

Firth, J.R. (John Rupert); (b. 1890, d. 1960; British), professor of English at the University of the Punjab, Lahore (1920-1928), senior lecturer at University College London (1928-1938), then senior lecturer, reader and Professor of General Linguistics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (1938-1956). An important figure in the foundation of linguistics as an autonomous discipline in Britain; known for his original ideas on phonology and the study of meaning. (See Also: *Halliday, M.A.K.; *Malinowski, Bronislaw)

J.R. Firth was a man of his time. Born in Keighley, Yorkshire, in late 19th century Britain, when it still held much of the world in imperial subjugation, his career was marked by the existence of the British Empire. He attended the local grammar school, studied for a BA and MA in history at Leeds University, and briefly taught the subject at a Leeds teacher training college. Just before the First World War, he went to India, still part of Britain's Empire, to work for the Indian Education Service. He also undertook military service in India during the war (and in Afghanistan and Africa), returning to the imperial Education Service after the armistice as a professor of English at the University of the Punjab. There Firth began his study of the area's languages, which were to provide linguistic data for later publications; his time in India had a lasting effect on his career.

He returned to Britain, first for a year, in 1926, then permanently in 1928, to a position in *Daniel Jones's Department of Phonetics at University College London, interspersing his UCL teaching with part-time work at the London School of Economics, what was to become the School of Oriental and African Studies, and Oxford. While at the LSE, he met *Bronislaw Malinowski, then working on language from an anthropological point of view. Some of Malinowski's ideas were influence Firth considerably – much more than those of *Jones, who Firth regarded as theoretically barren and intellectually insular (he did, however, rate highly the work of the experimental phoneticians at UCL).

Firth published his only books while at UCL. Meant for non-academic audiences, these nonetheless contain the basics of much of what was later recognised as 'Firthian' linguistics. The populist approach of these texts, *Speech* (1930) and *The Tongues of Men* (1937), is the first sign of Firth's constant striving to promote linguistics in Britain. Both books end, after a tour through many linguistic issues, with a call for the establishment of linguistic institutes. Firth writes on the last page of *Speech* that Britain needs to promote the investigation of English (as the only possible world language) and of other languages, together with its "partners in a world empire with hundreds of millions of Asiatics and Africans speaking hundreds of languages". The books cover similar points, and such repetition is frequent in Firth's writing. A positive way of viewing this is to recognise that Firth's ideas, which were not of the linguistic mainstream, were, with the exception of his phonological work, remarkably consistent throughout his working life.

Firth's main writing interests, can be split into four: (i) the idea that the study of 'meaning' and 'context' should be central in linguistics, (ii) discussion of the history of linguistics, especially of linguists from Britain, (iii) work on phonology, particularly the development of a model called 'Prosodic Analysis', and (iv) linguistic descriptions and encyclopaedia articles on Indian and southern Asian languages, particularly their orthography and phonology. Aspects of (i), (ii) and (iv) are present in his writing from the start; (iii) only developed later. He is best known for (i) and (iii), where he laid out his views as to how language works and how linguists should

approach its analysis. While by no means incompatible, there is, however, no necessary connection between his ideas in these two areas.

Firth's ideas on (i) are fundamental to his conception of language, as he considered the analysis of the meaning of utterances to be the main goal of linguistics; this was unusual at a time when contemporaries such as *Bloomfield were positively excluding meaning from linguistic study. Firth rejects any kind of distinction between 'langue' and 'parole' (as *Saussure made before Firth) or 'competence' and 'performance' (as *Chomsky did after him), because, for Firth, language was not an autonomous entity, and was not to be studied as a mental system. Rather, in keeping with the behaviourist and positivist ideas of the contemporary intellectual environment (see the work of *Skinner, for example), Firth saw language as a set of events which speakers uttered, a mode of action, a way of 'doing things', and therefore linguists should focus on speech events themselves. This rejected the common view that speech acts are only interesting for linguists to gain access to the 'true' object of study – their underlying grammatical systems.

As utterances occur in real-life contexts, Firth argued that their meaning derived just as much from the particular situation in which they occurred as from the string of sounds uttered. This integrationist idea, which mixes language with the objects physically present during a conversation to ascertain the meaning involved, is known as Firth's 'contextual theory of meaning' or his theory of 'context of situation', a phrase which he borrowed from *Malinowski.

Some of Firth's ideas on meaning were developed in his misleadingly titled article *The Technique of Semantics* (1935). Much of the article deals with the history of usages of the term 'semantics' and of the study of meaning, although it does make a start at recognising a taxonomy of possible situation types (never developed further). Firth proposes to use the term 'semantics' to describe his whole approach to language, which is to link all levels of linguistic analysis (from phonetics to lexicography) with their contexts and situations. He does not maintain this usage elsewhere in his writings, but he does extend the meaning of 'meaning' in remarkable ways, writing about the 'phonological meaning' of phones and the 'grammatical meaning' of constituents. This was due to his overarching definition of meaning as the function or effect of an item in a particular context, thus phonological entities have meaning because they can contrast and have relations with other entities in particular phonological environments. At a lexical level, this embraces the notion of the 'collocation', that is, which other words a particular word consistently co-occurs with (part of the 'meaning' of words in collocations, such as 'an egregious ass' is that they co-occur together). These usages of 'meaning' allowed Firth to perceive a fundamental unity among linguistic levels, linked through the search for statements of 'meaning' at each level. It has frequently been pointed out, not least by Lyons (1966), that this stretches the meaning of 'meaning' until it snaps, and that while situations must be understood for the interpretation of utterances, considerably more is required to give a full description of meaning.

Given Firth's anti-mentalist views, he expected the analytical levels that linguists employ to have different properties and to be described in their own terms; no universals or structural analogies were to be expected or sought. The number and nature of entities which could be postulated was unlimited because Firth's instrumentalism meant that a linguist was not thought to be describing the uniquely 'true' (or 'psychologically real') form of a language; linguists were free to use whatever theoretical constructs were necessary, and to mix information from different linguistic levels. Furthermore, Firth considered it perfectly proper to focus on only

one very small subsystem of a language, ignoring other subsystems if it made descriptive sense to do so, a principle referred to as 'polysystemacity'.

Firth also published several pieces on the phonology of languages such as Burmese and Tamil while at UCL. Following a 15-month research fellowship, spent in India working on languages such as Gujarati and Telugu, Firth moved in 1938 to the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies ('SOAS', then still called the School of Oriental Studies), where he was to stay for the rest of his career, being made a Reader two years later and Head of Department in 1941. The development of SOAS was in part due to the existence of the British Empire, as SOAS was the UK centre for teaching and research on the culture and languages of vast areas of the world in Britain's imperialistic thrall. Firth's expertise in southern Asian languages, gathered from his time in India, fitted SOAS's remit well, enabling him to prosper there, and the School was to prove an excellent base for Firth's ambitions to establish linguistics on a firm academic footing.

The year after Firth moved to SOAS, the Second World War began, oddly strengthening Firth's position. When Japan entered the war in 1941, Firth ran intensive training courses in Japanese for members of the armed services. This led to a substantial increase in the staff employed in his department, and Firth was awarded the Order of the British Empire in 1946 for this work. He had been given a Chair in 1944, which meant that he was the first Professor of General Linguistics in Britain (long after such appointments had been made in other countries). Firth's department flourished after the war, with continued government support following the recognition of SOAS's strategic importance, given Britain's imperial interests. Firth's charisma and inspirational abilities also lured several people to work at SOAS who before the war had worked at UCL.

Just after the war, Firth published *The English School of Phonetics* (1946), his main contribution to the history of linguistics. This illustrates Firth's conviction that he was working in a long linguistic tradition, stretching back centuries (including Henry Sweet, Alexander Melville Bell, John Hart, and even Orm and Ælfric). The article is coloured by the impression that Firth finds it important to praise the work of those who wrote in England, but Firth's interests in this area were important in stimulating other work in the field (for example in co-workers such as R.H. Robins).

While at SOAS, Firth developed his ideas on phonology, which many see as his greatest contribution to linguistics. Many of the ideas in 'Prosodic Analysis' (or 'London School Phonology') were, however, best written about by others, and the most impressive analyses in this framework were published by Firth's co-workers, (mostly colleagues at SOAS) who formed the 'London School', a group inspired and encouraged by Firth. The first publication where Firth set out his phonological ideas is *Sounds and Prosodies* (1948), although it is not easy to extract them from the article. One fundamental idea is a rejection of purely phonemic analysis, as practiced by others working in phonology at the time (such as *Trubetzkoy and *Bloomfield). Some kind of segments still exist in the approach (called 'phonematic units'), but, crucially, the phonologist can also assign features of phonetic form to 'prosodies' which are nonsegmental entities that can be tied to any piece of phonological structure – spread over a whole word, or syntactic unit, or part of a syllable, for example. The metaphor 'spread' should not be taken dynamically, however, as no notion of 'phonological process' is countenanced; rather the static domain of a prosody is described. Thus assimilations and vowel harmony are simply described in terms of the span the feature (the 'prosody') has in the observable form of an utterance.

Phonematic units can be nearly empty of distinctive phonological specification, if this is analysed as prosodic. Furthermore, anything which is described with reference to syntagmatic, rather than paradigmatic structure can be a prosody, including 'juncture' phenomena, which mark out linguistic boundaries, and features restricted to particular positions in a syllable.

Prosodic Analysis further assumes a clear separation between 'phonetics' and 'phonology'. Phonematic units and prosodies are not assumed to have 'intrinsic' or obvious phonetic content. They must be accompanied by 'exponency' statements which state formally how a particular piece of phonological structure maps onto the phonetics. This allowed Firthians to combine an abstract phonology with detailed phonetic description.

Firth's general assumption of instrumentalism and polysystematicity meant that phonologists are free to recognise a phonological system in any piece of linguistic structure, rather than needing to provide a coherent account of the whole phonological system of a language. There is no necessary expectation that the same phonological entities and systems should be relevant in, for example, both syllable onsets and in syllable rhymes, function words and lexical words, Noun Phrases and Adverb Phrases; this also illustrates the countenanced mixing of linguistic levels.

Some of Firth's phonological ideas are reexpressed in his last major publication, *A Synopsis of Linguistic Theory, 1930-1955*. This also repeats many of his other main ideas, quoting directly from *Speech and the Tongues of Men*, and served as the introduction to a volume of articles by his colleagues. It appeared in 1957, the same year as a collection of Firth's articles, *Papers in Linguistics 1934-1951*. These volumes served as a summary of, and practically end-point to his career. He had retired from SOAS in 1956. Firth lived only a further four years, leaving, many have argued, much unwritten, in part because he was already quite ill (although by no means infirm – he lectured part-time at Edinburgh).

At the time of his death, Firth was recognised in Britain as a central, distinguished figure in linguistics. He had been president of the Philological Society and awarded honorary degrees. He had published around 40 items but, notably, had never set out all his ideas in a clear and coherent manner. Firth was well aware of developments in linguistics in continental Europe and America, but his work was not influential outside Britain. He lectured abroad, attended conferences and was an invited teacher at a Linguistic Institute of the Linguistic Society of America; nonetheless, some claim that Firth shared some of Britain's insularity, lacking ambition to persuade those elsewhere of his ideas. He was certainly not understood in the US, except by such figures as Kenneth Pike. Within Britain, however, Firth's personal influence is indisputable. He was widely acclaimed as an inspiring teacher with organisational skill and the means to get his own way. While his writing is bad, his performance in lectures and personal conversation could be enthralling. A generation of linguists arose around him; they helped spread linguistics to newly founded departments in Britain, with an identifiably 'Firthian' approach.

Some recognise both malign and positive aspects of Firth's influence, describing him as autocratic and impolite. He controlled what most members of the London School could publish and suppressed linguistic ideas which he disapproved of, for example, the phonology done at UCL. This aggressive attitude, coupled with the need for personal contact to perceive his inspirationalness may have contributed to the waning of interest in Firthian ideas. Work in Prosodic Analysis continued in Britain in some quantity into the 1960s and 70s, but was then overtaken by the progress of

Generative Phonology, developed by Morris Halle and *Noam Chomsky, just as other Firthian ideas were challenged by general Generative Linguistics.

The true extent of Firth's posthumous intellectual influence is difficult to assess. Some linguists (mostly tending towards the 'applied' end of the spectrum) overtly claim Firth as an inspiration; others work with ideas which are reminiscent of his, although a direct line of influence is not easily recognisable. His ideas on meaning and context now find echoes, sometimes with citation, in discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Several fundamental ideas were taken up by *M.A.K. Halliday, who founded Systemic Functional Linguistics, now widely pursued in the world. Halliday's ideas, originally labelled 'neo-Firthian', picked up Firth's general approach of considering the function of language in context, working in realm of grammar (which Firth himself had not), expanding on the notion of linguistic systems as paradigmatic sets of choices, and developing new ideas, arguably compatible with Firth's (although essentially monosystemic).

Firth is still inspiring work in phonology, especially around a group at the University of York (see Ogden & Local 1994). Furthermore, many contemporary phonological ideas were foreshadowed by Firth's, although mostly in reinvented form. It is now widely accepted that the autonomous phoneme is an untenable object, and there are echoes of London School positions in (a) the common non-linear, 'autosegmental' understanding of segments, (b) the widespread use of information from other linguistic levels in phonological analyses, (c) many phonologists' rejection of dynamic phonological 'processes', in favour of static description of (and constraints on) the domain-span of a feature, and (d) the assumption among some phonologists (but no longer the majority) that an 'unnatural' phonology should be divorced from phonetics.

Firth died suddenly on 14th December 1960 in Lindfield, Surrey. He had seized the opportunities which came his way and left British linguistics stronger than when he entered it. His connections with the British Empire enabled his career, but he repaid this by working on many underinvestigated languages of the Empire. His theories were the product of novel, inspirational thinking: a posthumous festschrift was published 1966, full of ideas.

Primary works

- (1930). *Speech*. London: Benn's Sixpenny Library. Reprinted in Peter Strevens (ed.)
- (1964). *The Tongues of Men and Speech*. London: Oxford University Press.
- (1935). 'The technique of semantics'. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 1935. 36-72.
- (1937). *The Tongues of Men*. London: Watts & Co. Reprinted in Peter Strevens (ed.)
- (1964). *The Tongues of Men and Speech*. London: Oxford University Press.
- (1946). 'The English school of phonetics'. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 1946. 92-132.
- (1948). 'Sounds and prosodies'. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 1948. 127-152.
- (1957). *Papers in Linguistics 1934-1951*. London: Oxford University Press.
- (1957). 'A synopsis of linguistic theory, 1930-1955'. In J.R. Firth et al. *Studies in Linguistic Analysis*. Special volume of the Philological Society. Oxford: Blackwell.

Further reading

- Brown, Keith & Law, Vivien (eds.) (2002). 'R.E. Asher', 'M.A.K. Halliday', 'Frank Palmer', 'R.H. Robins' and 'J.L.M. Trim'. In *Linguistics in Britain: Personal Histories*. Publications of the Philological Society 36. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Joseph, John, Love, Nigel & Taylor, Talbot (2001). *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought II: the Western Tradition in the Twentieth Century*. London: Routledge.
- Lyons, John (1966) 'Firth's Theory of "Meaning"' In C.E. Bazell, J.C. Catford, M.A.K. Halliday & R.H. Robins (eds.) *In Memory of J.R. Firth*. London: Longmans.
- Mitchell, T.F. (1975). 'Introductory'. In *Principles of Firthian Linguistics*. London: Longman.
- Ogden, Richard & Local, John (1994). 'Disentangling autosegments from prosodies: a note on the misrepresentation of a research tradition in phonology'. *Journal of Linguistics* Vol. 30. 477-498.
- Robins, R.H. (1961). 'John Rupert Firth: Obituary'. *Language* Vol. 37. 191-200.

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NB: The (*See Also*'s) at the start, and asterisked names in the text refer only to other linguists who feature in *Key Thinkers in Linguistics and the Philosophy of Language*. It's a good book – buy it!

Further further reading and notes

(Titles and things which I could not include in the published version due to constraints on space: 3000 words in total...)

- I would like to thank Richard Ogden for correspondence on issues in Firthian Phonology. For further information, check out his website (www-users.york.ac.uk/~rao1/) and that of the University of York Firthian Phonology Archive (www.york.ac.uk/depts/lang/research/fpa.htm).
- Very many thanks are also due to Leendert Plug for comments on the article, which saved me from committing a few basic errors in its final version. Leendert has written an excellent and far lengthier biographical article on Firth for a volume on Firthian phonology, edited by John Kelly (to appear first as York Papers in Linguistics 18, and hopefully later as a properly published volume).
- The 'London School' can be thought to include, among others (in alphabetical order) Sydney Allen, Jack Carnochan, Eugenie Henderson, T.F. Mitchell, F.R. Palmer, R.H. Robins, R.K. Sprigg and Eileen Whitley.
- For comparisons of Firth's ideas with those of generative models, see Ogden & Local (1994) for phonology – this is an excellent description of Prosodic Analysis, despite its provenance – and Mitchell (1975) for also other grammatical concepts.
- The chapter on Firth in Stephen Anderson's (1985) *Phonology in the Twentieth Century*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press is also pretty much an essential read, and it's also well worth consulting the discussion of Prosodic Analysis in Roger Lass's (1984) *Phonology*, Cambridge: CUP.
- Further collections of articles on Firthian linguistics are the collection of Firth's later work edited by F.R. Palmer (1968) *Selected papers of J.R. Firth, 1952-59*, London: Longmans, where it's also well worth reading Palmer's introduction, and the multi-authored collection of articles edited by F.R. Palmer (1970) *Prosodic analysis*, London: Oxford University Press.
- Work in 'Integrationalist Linguistics' by Roy Harris and others also views itself in part within Firth's non-mentalist tradition (see Joseph, Love & Taylor 2001); this separately develops Firth's idea that the context of situation (including non-linguistic factors) is crucial in determining the meaning of an utterance in other ways.
- As a further development of the importance of the study of 'meaning', Firth frequently discussed phonaesthetics (another term which he introduced). This is first discussed in his first work, *Speech*, and the ideas are repeated, although not developed, in later work (typically using the same examples). Firth's work in this area – identifying units of more than only phonological segment which seem to recur with the same kind of meaning in several words, such as the 'unpleasant' *sl-*

Chapman, S. & Routledge, P. (eds) (2005) *Key Thinkers in Linguistics and the Philosophy of Language*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Pp 80-86.

in *slouch, slime, slovenly* (and other words) and *-ump* in *bump, thump, dump* and others – is often cited in discussions of phonosemantics and related issues. It is understandable that Firth's general interest in meaning was excited by the 'phonaesthemes' which he sought to identify – tantalising (but never satisfactorily explained) putative linguistic units.

- R.H. Robins slips up slightly in his *Language* obituary in saying that Firth died in Lindfield, Surrey. Leendert Plug's researches with primary evidence (Firth's death certificate and will) show it was Lindfield, Sussex.