



ROBERT ROBINS

Robert Henry Robins 1921–2000

ROBERT HENRY ROBINS, Professor Emeritus in the University of London will be remembered as one of the pioneers in the establishment of linguistics (as distinct from the related but older discipline of philology) as an academic subject in Britain. More specifically and especially in his later life, he was recognised as the leading scholar throughout the world in the history of linguistics.

He was a well loved, if somewhat unworldly and old-fashioned, figure known affectionately by all of his friends and many of his colleagues simply as ‘Bobby’. He died suddenly (and alone) in Caterham, Surrey on 21 April 2000 at the age of seventy-eight.

He was born in Broadstairs, the son of a GP, on 1 July 1921. He tells, in an autobiographical account, of his interest in language from an early age. He learnt Latin and French at school and his father had taught him the Greek alphabet before he was introduced to Greek at the age of nine. He was fascinated by the intricacies of Latin grammar (especially the mysterious ‘ablative absolute’), by the idea that ‘French came from Latin’ and the suggestion that English was ‘like French but also like German in a different way’.

He won a scholarship to Tonbridge School in 1935 and was placed in the Classical Upper Fifth and the Classical Sixth Form the following year. As was usual in those days his education at Tonbridge consisted almost entirely of a traditional study of the grammar of Latin and Greek and the reading of classical texts, but he continued his personal interest in linguistic issues, especially the relationship between Latin and Greek, which

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led him to look up etymological entries in the relevant major dictionaries and even (somewhat incomprehendingly) to read Otto Jespersen's *Language* in 1940.

He won a scholarship for classics to New College, Oxford in 1939 and took the courses for Honour Moderations from 1940 to 1941 (during the Battle of Britain), achieving a First Class degree. He often stated later that he regarded the study of the Classics, with its considerable emphasis on the language itself (and its grammar in particular) as the finest training for a career in Linguistics. Moreover, he added to his interest in, and knowledge of, the relationship between languages by attending a course of lectures entitled 'The Comparative Philology of the Greek and Latin languages', given by the Professor of Comparative Philology, G. K. Brauholtz. Bobby adored Brauholtz and was proud that he achieved a 'straight alpha' in the 'Mods' examination. Yet he was somewhat critical of Brauholtz's lectures in that they failed to discuss the predecessors of the Neogrammarians and, although they introduced topics such as sound laws, analogy, and borrowing, they did not address any of the theoretical issues associated with them (and even did not mention the term 'Neogrammarian').

He resumed his studies in 1945 and was awarded a First Class degree in *Literae Humaniores* ('Greats') in 1948. At that time this course consisted of Ancient History and Philosophy and Bobby saw both subjects as relevant to his future career—ancient history as a basis for his interest in the history of linguistics (discussed below) and philosophy as relevant to linguistic theory. He must have been influenced by A. J. Ayer and the logical positivists, and by the sceptical criticism of them by his tutors Isaiah Berlin and Herbert Hart. It was also the period of the dawning of 'ordinary language philosophy', which later found disciples among linguists.

From 1942 to 1945 he served in the RAF. In 1942 the War Office came to realise that knowledge of foreign languages was an essential part of the war effort, and that, in particular, there was complete ignorance of Japanese. So Bobby was sent to a rather traditional short course of Japanese, was then given a commission and sent to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London to teach Japanese to service personnel, under the formidable J. R. Firth. According to what may well be a somewhat apocryphal story, the War Office discovered that the Japanese Air Force was able to send all their operation messages in clear, because no-one understood Japanese (and the Americans had detained all their citizens of Japanese origin). So they approached a Department of Japanese for help,

only to be told that a course in Japanese would take four years! By some flash of inspiration, they then approached Firth, who realised that all that was needed was the ability to recognise a very small section of the spoken language (what he called a 'restricted language') and that this could be taught in a matter of months. There can be no doubt that Bobby's experience in teaching Japanese (with the emphasis on the spoken language and this notion of a restricted language) under Firth was quite the most influential on his later work in Linguistics.

After the war the Scarbrough Commission recommended expansion of work in Oriental and African languages. Firth was appointed to the Chair of General Linguistics at SOAS (the first such chair in any British University) in 1946 and proceeded to gather around him a band of young scholars who were willing and able to follow him. When Bobby had finished his degree at Oxford, Firth invited him to apply for a lectureship in his Department of Phonetics and Linguistics, and appointed him in 1948.

He was a very fine tutor and lecturer, explaining the intricacies of what was then a completely new subject in a clear and lucid manner. Indeed, one of his main tasks in his early years was to give a course of lectures at 11 a.m., immediately after lectures by Firth (which attracted a large audience from outside SOAS). He often said that his main function in these lectures was to explain what Firth had said to a largely uncomprehending audience. For Firth, for all his originality and knowledge, presented his ideas in a very discursive, unsystematic way and often used a sarcastic tone to indicate the matters that he disagreed with, much to the confusion of the overseas students in particular, who would often conclude that Firth was saying the opposite of what he actually intended!

His enthusiasm for his subject never waned, for he continued with part-time teaching in the Universities of Luton and Cambridge right up until his death. He also boasted that he would never decline an invitation to a conference after his retirement, for fear that he might be thought to be 'past it' and so not invited again. Indeed, he returned from one in Cyprus less than two weeks before his death. He often announced that his main aim in life was that of 'advancing the subject'. This he certainly achieved by the publication of one of the best ever introductions to Linguistics—his *General Linguistics: an introductory Survey*, first published in 1964 (fourth edition 1989). The word 'General' is important in that he believed that the inevitable specialisation in the subject should not mean that it could not be presented as an integrated whole. Moreover, for him linguistics was always 'descriptive', i.e.; based upon research into actual languages. This was partly through the influence of Firth and Bobby's

experience with teaching spoken Japanese, but it also derived from the fact that the department was in SOAS, for all its members, like the members of all the other departments, were expected to undertake research in little-known languages (or their institutions) and encouraged to take paid study leave to do so. After some research in London on Georgian, Bobby chose to work in California on Yurok, a Native Language of America, and later worked, in London, on Sundanese, a language of Indonesia. He wrote a number of excellent articles on all of these languages.

Firth's views on linguistics were highly original, marked particularly by his opposition to what was then known as 'American Structuralism' and to phonological analysis in terms of the phoneme, as presented by both the American linguists of the time and by Daniel Jones, who had been the Head of the Phonetics Department at University College London. Firth had been a lecturer there in the 1930s and had been required to teach phonemics, though his publications indicate early dissatisfaction with the theory. Yet members of Firth's department were expected to follow and develop his ideas (notably his theory of 'Prosodics', 'collocation' and 'context of situation'), and even to submit all their research papers to him for approval. However, Bobby, unlike most other members of the department, always maintained his interest in the American work, probably through the influence of American scholars whom he met in California while researching Yurok. Most importantly he (rightly) provided a detailed exposition of it in his lectures, thus somewhat balancing Firth's complete dismissal of it. Two of his best articles were published early in his career — 'Noun and verb in universal grammar' (1952) and 'In defence of WP' (1960). The first of these was published in the American journal *Language* and anticipates one of the most important issues to be much discussed later, mainly after 1980 and mostly in America under the heading of 'linguistic typology'. The second relates directly to a discussion in America on the merits of 'Item and Arrangement' and 'Item and Process' as the two possible models of grammatical description, but advocates neither, arguing instead for 'Word and Paradigm'. Both were excellent, scholarly, works, but neither of them has much relevance to the issues that Firth was pursuing. It may also be said that he was probably less enthusiastic than other members of the department about Firth's phonological theory of 'Prosodics'. His one descriptive article, 'The phonology of the nasalised forms of Sundanese', shows less enthusiasm for prosodics as well as less originality than some of the crusading articles written by other members of the department, while his more general article on prosodics, 'Aspects of Prosodic Analysis', takes a fairly detached view of

the theory, discussing it in relation to other linguistic proposals. It may also be significant that, unlike others, he did not continue to publish on the subject after Firth's retirement. But, of course, the fact that he was less inclined than others to follow Firth blindly is more a sign of his independent thought than a criticism of his scholarship.

Most of his publications in the twenty or so years after Firth's retirement were concerned with general linguistic theory. The most important was his *General linguistics: an introductory survey*. This, as already mentioned, is one of the best introductions ever written, but there are three comments on it when seen from today's perspective. One is that, as in some of his articles, he was influenced more by American work than by Firth's views. For instance, he devotes almost thirty pages to the (American) phoneme and only ten to Firth's prosodic analysis. The second is that there was very little on semantics apart from a section on 'The structural treatment of linguistic meaning' and a chapter entitled 'Grammar: grammatical semantics'. This neglect of semantics he inherited from both the Americans and Firth. Thirdly, there was nothing on Chomsky's Transformational-generative grammar, although Chomsky's *Syntactic structures* had been published seven years earlier. Although this omission was remedied in later editions, it is clear that Bobby, like so many others in both Britain and America, had failed at the time to realise its importance and to realise that, post-Chomsky, American structuralism would no longer be the dominant theory. He was, no doubt, encouraged in his theoretical work by the fact that Firth's successor was C. E. Bazell, himself an outstanding theoretician. In addition to the two articles already mentioned and the book, he wrote articles on a variety of subjects, such as the merits of formal grammar and its place in linguistic theory, syntactic analysis, the structure of language and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (that one's grammar determines one's view of the universe), as well as more general papers concerned with language and the status of linguistics as a science within a liberal education. None of them was outstandingly original, but their excellent presentation must have helped in Bobby's stated desire to 'advance the subject'.

Yet Bobby will be best remembered as the pioneer and for years the leading scholar in a subject that had been almost completely neglected—the history of linguistics. He published a little book entitled *Ancient and mediaeval grammatical theory in Europe* in 1951, the outcome of an invitation to Firth by Marjorie Daunt to give a short series of lectures at Birkbeck College which Firth passed on to Robins, stating firmly that any classicist worth his salt had read Priscian. That challenge led him to

develop an area of research which, founded on his love of ancient history, gradually claimed ever more of his energy and affection. In 1967 he published *A short history of linguistics*, a textbook which provided a coherent and accessible account of western linguistics from Plato to the present. Although not the first book on the subject in English, it was the most comprehensive in its scope, and certainly the first to pay more than lip service to the medieval and early modern epochs. It was characterised by a Firthian concern for “context of situation”, in that the relevant cultural and intellectual context was outlined in a few pages at the start of each chapter. This was a wise precaution in the light of the widely differing educational backgrounds of the international community of students at SOAS, and one which ensured that the book would continue to find an audience in Britain decades after such terms as ‘Hellenistic’ and ‘Scholastic’ ceased to be common knowledge amongst undergraduates. Studies on individual scholars and themes in the history of linguistics came to occupy the lion’s share of his time: particular favourites were Priscian, William Bullokar, Sir William Jones, and of course J. R. Firth. Also dear to his heart were the grammarians of Byzantium, and he tried to break through the deplorable silence of Byzantinists on the subject in his last book, *The Byzantine grammarians: their place in history* (1993). This is probably his most original contribution to the subject, offering as it does a series of sketches of the work of the principal figures, with generous quotations from sources available in print (he never indulged in manuscript work). He was particularly proud of his two doctoral students in the history of linguistics, Geoffrey L. Bursill-Hall and Francis P. Dinneen, both of whom went on to become scholars of note in the field. Not surprisingly, when the Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistics was formed, he was chosen as its President.

He stayed in the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics until his retirement, in 1986, deservedly and expectedly becoming a professor in 1966 and its head in 1970, after the retirement of Bazell. Although this was the first university department in Britain with ‘Linguistics’ in its title, a number of other departments were established in the sixties, and Bobby was always happy to point out that most of the Heads of these departments had started their careers in London. Yet he himself did not apply for any of the vacant chairs. This may have been due, in part, to lack of ambition for purely personal advancement and reputation, for he was always modestly content with his lot, though always quite devoted to pursuing his academic interests. It may also be due to the fact that everyone knew that he would eventually be appointed to what had once been Firth’s chair.

He will also be remembered for his close association with the Philological Society, the oldest linguistic society in Britain. He was its Secretary for eighteen years and then its President for three and, when he retired from that presidency, he was awarded the unique honour of being made President Emeritus. His eminence in scholarship was widely acknowledged. Many honours were bestowed upon him nationally and internationally. Most notably (in addition to being elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1986), he was made a life member of the Linguistic Society of America and a member of the *Academia Europaea*. He also served as President of the European Linguistic society, the *Societas Linguistica Europaea* and of the *Comité International Permanent de Linguistes*. Indeed, his standing was probably even greater overseas than in his home country, as shown by his election to the presidency of the SLE (for he had never had any interest in it and had never even been a member) and by the award of life-membership of the LSA quite early in his career.

He was presented with two *Festschriften*, both concerned with the history of linguistics, and was justly proud that he had been so honoured by his colleagues. Even since his death his eminence has been recognised. The Philological Society has set up an annual Robins Prize open to all, while the University of Luton has established the R. H. Robins Memorial Prize awarded annually to its best student in Linguistics.

Something must be said of the man himself, for he was a quite unique 'character'. To those who knew him only as the very distinguished Professor Robins he probably appeared to be a rather aloof patrician figure. Yet even this won him many admirers. At the business session of the International Congress of Linguistics in Japan in 1982, which was chaired by him as President, a distinguished American woman professor was quite ecstatic about his performance as Chairman, his wonderful command of English and his beautiful accent. He was, she said, 'the perfect English gentleman-scholar'. It is certainly true that he could present himself with dignity and confidence when required, as could be seen when, at the same Congress, the Japanese Crown Prince and Princess unexpectedly decided to accept an invitation to attend the official reception. Bobby and his wife Sheila were perfect hosts at this most prestigious occasion. (As an aside, it might be added that it was a most enjoyable event, because, in honour of the royal guests, the hotel in which it was held put on a magnificent offering of food and drink, at its own expense!)

To those who knew him well, those for whom he was always just 'Bobby', he appeared to be uncomplicated, with an almost child-like

simplicity and even a little other-wordliness. He was generous, courteous and quite incapable of making enemies or thinking ill of anyone—except when he was incensed by the threatened closure of ‘his’ department after his retirement and by subsequent unfortunate events that involved some of his most valued former colleagues. He was a supreme optimist who could always look on the bright side. He was held in great affection by many, though that affection was occasionally tinged with kindly amusement at what were seen as actions or remarks that were typical of him.

Yet his life was affected by great sadness. His two elder brothers had died when he was young, so that he was virtually an only child of aged parents. When he married Sheila Fynn, a fellow lecturer at SOAS, in 1953, he would speak openly and with pleasure about the blessings that ‘le bon Dieu’ would bring to them, but, unfortunately, they were not blessed and remained childless. Yet Sheila was a wonderful influence on him. Not only did she support him in his academic life, but she also made him extremely happy, relaxed and even domesticated. She died not very long after they celebrated their silver wedding anniversary. It was typical of Bobby that, although he spoke openly about her final, terrible, illness, he did not show his enormous grief, even to those who shared it, but involved himself in his work right up until the day he died. Yet his love for her never waned: shortly before his death he said ‘I’m not afraid of death, for either I shall just go to sleep for ever, or I shall see my beloved Sheila again’.

F. R. PALMER

Fellow of the Academy

VIVIEN LAW

Fellow of the Academy

Note. Vivien Law was seriously ill when she contributed to this memoir, and died before its publication. She will be greatly missed.

