

Editors' foreword

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Alternative Linguistics: Descriptive and theoretical modes

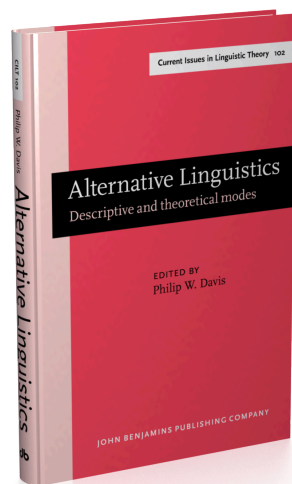
Edited by Philip W. Davis

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FOREWORD

The papers in this volume were presented at the Fifth Biennial Symposium of the Department of Linguistics, Rice University, March 1993. The title of the symposium was *Descriptive and Theoretical Modes in the Alternative Linguistics*, and the participants were (in alphabetical order):

Michael G. W. Bamberg (Clark University),
James E. Copeland (Rice University),
Philip W. Davis (Rice University),
John Du Bois (University of California, Santa Barbara),
Barbara A. Fox & Robert Jaspersen (University of Colorado),
John Haiman (Macalester College),
Paul J. Hopper (Carnegie Mellon University),
Ronald W. Langacker (University of California, San Diego),
Sandra A. Thompson & Tsuyoshi Ono (University of California, Santa Barbara),
Stephen A. Tyler (Rice University),
Robert D. Van Valin, Jr. (SUNY, Buffalo),
Anna Wierzbicka (Australian National University).

The fifth symposium was the second of two which were centered on the (re-) examination of our fundamental habits of thinking about language.

The Fourth Biennial Symposium, with the title *Language and Its Cognitive Interpretation*, was held in April 1991. The announced purpose of the 1991 symposium was to draw together a small number of scholars interested in language, and who had demonstrated in their published work an attitude which exhibited a dissatisfaction with formal approaches to language. Our thesis was that some broader view would allow us to enrich and to refine our grasp of language in specific and explicit ways. Our goal was to make proposals concerning the substantive character of language in this context; but surely, given the tentativeness of our thought about language in this way, there could be no orthodoxy, only ideas and intimations of its nature. The challenge was for each participant to draw upon their own experience and work, and attempt to go beyond, and to ground the concept of language in a larger framework. In this way, 'linguists', 'psychologists', 'anthropologists', and others may contribute, each from their own side. The papers from that meeting have appeared separately as two numbers of *Language Sciences* (Vol. 5, No.4 and Vol. 6, No.1), with the title *Alternative Modes in Linguistics: Reinterpreting language*.

The fifth symposium built upon the spirit and accomplishments of the fourth. But the fifth symposium was not a repetition of the previous one. The task set for the participants was to concentrate in depth and in a self-reflective way upon some range of data. The intent was multi-fold. The first purpose was descriptive. It was expected that the participants would carry out their task in a retrospective way, exemplifying and building upon their previous work, but it is also expected that they would begin to demonstrate the configuration of some area in a more comprehensive picture of language. The point was to take (at least) one substantive step in the depiction of what we think language will ultimately be like. The contributions were both specific and generalizing. Steps in this direction focussed upon methodology as well as upon hypotheses about language. By focussing directly upon the descriptive practices, we continued to concentrate upon the issues which concerned us all, and at the same time we tried to advance the discourse by the results of such description. We hoped that problematic and recalcitrant data would make our own practice clearer to us and that it might also instruct us in the refinement of our conceptions of language.

Given the mode in which we practice linguistics, it is contradictory to assume that there will be some closure to the conceptualization of language, especially in the sense that there can be a 'theory' of language. But this does **not** imply that we are forced to be always preparing to understand language. There are certainly conceptual problems to be confronted. Precisely what do we believe about language? What is the vocabulary we use to shape that grasp of language? The enterprise cannot require that we know beforehand what the outcome will be. It must be a matter of exploration, of tentative beginnings (and retreats) in which there gradually emerges a grasp of our subject. Our practice will not be independent from our beliefs about language and will then demonstrate all the properties which we attribute to language. The older ways in which an assertion concerning language was expressed may not be appropriate to the alternative view(s). And there are practical problems as well in that the different perspectives taken require that we simultaneously establish the alternative orientation(s) towards language as we use and develop them in our work. How can we make the world within which we practice understandable and plausible to others? These are some of the concerns which we attempted to address. The papers in the present volume are responses to these concerns.

Neither of these symposia would have been possible without the support of the Dolores Welder Mitchell Trust Fund and the Office of the Dean of Humanities, Rice University. Their support is gratefully acknowledged here.