Goals of linguistic essay

Mr. 1. Introduction 1. 1. Approaching the issue The task of setting out (to use a neutral word) the goals of a human activity may be approached in a variety of ways depending on conditions such as who is involved in the activity and who has the power to determine the goals. In the case of the goals of a scientific discipline, the question may, in principle, be approached by established scientific methods: * Deductive approach: The highest and most general goal is taken as an axiom, more specific and lower-level goals are deduced from it. Inductive approach: By methods of the sociology of science, the goals actually pursued by scientists may be ascertained; by sociological methods, it may be ascertained what goals a community thinks should be pursued by the sciences that it entertains. The deductive approach suffers at least from the following shortcomings: * The postulation of the highest goal is itself outside the scope of science. * Clean deduction is only possible in the logical disciplines. What is called deduction in (the rest of) philosophy, the humanities and social sciences is really informal and heavily dependent on the interpretation of words.

The inductive approach suffers at least from the following shortcomings: * Just like other people, scientists occasionally pursue selfish or idiosyncratic goals, which a purely inductive approach would not be able to separate out. * The extra-scientific members of a social community – be they politicians or citizens – have limited presuppositions of making a rational contribution to the discussion of the goals of a science, lacking both knowledge and experience of the nature and possibilities of scientific work and presuppositions for appreciating the spiritual side of objective knowledge (see below).

On the basis of available evidence, it is safe to say that few of them can distinguish between scientific insight and technological “ progress”. Thus, if one wants at all a scientific approach to the problem of the goals of a discipline, one would have to combine – as usual – deductive and inductive methods, hoping that they will compensate for each other’s shortcomings. It would certainly be reasonable to do this scientific work (from time to time). However, it has apparently not been done.

I will therefore abide by taking a common-sense approach to the problem, informed both by some epistemology of linguistics and by some experience with linguistic work. 1. 2. Fundamentals Like any human activity, linguistics has a place in a teleonomic hierarchy (see teleonomische Hierarchie) which is headed by its ultimate goals. Science is the pursuit of objective knowledge/understanding (Greek episteme, German Erkenntnis). The attainment of such knowledge is its ultimate goal. This goal is itself subordinate to the goal of human life, which is the improvement of the conditio humana.

It is in the nature of human cognition – as opposed to God’s cognition –, that it can be fully achieved only in communication. To say that the goal is objective knowledge is therefore almost tantamount to saying that it is rational communication. This rephrasing also serves the purpose of avoiding a static conception of ‘ objective knowledge’. In the more specific discussion below, the role of communication in the achievements of the goals of a science will come up again. Understanding has two sides, a spiritual and a practical one. On the spiritual side, the human mind is enriched if it understands something; and this in itself is a contribution to improving the

conditio humana. * On the practical side, understanding something is a presupposition for controlling it. Controlling1 the world in which we live is another contribution to improving the conditio humana. Some sciences make a stronger contribution to the spiritual side, others make a stronger contribution to the practical side. This is the basis for the distinction between pure and applied science. Linguistics is the study of human language.

Understanding this object has a purely spiritual aspect, which constitutes what might be called “ pure linguistics” and what is more commonly called general linguistics. It also has a practical aspect, which concerns the role of languages in human lives and societies and the possibilities of improving it. This epistemic interest constitutes applied linguistics. Given the divergence in the epistemic interest of pure and applied science, there can be no universal schema by which the goals and tasks of a science should be systematized.

As discussed elsewhere (see Wissenschaft), there is a basic distinction between logical, empirical and hermeneutic approaches. Linguistics shares components of all of them. Here we will focus on the tasks of linguistics as an empirical discipline. For such a discipline, the main tasks are: 1. elaboration of a theory of its object 2. documentation and description of its object 3. elaboration of procedures for the solution of practical problems in the object area. In what follows, the main goals of linguistics will be characterized, at a general level, according to this schema. . Theory: the nature of human language The spiritual aspect of the human understanding of some object is realized in the elaboration of a theory of that object. In this respect, the task of linguistics consists in the elaboration of a theory of

human language and its relation to the languages. Its most important aspects include * the structure(s) and function(s) of human language and languages * the relationship between unity and diversity of human languages * linguistic change * acquisition of one’s native language

In characterizing the nature of human language, linguistic theory also delimits it against other kinds of semiosis, both synchronically in the comparison of spoken and written languages with sign languages, whistling languages and, furthermore, with animal languages, and diachronically in the comparison with primate semiotic systems from which human language may have evolved. 3. Empiry: documentation and description of languages As recalled above, linguistics is (among other things) an empirical science.

In such a discipline, there is a necessary interrelation between the elaboration of a theory of the object and the description of the object; one informs the other. Furthermore, since speech and even languages are volatile, they have to be documented. The tasks of linguistics in this area may be systematized as follows: 1. language documentation: recording, representation, analysis and archiving of speech events and texts that represent a certain language 2. language description: . the setting of the language * ethnographic * social/cultural * genealogical 2. the language system: * semantic system: grammar, lexicon * expression systems: phonology, writing The documentation of a language must be such that people who do not have access to the language itself can use the documentation as a surrogate for as many purposes as possible. In particular, it should be possible to develop a description of a language on the basis of its documentation.

The description makes explicit the meanings that the language expresses and the functions it fulfils – what it codes and what it leaves uncoded –, and represents the structure of the expressions that afford this. It does all of this in the most systematic and comprehensive way possible. Such a description may be used for a variety of purposes, most of which are mentioned below in the section on applied linguistics. Both documentation and description take the historical dimension of the object into account.

That is, in the synchronic perspective, they are systematic, while in the diachronic perspective, they are historical. 4. Practice: application of linguistics The daily use of language for communication and cognition is replete with all kinds of tasks and problems that require science for a proper solution. Some of them are: * compilation of grammars, dictionaries and text editions for various purposes * native and foreign language teaching * testing of linguistic proficiency * standardizing and planning languages * devising and improving writing systems development and maintenance of special languages and terminologies * analysis and alleviation of communication problems in social settings * diagnosis and therapy of aphasic impairments * intercultural communication, translation and interpreting * communication technology: speech technology, automatic speech and text production and analysis, machine translation, corpus exploitation … The descriptions produced in “ pure” linguistics – not only descriptive linguistics, but also socio-, psycho-, neuro-, ethno- etc. inguistics – are exploited for the formulation of technical procedures by which tasks arising in the fields enumerated may be solved. And contrariwise, the demands arising from those practical fields are taken as challenges by

theoretical and descriptive linguistics to produce theories and descriptions that respond to them. 5. Methodology: epistemological reflection and working tools The nature of the goal of science – objective knowledge – requires the elaboration and testing of methods by which putative knowledge may be attained, verified/falsified and applied in the solution of practical or interdisciplinary problems. The epistemological side of this activity is a stock-taking of the particular nature of the activity of the linguist, its goals, conditions and possibilities. There will be reflection on the logical, empirical and hermeneutic nature of the object of linguistics and the approaches appropriate to each facet. * The operational side of methodology is the elaboration of particular methods within such a methodological frame of the discipline.

Given the interplay of specific aspects of the linguistic object with specific problems and purposes, specific sets of methods may be developed to deal adequately with such aspects of the object, to solve such problems and serve such purposes. This involves * in the deductive perspective, the operationalization of concepts and theorems and the elaboration of tests * in the inductive perspective, the elaboration of standards of representation of linguistic data and of tools for processing them.

While a contribution from general epistemology may be expected for the epistemological side of linguistic methodology, its operational side is entirely the responsibility of the particular discipline. Its status as a scientific discipline crucially depends on its fulfillment of this task. 6. Cooperation: interdisciplinary fertilization The articulation of science into disciplines is, first of all, a necessity of the division of labor. As observed above, a

particular discipline is constituted by the combination of an object with an epistemic interest.

The object is just a segment of the overall object area susceptible of scientific insight, the epistemic interest depends on all kinds of factors, and the combinations of these two elements are consequently manifold. In other words, no discipline is autonomous and self-contained. The contribution that it makes to human understanding can only be assessed if it is compared and combined with other disciplines. The theories developed by a discipline must define their object in such a way that it becomes transparent where they leave off, i. . where the interfaces for the combination of related theories are. And they must be formulated in such a way that non-specialists can understand them and relate them to the epistemic interest pursued by them. Thus, a linguistic theory has to make explicit what it purports to cover and what not – for instance, only the linguistic system, not its use –; and linguists should say what they think is required for taking care of the rest.

Moreover, the products of linguistic description and documentation must be represented in such a way that non-linguists may use them. For instance, there must be * grammars usable by foreign language curriculum designers * semantic descriptions usable by ethnographers * models of linguistic competence testable by neurologists * formal grammatical descriptions usable by programmers. Finally, linguistics must be capable of and receptive in taking up insights and challenges from other disciplines.

For instance, * phonological concepts must be related to phonetic concepts * models of linguistic activity must be inspired by findings of psychology and

neurology * models of linguistic competence must be able to account for the performance of plurilingual persons. Interdisciplinary cooperation is the touchstone of the communicative capacity of a scientific community. A discipline that can neither inspire other disciplines nor be inspired by them gets isolated and unnecessary. 7. Conclusion Above, five areas of goals of linguistics have been identified: 1.

Theory: the nature of human language 2. Empiry: documentation and description of languages 3. Practice: application of linguistics 4. Methodology: epistemological reflection and working tools 5. Cooperation: interdisciplinary fertilization These goals do not belong to the same level. Goal #1, the elaboration of a theory of its object, is the highest goal of any science. As already mentioned, goal #1 is interdependent with goal #2, because a theory of an object area presupposes its proper description, and a proper description presupposes a theory on which it can be based.

Furthermore, the production of documentations and descriptions is a service to the society. This is even more true of goal #3: The solution of daily-life tasks and problems is a practical contribution to the improvement of the conditio humana. It has to be done by someone, and if it is done by the discipline that has the relevant know-how, it is both better for the solution of the problem and better for the social standing of the discipline. Finally, the demands emerging from extra-scientific practice may feed back into the content and form of descriptions.

Goals #4 and #5 are more science-immanent. Neither the elaboration of a methodology nor interdisciplinary cooperation are anything that would be of

direct relevance outside a scientific context. They are, however, preconditions for the attainment of goals #1 – #3. As said before, no serious theory can be developed, no adequate descriptions and documentations can be produced, and no practical problems can be solved, without an arsenal of pertinent methods and without a systematic interchange with disciplines that partly share the object area or the epistemic interest.