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Preface

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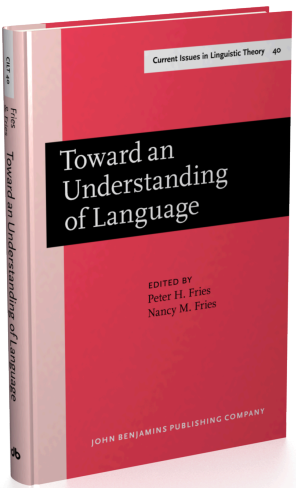

Pages vii–xvi of
Toward an Understanding of Language: Charles Carpenter Fries in Perspective
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PREFACE

In these days of looking back to one's roots, it seems only fitting that a book be dedicated to evaluating the work of Charles C. Fries. He was a major figure in American linguistics and language education during the first half of the twentieth century, and the one hundredth anniversary of his birth will take place in 1987. Like most people with ideas and energy, he was controversial. Some people regarded him as the founder of a brand new school of linguistics. In 1966 the University of Michigan awarded him a medal as one of the 150 most outstanding alumni. On the other hand, Jacques Barzun (1961:241) called him "the man who engineered the demise of English grammar in the American schools." Marckwardt (1964:1) took a more measured view when he said

> ...Charles Fries stood head and shoulders above his colleagues simply because in the course of a fruitful academic life he had three or four first-rate ideas, which is three or four more than fall to the lot of many of us. What is more, he has had the vitality and persistence to see to it that these ideas have had a powerful impact upon the profession.

These two aspects of work, theoretical innovation and practical implementation, were certainly important threads which ran throughout Charles Fries' work. If one looks at his interest in practical implementation, one sees that he devoted considerable time to the organizational aspects of

the language education of his time. He served on numerous committees and commissions of organizations such as the American Council of Learned Societies, the Linguistic Society of America, the Modern Language Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English. Many of these commissions and committees developed policy statements concerning language education in the United States. He was president of the Linguistic Society of America and the National Council of Teachers of English, and first vice-president of the Modern Language Association.

Charles Fries consistently attempted to create a climate which encouraged development. His energetic support was one factor which led to the reestablishment of the Linguistic Society summer institutes. In the belief that people who held a Ph.D. degree would contribute more to the summer L.S.A. institutes than they received, he also helped establish the policy that they did not need to pay tuition or fees to attend those institutes. He persuaded the administration of the University of Michigan to allow students to receive Ph.D. degrees from Michigan using credits taken only during the summer terms of the years that Michigan hosted the summer institutes of the L.S.A. His argument was that the strongest linguistics faculty were on campus during the summers of those years.

Charles Fries was seriously interested in the application of linguistic theory to practical problems. Gomes de Matos has described Charles Fries as the originator of applied linguistics, on the grounds that he quite consciously attempted to apply constructs derived from theoretical linguistics to language learning and learning to read. But this description captures only part of his approach, for he believed that the attempt to deal with practical problems was a vital part of developing

linguistic theory.

Clearly, the development of a useful theory was one of Fries' main interests. Historical accounts of the earlier years of this century often refer to Bloomfield, Sapir, and Fries as the main developers of the structural approach of the time. Surprisingly, one of the best accounts of the history of the linguistic theory of that time, Hymes and Fought (1975), does not discuss Fries' work, though some of his work is quoted. Fought, in conversation, said that two reasons accounted for this omission: First, Fries did not seem to fit into the general pattern of linguistic theory that they were describing, and second, they ran out of time as they were writing their work. Indeed one must be sympathetic with their view that his work did not fit the general pattern of linguistic theory of the times. Superficially, one can see this in the fact that during a period which has the reputation of focussing on phonology while ignoring grammar and meaning, Fries spent most of his effort exploring grammar as a tool for communicating meaning. On a deeper level, Fries' signals approach to grammar was significantly different from the approaches of younger men such as Harris, Bloch, Trager, and Smith, men who are now regarded as the center of the structural approach of the time. (See Fries 1983 for further discussion of this point.)

In light of this paradoxical position, it seemed useful to examine and evaluate the views of Charles Fries, who, on the one hand, was quite influential in the development of linguistics in the United States, and yet, in some ways remained outside the mainstream of the linguistics he helped to develop. We therefore asked our authors to take some aspect of Charles Fries' work and to present it and evaluate it. They were also encouraged to bring the field

up to date, and show how similar ideas are being used today.

Since the chapters were written by different authors, it is only natural that the views of C.C. Fries' work presented in the various chapters are not totally consistent. No attempt has been made to present an 'authorized' version of C.C. Fries' views, although Peter Fries did attempt to bring relevant passages from Fries' work to the attention of various authors. Sometimes these suggestions were accepted, and sometimes not. Acceptance of those suggestions was not a criterion for inclusion of an article in the book, and indeed, some readers may find their recollections of Fries and his approach challenged at various points.

As with most books, this book is the result of the efforts of many people. Its origins lie in a celebration in 1981 of the fortieth anniversary of the teacher training program at the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan, and the seventieth anniversary of the first English course offered by an American university (the University of Michigan, in the College of Engineering) specifically for its foreign students. This celebration had two phases: first, Joyce Zuck and Peter Fries co-taught a seminar on the work of Charles Fries at the 1981 TESOL Summer Institute at Columbia University; second, a panel, consisting of William Crawford, James Downer, Peter Fries, William Norris, James Stalker and Joyce Zuck, discussed Charles Fries' work at the 1981 TESOL summer meeting. The members of the seminar, the guest speakers at the seminar (Robert Lado, Eugene Winter, Louis Zuck, Fred Bosco), and the panel members all had their influence on the book and should be thanked. Our authors must be thanked for the very large jobs which they assumed. We

are grateful for their patience and for their abilities. Joyce and Louis Zuck were also part of the initial planning of the book, but were unable to continue work on the book. The rest of the Fries family has been very supportive. Agnes Fries (Mrs. Charles C. Fries), in particular, has given of her time most generously. Advice has come to us from many people, including Robert Kaplan, E.F. Konrad Koerner, Sidney Greenbaum, and James Stalker. We wish to give particular thanks to Richard W. Bailey for the constant advice and encouragement he has given us throughout the production of this book.

Farwell, Michigan P.H.F.
1984 N.M.F.

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