FRANK PALMER

Frank Robert Palmer

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elected Fellow of the British Academy 1975

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Frank Palmer established the Department of Linguistics at Bangor and the Department of Linguistic Science at Reading, the first university to offer undergraduate degrees in the subject. His major publications include descriptive work on a group of African languages, influential descriptions of the English verb, introductions to aspects of linguistics for the general reader and theoretical studies of grammatical categories.

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FRANK PALMER

I

Frank Robert Palmer was born on 9 April 1922 at Kendleshire, Winterbourne, Gloucestershire, the eldest of three children. His parents—George Samuel Palmer and Gertrude Lilian Newman—both came from large families. His father's family were merchants and market gardeners; his mother's family were farmers. George trained as a teacher and became headmaster of the local elementary school (taking children to age 14) in Winterbourne, but still retained his earlier profession, running a large market garden operation in his spare time. It was hardly surprising, then, that Frank became an enthusiastic gardener.

Frank attended his father's school from the age of 4, and went on to Bristol Grammar School when he was 10, where he was introduced to French, Latin and Greek—the last being his favourite, though mathematics was by far his best subject. He continued with Classics in the sixth form, where—unusually, compared with today—he spent four years, most of the last two spent in the private study of Classical texts. In 1940 he won a state scholarship and the Ella Stephens Scholarship for Greek at New College, and began his course in January 1941, joining the Voluntary Reserve, and thereby delaying his call-up until May 1942. While at the Officer Cadet Training Unit at Tonfanau army camp in Wales, he met an Auxiliary Territorial Service sergeant, Jean Moore, whom he married in 1948.

He was commissioned into the Royal Artillery in September 1943 and transferred six months later to the Somerset Light Infantry. Soon after he was posted to East Africa, which was where he developed his interest in languages. It took him only six weeks to become quite fluent in Swahili, and a subsequent posting to a Somali battalion gave him the chance to learn that language as well. A special release scheme for arts students allowed him to return to New College in January 1946 to read 'Greats', where the philosophy component proved relevant to his later career. He writes, in a chapter contributed to the Philological Society's anthology, *Linguistics in Britain: Personal Histories* (2002): 'My philosophical views were greatly influenced by Isaiah Berlin, who developed in me a sceptical, if not cynical, attitude towards much of philosophical thought (and later towards much of linguistic speculation).' That parenthesis would indeed be significant, as Frank's insightful critical appreciation of the ambitious claims of linguistic theory, especially within the paradigm associated with Noam Chomsky, was a great influence in everyday chat with his colleagues. The ancient history component he found less satisfying, despite a two-year postgraduate award at Merton College (MA 1947) to read for a DPhil in Roman Foreign Policy in the second and third centuries BC. The research required a six-month trip abroad, which he took to Italy, to study original materials, and this enabled him to add another linguistic string to his bow, Italian.

Lack of financial support for a third year, and the arrival of the first of his five children, led to him abandoning a possible career as a historian. It was a time, he recalls in his Philological Society memoir, when he was 'in despair'. A possible Fellowship at an Oxford college had come to nothing, when it was realised that he was married (and could not therefore live in college). By November 1949, in his second year of research, and with no source of further funding, he found himself without future prospects. But a visit from a student friend, R. H. ('Bobby') Robins, then teaching at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, changed everything.

Robins drew Frank's attention to a new lectureship in phonetics at SOAS, in the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics headed by J. R. Firth—the first of its kind in the country. Frank knew nothing of the subject other than having acquired practical phonetic abilities through his language learning, but this was a period when nobody had any academic background in linguistics, for the subject had yet to become part of university curricula, and Firth's policy was to appoint good scholars who would quickly assimilate and then develop this new academic domain. Frank's phonetic skills evidently didn't impress his phonetician interviewers in the department, but his ability was clearly recognised, for Firth then offered him a lectureship in linguistics instead. The availability of study leave gave him the opportunity to visit Eritrea for a year (accompanied by his wife and three young children); at other times he worked in London with native-speaking informants from this region. Looking back at this period in his Philological Society chapter, he comments that the time spent with these languages was 'an excellent training for linguistics and they confirm my faith in linguistic description as an essential part of linguistics'—adding ruefully: 'I regret that so many scholars in the subject today have little familiarity with actual spoken languages'.

II

His earliest body of work, the slim book *The Morphology of the Tigre Noun* (1962) and a dozen or more articles, was therefore on a group of languages in this region, variously South Semitic and Cushitic. The problems they address were partly phonological, and in these Firth's influence was at its clearest. Though others deal mainly with morphology and syntax, it is remarkable in passing how rapidly his phonetic skills developed. In working later, for example, 'for short periods' on the system of pronouns in another African language, he realised at once that it was tonal, which an earlier account had missed. It is remarkable too how clearly and succinctly findings of all kinds were set out. One short paper, on relative clauses in Tigrinya, made expert use of word-for-word translations, to give just the information, and no more, that a

reader unfamiliar with the language needed. If he had been writing later he would doubtless have relied on what has since the 1970s been a near-universal practice of glossing. It may therefore be worth noting that the *Journal of Linguistics*, of which Frank was then the leading editor, was among the earliest to fix and encourage glossing.

These papers were straightforwardly descriptive, synchronic and focused on a single language or dialect. But through the influence of Firth, and in the light of what was known already about the structure of Amharic and other South Semitic languages, neither Frank's analyses nor his mode of presentation was like those most widely inculcated at the time. For structural linguists in both Europe and America, a language had been essentially a system of signs, each linking a determinate form with a determinate meaning. For Leonard Bloomfield especially, whose ideas were still dominant in the United States, a morpheme had been a smallest unit of grammar paired with what he called a 'sememe'. The first step therefore for his followers was to divide speech first into phonemes and then into morphemes, avoiding above all what was described as 'mixing of levels'. Successive morphemes were conceived as forming larger units such as words and phrases, in a hierarchical structure assigned to utterances as wholes. But this model of description was already creaking at the seams, and for Firth especially, whose thinking had been his own, it made little sense. Categories of any kind had to be established independently at an appropriate level of abstraction. All that mattered was that they 'renewed connection' with the data from which they would be abstracted, through a mediating relation of 'exponence'. This could be as indirect and complex as was needed.

In Bilin, to take an example from Frank's work, a verb 'to have' is distinguished by its syntax from two verbs 'to be', one copular and the other combining with a locative. But each has a paradigm based, though he did not use the term, on more than one root. Two are the basis for most forms of the copular 'to be', one of which is also among the two found in most forms with a locative. Three others make up the paradigm of 'to have'. Many of these roots have other uses in forming paradigms of other verbs. A further 'striking characteristic' of 'to be' and 'to have' is that markers of 'past' and 'present' are systematically the opposite in these three paradigms of those regular in the language generally. One can imagine the blunders that a linguist trained to look for morphemes could have been led into.

It is not surprising, therefore, in the light of both Firth's teaching and his own experience, that Frank was drawn into the critique of structuralist ideas in general. In a contribution, for example, to the Ninth International Congress of Linguists (1962) he made clear that 'grammatical categories are abstractions *at the grammatical level*', which 'did not depend directly upon the results of phonological analysis'. As he had put it earlier in his summary of another paper, grammar was 'the central part of

linguistic analysis', phonetics was its 'ultimate justification' and phonology was instead 'the bridge between these two'. An earlier article (1958) focused on the sequence of grammatical units, as an exponent of what he distinguished as their 'order'. 'We have good reasons', as he pointed out, 'for not trying to handle' all relations abstracted by analysis 'in terms of linear structure'. At this point especially, it was clear enough, not least to Frank himself, how his ideas ran partly parallel to those of Chomsky, whose theory of transformational grammar, soon to morph into one of deep and surface structure, evolved in the same period. Frank was never, however, to become a theorist for theory's sake. For many of his younger contemporaries the aim of theoretical linguistics, if we may borrow a term from John Lyons,[1] was to develop a universal grammar, formal in a quasi-mathematical sense, which would prescribe the possible structure of all languages. The description of any one specifically had either to conform to current hypotheses, or show how they should be modified. Otherwise it could be dismissed as 'ad hoc'. But for Frank, in contrast, 'ad hoc' was a term of praise. From Chomsky's theory of generative grammar he was to maintain a respectful distance. He spoke with scorn, however, of the 'utter incomprehension' shown by a generativist interpretation of prosodic phonology, and in other general theories he had no interest. Michael Halliday's was one ostensibly inspired by Firth and widely labelled 'Neo-Firthian'. The leading article, to Halliday's regret, reached Firth himself when he was already close to death. But Frank remarked at the time as bluntly as ever, to at least one of the authors of this memoir, that if he had read it, it would have been enough to kill him!

In later years especially, his work can be seen more clearly as a contribution not to theoretical linguistics but to what Dixon, also at heart a descriptive linguist, has more recently called 'basic linguistic theory'. His concern, that is, was what in practice has to be linguists' intellectual training if they are to work directly on an actual language, in the field or elsewhere. But in the 1960s and '70s, to propose no theory in the sense that was then fashionable, with its own name and proprietary apparatus and its own ever-exfoliating terminology, was to risk being ignored. In one paper in 1973 that does not deserve to have been forgotten, Frank remarked that there is sometimes no way to distinguish between 'talking about' a person, creature or object and 'talking about' an event, action or state in which a person, creature or object is involved. Is a sentence such as *I intended the doctor to examine John* a statement about what was expected personally of the doctor or about something that was expected to happen? Its 'deep structure' and that of others like it was at the time a hot and controversial topic, on the assumption reinforced perhaps by Fregean systems of logic that *the*

[1] For John Lyons, see Eve V. Clark and Ruth Kempson, 'John Lyons, 1932–2020', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, XIX (2020), 419–32.

doctor had to be an argument of either one verb or the other. But could its construction not simply have been indeterminate?

III

In 1974–5 the monarchy in Ethiopia was overthrown and the region in which Frank had worked was soon to be plunged into war. For him personally, however, a far more significant development had been in 1960, when he was appointed professorial head of a newly established Department of Linguistics at what was then the University College of North Wales, Bangor—the second such post in the country. Several of the Bangor departments supported this development: the Welsh Department needed help to take forward its study of Modern Welsh dialects, the German Department wanted support in the teaching of English to its exchange students and the English Department wanted to add a linguistic component to its syllabus. All three elements would be explored over the next five years, though the day-to-day focus of the department was on the provision of postgraduate courses. The Welsh Dialect Survey began, under the direction of Alan Thomas. And the other elements combined to foster an interest in English grammar and English language teaching that would later prove to be Frank's main research domain.

At first, the focus was pedagogical. He had already taken part in summer schools for foreign students while in London and had visited Austria and Poland on behalf of the British Council in 1958 and 1959, becoming a member of the Council's English Studies Advisory Committee. Further visits followed—to Indonesia in 1961, Argentina in 1963 and Uruguay in 1965. As a consequence, Bangor became the first linguistics department in the country to foster the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL), providing a range of courses and qualifications that attracted many post-graduate and in-service students from around the world, often sponsored by the British Council. At the same time, joint action by the University Grants Committee and the Ford Foundation allowed the appointment of several more lecturers to the Bangor department. While one of the writers of this memoir already had a lecture-ship, the other was among those who owed theirs to this initiative, and in this way it was possible to offer a range of joint degree courses. It was a tight squeeze to fit every-one in to the two small houses allocated to the department, but it was nonetheless possible to include a phonetics laboratory, plus a so-called language laboratory and a technician.

It was his lecturing on English grammar during such visits, and the problems raised by teachers of English as a foreign language, that led him to write his first major publication in this field, *The Linguistic Study of the English Verb* (1965). Though

addressed to teachers, it had developed, as he explained in the preface, from 'a course of lectures designed to illustrate to students some of the linguistic problems raised by the description of one part of language'. It is also, therefore, in this work that Frank's method as a descriptive linguist can perhaps be appreciated at its clearest. The part on which analysis was to focus had first to be identified, and in that way, in Firth's spirit if no more, it was already 'polysystemic'. Once it was clear, however, what data were relevant, they could be assembled into, if we may recall another of Firth's terms, smaller and more manageable 'pieces'. The first chapter, for example, dealing with a 'primary pattern' takes a paradigm of fourteen phrases (*takes*, *took*, *is taking*, *has taken*, *is taken*, and so on) and abstracts from it four oppositions: past vs present, progressive vs non-progressive, perfect vs non-perfect and active vs passive. Each was justified by formal contrasts: in inflections and the way auxiliaries combined with *-ing* and, as it is generally represented, *-en*. In this way once more, categories connected, in ways that were of their nature 'ad hoc', with the data.

If they did not systematically connect they were not valid. Traditionally, for example, English has been said to have three tenses: past, present and future. But only the first two could be seen as part of such a primary pattern. A sentence may, of course, refer to the future, but *will* and *shall*, which are only two of the forms that may be used in that way, have their place in a secondary pattern, in which moreover they were shown to have several other functions. While this conclusion in particular caused not a little stir, the work was notable in general for the range of its description, dealing not only with traditional notions such as tense and voice, but also (at the time) several less studied areas: the modal verbs (such as *will*, *may*, *can*), phrasal verbs (such as *come in*, *sit down*), and catenative verbs (the term refers to their capacity to form chains, such as—to take one of the examples he used—*I don't want to have to be forced to begin to try to make more money*). These are all features of the verb that cause learners real difficulty, and this book was the first to integrate them into a single descriptive and theoretical framework. It influenced the large reference grammars that would be produced over the next twenty years by Randolph Quirk and his associates.

A decade later appeared *The English Verb* (1974, second edition 1987). Frank intended this to be a revision of the earlier study, and in many ways it is, but so much new research on the verb had appeared in the interim that he ended up rewriting it, with different chapters and headings, and including much new material, especially on spoken English. A rare photograph taken in the late 1960s at the Survey of English Usage (begun by Randolph Quirk in 1959 at University College London) shows a young-looking Frank Palmer exploring its files, which at the time contained an unprecedented amount of recorded and transcribed spoken material.

While at Bangor he initiated an extra-curricular social activity that continued throughout the rest of his academic life. He and Jean would hold an annual summer

get-together of staff and their families at his large house in Penmaenmawr, not far from Bangor. Anyone who had the opportunity to be present at one of those gatherings has very happy memories of sampling Jean's excellent cooking and meeting the five Palmer children, some of whom have contributed domestic details to this memoir. It formed a bond between the members of the new department—both staff and students—that could not have been achieved in any other way.

During the early 1960s linguistics was becoming much more widely known as an academic subject, not least because of the growing reputation of the Bangor department. The Linguistics Association of Great Britain was formed in 1959 and Frank gave it strong support, becoming a leading figure at its annual three-day meetings, giving several papers himself and getting something of a name for his critical and constructive comments on the papers of others. He would later (1965–8) become its chair. When the Association began its main publication in 1965, the *Journal of Linguistics*, he took over from John Lyons as editor in 1969, and edited it for a decade.

Several other universities were beginning to teach linguistics, or planning to do so, and it is perhaps not surprising to learn that in due course he was head-hunted to form a new department—at the University of Reading. It was a tricky decision, he recalls in his memoir, because he had been very happy, professionally and personally, at Bangor, and the cost of moving to the south of England he feared would be prohibitive. But the availability of a university house and a wider range of schools for his children overcame the personal problems, and the opportunity to develop a much more extensive range of courses—including a single-subject undergraduate degree in linguistics, which would be the first in the country—proved too tempting an opportunity to miss. In addition to the chair, Reading offered three lectureships to get the department off the ground, and these posts were filled by three of his junior staff at Bangor—including the two writers of this memoir. The new department was called Linguistic Science and, as if to justify this novel nomenclature, contained a large and well-stocked phonetics laboratory.

Over the course of the next two decades, he built up the department to become what is generally acknowledged to have been, at the time, the leading department in the country, unparalleled for the range of its courses and the development of new areas of the subject, such as in applied linguistics and language pathology. A particularly valuable feature was the institution of what were called 'language practicals', in which a native speaker of a language was introduced to a group of students, under the guidance of one of the lecturers. The informants would receive questions in English but were allowed to reply only in their own language, and the task facing the students was to describe as much of the language as they could in the ten hours or so over the course of a term, using the linguistic techniques they had so far learned. It was remarkable how much could be achieved in such a short time.

Visitors came from all over the world to see how things were being done there, and they took back Palmerian ideas to their own institutions. Frank's critical acumen was second to none. He belonged to no single school of thought and had a remarkable ability to see the strengths and weaknesses of the latest linguistic theory. He revelled in the controversies of the time—so much so that when a group of colleagues came together to present him with a Festschrift for his 60th birthday in 1982 they called it *Linguistic Controversies*. He claimed he did not enjoy administration, but he was an effective head of department, and also a respected Dean of the Faculty of Letters and Social Science (1969–72). As a teacher, he had a natural manner and an enthusiasm for the subject that made his lectures memorable. He was especially fond of talking to new undergraduates who chose to take linguistics as one of their courses in their first year, and was critical of heads of department who allocated this task to junior colleagues, or even to PhD students.

IV

His time at Reading saw the publication of several other important books that demonstrated his ability to write at both popular and advanced levels. The 1960s was a period when there were hardly any introductions to linguistics or its branches aimed at the new student or general reader. He contributed *Grammar* (1971, 2nd edition 1984) to the new Penguin series on linguistics, and then *Semantics* (1976, 2nd edition 1981) for Cambridge University Press, the latter based upon a series of lectures given at the Linguistics Institute in the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1971. Both are still widely read. And it is this dual interest in grammar and semantics that provided the foundation for many papers on the analysis of the English modal verbs and a synthesising book on the subject, *Modality and the English Modals* (1979, 2nd edition 1990). Frank's description of the modal verbs in English involved the development of a sophisticated semantic framework. Describing the way these verbs work in terms of syntax (word order) and morphology (word structure) was by then straightforward; but this gives no insight into the way we use these verbs, such as to explain such differences in meaning as seen in *we may go on holiday* (it's a possibility) and *we may go on holiday* (we've been given permission). Semantic distinctions of this kind were ignored in older accounts of the English verb, which did talk about 'mood' but focused solely on a contrast between indicative and subjunctive (as in *I am ready to go* vs *She insisted that I be ready to go*). As the subjunctive is not especially frequent in English—and some studies suggest its use is diminishing—mood was always given a marginal treatment in traditional descriptions. Frank made modality the centre of attention. He devotes nearly sixty pages to it in *The English Verb*—equal to the space

devoted to tense, aspect and voice combined. And it was his fascination with the semantic complexity of this topic that inspired his most important contribution to linguistic theory: *Mood and Modality* (1986).

The use of two terms in the title is important. 'Mood' is reserved for distinctions realised by the inflection of verbs, well illustrated by the contrasts between categories such as indicative, subjunctive and imperative familiar in Latin and later European languages. 'Modality' is instead a term applied to a more general category, related both to many other forms of realisation and to a far wider range of meanings. What is realised by an inflection in Latin can be identified in some sense as the 'same' distinction, at a higher level of abstraction, that is realised by a modal verb in English or through, among other means, an adverb. Compare *We may go on holiday*, in the sense of what is possible, with *Maybe we will go on holiday*. The range of meanings covered, again in English, involves the expression of opinions and attitudes, including the distinction between possibility and permission already illustrated, as well as notions of doubt (*I might be interested*), advice (*You should leave*), ability (*She can speak French*) and many more.

Frank began by making clear two basic assumptions, that it is possible to recognise a category of modality, and that it 'can be identified, described and compared across a number of different and unrelated languages'. How far then were both justified? 'If a category as clearly demonstrable as tense, aspect, gender, person or number is expected', the first assumption, as he acknowledges in a concluding section, is not. But even categories such as these are hardly straightforward, if identified as widely. What he did more firmly establish was a broad division between epistemic and deontic modality, as two main types distinguished across languages of many kinds. The terms derive from a well-known philosophical analysis, and they had already played a central role in Frank's analysis of English. If meant epistemically, for example, *She must be on holiday* is a judgement of what has to be the case. *She must take a holiday* is instead more likely to be understood deontically, as a statement of what someone ought or is obliged to do. Across languages, however, 'Epistemic' as a term distinguished by an initial capital was defined more widely to include not only Judgements, as one major subtype, but also Evidentials, as for the sake of argument another. The term 'evidential' has been applied especially to an obligatory distinction, marked by verb inflections in many languages in South America, between different levels of evidence on which a statement may be based: whether the speaker has seen, for example, something happening or has merely heard a report of it or has deduced from other circumstances that it must have been so. But distinctions like these can also be realised optionally, by lexical or other means, across languages more widely.

In many sources the material available to a typologist was at the time, as Frank remarked, 'of less than desirable quality and quantity'. Too many accounts of too

many languages had looked for distinctions like the ones familiar in traditional grammars or paid less attention to modality than to other categories. He was therefore forced to work especially with ones that had already been studied in detail, including Ancient Greek and Latin. If descriptions have since become both fuller and more reliable, it is due in large part to the influence of his own work, which was published as a textbook and was truly and impartially cross-linguistic.

The same year saw a Festschrift for Bobby Robins, edited by Frank and Theodora Bynon, and he was later to edit another (1990) for John Lyons. Both he and John had been editors from the beginning of the Cambridge monograph and textbook series, and the Press was keen to honour him. In addition, however, to second editions yet one more book was still to appear, on *Grammatical Roles and Relations* (1994). This too was published as a textbook and it too deals with categories across languages.

A subject, for example, stands in one 'relation' to other units, and despite the very different ways in which it is realised, it can be identified as the 'same' relation in English or Latin and other familiar languages. In meaning, more specifically, its 'role' varies: typically that of an agent, but also of an instrumental, an experiencer, and so on. In the passive it is typically that of a patient. But subjects are not universal, and in other languages what is typically an 'Agent' in relation to a transitive verb is realised separately in either all or some constructions from a single unit related to an intransitive. One form of realisation by then well understood was by the case called 'ergative'. The 'Subject' of an intransitive, as it would be in Latin or English, may instead be realised in the same way as an 'Object' or a 'Patient', by among other means an 'absolutive'. The terms with an initial capital can therefore be defined as part of a more general typology, at a level more abstract than that of either a subject or an object, which are categories in some languages only. As such they are distinguished too from 'agents', for example, with a small 'a' in reference to a more specific kind of meaning.

These distinctions are now familiar to most linguists, and in their dissemination Dixon's study of *Ergativity*, which came out in the same year as *Grammatical Roles and Relations*, has undoubtedly had greater influence. In the context, however, of Frank's own development as a theorist his last book brought to a conclusion what can be seen in retrospect to have been his main concern from the beginning, with the nature of grammatical categories and the criteria by which they are established, at successively more general levels of abstraction. Not even at the lowest level of description, as we look back to his work in the 1950s, had he found them as straightforward as many linguists, typologists included, have been so apt to assume.

V

Frank became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1975, and was the first chair of its linguistics section, which he had himself helped to establish. He also became a vice-president of the Philological Society of Great Britain (1992). On retiring from his chair at Reading, the University made him a professor emeritus (1987) and conferred on him an honorary DLitt in 1996. On that occasion, a former colleague wrote to him acknowledging 'the way you were able to help so many people at the beginnings of their careers ... without forcing or encouraging them to fit your own mould'. This is certainly a recollection shared by the writers of this memoir. Frank gave his colleagues freedom to develop their ideas, while always making himself available for critical appraisal whenever asked. And such a warm-hearted appraisal. We have never known anyone who could tell us that we were wrong in such a sympathetic way! But his primary legacy in the history of British linguistics has to be his role in establishing the subject at university level. Most academics would be pleased to be remembered for having started one new university department in an emerging field. Frank started two. And without his unstinting support, the application of linguistics to English language teaching and the clinical domain of speech and language therapy would not have achieved the prominence it now has.

This memoir would not be complete if it did not acknowledge Frank's long and full family life. He was married to Jean for sixty-four years, until her passing in 2012, and his expanding family grew to nineteen grandchildren and sixteen great-grandchildren. Nor would Frank forgive us if we did not recognise, in addition to his love of gardening, his lifelong support for local football teams, for if anything replaced linguistics chat in the staff common-room, it was the weekly fortunes of Reading and Bristol Rovers.

Note on the authors: David Crystal is Honorary Professor of Linguistics, University of Bangor; he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2000. Peter Matthews is Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of St John's College; he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1985.