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Begründet von
Klaus D. Dutz & Peter Schmitter

Herausgegeben von

Gerda Haßler (Potsdam)
Angelika Rüter (Münster)

in Verbindung mit
David Cram (Oxford), Miguel Ángel Esparza Torres (Madrid),
Stefano Gensini (Rom), Ludger Kaczmarek (Borgholzhausen),
Michael Mackert (Morgantown), Masataka Miyawaki (Kawasaki),
Jan Noordegraaf (Amsterdam),
Jacques-Philippe Saint-Gérand (Clermont-Ferrand)

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Elitzur Avraham Bar-Asher

The Notion of "Tradition" in the History of Linguistics*

Introduction

Who is the founder of the linguistic science? This is one of the questions that Keith Allan raises in the first chapter of his new book. Although, later in the book, he casts his vote for Aristotle, he explores other potential candidates. But underlying his question and attempted answers lies a further question, that should be raised — what is it that is particular about the field of linguistics that engenders constant "reinvention"? It is this reinvention that makes identifying a founder difficult and, although Allan does not deal directly with this question, *The Western Classical Tradition in Linguistics* provides an ample survey of the field to begin to explore the nature of the repeated reinvention of linguistics.

In contrast to most of the other scientific fields in linguistics, ontological questions are not relegated to the field of philosophy, but are required to initiate any inquiry. Such questions (among many others) include: Where is the language located? In what sense does it exist at all? Which phenomena should be explained? What answers are we looking for? The linguist must answer these questions, or at least have underlying assumptions concerning them before beginning any discussion. Therefore, linguistics lends itself to continual reinvention as linguists redefine the object of linguistic study and, consequently, propose a new scientific methodology. In doing so, the researcher sets

*) On the occasion of: Keith Allan, *The Western Classical Tradition in Linguistics*. London: Equinox Publications 2007, 368 pp. (Equinox Textbooks and Surveys in Linguistics.). [ISBN; 978–1–904768–96–8; $ 29.95 (PB) / 978–1–904768–95–1; $ 90,00 (HB)].

himself apart from previous scholarship and, thus, is often granted the title of founder of a new science.

Despite this history of constant paradigmatic shifts, however, we continue to deal with many of the same components and the manifestations of the linguistic reality. Every plausible theory is based on descriptive elements, and, therefore, similar observations are inevitable. The same regularities and irregularities continue to be the foundations of different explanations. Consequently, it is natural that many remarks about a given language or languages reappear again and again in the literature. This is in spite of the fact that each time they may appear in a new manner, in a different framework or methodology. In the same way, the fundamental speculations concerning the object of the language itself always, unavoidably, contain the same elements, and, as a result, despite slight variations, it is predictable that we will repeatedly encounter new incarnations of similar thoughts.

This is the major theme of Allan's book. He demonstrates how much of contemporary linguistics was foreshadowed in the works of the ancients. As attested by its title, this book is an attempt to portray "a tradition", but he is not solely concerned with the transition and development of ideas, but also, and to a greater degree, with the reoccurrences of concepts.

From the first page of the book it is clear that it is written by someone who is familiar with the end of the story, and the end of the story is contemporary linguistics, and, if I may add, the American one.[1] As is well known, current linguists are not often interested in old literature[2] (and they differ in what they consider to be old), only mentioning it in anecdotes.[3] In this sense, Allan definitely fills this gap, calling attention to parallels between ancient discussions and those of today. In this regard, this book's abundance of good examples makes it a worthwhile read.

Unfortunately, it is not always clear in Allan's discussions whether these similarities between ancient and modern discussions function anecdotally, or whether we can clearly speak about tradition. But I will leave this problem at the moment to survey first the content of the book.

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1) European scholarship appears only if it is regularly included in the curriculum of current American linguistics. Central figures from the French linguistics, such as Algirdas Julien Greimas or François Rastier, who worked on Semantics and Semiotics are completely absent from Allan's review. Likewise, among British works he does not mention figures like Roy Harris who tried to lead linguistics in a different direction.

2) Although there are some outstanding examples, such as Horn (2001).

3) For example every discussion about aspects (*aktionsart*) starts with Aristotle's distinction between *energeia* and *kinesis* (see for example Dahl (1981: 80). However, one can find some more interesting parallels in the works of the *Modistae Grammarians* in their development of Aristotilean *Categories*. For a survey of their theory see chapter 8 in Allan's book.

Obviously, it is a difficult task to cover in one book every important discussion, and indeed different writers would have probably chosen to cover different topics, but, nevertheless, Allan identifies some of the most fundamental issues to discuss in detail. It should be noted that it is not entirely clear as to whom this book is addressed; sometimes Allan explains basic terms (especially in the first chapters), and sometimes he writes with such brevity that it is challenging even for an expert to follow his argumentations and descriptions (for example, the last chapter). However, readers of various levels will benefit from reading this book, especially since Allan constantly puts the history of linguistics in context, intertwining the history of ideas with the history of events.

The order of this article will be the following. First, I will survey Allan's book, focusing on examples that will illustrate the major theme of the book, and *en passant* I will note locally, mostly when, to my mind, important issues for the discussion about the linguistics tradition are missing. Following this review I will use the examples from the different chapters as starting points for a discussion about "traditions" in linguistics and examine Allan's work from this perspective.

Review of Allan's book

The book is comprised of two parts. The first six chapters are ordered mostly chronologically, the last six chapters are divided along thematic lines with internal chronological sequences, and there is some overlap of the chronology between the chapters. Although Allan concludes each chapter with a summary, it only helps *post factum* to explain his reasons for grouping different topics together, which at the outset of the chapter is unclear. The first chapter serves as an introduction to the book. It begins by defining the scope of linguistics and suggests a very broad definition: any methodological study of the language. It presents the methodological distinctions between theoretical and descriptive treatments of the language and how, in fact, it is impossible to do the one without engaging in the other. Allan highlights the categorization of the different approaches to the language according to four viewpoints — physical, abstract, cognitive and social interactive — four categories that will frame the discussions in the following chapters.

In addition, this chapter presents the fundamental ontological and epistemological questions that, as noted earlier, are essential to any linguistic theory. Does the language have an independent existence apart from its speaker? Or is this just an abstraction or idealization of the language that is located in the individual brain? What is the origin of the linguistic knowledge — is it a reflection of our mind or is it an image and representation(s) of the world?

This chapter ends with the observation that prior to the twentieth century there were almost no women who studied languages. Although this is a very interesting topic, this is an example of the few tangential discussions throughout the book that detract from the structure of the book and make reading it more difficult.

Linguistics has, according to Allan, two parents: philosophy and the pedagogic tradition of teaching languages. The second and the third chapters focus on the former. In this context, Plato is brought up as the first example. Although, being a philosopher, Plato almost never dealt with grammar, many of his observations are important for a variety of issues that concern linguistics. As expected, Allan uses Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* as the starting point for a discussion regarding *naturalism* vs. *conventionalism*.[4] In doing so, Allan identifies a direct connection between the naturalist idea of etymology, namely that the "original meaning" are the "real meaning", and the idea, common even today, that there is a "correct" usage for a language, which relies on the historical usage. As we will see, Allan returns often in his book to this approach. In addition, he notes that the Platonic philosophy, which argues for the existence of abstract entities in an immortal world, has been advanced by some linguists and philosophers of linguistics in the twentieth century, such as Carré, Katz and Postal.

Given Allan's focus on Plato, it is surprising that he does not devote attention to an idea prominent in many modern linguistic theories — that real knowledge is an innate one, — and explicitly Platonic.[5]

Chapter 3 concentrates on Aristotle, a conventionalist in respect to the question of *naturalism* vs. *conventionalism.* Although Aristotle dealt with language only in the context of his philosophical and rhetorical discussions, in reality he was the first to be concerned with many of the fundamental questions that were and still are at the heart of the linguistic discussions. He dealt with phonology and made the first observations regarding parts of speech. Many of Aristotle's remarks on logic, such as the relation between the subject and the predicate, are the starting point for many linguistic discussions. Furthermore, Aristotle's distinction between the formal aspect of the sentence and its truth value is essential to the field of Semantics.[6] Finally, Allan also demonstrates parallels be-

4) Since Allan's treatment of *Cratylus* is very general, for a more detailed discussion on this topic, see Joseph (2000).

5) See Chomsky (1966: 63).

6) Allan points to the similarities between these ideas and Frege's distinction between "sense" and "meaning". However, some other parts of Frege's theory, such as the idea of "thought" (Der Gedanke), and his idea of truth value as the referent of the sentence, would have been more relevant to this discussion.

tween Aristotle and the maxims of Grice. Later on, their relevancy to the main theme of the book will be discussed further.

The fourth chapter is about the Stoics and Varro. Although the period of the Stoics saw the beginning of explicit grammatical studies, philosophy was nonetheless still relevant and central to all theoretical engagement with language. According to their metaphysics, the Stoics had a naturalist outlook, and, therefore, sought to find the "correct language". From this point of view, stemmed valuable linguistic observations concerning the grammatical categories of the verb and the semantic analysis of the cases, as well as significant contributions in developing propositional logic.

Allan singles out Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BCE) from the world of the Roman Empire. Allan characterizes Varro as the closest of all the ancients to modern linguists, but one who, unfortunately, did not have a strong influence on the following generations. Although Allan goes into great detail in describing Varro's linguistic theories, for the purpose of this review it is most important to highlight Varro's questions concerning language acquisition and differentiation between natural parts of language and those which are the result of the will.

Allan's treatment of Varro, however, lacks some important elements. The chapter would have benefited from a greater emphasis on Varro's correlation of grammar with nature, on the one hand, and non-grammar (lexicon) with arbitrariness and will, on the other. Varro viewed these two parts as co-existing in every language, an approach that would govern linguistics for generations, and one would say that it is stands at the heart of many of the current debates.[7] Prior to Varro the predominant belief held that everything had to be either natural or conventional. Finally, Allan could have highlighted the similarities between Varro's reconstructions of unattested words and the methodology developed by the philologists of the 19th century.

Chapter five describes the final shift from philosophy to pedagogy through a focus on two treatises that are the foundations for all the subsequent grammatical work: The Greek grammar *Thechnē Grammatikē*, attributed to Dionysius Thrax (160/170–85/90 BCE) and the Latin Grammar *Artes Grammaticae* of Aelius Donatus (315–385 CE) and chapter six surveys in detail the work of Apollonius (80–160 CE) and Priscian (6th century CE). In the context of the larger theme of the book Apollonius' discussion Semantic Roles is important, since, as Householder (1981: 17) noted, he was probably the first to explore underlying Structures.

7) This is the picture that arises from chapters 8 and 9 of *De lingua latina*. See Joseph (2000: 100–102).

The seventh chapter marks the start of the book's second part and the beginning of thematic discussions. The specific purpose of this chapter is to look at prescriptivism in eighteenth century Great Britain as an offshoot of the Middle Ages tradition. However, in actuality, this chapter mostly covers the history of the study of the language in Britain, focusing on grammar (and grammarians) and including some philosophical treatments of language as well (for example, the work of Lock).

Prescriptivism has its origin already in Greek rhetoric, but it was influenced by Christianity after the Church sanctified three languages — Hebrew, Greek and Latin — and in particular the dialects of these languages in which the holy scriptures were written. In general, prescriptivism seeks to correct the usage of the language, and, as Allan demonstrates, there are three models considered to be representative of the correct language: a logically constructed language, a language that is a reflection of nature, and a language of a "reputable person". At this point, Allan pauses from his descriptive attitude, to criticize prescriptivism, characterizing it as another form of censorship.

The eighth chapter endeavors to identify the precedents to the idea of "general" or "universal" grammar prior to Chomsky. Allan concentrates on two groups of scholars who returned philosophical discussions to linguistic inquiry and developed the idea of universal grammar: the modistate (or speculative) grammarians and the rationalists from the school of Port-Royal. The general assumption in both theories was that since there is only one logic, there should also be only one grammar.

Given the assumption that there is a one general and universal grammar, it became necessary to explain the existence of non-identical, different languages. Hence, the distinction was made between the essential parts of all languages, which they have in common, and the parts that are not essential, which they do not share. The essential elements are those that are rational, and the different elements are merely accidental. We can see here the roots of the similar solution given in modern theories that divides languages' governing rules between *principles* and *parameters*. As Allan shows, in this context, it is justified to speak about *tradition* as it appears in Chomskian theory, since Chomsky himself declared a connection between his theory and that of the grammarians of Port-Royal.

Citing the connection between Chomsky and the Port-Royal grammarians, however, is an incomplete picture. It would have been fitting for Allan to at least mention theoreticians who preceded Chomsky by only a few decades. I am referring to scholars such as the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen. On the one hand, Jespersen viewed language from a rationalist perspective and, therefore, spoke about the linguistic forms as representations of notions. On the other

hand, he argued fervently against any attempt to identify a universal grammar.[8] There is good evidence that Chomsky responded in many aspects to Jespersen's work, and in this respect Jespersen is a good representative of the common opinion at the time among the linguists.

Chapter nine deals with two topics: the history of phonology and comparative philology. The first part concentrates mostly on the development of the notion of the phoneme, while the second focuses on the history of philology by recounting the works of various philologists such as Dane Rasmus Rask, Jakob Grimm, Franz Bobb, and the Neogrammarians. The second part would have been enhanced if Allan had elaborated more as to why the Neogrammarians were considered to be innovators, and what were the specific contributions of the 19th century that led to the categorization of linguistics as a science.[9]

Allan concludes this chapter by offering an opposing viewpoint to that of Roger Lass who believes that there have been no notable breakthroughs in historical linguistics since the nineteenth century. In contrast, Allan argues that there have been developments in some generic works. Although he refers to the pertinent works, one would expect him to mention in this context the notion of *grammaticlaization*, which stands at the core of many of the recent historical linguistic discussions, and has engendered debate as to whether it is a distinct phenomenon.

At the heart of chapter ten stands the tension between language and languages. How can there be so many similarities and differences at the same time? Allan begins with a survey of past discussions about the origin of languages. These origins, which linguistics believe are to be found in either rational thinking or social phenomena, create a triangular relationship between reason, society, and language. This further leads to a discussion about the causal relationship between the three components. Humboldt first raised this question in the nineteenth century, arguing that language is a reflection of the way the individual perceives the world and that languages are results of collective activities of humankind. This is the starting point of early American linguistics. Boas emphasized the importance of studying a language and its surrounding culture equally. Following Boas' example, Sapir and Whorf studied many native-American languages and cultures, developing what is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. They asserted that different language communities select different *gestalts* and that the different languages create different ideas. Allan demonstrates that Whorf himself held a very weak version of this hypothesis

8) See Jespersen (1924: 46); on the tension regarding Universal Grammar in the work of Jespersen, see Francis (1989: 80).

9) For a good discussion about these issues, see Amsterdamska (1987).

and did not believe in an absolute version of relativism, considering that a person can think in different languages and move easily from one language to another.

In this chapter, Allan points to many interesting similarities between old speculations about the creation of the languages, which focused on language acquisition and on communication among animals and today's empirical researches about the same issues. Allan makes an interesting observation when he marks that after a long rejection of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, their ideas have reappeared in contemporary cognitive linguistics.

Chapter 11 begins with a delineation of the major points of the Saussurean linguistics. In general, Allan thinks that Saussure was not as innovative as one would expect for someone dubbed "the father of modern linguistics". In this regard, he agrees with Roman Jakobson that Saussure's importance had more to do with initiating many of the basic discussions of linguistics. Allan further believes that among the most important contributions of Saussure are his argument for the autonomy of linguistics as a separate field and his distinction between *langue* and *parole*, which became the foundation for Chomsky's distinction between 'competence' and 'performance.'

Saussure's work is also instrumental in that he posited that the *langue* is a social entity.[10] In this context Allan demonstrates a good example of tradition in the 20th century, since this emphasis on the social aspect of the language set up the foundations of a functionalist linguistics, which was developed by his successors in the linguistic circle of Prague (especially in the work of the founder of this group Vilém Mathesius)[11] and in the work of M. A. K. Halliday in England. Functionalism is a different paradigm for universalism, and, accordingly, all languages should be compared based on what they all have in common — the fact that they serve as a tool for communication. Following this point of view, language is regarded in light of its goal and this then is the foundation for *informational structure* and *discourse analysis*.

Allan shows how these approaches have their hairs in contemporary linguistics and uses the functionalist approach to languages and its concentration on the meaning of language and on its psychological mechanism to introduce another branch of linguistics — the work of *Role and Reference Grammar*. The latter also focuses on the structure of proposition and the semantics of the sen-

10) In this context Allan could have mentioned also the connection between Saussure's work and the field of *Pragmatics*, as it appears in Gardiner's work, which started from Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*. See Gardiner (1932).

11) Although it is questionable how much Mathesius himself was influenced by the work of Saussure.

tence, in which discourse and pragmatics provide a link between syntactic and semantic representations.

Regarding the first part of this chapter about Saussure, I should say that Allan's acquaintance with Saussure's theory is very general. He does not refer to the most significant literature about him, especially the scholarship (in French) that was published after the finding of Saussure's own manuscripts in 1996.[12]

The last chapter is divided into two parts, the first of which surveys the development of the American linguistics in the twentieth century as it relates to some metatheoretical issues. On the one hand stands the inductive method of Bloomfield, based on the tradition from Boas, that each language should be treated separately. The goal, therefore, is not to find what is universal, but rather the peculiarities of each language and dialect. Methodically, according to this approach, one should start from the smallest unit and then move to the larger ones. In other words, begin with finding all the phonemes of a language and only after should one attempt to find the morphemes and so on and so forth. These are the foundations of what is known as *American Structuralism*, *Descriptivism*, or *Taxonomy Linguistics*. The revolution of Chomsky, according to Allan, is in the realization that inductive research is not enough and, thus, the hypothetico-deductive paradigm is necessary. It should be noted, however, that this description of Chomsky's revolution significantly diminishes it, especially since the idea of a hypothetico-deductive paradigm for linguistics was first suggested by Louis Hjelmslev[13] and other scholars who were influenced by the logic of Carnap and formal approaches to science.

The second part of the chapter is focused on developing an "evaluating linguistic hypothesis: what a theory of language should do". Although Allan concludes with a realistic approach to language similar to that of Katz, Allan believes that the constructs of the language are abstracted from spatiotemporal located physical, psychological, and social manifestations of language events. He ends with an eclectic approach that both inductive and hypothetico-deductive paradigms are necessary for linguistics. We should regret the fact that the last part of this chapter is written very briefly, making it hard to follow and evaluate what exactly Allan has in mind and the reasons for his conclusions.

In these twelve chapters, Allan successfully covers many of the discussions that stand and stood at the heart of studies of language, and he repeatedly iden-

12) For example, one of the major works is Bouquet (1997).

13) Hjelmslev (1963), esp. chapter 4. This book was published in Danish in 1943 and the first translation to English was already published by 1953. It was immediately reviewed in *Language* (Garvin 1954).

tifies many concepts and ideas that extend from the ancient observations about languages to contemporary linguistics. However, before concluding, I would like to comment on the main theme of this book, the notion that we can speak about a western tradition, and I would like to discuss two problems that arise from reading this book.

Traditions in Linguistics

Speaking about tradition one usually has in mind some notion of continuity — a course of successive stages in which each stage is related to the other stages directly, either by being built upon a preceding one or by reacting to it.[14] If this is the accepted notion of tradition, Allan should have focused only on this kind of relationship between theories or approaches. But already from the examples that I mentioned earlier it is clear that this is not always the case. Many of Allan's observations are merely examples of external similarity. For instance, take Allan's comparison of Aristotle and the Gricean maxims (p. 52–54). This comparison is very problematic, since Aristotle spoke in a prescriptive manner and his rules are meant as instructions for good rhetoric. Grice, in contrast, is analyzing (empirically) the cooperative principles that exist in ordinary conversation. Although we can find connections and similarities, the two approaches are so distinct that it is hard to see any connection or to speak about tradition here.[15]

As I said in the introduction, since discussions about language are all based on the same material, it is inevitable that there will be similarities. But these similarities should not be taken so seriously, because, as they are a result of different frameworks, they are merely anecdotes or a demonstration of how studying the same phenomenon naturally brings different researchers with different approaches to reach analogous observations. I should say that there are more examples than just Aristotle and Grice, and, as a matter of fact, Allan had to elaborate within all of his examples as to whether these are merely resemblances or whether there is something deeper in the connections between similar concepts throughout the history of linguistics. And, more importantly, whether we can find the line of continuity that will justify the use of the word "tradition".

Sometimes it is even more problematic when there is an explicit connection between two approaches, because speaking about the similarities may lead to the essential differences being overlooked. In these cases, the attempt to dem-

14) Needless to say that Allan's work is missing an explicit account of his own approach to the appropriate methodology for intellectual history. Such as the discussion that can be found *inter alia* in Elffers (1988).

15) See p. 54 for Allan's attention to a similar problem.

onstrate connections may cause one of the theories to be read in light of the other and not in its own right. I will give one example for this phenomenon, (but I could mention a few others). Allan's discussion in chapter 8 affirms Chomsky's view of himself as the heir of the rationalist approach of the grammarians of Port-Royal. However, as an historian of ideas, Allan should have been more critical and not simply trusted Chomsky's testimony. A careful reading of *Grammaire Générale et Raisonée*, the masterpiece of Port-Royal, reveals that for them being a rationalist meant understanding that the language serves the needs of the mind. In fact, their approach is essentially much closer to functionalism than to anything that has to do with the work of the generativists.

In order to discuss "tradition", one has to focus on examples in which connections between different ideas and thoughts can be identified and traced. Furthermore, one must present the major shifts that transform tradition.

These two points are relevant even to the very recent history of linguistics, and can teach us a lot about the developments of thoughts and theories in general. I will give two examples that will illustrate my point. The first is a discussion regarding the interface between semantics and syntax from the last three decades. It is known that the idea of the *unaccusativity hypothesis* was reinvented many times,[16] and, therefore, it is difficult to conclude whether different scholars came to the same conclusions independently or whether one took it from another. It should be noted that these exact same ideas were already phrased a few decades earlier by Lucien Tesnière,[17] and connections to his work can be traced in American linguistics (such as the use of the terms "valence" and "actants"). A historian of linguistics should suggest criteria to evaluate whether in this case we can speak about "tradition" or not.

Another instance when linguists presented themselves as the heirs of others, but in fact had a totally different approach can be found in the late history of linguistics as well. Take for example the relationship between Saussure and Hjelmslev. The latter kept arguing for a direct connection to Saussure, but a careful reading of the writings of both reveals that they differed in every possible aspect. They held a very different ontology and epistemology, and, consequently, their methodology was significantly different.[18] This is a very interesting example of a different kind of relationship within what is considered a

16) See Pullum (1991: 147–158).

17) Tesnière (1965: 240–241).

18) For primary discussions about this comparison see Harris (2001: 76–93); Anne-Gaëlle Toutain, "La langue: du concept saussurien à l'objet hjelmslevien. Une tentative de formulation de la spécificité et des enjeux du point de vue saussurien", Colloque international 19–22 juin 2007, Révolutions saussuriennes, Documents de travail, pp. 209–216.

clear tradition. Studying such a relationship in detail would teach us a lot about the development of linguistic thinking.

Conclusions

Allan's book is an important presentation of the history of linguistics, and adeptly finds connections and similarities between theories from different time and places. However, I think that if Allan would have been more specific in defining the different kinds of relationship that characterize a tradition, we would have benefited from an understanding based more on the development of thoughts. More work of this nature is still necessary.

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