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**Decontextualising and Recontextualising Tendencies
in 20th Century Linguistics and Literary Theory**

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1 Lines of development in linguistics

Let us assume that one would have to present the history of 20th century linguistics in a nutshell: what would be the main lines of development? Would it be possible at all to synthesize a century of theoretical development into a few pages? The present paper contains a proposal for how this might be done. I will try to identify some of the main lines in the development of 20th century linguistics, I will argue that this development is characterized by a succession of a decontextualising and a recontextualising movement, and I will compare the development of linguistic theory with the development of literary theory, where a more or less similar development may be found.

Obviously, there is a price to pay for the attempt to cover such a vast domain. For one thing, I will be able to focus only on the mainstream developments in the international scene of linguistics, disregarding local traditions, isolated individual achievements, and forerunners. For another, a historiographical programme of this type basically takes the form of a logical reconstruction: can we retrospectively find a perspective that brings order into the apparent chaos? To what extent does the development lend itself to a rational reconstruction, where the different steps in the development are interpreted as the elaboration of a basic research question?

Such a rational reconstruction implies that hardly any attention can be given to actual, biographical factors and interactions. Also, I do not wish to claim that the analysis presented here is the only possible one. I will take my starting-point in the differences between the Saussurean dichotomy of *langue* and *parole* and the Chomskyan dichotomy of competence and performance, but I do not wish to rule out the possibility that the story could be told from a different point of view.

The success of a narrative like this one would probably be its comprehensiveness and its consistency: does it succeed in bringing together the main developments, and is it able to do so in a coherent and insightful way? Well, let us see...

2 Gaps in the systems: Saussure and Chomsky

The Saussurean dichotomy between *langue* and *parole* creates an internally divided grammar, a conception of language with a hole in the middle. On the one hand, *langue* is defined as a social system, a set of collective conventions, a common code shared by a community:

Mais qu'est-ce que la langue? ... C'est à la fois un produit social de la faculté du langage et un ensemble de conventions nécessaires, adoptées par le corps social pour permettre l'exercice de cette faculté chez les individus (1916: 25).

On the other hand, *parole* is an individual, psychological activity that consists of producing specific combinations from the elements that are present in the code:

La parole est au contraire un acte individuel de volonté et d'intelligence, dans lequel il convient de distinguer 1) les combinaisons par lesquelles le sujet parlant utilise le code de la langue en vue d'exprimer sa pensée personnelle 2) le mécanisme psycho-physique qui lui permet d'extérioriser ces combinaisons (1916: 30).

When langue and parole are defined in this way, there is a gap between both: what is the mediating factor that bridges the distance between the social and the psychological, between the community and the individual, between the system and the application of the system, between the code and the actual use of the code?

The Chomskyan distinction between competence and performance formulates the fundamental answer to this question: the missing link between the social code and the individual usage is the individual's knowledge of the code. Performance is basically equivalent with parole, but competence interiorizes the notion of linguistic system: competence is the internal grammar of the language user, the knowledge that the language user has of the linguistic system and that he puts to use in actual performance.

Remarkably, however, Chomsky introduces a new gap into the system. Rather than the trichotomy that one might expect, he restricts his conception of language to a new dichotomy: the social aspects of language are largely ignored. In comparison with a ternary distinction distinguishing between langue, competence, and parole/performance (between social system, individual knowledge of the system, and individual use of the system), the binary distinction between competence and performance creates a new empty slot, leaving the social aspects of language largely out of sight.

Relegating the social nature of language to the background correlates with a switch towards the phylogenetic universality of language. The Chomskyan emphasis on the genetic nature of natural language links up logically with his apparent lack of interest for language as a social semiotic. Where, in particular, does the individual knowledge of the language come from? If the source of linguistic knowledge is not social, what else can it be than an innate and universal endowment? If the language is not learned through acculturation in a linguistic community (given that a language is not primarily a social code), what other source could there be for linguistic knowledge except genetics?

3 The Decontextualisation of Grammar

The link between the Chomskyan genetic perspective and the absence of any fundamental interest in language as a social phenomenon engenders a stepping-stone development, leading by an internal logic to an isolation of grammar. Let us go through the argument in the form of the following chain of (deliberately succinct and somewhat simplistic) propositions.

First, if natural language is not primarily social, it has to be genetic. - This is the basic proposition that was described in the previous paragraph. The relationship could of course be construed in the other direction as well. As I presented it above, the Chomskyan predilection for a genetic perspective in linguistics follows from his lack

of interest for the social side of language. But in actual historical fact, Chomsky's preference for a genetic conception of language seems to have grown more from his discussion with behaviorist learning theory (Skinner in particular) rather than from a confrontation with Saussure. Because the amazing ability of young children to acquire language cannot be explained on the basis of a stimulus-response theory - so the argument goes - an innate knowledge of language has to be assumed. But if one of the major features of language is its genetic nature, then of course the social aspects of language are epiphenomenal. Regardless of the direction in which the link is construed, however, the effects are clear.

Second, if natural language is primarily a genetic entity, semantics or the lexicon cannot be part of the core of linguistics. - Meanings constitute the variable, contextual, cultural aspects of language par excellence. Because social interaction, the exchange of ideas, changing conceptions of the world are primarily mediated through the meaning of linguistic expressions, it is unlikely that the universal aspects of language will be found in the realm of meaning. Further, if the lexicon is the main repository of linguistically encoded meaning, studying the lexicon is of secondary importance. Here as before, though, it should be pointed out that the actual historical development is less straightforward than the reconstruction might suggest. The desemanticization of the grammar did not happen at once (nor was it absolute, for that matter). Triggered by the introduction of meaning in the "standard model" of generative grammar (Chomsky 1965), the "Linguistic Wars" (see Harris 1993) of the late 1960s that opposed Generative Semantics and Interpretive Semantics basically involved the demarcation of grammar with regard to semantics. The answer that Chomsky ultimately favoured implied a restrictive stance with regard to the introduction of meaning into the grammar, but this position was certainly not reached in one step; it was prepared by severe debates in the generativist community.

Third, if semantics or the lexicon cannot be part of the core of linguistics, linguistics will focus on formal rule systems. - The preference for formal syntax that characterizes generative grammar follows by elimination from its genetic orientation: formality is required to keep out meaning, and studying syntax (or more generally, the rule-based aspects of language) correlates with the diminished interest in the lexicon. It should be added that the focus on rules is not only determined by a negative attitude with regard to meanings, but also by a focus on the infinity of language: language as an infinite set of sentences requires a rule system that can generate an infinity of sentences. (At this point, an additional undercurrent in the history of 20th century linguistics crops up: the relationship between linguistics and logic. Chomsky, in fact, got the inspiration for his conception of linguistic rule systems from the architecture of logical proof theory. This is not a line to be pursued here, though.)

Finally, if linguistics focuses on formal rule systems, the application of the rule systems in actual usage is relatively uninteresting. - If the rules define the grammar, it is hard to see what added value could be derived from studying the way in which the rules are actually put to use. The study of performance, in other words, is just as secondary as research into the lexicon.

This chain of consequences leads to a decontextualisation of the grammar. It embodies a restrictive strategy that separates the autonomous grammatical module from different forms of context. Without further consideration of the interrelationship between the various aspects of the decontextualising drift, the main effects can be summarized as follows:

- through the basic Chomskyan shift from *langue* to competence, linguistics is separated from the social context of language as a social code;
- through the focus on the genetic aspects of the language, linguistics is separated from the cognitive context that shows up in the semantic side of the language;
- through the focus on formal rule systems, linguistics is separated from the situational context of actual language use.

In terms of the subdisciplines covered by linguistics, this means that the core of linguistics in Chomskyan terms respectively excludes sociolinguistics, semantics and the lexicon, and pragmatics. This does not mean, however, that these disciplines, which would be considered peripheral from the generativist point of view, disappeared altogether. For one thing, in spite of the generativist dominance, some people continued to work within older pre-generativist frameworks. (This holds true, for instance, for some of the work in structuralist lexical semantics.) For another, and more importantly, the generativist era witnessed the birth of approaches that autonomously developed the aspects that were rejected or downplayed by generative grammar. A brief overview may suffice to establish that the late 1960s and the 1970s constitute a crucial period for the development of sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and semantics.

Sociolinguistics as we know it now (including the sociology of language, the ethnography of speaking, and sociohistorical linguistics, next to sociolinguistics in the narrow, Labovian sense) came into existence with works such as Labov (1972), Haugen (1966), Weinreich, Labov & Herzog (1968), Gumperz & Dell Hymes (1972).

Pragmatics as a separate discipline started off in the wake of Grice (1975). In seminal works such as Stalnaker (1974) or Gazdar (1979), a logically inspired form of pragmatics saw the light, focusing on questions of presupposition and contextual interpretation. Somewhat later, a broader type of discourse linguistics and conversational analysis was introduced by Coulthard (1977), Gumperz (1982), Brown & Yule (1983), or Tannen (1984), to name just a few of the early works.

Semantics received an impetus through the development of formal semantics, as in Montague (1974), Partee (1979), Dowty (1979). Building on the achievements of formal logic, formal semantics is a type of meaning-based grammar, but the conception of meaning that lies at the basis of formal semantics is restricted to the referential, truth-theoretical aspects of meaning. In this sense, it is a more or less restricted form of semantics. Later developments like Cognitive Linguistics will take a less restrictive approach to meaning, as we will see.

In short, the decontextualising, autonomist attitude of generative grammar is to some extent compensated by the development of disciplines that explore the aspects of language that are relegated to the background by generative grammar. None of the approaches mentioned here, however, overcomes the autonomist restrictions in any fun-

damental sense. Sociolinguistics and pragmatics exist alongside grammatical theory rather than interacting with it intensively, and the conception of meaning that lies at the basis of formal semantics is too restricted to consider it a truly recontextualised grammar. In other words, the recuperation of the contextual aspects rejected by generative grammar could go further, and this is exactly what is happening in a number of contemporary trends in linguistics.

4 The Recontextualisation of Grammar

From roughly 1985 onwards, a number of trends in linguistics appear to link the grammar more closely to the contextual aspects that were severed by generative theorizing. The peripheral aspects that were being developed largely separately and autonomously, are now being linked up more narrowly with the grammar itself (which can then no longer be autonomous). The following overview of the relevant tendencies will again be brief and schematic. Its main purpose is to point out the existence of the trends, not to describe in much detail. This also means, for instance, that no attention will be paid to the overlap that may exist between different tendencies.

1. The reintroduction of the lexicon into the grammar is probably the most widespread of the four tendencies to be mentioned here; it is, in fact, relatively clear within generative grammar itself. This lexicalist tendency in grammatical theory is triggered by the recognition that describing grammatical rules appears to imply describing the lexical sets that the rules apply to. Reversing the descriptive perspective then leads to a description of the valency of the lexical items (i.e. the structures that an item can appear in). The lexicalist tendency appears in various forms in the more formal approaches to grammar: one may think of the projections and theta-roles of Generative Grammar, of the central role of the lexicon in Lexical Functional Grammar, and of the lexically driven grammar developed in the framework of Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar. A more recent development is Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995, Croft 2001) which is situated in the tradition of cognitive and functional approaches rather than formal grammar. Typically, Construction Grammar starts from the assumption that there is a continuum between syntax and lexicon: constructions are syntactic structures that may contain lexical material.

2. Cognitive Linguistics as founded by Langacker (1987), Lakoff (1987), and Talmy (2000) (see Ungerer & Schmid 1996 for an introduction) is the most outspoken attempt to give meaning a central position in the architecture of the grammar. In contrast with formal semantics, however, the conception of meaning that lies at the basis of this approach is not restricted to a referential, truth-functional type of meaning. First, linguistic structures are thought to express conceptualisations, i.e. conceptualisation is central for linguistic structure - and conceptualization goes further than mere reference. It involves imagery in the broadest sense of the word: ways of making sense, of imposing meaning. Second, the conceptualisations that are expressed in the language have an experiential basis, i.e. they link up with the way in which human beings experience reality, both culturally and physiologically. In this sense, Cognitive Linguistics

tics embodies a fully contextualized conception of meaning. (There are other approaches that develop a meaning-based approach to grammar, like Hallidayan Systemic-Functional Grammar, but I concentrate here on Cognitive Linguistics because it the most outspoken example of this tendency.)

3. The link between linguistic performance and grammar is re-established in two different ways. First, a number of functionalist approaches try to find (potentially universal) discourse motivations for grammatical constructs. Discourse is then no longer the mere application of grammatical rules, but the grammatical rules themselves are motivated by the discourse functions that the grammar has to fulfil. The existence of passives in a given language, for instance, is then explained as a topicalization mechanism: grammars contain passives because topicalizing direct objects is a useful function in discourse. Seminal publications within this approach include Givon (1979), Hopper & Thompson (1980), Hopper (1987).

Second, there is a growing methodological interest in actual language use as a methodological basis for linguistic research. Such usage-based models of language (as they are aptly called by Barlow & Kemmer 2000) link up with the highly productive field of corpus linguistics. From a theoretical point of view, it is particularly important to note that the usage-based approach also holds the promise of answering the acquisition problem that looms large in the Chomskyan delimitation of linguistics. Specifically in the work done by Tomasello and his group (1998), an alternative is presented for the Chomskyan genetic argument. These researchers develop a model of language acquisition in which each successive stage is (co)determined by the actual knowledge and use of the child at a given stage, i.e. language acquisition is described as a series of step by step usage-based extensions of the child's grammar. The grammar so to speak emerges from the child's interactive performance.

4. Recontextualising grammar in a social context is as yet a only a minor trend, but at least two burgeoning trends may be identified. First, there is a renewed interested in the social construction of linguistic meaning. The methods of semantic description that are being developed in the context of Cognitive Linguistics can be applied to culturally specific meanings. If meaning is experiential, then obviously the socio-cultural context is part and parcel of the experiential background of language use, and it will have to be investigated how language and culture interact. Examples of this trend are Palmer (1996) and Lakoff (1996). (Again, there are a few similar tendencies outside Cognitive Linguistics, but for reasons of economy, I restrict myself to the latter.)

Second, there is an incipient tendency, as illustrated by Grondelaers et al. (2002), to bring grammatical analysis and variationist research closer together. Usage-based and meaning-based models of grammar introduce more variation into the grammar than a rule-based approach tends to do: the language-internal or discourse-related factors that influence the use of a particular construction may be manifold, and the presence or absence of a construction is not an all-or-none matter. In the analysis this type of variation, it often appears that the variation is co-determined by 'external', sociolinguistic factors: the variation that appears in actual usage (as attested in corpora) may be determined simultaneously by grammatical, discursive, and sociolinguistic factors. Disentangling those different factors, then, becomes one

methodological endeavour: in the actual practice of a usage-based enquiry, grammatical analysis and variationist analysis will go hand in hand.

Figure 1 summarizes the recontextualising tendencies that characterize the development of linguistic theory in the last 15 to 20 years, when the dominant position of generative grammar gradually gave way to new approaches.

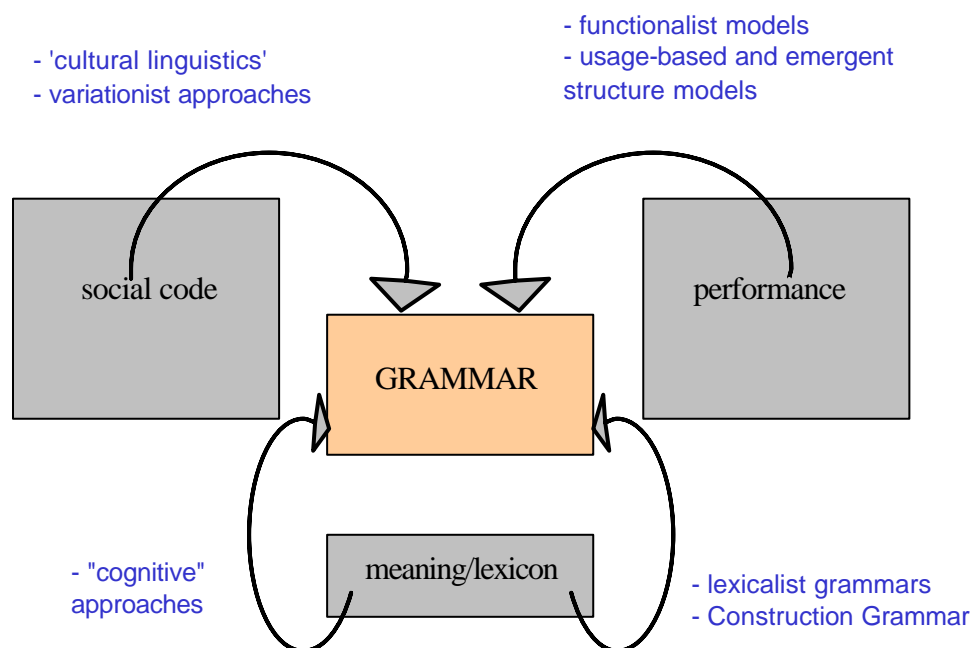


Figure 1

5 Analogous Developments in Literary Theory

If we wish to make a comparison between the development of linguistics and that of literary theory, three questions spring to attention. First, can we use the same notions to classify approaches to literary criticism as we do to classify the various tendencies in linguistic theory? Second, can we define a concept of de/re-contextualisation for literary theory? And third, is the development of literary theory characterized by a similar succession of decontextualisation and recontextualisation? The first question involves matters of classification, the second is a definitional question, and the third a chronological one.

The classificatory question can be answered by identifying the literary counterparts of the factors that constitute the basic architecture of Figure 1. The factor 'performance' in linguistics corresponds with the literary text: the product of literary performance. Corresponding with the 'grammar' factor in linguistics, then, is the semiotic code: the set of linguistic and/or literary conventions that constitute the 'system' against the background of which literary texts are produced. The 'social code' aspect is replaced by the

factor culture and community, i.e. the historical, social and geographical situation of the literary production, including communities of readers. Finally, the factor 'meaning' may be linked (given a maximally contextualized interpretation of 'meaning') to the individual experiential background of the author.

If we try to use these parallel concepts to classify approaches to literary criticism (just like we did with their counterparts in linguistics), we immediately find that they can indeed be used to demarcate some of the well-known tendencies in literary theory. First, an interest in the author's experiential background corresponds with the biographical approach in literary theory, for instance in the form of a romantic conception of the artist as genius. Second, a focus on cultures and communities takes two different forms. An older, idealist version sees literary texts in the context of the history of ideas. Literary theory as *Ideengeschichte* explores how the ideas and ideals that live within a historical community influence literary production. Reception theory (reader response theory) is a more recent, empiricist version of the focus on cultures and communities. Third, concentrating on the text as text takes the form of different types of formalist approaches, in the historical line of close reading and New Criticism. And fourth, interpreting literary texts against the background of the relevant semiotic system is exemplified by traditional philological criticism.

However, it will be clear that this enumeration does not exhaust the existing approaches to literary theory. In order to arrive at a more comprehensive view, we have to add an additional dimension: I suggest that we introduce a distinction between approaches that study the relevant factors in a fairly straightforward way, as overt and transparent influences, and those approaches that study them as rather hidden and covert factors - hidden, in particular, from the author himself. The latter set of approaches often take a critical turn: revealing the hidden factors behind the literary texts is a critical activity.

Systematically, we may then identify psychoanalytic approaches as corresponding to the biographical approach. Reception theory and the history of ideas are complemented by various socially critical approaches: marxist criticism, and the more recent forms of critical theory (feminist and gender criticism, ethnic and minority studies, postcolonial theory). A text-based approach is obviously represented by poststructuralism and deconstruction: texts may generate ever new meanings beyond the original intention of the author. Structuralism itself, finally, matches philological criticism as an approach focusing on the code rather than the texts. Typically, structuralism is a 'deep structure' approach, identifying underlying patterns rather than restricting the analysis to the surface of the text.

The resulting classification of approaches in literary theory may now be summarized as in Figure 2. Given this classification, we can now ask the definitional question: what would decontextualization or recontextualization mean in literary theory? In contrast with linguistics, where an interest in the linguistic system (either as a social code or as an individualized grammar) occupies the centre of the attention, literary theory is more or less by definition primarily interested in the text. This is an important observation for the definition of 'contextualization': while the evolution of linguistics as I have presented it essentially involves the relationship between the grammar and

the other three factors, the literary question involves the relationship between the literary text and other relevant factors. I suggest, then, that decontextualization in literary theory involves any theoretical or critical shift away from the immediate communicative context of the text, i.e. any shift away from authors and readers to so-called autonomous texts and to the independently existing code in which the text is produced. In terms of Figure 2, a decontextualization then takes the form of a downward shift in the figure.

	OVERT FACTORS	HIDDEN FACTORS
AUTHOR'S EXPERIENTIAL BACKGROUND	the biographical approach (the artist as genius)	psychoanalytic approaches
CULTURES AND COMMUNITIES	- the idealist version: Ideengeschichte - the empiricist version: reception theory	- marxist approaches - critical theory
THE TEXT AS TEXT	formalist approaches (close reading, New Criticism)	deconstruction, poststructuralism
THE SEMIOTIC SYSTEM	traditional (historical) philological criticism	structuralism

Figure 2

Given this definition of decontextualization, we may now have a look at the chronology of the various approaches. Roughly, we can identify a timeline with five stages. In the first stage, before 1930, the biographical and history of ideas approaches dominant. In the stage between 1930 and 1960, formalism is in the centre of the theoretical developments. Between 1960 and 1980, the major innovations come from structuralism, to be followed by a poststructuralist and deconstructionist stage from 1980 onwards. From 1990 on, critical theory constitutes a new focus for theoretical developments.

If we map this timeline onto the classification in Figure 2, we can indeed see a succession of a downward shift followed by a recontextualizing move upwards, as may become apparent from the position of the stages 1 to 5 in Figure 3. At the same time, though, Figure 3 adds a nuance to the overall picture of decontextualization and recontextualization: some approaches are not included in the main line of development, like reception theory and marxist criticism as older forms of the recontextualising trend.

	OVERT FACTORS	HIDDEN FACTORS
AUTHOR'S EXPERIENTIAL BACKGROUND	the biographical approach (the artist as genius)	psychoanalytic approaches
CULTURES AND COMMUNITIES	- the idealist version: 1 Ideengeschichte - the empiricist version: reception theory	- marxist approaches - critical theory 5
THE TEXT AS TEXT	formalist approaches (close reading, New Criticism) 2	deconstruction, poststructuralism 4
THE SEMIOTIC SYSTEM	traditional (historical) philological criticism	structuralism 3

Figure 3

6 Conclusion

The challenge defined at the onset of this paper was the following: can we find a line of thought that brings together the history of linguistic theory into an insightful narrative perspective? I hope to have shown that this can be done by describing the history of 20th century linguistics in terms of a decontextualising and a recontextualising movement, where 'context' involves either the socio-cultural environment, the performative level of actual language use, or the cognitive and experiential background of language users. It adds to the appeal of the model that we can extrapolate it to literary theory, given that the focus of attention in literary theory is the text rather than the linguistic system. Given this proviso, we have been able to identify a similar, though somewhat less straightforward succession of decontextualisation and recontextualisation in literary studies.

Of course, these sketchily drawn lines of development will have to be described in more detail. What exactly are the various theories that belong in the different traditions? What are the exact historical processes behind the overall evolution? What are the undercurrents that should be added to the picture? Even though these questions make clear that we are still far removed from a comprehensive history of 20th century thought in linguistics and literary theory, we can at least be confident that a synthetic view of that history is not altogether impossible.

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