" or "no" with a rising intonation, or "go on". In each case the reply will determine a different relation between "[bɔ:d]?" and its context; and it is this relation with a context that Firth distinguishes as semantic meaning.

Perhaps the most salient feature of the analytic technique outlined here is its obliteration of the dichotomy of two levels of articulation, whereby (meaningful) units of form on one level consist of combinations of (meaningless) units on the other. [b] is no less meaningful than [bɔ:d], and [bɔ:d], as such, is no more meaningful than [b]. Meaning ("semantic meaning") inheres in the relation between a situationally identified utterance and its context, not in abstract units at any level.

Various questions arise, however. First, as Firth himself observes, "no two people pronounce exactly alike. The same speaker will employ several variants of 'the same word' as required in different situations. There is not one word have, there are many have's, there is not one k, t or i, but groups of related variants of these sounds".²²⁾ But if no two utterances are phonetically identical, justification is required for the view that spoken English includes a single recurrent phonological invariant, identified by writing the symbols bɔ:d within square brackets. Nowhere does Firth explicitly address this issue. But it may be assumed that he accepts without question that application of the transcriptional procedures associated with the use of a phonetic alphabet will automatically yield just those phonological abstractions that a linguistic description is concerned to state. The correctness of this assumption may be concluded from the answer he does explicitly give to a further question, namely: given that in normal speech the movement of the vocal organs is continuous, what determines that there are just three discrete "sounds" in [bɔ:d]? According to Firth, we can take it for granted "that the [speaker-hearer] recognises a phone or separable speech-sound when he hears or makes one, and that one can analyse the stream of speech into a sequence of

such phones".²³⁾ Furthermore,

"a phonetic notation does not attempt to produce on paper an exact record of every detail of sound, stress and intonation. It is not a direct sound-script faithfully caught by an acoustic automaton Phonetic notation enables you to represent the language when you know something about the way the native uses his 'sounds' In a sense, therefore, you should record not what a native says, but what he thinks he says."²⁴⁾

So it may appear from what has been said so far that Firth perceives no problem in answering either of these questions. The analysis of a given concrete utterance is guided by the native speaker's tacit knowledge, as embodied in an antecedently given alphabet-based system of representation which already identifies for the language-describer the abstract invariants underlying the utterance. This is *a priori* psychologicistic phonemics of a familiar kind.

The trouble with it is that it is incompatible with the idea that the abstract structure which emerges from the language-describer's analytical labours, is no more than a linguist's fiction. For by taking for granted the putative decisions of language-users as to the identification of recurrent invariants Firth is in effect appealing to the principle that the language-describer's task is to make plain what language-users already know. But this renders untenable his claim to repudiate Saussure-inspired psychologicistic structuralism, in as much as he here seems to be doing just what psychologicistic structuralists do: eliciting an abstract structure stored in speakers' heads.

This applies to other "levels" of a Firthian description no less than to phonology. Another question which might be asked about [wɪtʃbɔ:d] , [bɔ:dəvstɑdɪz] , [bɔ:di] , [bɔ:dɪŋ] , [bɔ:dtədɛθ] , etc. is what makes [bɔ:d] in these sequences a "form", as opposed to, say, [tʃbɔ:] , or [bɔ:dəv] , or [ɔ:di] ,

or [dɪŋ] , or [dtə] . But again Firth sees no problem: he simply assumes that what we say can be uncontroversially analysed into elements and components. So circumvent, for example, is an English "primitive" or word-base, while fishy or restless are "derivatives". "It follows from this", says Firth, "that we recognise such categories as word-base, stem, affix and other formatives, and eventually what we call sounds".²⁵⁾

This, as Firth apparently came to recognise, will not do. Elsewhere in his writings one can see attempts to rectify the discrepancy outlined here between his broadest theoretical principles and the analytic practice exemplified with respect to [bɔ:d]. As regards grammar, his remarks to this effect are somewhat sketchy.²⁶⁾ But nonetheless they imply rejection of the idea that the artefacts of traditional grammatical description are *realia* underlying utterances, and to which utterances are to be referred. For instance, he points out that "the characteristic feature of all spoken language is that native speakers make the fullest use of the perceived situation and of the assumed background of common contexts of experience".²⁷⁾ Speakers effect economies in speech by relying on shared background knowledge: "the linguistic 'economics' of speech are not those of writing".²⁸⁾ But these economies are not to be explicated in terms of "full" forms from which "economic" utterances are to be derived by such processes as contraction or ellipsis. "The use of such terms as 'contraction', 'mutilation', 'ellipsis' in describing normal speech habits is unscientific and unnecessary grammar is logical and makes language amenable to reason. Common speech is, however, not the servant of reason".²⁹⁾ Rapid colloquial utterances such as [aɪstfθɔ:tsou] or [aɪŋənəbaɪwʌnfəmi:ɪself] present difficulties for grammatical analysis ("What sort of word is [aɪŋənə] ?"),³⁰⁾ but it does not follow that they should be analysed as derivations from I should have thought so or I am going to buy one for myself, for it is inappropriate to think of such utterances as deviant implementations of the grammarian's regularised abstractions.

He observes, as another example, that inclusion among the traditional impedimenta of grammatical description of a category called "the verb" by no means guarantees that one can always identify an exponent of that category:

"May I illustrate this by quoting one of my well-known examples which I first used at a colloquium on machine translation. Somehow or other the game of finding the verb had been mentioned. And, pressed for material, I suggested the sentence: She kept on popping in and out of the office all the afternoon. Where's the verb? Kept? Popping? Kept popping? Kept on popping? Kept on popping in and kept on popping out (with forms, as they say, understood), or kept on popping in and out, or kept on popping in and out of? Is there a tense here? What conjugation does it belong to? How could you set it out?

If you look at the various ways in which what is called the English verb is set out in tabulated paradigms, you will get nowhere at all. It is useful here to distinguish between the verb in English as a part of speech, and what may be called the verbal characteristics of the sentence. The exponents of these characteristics in the sentence quoted are distributed over the sentence structure In noting such verbal characteristics as person, tense, aspect, mode and voice, we cannot expect to find them in any single word called the verb, drawn from a book conjugation." 31)

But it was in phonology that Firth made a concerted effort to pursue the location and statement of "meaning" at the expense, if necessary, of established descriptive practice. The innovative techniques of phonological description for which he is perhaps best known derive from a dissatisfaction with phoneme-based phonology. A preliminary illustration of his reasons for this is mentioned in passing in his analysis of [bɔ:d]. [p] and [k] are both functionally different from [b], but there is a difference between the differences: whereas [k] differs from [b] in both place and manner of articulation, [p] differs from [b] in manner but not in place; and this cannot be represented by the use of alphabet-based segmental symbols alone, for such symbols do not allow for the

recognition of degrees of phonetic difference between the sounds represented. Many phonological processes (for instance, the devoicing of word-final obstruents in some Germanic languages) apply to classes of segments whose status as a class cannot be made apparent merely by citing the segmental symbols used to represent their members. This is a specific instance of Firth's general reason for dissatisfaction, which has to do with what it is to identify meaning at the various (non-semantic) levels of analysis. As a contemporary writer put it, "speaking a language is picking one's way through a succession of choices".³²⁾ The meaningfulness of an element at any level resides in the possibility of choosing an alternative from the paradigm of substituents; and since a Firthian description consists in identifying a hierarchy of sets of meaningful elements, the analytic technique employed must be such as to permit the identification of the units which are meaningful in this sense. But not all the units identified by phonemic analysis *are* meaningful in this sense. For instance, the English words *cats* and *caɪds* would be transcribed /kæts/ and /kædz/ respectively. But there is no possibility of a choice between voiced and voiceless sibilant in these forms: the phonotactics of English demand that a word-final plosive-plus-sibilant cluster be either voiced or voiceless as a whole. A segmental transcription misleads by offering no indication of the impossibility of a choice. To put the point another way, it fails to show that there may be syntagmatic dependencies between the segments. Firth's proposal, in effect, is to recognise "segments" in two dimensions instead of one. From /ts/ in /kæts/ he would extract a two-segment-long "prosody" of voicelessness, contrasting here with a prosody of voice, for the cluster as a whole. This prosody determines the pronunciation of the cluster in interaction with segment-sized "phonematic units" (not "phonemes") that represent the information that is left when the co-occurrence restriction on the elements of the cluster has been abstracted as a prosody.

In sum, segmental writing, even in the streamlined guise of a phonetic alphabet, is an unreliable guide to what is phonolo-

gically "meaningful": "in actual speech, the substitution elements are not letters, but all manner of things we may analyse out of the living voice in action: not merely the articulation but quite a number of general attributes or correlations associated with articulation, such as length, tone, stress, tensivity, voice. The phoneme principle enables a transcriptionist to get down formulas for pronunciation, but lengths, tones and stresses present many difficulties, both practical and theoretical".³³⁾

Distrust of the letter leads Firth to recognise as a further problematic aspect of established phonological theory the lack of attention it pays to "polysystematicity". He introduces this principle with the following observation:

"In print the word nip is just pin reversed. The letters p and n occur at the beginning or at the end. But if you had pin on a gramophone record and played it backwards you would not get nip. You might get something rather like it, but not distinguished from pin by the same diacritica as the normal nip. So although we identify our sounds by articulation likenesses and represent them by the same letter, this does not really correspond to the facts of speech. An initial element in a spoken word is functionally different, physiologically and grammatically, from a final element."³⁴⁾

Adumbrated here is the idea that it may be a mistake to see a language as having one integrated phonological system, identified by the letters of a regularised alphabet, such that one letter represents one sound. Rather, the phonology of a language consists of a number of different subsystems which come into play at different points in a phonological "piece", and there is no reason to identify the alternants in one subsystem with those of another. Firth suggests as one such subsystem in English the pattern of possibilities for syllable-onsets.³⁵⁾ English syllables may begin with one, two or three consonants. Triconsonantal onsets are very restricted: the first consonant must be [s], the second must be a voiceless plosive [p] [t] or [k], the third must be

a liquid or glide [l] [ɹ] [j] or [w]. Additionally, if the second consonant is [t], the third cannot be [l], and if the third is [w], the second must be [k]. Firth suggests that consonant clusters such as these should be regarded as "group substituents", whose individual components (for example, the [t] in [stjaip]), because they have a different function (that is, phonological meaning) from similar sounds in other phonetic contexts (for example, [t] in [taip]), are not to be identified with these sounds.

This rejection of the idea that a language has "a sound system or phonetic structure as a whole"³⁶ might be said to offer a number of descriptive conveniences, for instance in the treatment of morphophonologically complex languages. In Welsh a phenomenon called the "nasal mutation" requires that word-initial plosives be replaced by nasals corresponding in voice and place of articulation, in just two contexts. One of these is after the preposition yn [ən] "in". So : Brycheiniog [brəxainiɔg] "Breconshire" but ym Mrycheiniog [əmrxainiɔg] "in Breconshire", Cymru [kəmri] "Wales" but yng Nghyrmu [əŋəmri] "in Wales", Dinbych [dɪnbɪx] "Denbigh" but yn Ninbych [ənɪnbɪx] "in Denbigh". In terms of "process morphophonemics" this situation might be described as a progressive assimilation of the initial plosive to the manner of articulation of the preceding nasal, "followed by" a regressive assimilation of that segment to the place of articulation of the following nasal. But such a description fails to make explicit a fact which Firth would emphasise: that the system of word-initial consonants available in the environment

[ən] _____ differs from that elsewhere in Welsh, in lacking the oral plosives. This restriction on the normal choice of word-initial consonants should, Firth would say, be stated as part of the phonological "meaning" of the consonants that do actually occur. Moreover, the other context for the nasal mutation is after the possessive adjective fy [və] "my" (thus glo [glo] "coal" but fy nglo [vəŋlo] "my coal", pentref [pɛntɾɛv] "village" but fy mhentref [vəməntɾɛv] "my village", tacsi [taksi] "taxi" but fy nhacsi [vəŋaksi] "my taxi"); and

here the process-morphophonemic description embodying a phonological explanation becomes implausible, for Modern Welsh shows no trace of a conditioning nasal in [və]. But a Firthian statement of the subsystem of segmental contrasts in use immediately following [ən] and [və] is unaffected by its synchronic phonological arbitrariness in one of those contexts.

Commentators on Firthian phonology are divided as to whether prosodic analysis and the polysystematicity principle were developed as a substitute for a psychologicistic phonemics which Firth had abandoned as "incorrect", or whether the two approaches were never understood to be competing in this way.³⁷⁾ Firth's own comments do not clarify this issue. What is clear enough, however, is that the theoretical basis for the new descriptive procedures is quite different from that underlying psychologicistic phonemics. The rationale for setting up prosodies and phonematic units is not that one reveals thereby phonological abstractions which are "real" for speakers, but in doing so one conforms more precisely than is possible with phonemic analysis to the information-theoretic principle of meaning-as-choice. Thus there is at least a superficial sense in which the phonological system is allowed to emerge from an analysis of phonological meaning, rather than being assumed as the basis for that analysis.

But there are a number of issues which remain unresolved by this reformulation of the principles of phonological description. The chief of these is the question, alluded to earlier, of how to identify the abstract invariants whose phonic structure application of the principles is designed to elucidate. Confronted with an utterance which might be somewhat narrowly transcribed as [k^hæts], the phonemicist in effect assumes that his task is merely to regularise the transcriptional system already invoked in citing the utterance, with reference to such principles as contrastive vs. complementary distribution. In this case, all the tidying-up required is elimination of the phonemically redundant information that [k] is aspirated here, giving a transcription /kæts/. The prosodist, in con-

trast, makes no assumption that crypto-orthographic [k^hæts] provides even an approximate ready-made guide to the points at which significant choice is possible. But he nonetheless takes it for granted, no less than the phonemicist, that the abstraction [k^hæts] correctly identifies a relevant class of actual or potential utterances, notwithstanding that no two of them are phonetically identical. There is, therefore, a sense in which prosodic analysis is a less thoroughgoing departure from orthodox phonology than might at first sight appear. It is not so much an alternative to segmental analysis as a superimposition on it. For it continues to rely on segmental analysis to reveal the abstractions on which it operates.

The difficulty here is fundamental to any attempt to reconcile the study of speech-events with the description of a language, and particularly pressing if one wishes to claim, as Firth does, that the language-system under description is no more than the emergent product of an effort to understand speech-events. No doubt a given utterance is envisaged by both speaker and hearer as an utterance *of* an abstraction of some kind (or of a number of abstractions of different kinds). Stating the meaning of speech-events therefore involves, among other things, identifying and stating the abstractions. But what is crucially required is a means of ascertaining *what* abstractions an utterance is an utterance of. Firth fails to confront this requirement directly. But his attitude to it is hinted at in the remark that "in a sense, written words are more real than speech itself".³⁸⁾ For in practice, notwithstanding the distrust of writing underlying the rejection of phonemics, he falls back on the old idea that the writing system in use in a community already offers the necessary identification of the abstractions instantiated by utterances.³⁹⁾ A phonetic alphabet improves on the ordinary spelling system in eliminating certain obvious inconsistencies. It is true that there are many English-speakers in whose speech there can be detected no systematic differentiation of board, bawd and bored. A spelling [bɔ:d] for all three is, for phonological

purposes, therefore preferable. But it is nonetheless a spelling of board, bawd and bored. A truly radical break from orthography-imposed description would start by asking what guarantees that the spellings board, bawd and bored themselves identify units of the language. Unless this is asked, the claim that it is the meaning of speech-events that gives rise to the language-system rather than *vice versa*, cannot be made good.⁴⁰⁾

Moreover, unless this question is asked, the central claim that meaning ("semantic meaning") is a function of context and not of expressions cited in the abstract, will be unconvincing. The farmer kills the duckling, we are told, has no meaning except as an actual utterance in an actual context of situation. But it is nonetheless available, as it stands, for phonological and grammatical analysis. But this can only be because it is recognisable, as it stands, as a unit (or combination of units) of English. And that can only be because we already know (something about) what it means. There may be more to say about what it means, as uttered in a context, than can be said about what it means in the abstract. But nobody would contest that. Firth's claim that in the abstract it is "meaningless" thus seems to dwindle to no more than a rhetorically overblown assertion of the need to supplement semantics with what has come to be known as "pragmatics".

Another point is that Firth's abolition of the distinction between two levels of articulation likewise turns out to be superficial. (Indeed, such a distinction was implicit in the retention of phonology and grammar as distinct components of a linguistic description.) For in practice the subject-matter of grammatical description appears to be distinguished from the subject-matter of phonological description in that the former is meaningful and the latter is not. (There is no question of stating the "grammatical meaning" of [bɔ:d] in [səbɔ:dɪnət] or [hi:bɔ:daʊnɪt].) But just this is the basis for distinguishing the "articulations".

Yet another departure from orthodoxy which turns out on inspection to be more apparent than real concerns the view implied as to the relation between speakers and the language-system which emerges from the language-describer's analysis. Strict application of the principle of meaning-as-choice yields (for phonology at least) a descriptive statement (of prosodies and phonematic units) which cannot be readily matched up with what a language-user "thinks he says". The system of contrastive phonic units identified by phonemic analysis gives way to a system of "choice-points"; and the analyst's decisions as to the nature of the units, at any given point, among which a choice is possible, will not necessarily correspond to notions entertained by the language-user. But the fictional system of abstractions thus identified is nonetheless underpinned by a very familiar idea about the relation between speakers and the language they speak. It is the idea that speakers are constrained to manipulate a system of choices provided for them in advance by the language. That this is so is tacitly hinted at by Firth's failure to answer another question which might be asked about the analysis of [bɔ:d]. Why is it that, in discussing the paradigm of potential substituents for [ɔ:] in that form, he neglects to mention such possibilities as [ʌɔ:] in [bʌɔ:d] or [ʌɪŋəleŋkθəvko:] in [bʌɪŋəleŋkθəvko:d]? Why is it not part of the meaning of [ɔ:] in [bɔ:d] that it contrasts with these sequences? Presumably because to admit such possibilities would be to open floodgates that Firthian descriptive procedures depend for their viability on keeping firmly shut. For the fact is that there is no definite limit to what might fill the gap between [b] and [d] in an utterance [b _____ d]. But if to analyse a form at a given level of description is to state its meaning at that level, and if to state its meaning is to state an exhaustive paradigm of potential substituents, some definite limit must be imposed. Otherwise its meaning at that level cannot be determined. And if we ask why its meaning at that level should be held to consist in the contrast between what is said and a finite list of things which might alternatively have been said, the answer is

that this is simply a fundamental principle of Firth's view of how languages work: that is, of how they offer to their users a means of communication.

But this principle is at odds with Firth's explicit repudiation of the psychologistic structuralist's account of communication. For the possibility of communication turns out to depend on interlocutors' shared knowledge, for every point in an utterance at which a choice is possible, of a fixed paradigm of substituents. Furthermore, it jars with Firth's repudiation of the negativity of Saussurean structuralism. For Firth, no less than for Saussure, to understand a linguistic element is to know what it is not. But whether or not it is consistent with other parts of Firth's doctrines, it is in any case a principle which has little to recommend it. Suppose A says to B "comment allez-vous?", where A and B are monoglot Englishmen for whom "comment allez-vous?" is the only French expression they can reliably produce and understand. For Firth the linguistic analysis of such an utterance involves making plain its phonological, grammatical etc. "meaning", by revealing the places taken by its component elements at the various different levels in a total system of abstractions called "French" (or conceivably, some restricted subsystem of that system). But this system or subsystem is here quite irrelevant. For the speech-event envisaged is simply not "an expression of a language-system" at all. And even if this is dismissed as an unusual or abnormal kind of case, the general question remains: is speaking a language ever really a matter of picking one's way through a succession of choices? At the very least, it must be conceded that the system of choices actually in play will depend on who is speaking, when, and to whom.

Firth's aim is to reconcile study of "the living voice of a man in action" with the description of linguistic systems. To do this he proposes to state the meaning of speech-events by seeing them as "expressions of the language-system from which they arise and to which they are referred". He acknowledges that what cultural tradition identifies as a language-

system ("English", "French" etc.) may not be an appropriate domain within which to wield his descriptive procedures. Hence the recognition of distinct phonological subsystems and the notion of "restricted languages" generally. But he stops short of recognising that for any given speech-event what is "structure" and what is "uniqueness" will depend on context. This is not surprising, for describing a language-system must start from the assumption that there is some context-independent way of separating structure from uniqueness. A linguistic description separates structure from uniqueness for an indefinitely large class of actual and potential utterances. It automatically imposes on a given potential utterance "in the language" a preordained separation of structure from uniqueness. There are two significant consequences. First, whatever meaning there may be in what is unique about an utterance must lie outside the describer's purview. What a man can mean by deploying his living voice turns out to be limited, as it is for many another theorist, to the structure-dependent meanings assigned by the language-system to his utterances. Secondly, the describer must find, by fair means or foul, a way of separating structure from uniqueness in the abstract. Firth's way is utterly conventional. He differs from other descriptive linguists merely in hinting from time to time that he is not satisfied with it. Hence a number of cryptic remarks scattered through his writings to the effect that there are (unstated) difficulties about the relation between object-language and the metalanguage of linguistic description. "Let it be borne in mind that language is often not very apt when used about itself the reflexive character of linguistics in which language is turned back on itself is one of our major problems".⁴¹⁾ Firth himself never attempted to specify precisely what the problem is. But in fact it is clear enough. It is the problem of envisaging a viable alternative to taking for granted, for purposes of a generalising linguistic description, the structure already assumed in the scriptic conventions used for stating and citing utterances. If studying the living voice of a man in action can be reconciled with describing linguistic systems at all, what makes it an even bigger job than Firth bargained for is the need to solve this problem.

FOOTNOTES

1. See "A synopsis of linguistic theory, 1930-1955", in Palmer 1968:202.
2. See for example Fowler 1974:4: "I shall give COMMUNICATION the following general definition: communication is the manifestation of an abstract message through the medium of a physical signal; particular messages being tied to a specific signal according to conventions shared by the parties to any communicative event. These conventions, or 'rules', allow a sender to encode a meaning in a proper signal and, provided the sender has obeyed the rules, permit a receiver to retrieve the intended meaning from the signal".
3. See "Personality and language in society", in Firth 1957:180.
4. *ibid.*
5. See "The treatment of language in general linguistics", in Palmer 1968:206.
6. See "The semantics of linguistic science", in Firth 1957:144.
7. See "Personality and language in society", in Firth 1957:181.
8. *ibid.*
9. See "Descriptive linguistics and the study of English", in Palmer 1968:106.

10. See Malinowski 1935:7.
11. *ibid.*:9
12. See Speech, in Firth 1964:184.
13. *ibid.*:176
14. See "The technique of semantics", in Firth 1957:24.
15. See e.g. Sampson 1980:226, Lyons 1966:291.
16. See The Tongues of Men, in Firth 1964:110-1.
17. See "A synopsis of linguistic theory, 1930-1955", in Palmer 1968:200.
18. See "Personality and language in society", in Firth 1957:187.
19. *ibid.*:183
20. See "The technique of semantics", in Firth 1957:25.
21. *ibid.*
22. See Speech, in Firth 1964:181-2. Moreover, "each word when used in a new context is a new word" --- see "Modes of meaning", in Firth 1957:190.
23. See Speech, in Firth 1964:159.
24. See "The principles of phonetic notation in descriptive grammar", in Firth 1957:3.
25. See "The technique of semantics", in Firth 1957:20.

26. This is not to imply that he has no more to say about grammar than is mentioned below. Discussion of such Firthian grammatical concepts as "collocation", "colligation" etc. will not be entered into here.
27. See Speech, in Firth 1964:174.
28. *ibid.*
29. *ibid.*:175
30. See "A new approach to grammar", in Palmer 1968:122.
31. *ibid.*:121-2
32. See Haas 1957:43.
33. See "The technique of semantics", in Firth 1957:21.
34. See The Tongues of Men, in Firth 1964:39.
35. See "Alphabets and phonology in India and Burma", in Firth 1957:73.
36. See "Phonological features of some Indian languages", in Firth 1957:48.
37. Langendoen (1968:5) finds in Firth's phonological thinking a succession of distinct doctrines: "... three stages ... can be distinguished. In his earliest papers in the early 1930's he propounded essentially orthodox Daniel Jones phonemics. By 1935, however, he had come to a position roughly equivalent to that of W.F. Twaddell in the latter's On Defining the Phoneme. Finally in 1948 he published an account of his theory of prosodic analysis, which is in essence very like Z.S. Harris's theory of long components first expressed in 1945".

Robins (1971:150 ff.), on the other hand, in discussing prosodic phonology implies that phonemic and prosodic phonology are not in theoretical competition: "Phonemic phonology' grew out of the need and search for adequate broad transcriptions Broad transcription is essential to the study of a language, and phonemic analysis is a necessary procedure in the development of a broad transcription for it to be accurate, unambiguous and usable; but phonological analysis and transcription are two different things, and there is no *a priori* reason to assume that the most useful theory of phonological analysis will be one embodying the same concepts and employing the same procedures as are needed for transcription. Prosodic analysis is not as such concerned with transcription".

38. See The Tongues of Men, in Firth 1964:40.
39. "To the oft-repeated statement that no man ever pronounces 'a sound' twice in the same way except by some foul coincidence, all I can say is, 'No! no!', or 'Well, well!' or perhaps just 'Come! come!'" --- see The Tongues of Men, in Firth 1964:33. The point seems to be that the orthographic sameness of the two halves of each utterance guarantees their status as instantiations of the same invariant.
40. Not that Firth is entirely happy with the reliability of a writing-system as a guide to the identification of the units of a spoken language, as is suggested by the following passage: "There is no doubt about the fact that read is an English written word. But you cannot give it a name or a meaning unless you see it in some sort of arrangement. Do read this! gives it one value, he read his newspaper another value. The English word bear may occur after the or after they, and in some dialects its spoken name rhymes with bier and beer. Even in standard English it sounds exactly like bare. What does the spel-

ling difference between bear and bare really represent, if they both sound exactly alike? Does it represent anything? Is it worth representing? Is the present chaotic way of representing such differences satisfactory, or can we devise better ways? Or shall we say that they are both the same thing and spell them alike?" --- see The Tongues of Men, in Firth 1964:43. See also comments on the "reflexivity" of linguistics mentioned below.

41. See "The semantics of linguistic science", in Firth 1957:140, 147.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Nearly all of Firth's published writings, and all of those referred to here, may be found in one or another of three collections. In the following lists the date of first publication is given after each title. Papers in Linguistics 1934-1951 (Oxford University Press), which Firth himself published in 1957, contains "The word 'phoneme'" (1934), "The principles of phonetic notation in descriptive grammar" (1934), "The technique of semantics" (1935), "The use and distribution of certain English sounds" (1935), "Phonological features of some Indian languages" (1935), "Alphabets and phonology in India and Burma" (1936), "The structure of the Chinese monosyllable in a Hunanese dialect (Changsha)" (1937), "The English school of phonetics" (1946), "Sounds and prosodies" (1948), "Word-palatograms and articulation" (1948), "Atlantic linguistics" (1949), "Improved techniques in palatography and kymography" (1950), "Personality and language in society" (1950), "Modes of meaning" (1951) and "General linguistics and descriptive grammar" (1951). Selected Papers of J.R. Firth 1952-59 (Longman, London, 1968) is a posthumous collection edited with an introduction by F.R. Palmer. It contains "Linguistic analysis as a study of meaning" (1968), "The languages of linguistics" (1968), "Structural linguistics" (1955), "Philology in the Philological Society" (1956), "Linguistic analysis and translation" (1956), "Linguistics and translation" (1968), "Descriptive linguistics and the study of English" (1968), "A new approach to grammar" (1968), "Applications of general linguistics" (1957), "Ethnographic analysis and language with reference to Malinowski's views" (1957), "A synopsis of linguistic theory, 1930-1955" (1957) and "The treatment of language in general linguistics" (1959). The Tongues of Men and Speech (Oxford University Press, 1964) reprints in one volume, with an introduction by P. Strevens, two short books first published in 1937 and 1930 respectively. All references to Firth's work are to these editions.

The Philological Society's Studies in Linguistic Analysis (1957) is a collection of Firth-oriented papers, including Firth's own "Synopsis of linguistic theory, 1930-1955" and W. Haas's "Zero in linguistic description". A larger and more wide-ranging collection is In Memory of J.R. Firth (ed. C.E. Bazell et al., Longman, 1966). It includes J. Lyons's paper "Firth's theory of 'meaning'". Prosodic Analysis, edited by F.R. Palmer (Oxford University Press, 1970), gives detailed exemplifications of Firthian phonological procedures. It reprints Firth's "Sounds and prosodies", his own most significant paper on prosodic analysis. Despite its title, T.F. Mitchell's Principles of Firthian Linguistics is not an account of the principles of Firthian linguistics. It is, rather, a collection of Mitchell's own Firth-inspired papers. It does, however, include a general introductory chapter.

Other general introductory material is to be found in R.H. Robins, General Linguistics: an Introductory Survey (Longman, 1964) and G. Sampson, Schools of Linguistics (Hutchinson, London, 1980). D.T. Langendoen, The London School of Linguistics (M.I.T. Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1968) is a longer critical discussion. R. Lass, Phonology (Cambridge University Press, 1984) offers an introduction to Firthian phonology.

A recent approach to phonology which has much in common with prosodic analysis is "autosegmental phonology". See e.g. J.A. Goldsmith, "An overview of autosegmental phonology" (Linguistic Analysis, 2, 1976, pp. 23-68).

"Systemic grammar" is essentially an attempt to extend Firth's meaning-as-choice principle to an area of linguistic description not systematically considered by him. See e.g. M. Berry, An Introduction to Systemic Linguistics 1: Structures and Systems (Batsford, London, 1975).

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