

Additional material:

Linguistic Studies
of Unesco's Cultural
Activities

(for Meeting of Experts
Unesco, Paris
15 Nov. to 5 Dec. 1951)

In pursuance of resolutions 4.11 and 4.53 of the Fifth and Sixth Sessions of the General Conference of Unesco respectively, the Department of Cultural Activities (Division of Philosophy and Humanistic Studies) is carrying out a project on the analysis of the structure of languages spoken in certain limited areas of Africa, Oceania, India and America to serve as a basis for the study of cultural differences and modes of thinking of various peoples.

For the information of members of the Meeting of Experts in the Use of Vernacular Languages in Education (Unesco House, 15 November to 5 December 1951) the following two documents are attached: the report produced by the Commission of Linguists invited to choose the languages to be used for comparison and the directives they drafted for the linguists who, under the direction of this Commission, will make the study of the languages chosen.

ANALYSIS OF THE STRUCTURE OF LANGUAGES SPOKEN IN CERTAIN
LIMITED AREAS OF AFRICA, OCEANIA, INDIA AND AMERICA TO
SERVE AS A BASIS FOR THE STUDY OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES
AND MODES OF THINKING OF VARIOUS PEOPLES

This Project was adopted at the Sixth Session of the General Conference of Unesco and the International Permanent Committee of Linguists was asked to collaborate in its execution. The Project is based on the Report of the Commission on the Study of mental habits through the languages, held at Unesco House, Paris, in June 1951 under the Chairmanship of Professor A. Sommerfelt.

R E P O R T

The meeting of the Commission for the study of what language can contribute to the elucidation of the problem of cultural differences in modes of thought was called by the Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies through the intermediary of the International Permanent Committee for Linguists and met morning and afternoon on June 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6. The following linguistic experts took part: Professors E. Benveniste (Collège de France, Paris), J.R. Firth (School of Oriental and African Studies, London), Greenberg (Columbia University, New York), L. Hjelmslev (University of Copenhagen), Levi-Strauss (Musée de l'Homme, Paris), A. Sommerfelt (Executive Board of Unesco, University of Oslo), H. Vogt (University of Oslo). Prof. R. Jakobson and Prof. Clyde Kluckhohn (University of Harvard, U.S.A.) were prevented from attending. Professor Sommerfelt was elected Chairman.

The Commission was unanimous in stressing the great interest of the Unesco project. In view of the tensions of the present world, it will be of paramount importance to undertake a really scientific study of the question of cultural differences between peoples in modes of thought. Such a study can only be made on the basis of language as many linguists and logicians agree that the structure of language is relevant to logic. What is needed is reliable descriptions of structures of a selected number of languages written for the special purpose of serving as bases for a comparison between language and civilization. To this end, the Commission elaborated a set of directives which the author will be asked to follow as far as possible.

It was very gratifying to note that linguists of different schools and backgrounds were able to reach complete agreement, both practical and theoretical, in regard to the directives to be followed. As there can be no question of field work financed by Unesco, the languages chosen must either be known by descriptions and texts or be under investigation by a competent field worker who can undertake a description along the lines of the directives without extra costs to Unesco.

In selecting the languages, the Commission agreed that they must be chosen according to extra linguistic criteria. It was found that the languages susceptible of yielding the best results for a comparison would be local languages, spoken in a restricted area and not having been, for a long time, subject to languages of great extension.

On account of the present political situation, it would be very difficult to check the results of the study of languages in certain regions of the world, such as the Soviet territories of Asia or the Chinese area. After a careful examination of the different areas and of linguists who may be expected to undertake the investigation, the Commission agreed unanimously to propose the following languages:

- a) Africa: 1 - Ibo (Nigeria)
2 - Twi (Gold Coast)
3 - Nama, Hottentot or Cape Bushman (South-West Africa)
- b) America: 1 - Eskimo (Greenland, Canada and Alaska)
2 - Kwakiutl (North-West America)
3 - Carib (West Indies and Guyana)
- c) Oceania: Fijian (Fiji Islands)
- d) Coylan: Vedda

Names of linguists who could be supposed to be capable of undertaking the study of these languages and available for the task were suggested. The Members of the Commission will enter into contact with them as soon as the project has been approved by the authorities of Unesco.

If some of the linguists suggested are unable to undertake the task, the following languages were proposed as substitutes:

- Africa: Yoruba (Nigeria) or another West African language.
- North America: Navaho (New Mexico)
- South America: Kaingang or
Pilaga (Brazil and Paraguay)
- Oceania: Gilbertese (Gilbert Islands)
- India: Santali

The manuscripts should not exceed 150 typewritten pages, ordinary size, and ought to be ready for the middle of 1954.

When the descriptions are ready and available for study, the Commission recommends the calling of a second meeting, if possible towards the end of 1954. To this meeting, it would be appropriate to invite, in addition to the nine members of the present Commission, four ethnologists and one or two philosophers. The task of this greater commission would be to compare the fundamental categories of thought which appear from the linguistic material with the characteristics of the relevant societies and their culture and thus draw the conclusions of the investigations.

In examining the project it seemed clear to the Members of the Commission that it should be an important contribution to one of the major purposes of Unesco, the cultural development of peoples in underdeveloped areas. Moreover, it is a necessary complement to several of Unesco's specific projects for promoting public welfare such as mass literacy and the use of vernacular languages.

The completion of this project would tend to show the value of cultures and languages which have often been neglected and despised.

Directives

GENERAL

The projected linguistic investigation is intended to serve as the basis for an examination of the relationships between language and the other aspects of culture, undertaken by linguists, cultural anthropologists and philosophers. The recommendations which follow are not put forward as a formal scheme of description. In each case the method of analysis and description to be employed should be synchronic in principle and appropriate to the structure of the language under examination. The intention is simply to bring out certain general and necessary requirements for the descriptions of the type desired: It may happen that certain of our recommendations cannot be followed on account of the special circumstances of each investigation. In addition, attention has been drawn to the importance of certain social factors without restricting in advance either the number or the nature of the observations in these matters.

The essential requirement is to outline a precise and complete description paying special attention to the features relevant to the object of the enquiry and keeping in mind that the phonemic description should serve primarily as a basis for the statement of the grammatical and lexical facts.

PHONEMICS

1) The description should contain as accurate and complete an inventory as possible of all elements which have a differentiating function from the phonological point of view. Great attention should be paid to the distinction between such elements and their possible variants.

2) Reasons should be given for the procedure followed in the analysis and for the distinctions set up. The elements which have been established should be studied with respect to their distribution, their frequency, their combinations and the frequency of their combinations. An attempt should also be made to characterize words and analogous units in terms of syllabic structure. In describing syntactical intonation attention should be paid to its function in delimiting syntactic units, and to intonations which distinguish types of utterances.

The symbols used to represent in writing the elements which have been established should be simple in form and of a type generally accepted.

GRAMMAR AND LEXICON

1) As a general principle, and as far as possible, the meaning of linguistic forms at the grammatical and lexical levels should be determined with reference to the system of the language and identified by linguistic context.

2) In the description of the grammatical system the basic principle is to avoid the introduction of a priori classifications and to recognize only those linguistic distinctions which are formally expressed.

In the case of all formally expressed grammatical distinctions, a complete inventory of the elements should be drawn up and their distribution, function and meaning and the grammatical level should be stated in terms of the grammatical system, as well as with reference to concrete situations.

The description of alternances (alternations) should be exhaustive both from the phonological and morphological points of view. Due attention must be given to stating as precisely as possible the range of grammatical distinctions as those of noun and verb, or noun and adjective, if these are found, it is necessary to indicate how far and by what means they are clearly shown. Morphological and syntactical criteria, that is to say formal structure and the conditions of use in utterance, should be constantly taken into account.

These distinctions should always be founded on formal, not notional criteria. The definitions and the terminology should be decided in accordance with the system of the language under examination.

If the language makes use of derivation and the formation of compounds, the degree of relative autonomy or fusion of the constituents must be defined as well as the degree to which they may be said to maintain separate function.

Specific mention should be made of those word junctions or compounds which are possible and those which involve incompatibilities imposed by the language system. If there is occasion, differences between the various norms, such as the language of religion and of everyday life, should be noted.

In stating the processes of formation of new words, it would be useful to bear in mind the productivity of types of derivation or compound formation and also the borrowing of foreign elements, adaptations, loan-translations, calques.

When classes or sub-classes are found, for example nominal or verbal classes, the statement of what each class comprises should include as complete a list as possible of examples with indications of the productivity of each one of the classes.

It will probably be found useful to consider the following points in the examination of numerations:

- 1 - the terms used in counting
- 2 - the formal bases of the numeral system (quinary, decimal, etc...)
- 3 - the rules relating to the distribution and order of the compound numerals
- 4 - the possibility of deriving sub-categories such as ordinal fractional and multiplicative numerals
- 5 - the presence of borrowing or calques based on foreign systems.

In the study of syntactical categories, special attention should be paid to the manner in which subordinate constituents are expressed and integrated, including the various ways in which the utterance analyses or synthesizes the aspects of a complex situation.

As much attention as possible should be paid to the social conditions of employment of these categories. For example, in a language with a highly complex verb system, one should specify the situations involved in the employment of the different categories.

In the case of those languages for which a dictionary has not as yet been written, the investigator is not, in principle, expected to compile one, but he should endeavour to classify as large a number of vocabulary elements as possible. He should specify which areas of vocabulary are the richest and the most differentiated.

In the analysis of vocabulary elements, it is important to group together those which form a series. Such series, for example, might be kinship terms, parts of the body, terms of orientation in time and space, numerals, calendrical terms, names of social units, proper names of persons as well as of places, in short all lexical elements which exhibit structure.

The same structural considerations should be applied to terms of sensory perception such as colours, sounds, smells, tastes, shapes and to terms of social and personal evaluation.

The attempt should be made to construct complete series of those terms, as well as all those which, according to linguistic or other criteria, form a system. In order to avoid difficulties of translation, the meanings of these terms should, as far as possible, be established through citations. Wherever structure can be discerned in elements with syntactic function such as those indicating interrogation, negation, conjunction, disjunction, connection, comparison, etc..., the relations of these elements should be indicated by means of examples.

SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF USE

The expressive use of certain morphological and syntactical categories should be considered. For example, echo and rhyme-words, ideophones (Lautbilder, gestes vocaux) etc...

If the language contains several levels of diction (ordinary, narrative, emphatic, oratorical, poetic, ritual, etc...) the rhythmic, prosodic and metrical features of each should be stated.

The following questions should also be considered:

Does the society under consideration pronounce moral, aesthetic or other judgements regarding the language as such, and does it distinguish one or more norms of usage ?

To what extent does the language show specializations on the basis of sex, age, occupation, social class, local, religious and ritual groupings?

Under what institutional auspices does the child learn to speak? In the family? In freely constituted groups? Or under what other conditions? Under what conditions are terms avoided or preferred? (tabu, euphemism, pejoratives and terms of censure).

Does the society under consideration use one or more than one language and under what conditions ? (Languages of contact, pidgin, lingua franca, etc...) To what extent does this situation affect, on the one hand, the system and use of the language and on the other hand the evaluation of the native language and the languages of contact?