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What is
a Linguistic Fact ?

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It is a common understanding among linguists that we are engaged in the general study of the structure of language, not gathering particular facts about languages; our aim is to understand the human capacity to construct a language system and not just to collect the output of that system. At the same time, we all want our explanations and analyses to be right; very few linguists are interested in grammar which is universal but wrong. At the least, our theories must fit any body of reliable reports of facts about language, and we have a vested interest in obtaining more reliable facts, even if we do not collect them ourselves. In this sense, all linguists are data-oriented, and we are equally concerned with the empirical foundations of our field. Some of the apparent differences between linguists on this question seem to be due to their rhetorical approach; others seem to be real differences in working strategy. In any case there has grown up a popular dichotomy which would wrongly lead outside

observers to think that some linguists are interested in the empirical foundations of their field, while others are not.

A common view of the history of linguistics in America over the past fifty years is that it can be divided into two major periods: in the first thirty years, from 1925 to 1955, American linguists were concerned with the description of language on the basis of objective facts; in the last twenty years, from 1955 to 1975, linguists have been increasingly concerned with the explanation of the language faculty through the study of intuitions. While this view overlooks a very large body of historical and phonetic investigation which has continued without any sudden shift, it does reflect the overt changes in terminology and topic to be found in most articles in most journals. It is particularly true in the way that linguists use the term *theory*: in the early period, *theory* is said to mean a set of procedures for writing grammars; in the later period, it means a set of universal principles governing the abstract models which can generate the well-formed sentences of the language.

This review assesses the history of American linguistics in a somewhat different light. It will appear that native speakers' intuitions have been the main basis for linguistic description throughout this fifty years. But as the wealth and subtlety of linguistic description has increased, intuitive data has been found increasingly faulty as a support for our theoretical constructions. A new movement has therefore appeared to reconsider the relations between *langue* and *parole* – not to overturn the achievements of the past fifty years but rather to support and develop them.

In the course of this discussion I will necessarily take up some problems of methodology, but only in so far as they concern fundamental issues.[2] We will be forced to re-examine some basic questions: what is a language? what is a linguistic fact? and what is evidence for a linguistic theory?

We must first make the distinction between linguistic facts and linguistic explanations. It is well known that there is little agreement on what makes a convincing explanation, and it is common for some linguists to criticize other linguists for not being interested enough in explanations. But all of the linguists whose work I will consider here look at linguistics as an empirical science; all begin with linguistic facts as the subject matter for their theories to explain, and as the means of proving theories already constructed.

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[2] For a more detailed discussion of methodological questions, see "Methodology" (Labov 1971a) and "Some principles of linguistic methodology" (Labov 1971b).

As we will see, most discussions of linguistic evidence begin with the assumption that we have a clear understanding of what the nature of linguistic facts is – not in detail, but in principle. Yet here the underlying disagreements can be even more profound than with linguistic explanations. If two linguists disagree about their explanations, the argument may be resolved with new facts; but if one linguist cannot persuade another that his facts are facts, he can hardly persuade him that his theory is right, or even show him that he is dealing with the same subject matter. A first step in reviewing the empirical foundations of our field is to point out the areas of agreement on this crucial question and then see where the disagreements may lie.

1. WHAT IS A LINGUISTIC FACT?

The search for empirical foundations cannot be directed intelligently unless we distinguish between variable and invariant phenomena in linguistic relations. The general program of all linguists begins with the search for invariance. Thus the fundamental postulate of linguistics set out by Bloomfield at the beginning of our development still stands without question: that some utterances are the same.[3] The fundamental fact of phonetics is of course the opposite claim: that no two utterances are in fact alike.[4] The basic mode of operation of linguistics and its raison d'être follow from the need to resolve this contradiction: we find in principle and in fact that some differences don't make a difference. This equivalence of variants, or free variation, is the obverse of the fundamental postulate. Our first finding of invariance is therefore at the initial statement of types or categories: that [hænd] is a token of the same type as [hæ:ˆnd], and the small differences in length, height and nasalization between these two utterances don't make any difference in a linguistic sense. There are a vast number of such facts about well-known languages which we feel free to report, discuss and analyze without presenting any further evidence. In this case, we find or assume that introspective judgments, formal elicitation, observation and experiment all agree. When we read accounts of little-known languages, every

[3] More precisely, "Within certain communities, certain utterances are alike or partly alike" (1926:154).
[4] Bloomfield recognizes this in principle in his following comment: "Outside of our science these similarities are only relative; within it they are absolute. This fiction is only in part suspended in historical linguistics."