Uriel Weinreich (1926-1967)

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Such noted American linguists as have immigrated from Europe show a spectrum of attitudes toward their old country and the new, and a gamut of achievements influenced in part by these attitudes. One, though surely not the sole, controlling factor in these delicate situations has been each person's age at the time of his weaning from his original homestead. Edward Sapir and a very few others, less prominent, came to New York as children; but most Europeans who have flocked to this country as refugees from despotism or as invited guests, since 1935, have been mature adults. Weinreich, the son of a well-known East European Yiddishist, occupied a middle ground between these two extremes. As a result of having arrived on the scene at the age of fourteen, he managed to blend the European and the American traditions of living and of scholarship in an intimate, truly inimitable manner. He was also destined to become an exception in yet another way, sadder for his survivors: no other figure of comparable stature in our field has, to the best of my recollection, died after barely reaching the age of forty.

Into his fifteen years of unbelievably concentrated research, Weinreich crowded not only a vast number, but also an extraordinary variety, of investigations, exceeding—deliberately—the bounds of linguistics, which I must here respect. Like Sapir, he saw language embedded in a social and cultural matrix; as a result, the separation of his purely linguistic concerns from the ensemble of his interests is unavoidably artificial. With due allowances for this infelicity, I shall attempt to distinguish between three phases of his work in general linguistics. Other facets of his production (e.g., his contributions to folklore and to Judaic studies) will doubtless be highlighted in journals so slanted; in fact, I intend to supplement the following remarks with a separate, more elaborate assessment in Romance philology.

From the younger Weinreich's Columbia dissertation (1951) came his monograph *Languages in contact* (1953)—its attractive title possibly suggested by phonetic terminology; witness M. Grammont's 'dissimilation en contact'. This work won immediate success, went through several printings, and was expected to emerge even further improved from a thorough revision, an idea which the author had in mind to the last. Its impact was only increased by the appearance, four years later, of E. Haugen's topically germane, if more restricted and a shade more conservative, tract, *Bilingualism in the Americas*; characteristically, it was Haugen who wrote for this journal (30.380–8 [1954]) the most searching critique of Weinreich's thesis. Both authors, sophisticated pragmatists, took cognizance of the realities not only of speech, but of differently contoured societies as well, in harnessing elements of advanced linguistic thinking to perform badly needed down-to-earth operations. Shortly thereafter Weinreich, as co-editor of *Word* from 1953 to 1960, assisted A. Martinet in launching *Linguistics today* (1954)—a trail-blazing venture in content and tone, slimmer but
no less weighty and conceivably more cosmopolitan than its immediate prototype, A. Kroeber’s influential miscellany, *Anthropology today* (1953). Significantly, Weinreich’s own contribution to the volume he helped to pilot, ‘Is a structural dialectology possible?’ (a question answered in the affirmative), pinpointed and dramatized the need for reconciling two key disciplines, whose equal rank and potential importance for contemporary research L. Bloomfield never tired of stressing, though in practice that pioneer was less successful in bridging the gap between their conflicting implications and in kindling the same degree of enthusiasm for them among the majority of his followers. Here there seemed to open up before Weinreich a domain of almost inexhaustible possibilities.

The midpoint in Weinreich’s all-too-short career is less easy to select, because the late ’fifties were given over almost in their entirety to monographic investigations of special concern to Yiddishists. My personal choice—perhaps not unbiased—would be his ambitious review article ‘Mid-century linguistics: attainments and frustrations’ (1960), dealing with Hockett’s *Course in modern linguistics*. The scope of the article forced the author to take an unequivocal position vis-à-vis every major problem then in the focus of discussion. The principal merit of this particular piece is that it bespeaks an encyclopedic range of active curiosity on the part of the critic—at that juncture a young man barely past the age of thirty. Two additional qualities that recommend the article to our continued attention are the reviewer’s courageous rebellion against dogmatism and conformity, in general (and against many tenets of the linguistic Establishment which was then in power, in particular); and, at the same time, his studied fairness in appraising a book rooted in an emotional and intellectual subsoil radically at variance with his own. Before long, restraint from any manner of extremism and from rationalistically disguised violence became a hallmark of Weinreich’s scholarship.

It was unquestionably in the concluding five years of his life—and therein lies the full measure of our loss—that Weinreich’s research reached that degree of originality, forcefulness, and maturity which stamped him as a first-rate theorist and a fine practitioner as well, to say nothing of his growing success as teacher and guest lecturer. The search for independence, so characteristic of the gropings of our times, must be severely qualified with reference to Weinreich: under no circumstances did he stoop to the pose of an ‘Originalgenie’ contemptuous of the production of his seniors or of his peers. The writing of an objective, strictly informative report, such as his digest of Soviet lexicology (1963), implied for a man of his modesty no loss of prestige, because he did not wish his reputation to rest on sensationalism. Inclined to compromise by temperament, superbly abreast of all relevant developments on a global scale, he could nevertheless assert with impressive strength his personal initiative and his private scale of values, as is evident in his two major contributions to semantic theory: ‘On the semantic structure of language’ (oral delivery in 1961) and ‘Explorations in semantic theory’ (oral delivery in 1964); for full publication data, see the appended bibliography. Those who were privileged to attend some of the more memorable among his last major lectures—e.g., those on ‘Empirical foundations for a theory of language change’ (in collaboration with W. Labov and M. Herzog,
at the Texas Symposium on Historical Linguistics, April 1966) and on ‘Problems in the analysis of idioms’ (at UCLA’s 1966 Linguistic Institute)—can readily predict, from the observed reaction of live audiences, the amount and intensity of fruitful discussion which these studies, once they become available in print, are certain to kindle in this country and abroad. The esteem and admiration foreseeably roused by this flow of posthumous publications, culminating, it is hoped, in Weinreich’s magnificent lifetime project, *The language and culture atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry*, will, however, be tempered by the sad awareness of a unique promise only partially fulfilled.

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