ON THE PROGRESS OF WOMEN IN LINGUISTICS

Donna Jo Napoli April, 1978

When I was first asked if I would talk about the progress of women in linguistics, I thought I'd better go to the library and see what I could find written by women in the general area. What I found, as any of you probably would have predicted, was a great paucity of work reflecting women's research as far back as I looked up to about 1965. But what I found that is, perhaps, a surprise to those of you who are not familiar with linguistics, was a great mass of work reflecting very serious women's research since 1965. The marked increase in women's contributions (or, rather, in the publication of women's contributions) to linguistics is noticeable first in the American journals—but by the 1970s is obvious in European and Japanese journals as well.

I would like to offer for you today an analysis of why this increase occurred at precisely this time. Certainly the implications I am about to make can be challenged—I am neither a philosopher nor a political scientist. I offer the following comments as a woman committed to linguistics and, inevitably, my analysis will be somewhat personal.

While the word "linguistics" may be a bit unfamiliar to you, this unfamiliarity is perhaps due more to the intimidating formalistic aura that surrounds the field today than to any real newness. Indeed, if we take linguistics to mean the study of language in and of itself (that is, not as a tool—as one may treat language learning when one's goal is access to the literature of that language—but more of a bona fide problem per se), then it is clear that linguistics is among the oldest fields of human study. In 2000 BC people were concerned with the grammar of Sanskrit—as Panini's classical work shows

us. And throughout recorded his students of language have had their say is, after all, no great surprise language should have received such tinuous attention. We can all, but for the most infortunate of us, speak-and so the fascination is to a certain extent a Mascinetion with ourselves, a desire to desire language may be the most obvious symp tom of humanity. As you sit here, you may think that you have never pondered als, the questions of what "language" is, how it lines develops, changes, functions. But I have wh no doubt that if a discussion about no language started among your friends ath most of you would join right in-quickly answ coming up with what seem to be plausible mues hypotheses. Indeed, to be a linguist is to mot. be forever plaqued at cocktail parties.

Thus the recent increase in women's can contributions to linguistics cannot be at dist tributed to any kind of new interest in that all fir field. Rather, the interest has always been need there—and undoubtedly will continue to er to be as long as we humans speak. Instead by this increase, I believe, is due to a series of the sense to give an effect similar to that of are is political revolution. Let me explain the muself.

The study of language in and of itself-rect which is how I have broadly defined cat linguistics-encompasses many areas darge knowledge. Linguists can study thular sounds of language (like consonants anits ! vowels), the way sounds are combined than make meaningful units (like the less acrir penniless), the way meaningful units carrel be combined to make larger meaningflect units (such as words), the way words arine put together to make sentences, the palme tern of sentences in a discourse, the wal sh we understand sentences, the way languis guages change over time, the complexita; ities of translating, the social functions and factors of language, and many many scri more. Linguistics, by nature, is an internsic disciplinary field.

But as of the past 20 years there has the been a flowering in a particular area of large linguistics led by Noam Chomsky that may be described in many ways, but for which I will concentrate on three adjectives: descriptive, synchronic, and support the synchronic, and synchronic. Let me go through these terms for you.

As long as people have been writing about language, the question has always been present as to whether to write about (continued on pages)

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we should say or what we do say. they are identical. But not always. we still find the grammar school such who tells us to say, "It is I" rather My's me". We could sit here now and e ad nauseam as to which is "correct" maybe no one would be convinced of humanity ne else's position. And that's good-, indeed opinion. For the answer to what is ous symp meet when we speak about a convenhere, you such as clothes styles, holiday pondered als, and, yes, indeed, language—is a "is, how it laical answer. The one in power is the But I have who is "right". Since in this room toion about mone of us is in a position of power ir friends the others, I'd expect a wide diversity n-quickly knowers to the "which is correct" kind e plausible luestion about language. But while we 19uist is to mot, perhaps, agree on what is correct, can definitely agree on what is said. 1 women's can go around with a tape recorder mot be at sit down to tabulate our results. And rest in that I find, for example, that out of 30 inlways benuces, 8 went one way and 22 went the continue toler on a given question. We call the ik. Instead by of what is "correct" prescriptive) a series objectics, and the study of what is said spire in criptive linguistics. As you can see, to that of le is no answer in prescriptive linguisexplain that is free of social or political im-

ations. Instead, the answer to what is d of itself-lect will reflect what is typical of lly definecated people, or wealthy people, or of ly areas irge metropolitan center, or of a parstudy that tradition which is favored because onants aris literary importance or political imombined lance, etc. In contrast, the answers in the less criptive linguistics are empirical and il units carelative. That means that anyone who meaningfects the data will come up with the , words ale "answers". (Certainly these es, the pawers, being the data itself, can be used se, the washow different things by different e way larwists—the point here is only that the e complet are the same for everyone.) This Il function as that the linguist working in a nany many inptive framework doesn't have to is an intersider social, political, or other factors

s there has be data and it stands regardless of a lar area of a factors. Thus the descriptive linguist omsky that in a sense, working in an egalitarian ays, but for term. Which means that those who three adject to no power can be just as right as onic, and see who have all the power. And which, these terms to ourse, means that women in a society has ours are at no disadvantage.

has alway the second adjective I used to describe has alway thronic. The contrasting word here ed on page to be "diachronic". Languages

change, of that we are sure. The linguist can study the change of language over a broad span of time-which would be called a diachronic study-or she can study a language in its use in a given short time span-which would be called a synchronic study. Of course, at any given time no language is "fixed". Rather, language is full of free variants, where often one will eventually win and "change" will take place. Both diachronic and synchronic studies have been with linguistics throughout its long history. And to a certain extent the two approaches are not discrete, but inextricably intertwinedwith isolated relics of an older stage of a language surviving into a much later stage. Still, given this caveat, it makes sense to speak of a synchronic study-in which the linguist looks at the language as spoken right in a given moment. What Chomsky's work emphasized was the study of language today. Focussing on today's language means that a linguist can gather data just by frequenting the particular speech community of interest. The linguist working on a synchronic study of today's speech may well never open a manuscript written a thousand years ago or even a hundred years ago. That means that knowledge of ancient languages and access to older manuscripts—both being typically reserved for an elite literatiprimarily made of men-are not necessarily tremendously advantageous in such a study. Once more, women are more likely to be on an equal footing with men.

The final adjective was "generative". Earlier work in this century (primarily that of Z. Harris) proposed that it was useful to look at various levels when speaking of language. Chomsky came forth with a well developed elaboration of this idea with his proposal that sentences are generated in our heads from underlying structures to surface structures by a series of rules. For example, we can start with the underlying sentence "You be home by six o'clock" and delete the "uou". yielding the typical imperative sentence "Be home by six o'clock". That is a very simple example—the only rule involved is Imperative "you" Deletion However. Chomsky's proposed description of the grammar is not at all simple. His theory involves a complicated formalism; rules that move, delete, substitute, and insert items; rules that interpret semantic relationships such as coreference; rules that mark various surface structures as unacceptable, etc. The linguist in the late 1950's faced with Chomsky's initial

works didn't have much in his past experience with linguistics to help him approach this new theory. He was, instead, a beginner—with very little edge over any other person who might try, without previous linguistic training, to understand Chomsky's books and articles. The result, of course, is that women who decided to take a look at language in the 1960's, found that there was a new, fresh theory to dig into and at which they would be at no disadvantage.

These three factors together were overwhelming. A woman could easily collect data in this synchronic approach, easily record it with no need to consider the power structure of the society in this descriptive approach, and as easily as anyone else analyze it in this generative approach. The appeal was obvious. And it coincided with the women's movement timewise perfectly—leading to the effect in the journals that I began this talk by describing.

For the last 13 years women have excelled in linguistics. But a very interesting point is that women have recently begun to excel in all areas of linguistics—computational, historical, sociological, anthropological, etc. Areas of linguistics that barely touch at all on Chomsky's specializations are flooded with women scholars. This is hardly surprising. Consider any community into which a new political view is introduced. While only a small section of the community may be of the new group, the effect of their existence is felt throughout the community:

of the new group, the effect of their existence is felt throughout the community: it ripples into the theater, the newspapers, the novels, the schools, the dress, the moral code, etc. The same is true of any academic community. And linguistics is an exemplary instance of this. At this point I cannot imagine anything that could turn us around. We seem here to stay.

This address was delivered on April 15, 1978, Gaston Hall, Georgetown at the celebration for The First Woman in History to Receive a Doctorate Degree Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia.

Dr. Donna Jo Napoli is professor, School of Languages and Linguistics at Georgetown University in the District of Columbia.