

The Language System of English

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Foreword

This book is an outcome of five decades of my professional activities in exploring and teaching English as a foreign language, which have given me a novel insight into its basic systemic properties. My views on the subject might hopefully be of interest not only to my linguistic colleagues, but also to broader circles of language learners, and to quite a few native speakers of the language as well, for although a foreigner's mastery of the language is bound to be wanting, this deficiency may be compensated by somewhat deeper penetration into the systemic mechanisms of the language.

Due to my intention to reach a wider readership not confined to expert linguists, this book is not a scholarly monograph equipped with the appropriate paraphernalia, like a historiography of the subject or bibliographical references. As the volume of linguistic literature on the English language is daunting, even the minimal reference list would probably be much longer than the book itself. In my opinion, the advent of the Internet with its hosts of powerful search tools has effectively freed authors from the need to corroborate any idea in their writings by citing its proponents and adherents. My linguistic colleagues will no doubt easily distinguish my contributions from ideas put forward by others long before me, whereas laymen are unlikely to care about who said what and when. Therefore the few names of linguists mentioned below, whose classical works are well known to every scholar in this field, will not be accompanied by superfluous bibliographical references.

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Chapter I

The notion of a language as a system

1. A language system and its structural pattern

A language, contrary to Noam Chomsky's well-known contention, is a system, i.e. a functionally determined, structured aggregate of elements. Since systems themselves are mostly elements of superior systems, a system occupies a certain rung on the hierarchical ladder and can be characterized as both a subsystem within the respective superior system and a system embracing several subsystems. A system should therefore be characterized in its upward and downward relations within the systemic hierarchy. When only two systemic levels are considered, the designations 'system' and 'subsystem' are sufficient, but with more levels involved prefixal terms like 'macrosystem', 'microsystem', 'hypersystem', 'mini-system' etc. have to be used.

A language serves as a subsystem not for one, but for two superior systems. One is the human mind, for which a language is a tool shaping the mind's products in order to make them exportable to other minds. Since the tools used by participants in this exchange between minds must be uniform, a language system is an element not only of individual minds, but of the totality of minds in the entire language community – a social system comprising all the speakers of the language. It should be emphasized that although a subsystem incorporated into a superior system cannot be independent of the latter, it is nevertheless an autonomous entity.

There are three facets to every system: (1) the functional facet relating to the purpose it serves in the superior system as its element; (2) the substantive facet characterizing the substance of which the system builds its elements; (3) the structural facet

pertaining to the inner organization of the system, to the relations between the elements within it as well as between them and the system as a whole. A system is evidently not independent of the superior system in its functional relation determined by the requirements of the latter. Neither is it fully independent in the choice of substance for its elements, which can obviously be built only of what is available for the purpose. Unlike these two facets, which relate a system to those two external domains, its internal structure is not directly determined by outside factors, and a system is highly autonomous in selecting the most suitable available substance, moulding it into elements and organizing them for optimal functioning in order to meet the requirements of the superior system.

A language system comprises three subsystems: (a) the lexical subsystem containing thousands of words, whose function is to reflect the entire range of things and phenomena in the ambient world; (b) the grammatical subsystem, whose function is to arrange words into sentences reflecting thoughts exchanged in speech communication; (c) the phonic subsystem, whose function is to provide the items and products of the two other subsystems, i.e. words and sentences, with externalizable and transmissible sound shapes. Each subsystem has its own structural organization and is based on the appropriate substance used in building its elements. The sources of substance for subsystems (a) and (b) belong to the plane of language content, which encompasses the entire range of objects, phenomena, events, their properties and relations reflected by the mind. The phonic subsystem operates in the other language plane of sound expression and is based on the psychophysiological and acoustic mechanism of speech production and perception as its material substance. It should be stressed that the substantive basis of all language systems and their elements belongs to the mind, to its mental and physiological spheres that are undoubtedly universal for all mankind, and thus cannot be directly incorporated as elements into the uniquely peculiar systems of the thousands of human languages.

The elements of language systems are not the sounds, things, phenomena, properties and relations as such, but language units built on their substantive basis, which is never used fully for that purpose – only part of it is selected and incorporated into the respective unit, thereby acquiring a place and a function in the

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language system. Thus, the phonic subsystem of any language never uses the whole gamut of possible sounds and all the properties of the sounds adopted by the system, the grammatical subsystem of a language makes use of only part of the properties and relations reflected by the mind, and the words in the lexical subsystem can never cover the infinite variety of things and phenomena in the ambient world. Speaking otherwise, a language system restricts the substantive bases of its elements as it moulds them, because extralinguistic substance is mostly continual, non-discrete, whereas systemic organization presumes a high degree of discretization, which entails dissecting the continuum by borders imposed by the system. Since a continuum can be segmented into discrete units in a theoretically infinite number of manners, the discretization of the universal extralinguistic substance by any language system must inevitably be unique, language-specific.

The systemic approach to languages presumes that describing a language system adequately is not tantamount to giving a full, detailed description of the language. The latter, striving to present all the facts pertaining to the language, tends to go far beyond the scope of systemic description, expanding in two directions. On the one hand, although analysis of any systemic object is incomplete without considering the substance involved in the system, the continual nature of extralinguistic substance makes it difficult to delimit the part of it that is relevant to the system and should therefore be included into its description. Thus, phoneticians sometimes go deep into certain properties of speech sounds that have no role in conveying the spoken message, grammarians devote much attention to properties and relations of objects and phenomena which are not reflected in language forms, lexicologists habitually tend to blur the distinction between a dictionary, whose purpose is to explain the meanings of words, and an encyclopaedia, which is devoted to the description of things and phenomena denoted by words.

On the other hand, any complex system comprises a few elements with peculiar properties that are not characteristic of the system as a whole, but are retained from its previous states. These exceptional elements are often characterized by frequent occurrence in speech. A full description of a language naturally treats them like its other units and sometimes even pays them more attention. But a systemically oriented analysis of a language,

focusing on the essential features of its peculiar system, which in their totality and interaction jointly determine the unique character of the language, points out the marginal place occupied by these relics in the language system in contrast to its typical, regular elements, which fully conform to the dominant trends in its dynamically evolving structural pattern.

The three subsystems – lexical, grammatical and phonic – differ in their relations to the structural pattern of a language. The structural role of the former is less significant in comparison to the two others. The latter are closed, rigid systems with well-defined inventories of comparatively few elements frequently used in speech and thus rather weighty in the language system, which makes mastery of a language impossible unless and until both subsystems are learned satisfactorily. The lexical subsystem, on the contrary, is open, non-rigid, with several thousand elements, of which a few hundred core elements are in rather frequent use, while the rest are more or less peripheral. The vocabulary as a whole and its core have no definable borders and cannot therefore be listed in exhaustive inventories. That is why even good command of a language never entails full knowledge of its vocabulary. An infant or a foreigner learning a language can be regarded as having mastered it when its grammar and phonology have been assimilated together with the core of its vocabulary, after which the rest of the latter may be learned step by step over many years.

The basic criterion for determining what in a language lies within or outside the structural pattern of its system is the distinction between productive and unproductive patterns. The latter are always found in words that can be listed in closed inventories and display features stemming either from the past stages in the evolution of the language or from other languages, e.g. the plural forms of English nouns like *men*, *teeth*, *oxen*, *mice*, the past tense (preterite) and participle forms of verbs like *sang* – *sung*, *drove* – *driven*, which are grammatical vestiges from earlier periods, or borrowings like *genre* and *loch* with exceptional sounds – initial [ž] and [x] respectively, plural forms like *antennae*, *stimuli*, *phenomena*, which preserve grammatical and phonic features imported from other languages. Treating such elements as remnantal or unassimilated clears up the overall view of the structural pattern underlying the language system and the

dominant trends in its typological evolution. In particular, it reveals the uniform pattern in the use of the English inflexions (*e*)s and *ed* in the morphology of English nouns and verbs, enabling significant conclusions to be drawn about the dynamic typological characteristics of present-day English.

2. Language systems and language types

Each language system and its structural pattern are unique products of the historical evolution of the language. The uniqueness of the structural pattern stems from the peculiar combination of structural features which singly or in diverse clusters are common to many languages. The most essential of these features determine the type to which a language belongs, its place in the typological classification of languages. One of these determinant features is the manner in which words and their forms are typically built in the language. Words are language units that carry both lexical and grammatical meanings and therefore serve as elements in both the lexical and grammatical subsystems. They are generally built of components called morphemes, which are classified as stems carrying the word's lexical meaning and affixes expressing the grammatical meanings of its forms. A word contains at least one stem, to which affixes are attached that precede it (prefixes), follow it (suffixes) or are placed inside it (infixes). Three language types are recognized as the most widespread in the world – (1) isolative languages, where words are typically built of stems alone without affixes; (2) agglutinative languages, where a word can contain several affixes attached to its stem; (3) inflexional languages, where a word typically contains a stem with a single affix.

All these three language characteristics have been tightly interwoven in the dynamic historical evolution of the English language. From its Indo-European and Germanic ancestors Old English inherited an inflexional structural pattern. The single affix of an inflexional word-form carries a considerable amount of grammatical information connected to the lexical information that is contained in the stem. Since the grammatical information mostly consists of several grammatical meanings, the single affix is polysemic, i.e. carries a bundle of diverse meanings. Some of them may lose their relevance in certain contexts or situations, but cannot be excluded from the affix, which causes a high level of

grammatical redundancy in word-forms. This enhances the grammatical autonomy of words in the sentence and weakens their dependence on the syntactical context. Another corollary of the unremovable nature of the grammatical meanings carried by the single polysemic affix in an inflexional word-form is the impossibility to remove the affix itself, which results in its tight cohesion with the stem. Word-forms in inflexional languages can consist of stems unaccompanied by affixes, but instances of that are typically rare – e.g. Latin and ancient Greek had very few word-forms without affixes.

In agglutinative languages a string of several affixes can join the stem in a word-form, e.g. in the Turkish noun-form *evlerimizde* ‘in our houses’, where *ev* is the stem followed by three suffixes (*ler* indicating the plural, *imiz* – possession by a group including the speaker, *de* – location) or in the verb-form *bilmemişim* ‘I did not know’, where *bil* is the stem followed by three suffixes (*me* denoting negation, *miş* – the past tense, *im* – the speaker as the subject). Such strings, which can be much longer, are often proclaimed to be most characteristic of agglutinative languages, but their length is in fact a corollary of a much more significant feature of agglutination – each affix is monosemic, i.e. carries only one grammatical meaning, which necessitates the use of a separate affix for each of the meanings of the word-form. Another corollary is the easy removal and replacement of any affix when the word changes its grammatical meaning. The examples cited above can be modified to demonstrate this: *ev* ‘house’, *evler* ‘houses’, *evimiz* ‘our house’, *evde* ‘in a house’, *evlerde* ‘in houses’, *bilim* ‘I know’, *bilmiş* ‘he/she knew’, *bilme* ‘he/she does not know’, *bilmişim* ‘I knew’, etc. The connection between the removable affixes and the stem is evidently loose in comparison with inflexional languages, and the stem appears in word-forms alone, unaccompanied by any affixes, much more often.

The three language types thus differ not only in the typical number of affixes in a word-form (several in the agglutinative type, one in the inflexional, none in the isolative) or in the kind of semantic load in an affix (polysemy in inflexions, monosemy in agglutinates). The most essential typologically relevant feature is the degree of the stem’s self-containment, its ability to build a word-form alone, without affixes, which is the highest in isolative languages, high enough in agglutinative and low in inflexional.

Another determinant feature of typological significance is the manner in which language units are combined in order to express semantic complexes of several conjoint grammatical or lexical meanings. For joint expression of lexical meanings like a person's age and gender, or of grammatical meanings like an action and its time, either a single word can be used, as *boy* and *worked* respectively, or two connected, but separate words, as *young man* and *will work*. The former method is called synthetic, the latter analytic. Languages display various degrees of predominance for either of these methods, which are two poles with a continual transition between them. Six distinct stages can be marked out on the line connecting the two poles:

1. Phrases of two (sometimes more) words instanced above represent the highest degree of analytic formation.

2. Compounds, i.e. words built of two (or more) stems, e.g. *waterfall*. They are widely used as lexical units, but less common as grammatical forms. Instances of composite word-forms of verbs can be found in the Romance languages: the Latin plusquamperfect *scripseram/eras* etc. 'had written' combining the stem *scrips* with the past forms of the auxiliary verb *esse* 'to be'; the French future *chanterai/as* etc. 'will sing' with the present forms of the auxiliary verb *avoir* 'to have' as the second component. Forms of two past tenses in Romanian are built of the same components – the stem and the auxiliary verb, but in one of the tenses they are separate words (*am/ai/a/am/ați/au purtat* 'have carried'), whereas in the other they are joined in a composite word-form (*purtam/ai/a/am/ați/au* 'carried'). Traces of similar grammatical compounds are discernible in many Slavonic languages. Among the Germanic languages Modern Danish has developed two such patterns of composite word-forms – the definite form of nouns (*dagen* 'the day', *huset* 'the house') and the present form of verbs (*lyser* 'shines'); the status of *en*, *et*, *er* as auxiliaries is demonstrated by their ability to be used as separate words with different, but related grammatical meanings – as indefinite articles (*en dag* 'a day', *et hus* 'a house') and a link-verb (*er lys* 'is bright').

3. Affixal words like *player* or word-forms like *played* with clear intermorphemic borders. Such affixation is typical of agglutinative languages, because the absence of such borders

would seriously hamper free removal of affixes from a word-form, which is the essential structural feature of that language type.

4. Affixal words or word-forms with blurred intermorphemic borders, with fusion between the stem and the affix due to the sound substance of one morpheme intruding into the other, e.g. in word-forms like *left*, *lost*, *thieves*, in words like *theft*, where the final consonants of the stems, respectively [v] in *leave*, [z] in *lose* and [f] in *thief*, assimilate to voiceless [t] and voiced [z] in the suffixes, while the long vowels [i:], [u:] in the stems are shortened and change in quality due to the following consonant clusters created by the addition of the suffix *t*. Such fusion is characteristic of inflexional languages, in which the synthetic trend is dominant, because the connection between the stem and the affixes is typically strong there.

5. A further step in the synthetic direction is internal inflexion inserted into the stem, e.g. in word-forms like *foot* – *feet*, *sing* – *sang* – *sung*, *write* – *wrote*, in words like *song*, *writ*.

6. The synthetic trend attains its highest level in suppletion, i.e. the use of different stems to express meanings that are ordinarily expressed by affixation. These meanings may be grammatical, like in *be* – *am* – *is* – *are* – *was*, *go* – *went*, or lexical, like in *boy* – *girl*, *bull* – *cow*, where the gender distinction is expressed by different stems, as compared with *author* – *authoress*, *lion* – *lioness*, where a suffix is used for the same purpose.

3. The typological characteristics of English

Before considering the language type to which English should be referred, the role of the above-listed six ways of expressing connected meanings must be determined in the language system of English. The exploration should pass over the lexical subsystem, where numerous instances of all the six methods can easily be found among the thousands of words with highly individual characteristics. Only word-forms will be considered here – products of the grammatical subsystem, which is the backbone of the language system.

The first of the six methods, which is essentially analytic with the conjoint words fully separated, is well known as the most widespread in English grammar. On the contrary, the second method of building composite word-forms is totally unknown in

English. On the other end of the list the most synthetic method of suppletion is exceptional in any language, because it is incompatible with regularity in grammatical formations and is therefore always confined to few words frequently used in speech. But since grammatical properties restricted to words in closed inventories are not inherent to the structural pattern of a language system, suppletion is irrelevant from the systemic viewpoint.

The method of internal inflexion, confined in English to a closed inventory of several nouns and several dozen verbs, also remains outside the structural pattern of the language system. It is highly instructive, nevertheless, that internal inflexion, unlike suppletion, can be compatible with regularity, and in the Germanic prehistory of English it was quite standard in the so-called 'strong verbs', governed by strict rules of ablaut (stem vowel alternation, apophony). The wide regular use of internal inflexion testifies to the strong predominance of the synthetic trend in the ancestry of the English language about two millennia ago.

But internal inflexion was inherently doomed due to the inevitable conflicts between the grammatical subsystem and the two other language subsystems. Internal harmony is not an intrinsic feature of complex systems, it is highly dynamic and unstable, being constantly renewed in incessant collisions between opposite systemic forces. While the systemic requirement for stability entailed full protection for the alternating vowels against impact from the adjacent sounds, the phonic subsystem had no mechanism for insulating any sound in the speech string from its neighbours and could therefore not meet that requirement.

The collision with the lexical subsystem was caused by the strict demands imposed on the sound shapes of verbs by stipulating the choice of the vowel in the stem, which meant that numerous verbs with stem vowels not in compliance with the rules of ablaut could not be included into that pattern. Known as 'weak verbs', they built their word-forms using suffixes instead of infixes. The latter, penetrating into the stem, are in closer connection with it than affixes, which, although unquestionably synthetic in nature, are therefore somewhat farther from the synthetic pole of the typological scale.

The decay of the Germanic ablaut started early enough. In the Gothic language documented as early as the 4th century A.D. the rules of ablaut were still in force, though their erosion was already

evident. The disintegration continued in Old and Middle English, and in present-day English only vestiges of ablaut are extant in several dozen verbs, which are among the most frequently used in speech and therefore more likely to retain peculiar individual properties. The elimination of regular internal inflexion from the structural pattern of the language system is a manifestation of the gradual, but steady shift of the evolving English language system away from the use of synthetic word-forms, which enhanced the growing ascendancy of the analytic trend.

Two manners of grammatical affixation are used in English. One admits fusion of the suffix with the stem, resulting in blurred intermorphemic borders within the word-form, making the integration of the suffix in it rather close and thus showing the action of strong synthetic forces. It was widespread enough in Old English, but its use has later been considerably reduced, so that today it is confined to several dozen words in a closed inventory, which leaves the method outside the structural pattern of the present-day language system. The words with forms of that type display varying degrees of integration between the stem and the suffix – the fusion is minimal as the suffix affects only the final consonant of the stem by voicing it, e.g. in *houses* [s > z], *paths* [θ > ð], *knives* [f > v]; in *kept* only the stem vowel is affected by the presence of the suffix *t*, while both the vowel and the final consonant are affected in *lost*; in *spent* the stem has lost its final consonant altogether, while in *led* it has merged with the suffix. The deepest impact of the suffix *t* on the stem is instanced by *taught*, *sought*, where only the initial consonants of the stems remain intact. It is noteworthy that the integrating impact in all such cases was always directed from the suffix backwards onto the stem, which is a characteristic feature of inflexional languages, where the affix plays a major role in the word-form, while the stem is rather less weighty grammatically. The decline of fusion in suffixal word-forms is yet another indicator of the synthetic trend being weakened in the grammatical subsystem of the English language.

On the other hand, suffixation without fusion, with clear intermorphemic borders has become the only productive pattern for regular synthetic English word-forms like *works*, *worked*, *working*. Of course, the elimination of fusion from unrestricted, productive suffixation cannot preclude phonic interaction between

the sound shapes of the stem and the suffix, but a mechanism has emerged in the language system to protect the clarity of the border. It is highly indicative that the new mechanism has reversed the direction of phonic interaction between the two morphemes – whereas in the formerly widespread suffixation with fusion the impact came from the suffix and affected the sound shape of the preceding stem, in the new pattern the impact comes from the stem and can change the sound shape of the following suffix, testifying to the redistribution of relative weight in the word structure between the stem and the suffix. The former is now secured against encroachment on its immutable sound shape, while the sound shapes of the suffixes are regularly affected by the sound shapes of the stems. Of the only three productive suffixes (*e*)*s*, *ed*, *ing* used in English grammar, the latter has an immutable sound shape, while the variable sound shapes of the other two, basically consisting of single consonants, [s/z] and [t/d] respectively, are governed by two rules: (a) if the stem ends in a consonant similar to that of the suffix, like in *passes*, *rises*, *pushes*, *rouges*, *matches*, *judges*, *wanted*, *landed*, a buffer vowel is inserted between them to keep them apart and thus prevent the intermorphemic border from blurring; (b) the consonants of the suffixes remain voiceless if preceded by a voiceless final consonant of the stem, like in *cooks*, *cooked*, otherwise they are voiced, like in *loves*, *loved*, *frees*, *freed*, *losses*, *posted*.

Whereas suffixation with fusion enhances the role of the affix in the word structure, which is characteristic of patently synthetic inflexional languages, the establishment of fusionless suffixation as the only productive pattern for synthetic English word-forms and the redistribution of relative weight in the word structure in favour of the stem was a typological shift of immense significance for the language system of English. Notwithstanding the widespread use of a few inflexional suffixes in building synthetic word-forms, contemporary English should be characterized as a language which is neither inflexional nor basically synthetic. Returning to the above typological scale with its six stages between the analytic and synthetic poles, it can be seen that only two of the patterns, viz. (1) and (3), are widely represented now in building regular word-forms analytically or synthetically, and both are on the part of the scale closer to the analytic pole. In Old English, on the contrary, patterns (3), (4) and (5) were

predominant, demonstrating proximity to the opposite synthetic pole. Internal inflexion (5) ceased to be productive in the Old English period, while suffixation with fusion (4) lost its productivity in Middle English. Thus the typological shift from synthetic to analytic patterns in the English language system is a protracted step-by-step process that began no less than 2 millennia ago in the Common Germanic language and has proceeded with different intensity and results in all the Germanic languages. In English, Afrikaans and Danish that process has been most intense and changed their language systems radically.

A major role in the process of de-synthetization was played by the gradual erosion of grammatical distinctions between word-forms of verbs, nouns and adjectives. Old English nouns had 8 word-forms (4 cases in 2 numbers), but no more than 3 to 6 of them had different inflexions, while over 40 word-forms of adjectives could be distinguished by no more than a dozen inflexions. The verb was somewhat better equipped, so that according to the distinctness of their word-forms the three large parts of speech could be arranged in the following order: verbs – nouns – adjectives.

The erosion of inflexions was a bilateral process involving the grammatical and phonic subsystems, with either of them enhancing the eroding impact of the other – the erosion of the sound shapes of the inflexions diminished their functional semantic value, which in its turn facilitated their loss to phonic erosion. The Middle English period was marked by two major steps in that destructive process – at its start all the vowels unstressed in word-final positions merged into one vowel of neutral timbre [ə], thereby drastically impairing the distinctness of some inflexions and completely erasing many others, and by the close of the period that vowel was dropped together with the word-final nasal sonant [n]. Only inflexions with other consonants could have survived – for the noun this was *es* in the Gen. Sg. and Nom.-Acc. Pl., as in Middle English *stones* (resulting from the merger of Old English Gen. Sg. *stānes* with Nom.-Acc. Pl. *stānas*); the verbs preserved the suffix of the ‘weak’ preterite *t/d*, as well as *st* for the 2nd Sg. Pres. (e.g. *writest*) and *th* for the 3rd Sg. Pres. and all persons of Pl. Pres. (e.g. *writeth*). Two inflexions, *es* and *re*, could phonically survive in the adjectives, whose declension, however, was so weakened by the erosive process that

it was abandoned altogether, turning the adjectives into an indeclinable part of speech.

For the typological characterization of the English language system, both in its present state and in its evolutionary dynamics, the crucial question is whether the inflexions whose sound shapes survived that extensive reduction have retained their grammatical functions. If so, English is still an inflexional language, albeit with a drastically reduced inventory of inflexions. But if only the sound shapes survived, while the inflexions themselves were transformed by the language system into its essentially different elements with new functions and properties, the large-scale restructuring undergone by the language system in the Middle English period has deeply affected its typological characteristics.

The former view was upheld by some linguists on the strength of an argument, the validity of which is questionable. So-called 'zero inflexions' are common in inflexional languages, distinguishing the word-forms in which they are present from the others by the actual absence of a materially perceptible inflexion – e.g. the 'zero inflexion' in Latin Nom. Sg. Masc. *pater* 'father' in contrast with the non-zero inflexions in Gen. Sg. *patris*, Dat. Sg. *patri*, Acc. Sg. *patrem*, etc. It was suggested that English word-forms like *play*, *book* have similar 'zero inflexions' comparable with and distinct from non-zero inflexions in *plays*, *books*, *played*, *booked*, *playing*, *booking*. Consequently, each word-form of verbs and nouns is regarded as containing an inflexion, supporting the notion that English is still an inflexional language.

As an inflexion is typically polysemic, carrying several grammatical meanings, the problem was then posed of determining the semantic load of the 'zero inflexion', which is apparently enormous, embracing the common case and the singular in nouns, the 1st and 2nd persons and the plural in the present tense and the imperative of verbs. The suggested solution was to split the 'zero inflexion' into several 'homonymous' inflexions, which would presumably lead to the recognition of such grammatical figments as at least six separate 'zero inflexions' of case and number for nouns, for person, number, tense and mood for the verb. To further complicate the problem, the other, non-zero inflexions must also be split into several homonyms each: *s* for the plural and 's for the possessive in nouns as well as *s* for the

3rd Sg. Pres. in verbs are homonymous, *ed* for the preterite and the participle in verbs are also homonyms.

The argumentation based on the notion of 'zero inflexion' aims at diminishing the typological significance of the radical restructuring in the language system of English. Whether this evidently marginal phenomenon should be called 'zero inflexion' or 'absence of inflexion' may seem immaterial as a purely terminological squabble, but the former designation is plainly intended to boost the number of inflexions active in the grammatical subsystem. This is a case where numbers matter, where quantitative change has brought about profound qualitative transformation. In typically inflexional languages like Latin and Old English, as well as present-day Russian, with inventories of inflexions containing several dozen materially distinct items with sound shapes, their absence is distinctive enough in certain not too frequent word-forms. In English, however, the inventory of materially distinct inflexions used to build regular word-forms has been reduced to only three, which is by no means a mere numerical change. Adding the 'zero inflexion' to that inventory raises the number of distinct word-forms to four – *work*, *works*, *worked*, *working*, which is certainly not a significant increase. Sixfold homonymy of the 'zero inflexion', if the notion is accepted, doubles the inventory, but even that trick fails to liken the structural pattern of the English language system to that of inflexional languages.

Absence of inflexions in word-forms cannot be anything but a marginal phenomenon of limited extent in language systems, because it runs counter to the essential need for distinction in a language. Up to a certain degree it is admissible in languages with rich inventories of materially distinct tools for building word-forms, which provide the contrastive environment necessary for the functioning of word-forms without inflexions. It cannot, however, become a tool that is most frequently used in the grammatical subsystem of a language. The English 'zero inflexion', if the notion is accepted, would certainly have the highest frequency in speech, which would drastically diminish its potential for contrast with the other inflexions and thereby wreck its ability to function as one of them. Whereas a few non-zero inflexions may survive the collapse of the inflexional structural pattern and find new places in the transformed pattern, the 'zero

inflexion' is doomed with the demise of the only pattern in which it can possibly function. True, on the face of it the erstwhile Old English 'zero inflexion' expanded its use, replacing many other inflexions destroyed in the Middle English process of phonic and grammatical erosion. But its gains and the demise of most other inflexions contributed greatly to the collapse of the structural pattern based on the use of inflexions in word-forms and thereby destroyed the conditions vital for the survival of the 'zero inflexion' itself.

The newly established prevalence of word-forms with no inflexions in English speech signified the radical transformation in their grammatical nature – they are no longer inflected and comprise the stem alone (the 'bare' stem). The notion of 'zero inflexion' surviving in Modern English should thus be discarded as misrepresenting the essential typological characteristics acquired by the language system in the course of its evolution. Moreover, even the few inflexions which have been retained by the language system were so radically transformed by its new structural pattern that they can no longer be regarded as inflexions and should therefore be designated as suffixes.

Homonymy is likewise marginal in language systems as being contrary to distinction. It is always restricted in its extent, specific as a characteristic of individual words and word-forms conforming to no rules, which means that it cannot in principle be part of the structural pattern in a language system. Attempts to present it as a feature of that pattern stem from considerable difficulties encountered in revealing the deeply hidden meaning common to all the alleged homonyms. Similar to the case of the 'zero inflexion', the extension of homonymy signifies its transformation into a phenomenon of a different nature with a changed role in the new structural pattern. In that light attention should be drawn to three instances of apparently new homonymy established soon after the restructuring of the English grammatical subsystem. All the three events took place in verb-forms and were not directly caused by the elimination of inflexions.

When the word-forms of the 3rd Sg. Pres. (OE *bindeþ*, *macaþ*) and of the Pl. Pres. (Old English *bindaþ*, *maciaþ*) became identical in Middle English *bindeth*, *maketh*, there was an attempt to keep them distinct by introducing the inflexion *en* for the plural, which was, however, soon fully eroded. As a result the plural

coincided with the 1st Sg., while the 2nd and 3rd Sg. preserved their respective phonically uneroded inflexions *est*, *eth*. After the 2nd Sg. mostly went out of use, the 3rd Sg. was left as the only word-form distinct from the rest of the present tense, which may be regarded as either a single word-form or several homonymous word-forms. Both solutions are problematic, as the former necessitates a definition of the integral grammatical meaning of the word-form as distinct from the 3rd Sg., while the latter calls into question the traditionally accepted structure of the verb paradigm with six word-forms (3 persons in 2 numbers). This problem will be considered below (see p. 53ff.).

The 3rd Sg. Pres. was involved in another instance of newly established grammatical homonymy. In Early Modern English its suffix *eth* was replaced by *(e)s*. The replacement, which, unlike the previous instance, had nothing to do with the erosion of inflexions and is therefore harder to explain, resulted in regular identity between two highly frequent word-forms of the two major parts of speech, as in *plays* 'activities, performances' – *plays* 'performs, amuses oneself'. Whereas homonymy is intrinsically irregular, this new coincidence is standard, it is undoubtedly part of the structural pattern of the language system and therefore cannot be regarded as grammatical homonymy. An attempt to reveal the grammatical meaning that finds expression in the identity of word-forms patently opposite in their grammatical functions will be made below (see p. 55).

The third instance of a new coincidence between formerly different word-forms was the replacement of the suffix *nd* in the present participle (Middle English *slepende*) by the suffix *ing* of the verbal noun included into the verb paradigm as the new non-finite – the gerund, which thus became identical with the present participle. Again the question is posed whether they have merged into a single word-form, whose common grammatical meaning is to be determined, or are to be treated as two homonymous word-forms (see p. 73).

To fully comprehend the sweeping scope of the restructuring undergone by the entire language system of English in the past several centuries, not only the drastic reduction in the inventory of inflexions and the resulting enormous increase in the frequency of uninflected word-forms should be considered, but also the above-listed developments involving the few former inflexions that

survived the process of grammatical and phonic erosion. Their survival, however, was only partial – what really survived were their sound shapes, but not their grammatical nature and functions. The causes for these developments may seem obscure, but they were by no means fortuitous, a systemic purpose is evident in them. Their results are indicative in that respect, demonstrating the new relations between the morphemes involved in the changes and thereby throwing light on their new roles in the grammatical subsystem.

As the direction of the restructuring moved the English language system away from the primarily inflexional type, it was brought closer to the two other types – isolative and agglutinative. Since affixation is alien to the former, the few remaining productive affixes should be explored for features of agglutination. Agglutinates are attached to the stem without fusion and are easily removed, whereas the stem can just as easily build a word-form alone without them. Word-forms consisting of the stem alone are the most frequently used in English speech, the three productive grammatical suffixes *s*, *ed* and *ing* being attached to the stem without fusion and thus unable to affect its sound shape, while the sound shapes of two of them are themselves influenced by the stem, demonstrating the preponderance of the stem in the word-form. These are characteristic features of the agglutinative type. While many word-forms can be built by attaching numerous agglutinates to the stem and arranging them in strictly ordered sequences in a patently agglutinative language with a grammatical subsystem rich in affixes, the paucity of productive affixes precludes the formation of such strings in English word-forms, where no more than one affix can be present.

Agglutination has thus replaced inflexion as the principal method for building synthetic word-forms in English. But as synthetic word-forms do not predominate in the language system of English and the overall weight of agglutinative elements in it is therefore limited, the system cannot be characterized as basically agglutinative. It should be admitted that at the present stage of its evolution English does not definitely belong to any typological class, and the only way to characterize it typologically is to view it in its evolutionary dynamics, which has already removed it from the inflexional type and imparted some agglutinative features to its language system.

Agglutination is in the middle of the typological scale between the prevalence of synthetic or analytic means in the grammatical subsystem, whereas the isolative language type is essentially analytic, because word-forms containing the bare stem with no affixes attached can be distinguished from one another only by their position in combinations with other word-forms. Since such word-forms have become predominant in English, its language system has evidently acquired certain properties characteristic of isolative languages, which Otto Jespersen was the first to bring to light in 1933.

To sum up, present-day English is to be characterized as a language that has moved away from the inflexional synthetic typological pole in the past millennium and traversed much of the distance towards the opposite isolative analytic pole, with agglutination used in the few productive patterns for synthetic word-forms.

Chapter II

The grammatical subsystem

A. The sentence

1. The sentence and the utterance

Two tiers are traditionally distinguished in the grammatical subsystem of a language – the grammar of the word and the grammar of the sentence, the former known as morphology, the latter as syntax. But morphology, the linguistic domain dealing with the relations between words and morphemes as their components, is not entirely grammatical, since besides the structure of word-forms carrying grammatical meanings it is also concerned with word-building, which belongs to the lexical subsystem. Syntax, on the other hand, is concerned not only with combining words into phrases and sentences as grammatical units, but also embraces utterances – syntactical units of a domain that in the present author's opinion lies outside the language system proper.

The sentence, whose semiotic function is to present any event in standard format, is the final product of the functioning grammatical subsystem and thus the highest product of the language system as a whole. The sentence is delivered to the functionally higher systemic domain of speech communication, where it provides the foundation for utterances – the elementary units of communication. The relationship between the sentence as the final grammatical unit and the utterance as the elementary unit of the higher systemic tier needs to be determined with the utmost clarity because of its extraordinary significance for the delimitation of speech as a communicational activity from