

ESSAYS ON THE
EVOLUTIONARY-SYNTHETIC
THEORY OF LANGUAGE



ALEXEY KOSHELEV

ESSAYS ON THE
EVOLUTIONARY-SYNTHETIC
THEORY OF LANGUAGE

On the Crisis in Theoretical Linguistics
Basic Meaning and the Language of Thought
The Unity of Lexical and Grammatical Polysemy

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in collaboration with
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Preface

1. The place of the evolutionary-synthetic theory of language among the ranks of linguistic theories

1.1. Why a new theory of language is needed. When reading the title of this book the reader may with reason have asked, why is yet another theory of language needed? Is it possible that the author is unsatisfied with the scores of theories that already exist? Does he intend to add yet another, thereby coming close to repeating the situation during the first third of the 19th century when, according to A. Meillet (see p. 4 below), there were as many versions of general linguistics as there were linguists?¹ (Here and throughout we point to the pages of this publication with more detailed facts and references.)

To answer these questions it is necessary to begin by outlining the current condition of theoretical linguistics. The analysis in chapter one will show that the distinctive characteristic of the current period of theoretical linguistics appears to be the existence in simultaneity of a great number of incompatible theories of language. While in the mid-1900s it was still possible to speak about the unity of the various linguistic theories then existing (R. Jakobson, p. 4), by the end of the 20th century such unity had already disappeared without a trace (p. 5). This is due to the fact that the common core of linguistic knowledge shared by differing schools of thought has dwindled to an absolute minimum.

The current situation is disastrous, not only for linguistics but also for interdisciplinary research. Representatives of other human sciences related to linguistics (psychology, biology, anthropology, etc.) make reference for the bases of their positions to different and at times contradictory theories of language, leading to growing confusion (pp. 17–18).

¹ “Chaque auteur procède à sa manière et il y a, semble-t-il, autant de linguistiques générales que de linguistes.”

1.2. Causes of the current crisis and ways to overcome it. Regarding the original cause of this theoretical dead-end (pp. 22–26), it is necessary to point out two fundamental flaws inherent (separately or in combination) to modern linguistic theories. Firstly, the **synchronic** approach, which still predominates, ignores the processes of macro- and microevolution of language, its genealogy, and development. Secondly, when describing the mechanisms of language functions, these theories do not take into account the **complex** contribution of the related subsystems of thought, knowledge representations, memory, etc.

Overcoming these two flaws is the aim of the Evolutionary-Synthetic Theory of Language, a preliminary version of which is presented in this book.

1.3. General principles underlying the Evolutionary-Synthetic Theory of Language. The theory here set forth harkens back to antiquity, to Aristotle’s conceptualization of the divide between reality, thought, and language, and the role of language as an instrument for describing the mental representations humans have of the world. According to this idea, language does not function in isolation but in close interaction with other subsystems. This principle is implemented within the framework of the synthetic component of this theory by means of a systematic merger of the basic concept of language with the knowledge and findings of certain other theories closely related to linguistics. These are theories of: (a) basic concepts (Rosch et al. 1976; Lakoff 1986 and 1987; Mervis and Rosch 1981; Mervis 1987, *inter alia*), (b) thought (Sechenov 1978), (c) motor control (Bernstein 1967: 223, 227–228), (d) visual perception and event recognition (Johansson 1973 and 1976; Bingham et al. 1995; Runeson 1977, *inter alia*), (e) neurobiological theory of memory (Tsien 2008). Selected results from research in other disciplines have also been drawn upon in the formation of the present theory.

The second principle—the study of language in macro- and microdiachrony—is implemented through a very broad use of general development theory (pp. 31–33). This theory is involved in the analysis of a wide range of language issues, from lexical representation and grammatical meaning to explanations of glottogony and the overall structure and evolution of language.

The evolutionary-synthetic theory of language is conceived as an alternative to the many incompatible theories now existing. Naturally, the question arises: is it possible to develop alternatives to these theories? Our answer is: yes, it is possible. But since such alternatives are also bound to be complex theories, there cannot be more than one or two of them. This situation, however, is characteristic of normally developing sciences.

2. Peer reviews of the evolutionary-synthetic theory

When a new theory emerges, the first peer reviews from specialists are of particular interest. In Zubkova's (2017, Moscow) monograph, *Language Theory in its Development*, chapter 15 contains an analytical review of the theory of language presented in the Russian edition of the A. D. Koshelev's (2017, Moscow) monograph, *Essays on the Evolutionary-Synthetic Theory of Language*.

I provide one excerpt below:

The relationship between the world of external events and the inner world of man, between reality, thought, and language, occupies the central place in this theory of language. However, the fact is that the actual mechanisms connecting these two worlds remained undiscovered until the end of the 20th century.

The elucidation of these mechanisms became possible through A. D. Koshelev's development of a cognitive theory of semantics which combines a referential approach to language with a concept-based approach.

The inspiration for this approach, it appears, is the contrast distinguished in antiquity between two worlds: the "visible domain" (the perceptible world) on the one hand, and the "intelligible domain" (the world of ideas) on the other (Zubkova 2017: 534) [translation J. Smith].

In the preface, while analyzing the contribution of various linguistic concepts in the development of a general theory of language, Zubkova writes:

A. D. Koshelev takes the next crucial step, toward a synthesis of cognitive and linguistic abilities in their interrelated development, toward a systematic unity of universal and specific, abstract and concrete in language. He begins with patterns in the cognition of objects, from the most basic and holistic representations of an object to the delineation of its distinct features and, further, to the synthesis of the accumulated knowledge of the various facets of an object into a cohesive system for its representation (Ibid.: 20) [translation J. Smith].

Another analysis of the present theory is given in chapter 9, section one, of Skrebtsova's (2018) monograph, *Cognitive Linguistics: classic theories and current approaches*.

3. About the book contents

This book is a translation of the first part of the Russian edition of *Essays on the Evolutionary-Synthetic Theory of Language* (Koshelev 2017) and includes chapters 1–4 and §§ 23–25 from chapter 5.

In chapter 1, it is argued that over the past 50 years theoretical linguistics has been in a state of crisis. It has remained a compendium of mutually contradicting theories on multiple levels: the level of general theories of language, the level of its main constituents (the lexicon, syntax, and the syntax-semantics interface that connects them), and the lower levels of specific linguistic problems (such as lexical polysemy, lexical-semantic combinability, grammatical meanings, etc.).

The Evolutionary-Synthetic Theory of Language aims to overcome this crisis. It implements an interdisciplinary approach in describing language (a) in its ontogenetic development, and (b) in its close interrelationship with other human subsystems: thought, memory, actions, etc.

The chapters that follow deal with the semantic component of the evolutionary-synthetic theory.

In chapter 2, a reference-based approach to the analysis of basic meanings of concrete nouns and action verbs (that is, object and motor basic-level concepts) is proposed. Two types of cognitive units (elements of the language of thought) for representation of these meanings are singled out—perceptual, accessible for sensory identification, and functional, reflecting human intentions—along with the relationship of interpretation that connects them. The mechanisms for lexical polysemy are also analyzed.

Chapter 3 brings to light the structural unity of artifacts and natural concepts (STUL ‘CHAIR’, TROPINKA ‘FOOTPATH’, DOROGA ‘ROAD’, OZERO ‘LAKE’, REKA ‘RIVER’, DEREVO ‘TREE’, etc.); object and motor concepts are defined in terms of the language of thought, and their representation in neurobiological memory codes is discussed.

In chapter 4, the mechanisms for grammatical polysemy are analyzed, and the structural unity of lexical and grammatical polysemy is brought to the fore.

Finally, in chapter 5, the notions of attributive and partitive concepts (that is, the systems of object properties and parts) are introduced; using concrete examples as illustrations, the hierarchic structure of basic meanings of concrete nouns is shown to arise as a result of their step-by-step development in ontogeny. It is shown that basic-level concepts belong to the first level, and attributive and partitive concepts, which develop from basic-level concepts, to the second level of the hierarchy.

All quotations from the Russian sources have been translated by Alexander Kravchenko unless otherwise indicated.

The transliteration system ISO 9 – 1995 has been employed throughout the book. The ALA-LC Romanization Tables have been used for transliterating personal names.

Chapter 1

On the contradictory nature of contemporary linguistic theories and how to change it for the better

§ 1. Introduction

Our attention will be focused on an analysis of the inherent contradictoriness of contemporary theoretical linguistics that harbors a number of mutually contradicting theories of language. More specifically, arguments will be given in support of the following claims:

1. Over the past 50 years theoretical linguistics has nearly failed to add anything new to the universally recognized facts about language as a global object of study. Throughout several decades it has remained a compendium of mutually contradicting doctrines on multiple levels: the level of general theories of language, the level of its main constituents (the lexicon, the syntax, and the syntax-lexicon interface that connects them), and the lower levels of specific linguistic problems (such as lexical polysemy, syntax-lexicon combinability, grammatical meanings, etc.).

2. This contradictoriness of contemporary linguistic theories is indicative of a deep crisis. However, it does not follow that *all* of contemporary linguistics is in a state of crisis. The main issue is that theoretical linguistics does not seem to build on direct intuitions of native speakers. As for the concrete research that takes linguistic intuitions into account, it has been growing in scope and in many different directions.

3. It is impossible to overcome this obvious crisis without working out a unified evolutionary-synthetic theory of language. This task, in turn, cannot be solved without (a) taking into account not only the synchronic, but also the diachronic regularities in linguistic functions, and (b) a comprehensive use of research data on the functional regularities of other subsystems in humans,