

Editorial

REPRINTING IMPORTANT ARTICLES

Modern linguistic science,¹ especially some of the more recent developments in that science, has so much to contribute toward the solving of the practical problems of language teaching that no one who has any responsibility for that teaching can afford to ignore it. It was indeed the keen realization of this fact that stimulated the small group of young teachers, as students of linguistics, to found and finance this journal, *Language Learning*, devoted entirely to the publication of articles concerning research and experience in the practical application of linguistic science.

Some of the materials that constituted the landmarks in the development of modern linguistics were articles appearing in various journals,—articles which are not now easily accessible to teachers in service, especially to those in other countries. The editors of *Language Learning*, therefore, believe that many of our readers would welcome, from time to time, the reprinting in these pages of articles that have become such landmarks. In the present issue, in accord with that view, appears Edward Sapir's "Sound Patterns in Language."²

It is, of course, somewhat artificial to mark off history with sharp divisions and point to a particular event as the precise beginning of an important development. And yet, as we study the record of the past and realize the complexity of the patterns out of which significant accomplishments grow, certain items do seem to stand out as the precise steps that initiate new approaches to old problems. They seem to furnish the new insights, the new understanding, that man has needed to break through the barriers of piled up problems.

¹Linguistic "science" is here understood to be a body of knowledge of the nature and functioning of human language, built up out of information about the structure, the operation, and the history of a wide range of human languages, by means of those techniques and procedures that have proved most successful in establishing verifiable generalizations concerning relationships among linguistic phenomena.

²See pp. 62-76 *infra*.

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In the history of Modern Linguistic Science three articles seem to me to have provided such initial steps into exceedingly important developments.

- a) The essay of Rasmus Rask, published in 1818, but completed by him in 1814. It was entitled *Undersøgelse om det gamle nordiske eller islandske sprogs oprindelse*. This essay on the origin of the Old Norse language, although it speaks of "letters" rather than "sounds" did provide the first step in the development of the comparative historical approach to language relationships and a growing understanding of language change and language differences. One could perhaps say that *modern* linguistic science really had its first "break through" here.
- b) The article by Karl Verner, published in 1875. It was entitled *Eine Ausnahme der ersten Lautverschiebung* or "An Exception to the First Consonant Shift." This article ushered in a new era of increasingly greater rigor in the techniques of dealing with language phenomena, as indicated by the vigorous and continuing discussion concerning the "regularity" of language change, and the view that "a completely stated 'phonetic law' can have no 'exceptions'." If there are items that do not fit the generalization as it is stated then one must search for the modifying generalization that will cover each class of such so-called exceptions.
- c) The article by Edward Sapir, first published in 1925, and reprinted in this issue. The germ of the view developed in this article had been stated in Sapir's book *Language*, published in 1921.³ But in the article "Sound Patterns in Language", for the first time,

³See the following sentences:

"Two historically related languages or dialects may not have a sound in common, but their ideal sound systems may be identical patterns."

"I found that it was difficult or impossible to teach an Indian to make phonetic distinctions that did not correspond to 'points on the pattern of his language' however these differences might strike our objective ear, but that subtle, barely audible, phonetic differences, if only they hit the 'points in the pattern' were easily and voluntarily expressed in writing."

Sapir *Language*, pp. 56-58.

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what seems to me to be the basic principle of Structural Linguistics as developed in the United States is clearly grasped with specific evidence. I would sum up what seems to me to be the most important part of the view that Sapir develops, in the following sentences:

- (1) The *same phonetic differences* may have (and probably will have) entirely different structural values from language to language.
- (2) There is power or force in the structural system itself—that is, the habits that constitute the control of one's native language are not habits concerning items as items (in relation to the external world) but habits concerning an *ordered system of structural patterns*.

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