

THE SCIENTIFIC FOUNDATIONS OF MODERN LINGUISTICS

1. Introduction :

A brief survey of the range of topics dealt with in modern linguistics, carried out, say, by a close inspection of the tables of contents in the major linguistics journals and in, what may be loosely called, the 'best-sellers' in this discipline (Lyons 1968, 1981), quickly reveals that there is neither a lack of 'theories', or models, in this discipline, nor a lack of descriptive studies carried out on the basis of the majority of these 'theories' or models. By comparison, there is a dearth of studies dealing with the scientific foundations of most of these theories, and, by implication, of the descriptive studies based on them. Two notable exceptions to this generalisation are Hjelmslev's glossematics and Mulder's axiomatic functionalism.

This article has an immediate aim and an ulterior motive. Its immediate aim is to offer a brief examination of the philosophies of science underlying three major types of theory or school in modern linguistics, with a view, ultimately, to throwing serious doubt on their, albeit implicit, claims of being 'scientific' enterprises. Its ulterior motive is to suggest that as long as linguists continue to eschew the task of delving into the underlying philosophy of science issues inherent, willy-nilly, in their pronouncements on language, whether theoretical or descriptive in character, they will not cease to grapple in the dark in their efforts to genuinely push forward the frontiers of linguistic knowledge. The three types of philosophy of science which will be dealt with

in this article are : (1) inductivism, (2) the modelling view, and (3) conventionalism approach.

The reason for concentrating on the first two approaches stems from the fact that, between them, they underlie the vast majority of modern linguistic schools or theories, as will become clear later in this paper. Our decision to concentrate on the third approach springs from a different consideration, namely the fact that Hjelmslev's glossematics and Mulder's axiomatic functionalism, which presuppose this approach, have made a determined and commendable effort to spell out their underlying philosophy of science, albeit the case neither of the two theories uses the term 'Conventionalism' to characterise its meta-theoretical base. Furthermore, the present writer has a first-hand knowledge of axiomatic functionalism, having studied under, and worked with, its originator, J.W.F. Mulder, for almost a decade.

2. Inductivism :

2.1. The Salient Features of Inductivism

Roughly speaking, inductivism, at least in its naive and most common form, is no more than an elaborate statement of what may be referred to as the 'popular' or 'common-sense' view of science. In accordance with this view, science may be characterised in the following manner with respect to its method of investigation, the nature of the knowledge it yields and the nature of its growth or progress. As far as its methodology is concerned, science is said to

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ABSTRACT

Linguistics is often defined as «the scientific study of human language». One way of assessing the 'validity' of this claim is to examine linguistic 'constructs', particularly descriptions, by reference to criteria of explicitness, objectivity, precision, rigour, etc. that are employed in the field of the mature natural sciences, such as physics. Another method for carrying out the afore-mentioned task is to transcend descriptions and the theories upon which they are based by investigating their underlying scientific foundations, i.e. the philosophies of science which they presuppose.

Rather than being in competition with one another, these two methods complement each other. In this article, the present writer will concentrate on the second method only, the motivation behind this being the lack of studies of this type in modern linguistics. Three major types of scientific approach are identified, and they are dealt with by, first, outlining their major salient features and, secondly, examining them critically in their own terms, i.e. without imposing an outside mould on them.