Preface

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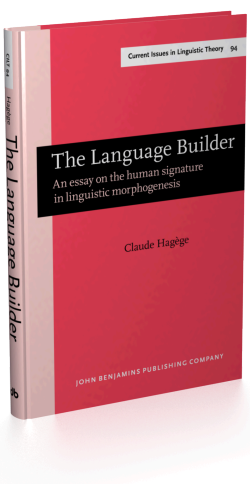

Pages ix–x of
The Language Builder: An essay on the human signature in linguistic morphogenesis
Claude Hagège
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Preface

Linguistics, to the extent that it is a social science, should have something to teach us about humans as social beings. Contemporary linguistics, however, has not really met this need. The insistence of Generative Grammar on processes by which so-called surface structures are derived from deep structures by a series of transformations seemed to announce a renewed interest in the human beings whose mental activity is implied by these operations. But this model regards languages as autonomous systems, and is therefore little concerned with speakers and hearers, their interactions, and their relationships to the world around them. Furthermore, the algorithms and formulas which this model uses on a large scale have much more to do with methodology and the properties of linguistic theories than with languages themselves and those who use them in everyday life.

The enthusiasm with which many linguists formerly trained in Generative Grammar have embraced cognitive approaches to language in recent years seems to promise new insights into the functioning of the human brain, and to lead to a more adequate understanding of language. Yet, exciting though this prospect may be, there remains the need for a thorough study of another, hardly less important, aspect of language; this aspect is by no means contradictory to cognitive investigations: it shows us the users of language within a framework that accounts for the social activity by which speakers build linguistic structures in order to meet the requirements of communication.

The present book is an attempt at a treatment which, based on a wide range of languages of the world, hopes to shed light on language building activity. Humans are therefore defined here as language builders. Certain aspects of language building are conscious, especially those which are related to lexical creativity, commonly referred to as neologization. Within the domains of morphology and syntax, however, this activity is largely unconscious. And yet the striking phenomenon which is stressed here is that by initiating language change, humans leave their signature everywhere, even if they do it unconsciously in most instances. In other words, it is maintained here that human presence is manifest at all levels of

consciousness, whether it be total, partial or nonexisting. Therefore, studying humans as language builders is a way of complying with one of the main tasks of linguists as social scientists: to reveal some basic characteristics of human beings as reflected in languages and the way they are used in regular speech activity.

It is my conviction that the human presence in language building deserves much more attention than it has received so far on the part of linguists. Indeed, the time has come to re-humanize linguistics, and to show that this can be done in full accordance with scientific standards. The effort made here in order to restore the human presence in linguistics relies on well-established methods, though it puts into question the opposition between synchrony and diachrony advocated by many linguists, and stresses instead the importance of language as a dynamic activity (speech), as opposed to language as a self-contained system which has been the main, if not the exclusive, concern of most modern linguists.

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Paris, 14 July 1992
Claude Hagège