

# LINGUISTIQUE

## LE VERBE ANGLAIS.

● M. Joos : *The English Verb : Form and Meanings.*

(University of Wisconsin Press, 1964).

Taking as his raw material the transcript and account of a trial, the author discusses « the English verb system in that mode of discussion which is called descriptive linguistics. » (p. 4) Notwithstanding the jacket blurb (« English is simple in everything but its verb-system ») this is a serious attempt to deal with problems of meaning and as such provides an interesting example of what a descriptivist can do when he goes beyond what can be grasped physically to what can be grasped only mentally.

As might be expected, problems arising directly from form are treated most satisfactorily. Thus, in the discussion of tense it is refreshing to find that a strict attention to form provides a clear view of the two tenses of the indicative. Similarly, when the author says that the perfect « phase » « belongs solely to the actual or 'present tense' » (p. 144) one feels that any other attitude must do violence to the form. It is therefore all the more surprising when, having defined a finite verb as one requiring a subject which can be a personal pronoun (p. 56), the author classifies the subjunctive (« if it be suggested... » ; « if a man be accused... ») as non-finite (p. 37).

When it comes to meaning, one gets the impression that the descriptivist approach does not provide the means for pushing the analysis to its conclusion. Thus, even after making the essential distinction between grammatical and lexical meaning, the author discusses the modal auxiliaries as though they involved only grammatical meaning. But it is precisely because they retain an appreciable element of lexical meaning that these auxiliaries are « the most difficult to discuss » (p. 147). Indeed, one wonders precisely what the author understands by grammatical meaning when he says that *Do*-auxiliary is meaningless ; surely *Do* expresses the tense very clearly. And that it expresses more than just tense can be illustrated by the following pair : « Why aren't you a doctor ? » ; « Why don't you be a doctor ? » Similarly to say that the *s*-ending is meaningless (p. 73) is to ignore the difference between such pairs as « I say » and « I says » ; « he go » and « he goes. »

In his treatment of the simple form (« generic aspect ») Joos comes to a conclusion reminiscent of Bolinger's and Hatcher's : « the generic aspect has no meaning of its own. It gets its meaning entirely from the context. » (p. 112). Opinions of this type always make one wonder why the form cannot take on any meaning whatsoever, and why it cannot be used in any context indifferently. In speaking of the progressive form (« temporary aspect »), however, he says : « from among all the possible aspectual significances of the generic aspect, it singles out one by obliterating all the others. » (p. 112) How a form can single out one meaning among many when there are none to start with is not clear.

The treatment of the « temporary aspect » is ingenious : it is concerned with the predication's validity, declaring not only a high-point, « a maximum of perfect validity » (p. 108) but also a regular tapering

off of its probability into the past and future from this point. It is, however, hard to imagine the «maximum of perfect validity» in interrogative sentences or in a protasis like: «If you were working harder...». Like other theories before it, this theory, when applied to the past, requires «a reinterpretation, but that can do no harm» (p. 130) as the author says quite disarmingly. But even at that, the suggestion that, except when they express background, all «process» verbs take the simple form in the past does not apparently apply to examples like «Did he say this to everybody or was he saying it to her specially?»; «The opportunity was going; the minutes were bearing it away; and if lost!...»

In his treatment of voice, the author suggests that the passive, like the progressive, has *privative meaning*. The «neutral» voice (i.e. what is generally called the active) can point «ambiguously both to active components of the referential world and to passive components thereof;» the passive «points only to passive ones... [by] the canceling of possible active meanings.» (p. 98). The neutral voice seems to be in the same position as the generic aspect; one wonders if it gets its meaning entirely from the context as well. Again, one wonders if the «referential world» is mental or extra-mental. If the former, then it is incumbent on the author to give the meanings of active and passive in terms of the mental world; if the latter, then the author would appear to link symbol directly to referent (to use the terminology of Ogden and Richards) with all the difficulties attendant on this view or meaning. That it is likely in the extra-linguistic, extra-mental world that the author situates meaning is suggested when he classifies the verb in «the Judge looks kind» as having passive meaning (p. 96).

On the other hand, in order to avoid seeing a contradiction in the remarks (p. 18): the infinitive «is an adverb» and the infinitive is «used as an adverb», one is driven to attribute to the author the outlook that meaning is in the context. And when he says that «what makes a lexical item a verb-base is after all nothing but the manoeuvre of locating it in the base position in the verb schema» (p. 87) it would appear that the whole category of *verb, as verb*, is nothing more than a positional signal with no grammatical meaning of its own. Some such approach to meaning must lie behind remarks like «A gerund is always a noun... It belongs to the verb system» (p. 40). And yet there are meanings that lie «buried deep in the subconscious». (p. 147).

These remarks serve to point up that the place of meaning in language is not clearly defined in this book. Questions like the following crop up: does meaning exist in the context? in the mind? in the outside world? What precisely is a meaningless word? Is such an entity possible?

Curiously enough, the author himself hints at an approach which would do much to clarify his treatment of meaning. Thus, when he remarks that «A shape is only *evidence* of form» (p. 205) he leaves us to understand that *form* in the sense of «canonical form or its abstract representation» (p. 48) is not to be observed directly in speech but must be reconstructed (to borrow a term from historical linguistics). On the other hand, he suggests that the lexical meaning «surviving» in any given context is left over from «the complete list of all its possible meanings.» (p. 83). Unfortunately the author does not pursue this line of thought to discuss the existence, besides the «canonical form», of a «canonical meaning» for which the meanings surviving in various contexts are «only evidence». The job of the «ruthless professional analyst of languages»

(p. 147) is then to reconstruct this single underlying meaning « buried deep in the subconscious » (p. 147) from which all contextual meanings are drawn. Though he does not propose such an approach explicitly, it lies implicit behind parts of the book.

The author has certainly achieved one of his purposes: he shows clearly « what that mode of discussion which is called descriptive linguistics » (p. 4) can tell us about the meanings of the English verb. On the whole the book suggests that, having spent some thirty years discussing problems of form, the descriptivist school might now do the same for meaning, though an appeal to other schools could shorten their labours.

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