SOME REFLEXIONS ON
PRACTICE AND THEORY IN STRUCTURAL
SEMANTICS

by

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Guidé par quelques principes fondamentaux, personnels, qu'on retrouve partout dans son œuvre et qui forment la trame de ce tissu solide autant que varié, il travaille en profondeur et ne s'étend en surface que là où ces principes trouvent des applications particulièrement frappantes . . .

East is East, and West is West... But not so Practice and Theory. Some day the twain shall meet. Once upon a time they may have met, sub-consciously perhaps, *en profondeur.* Or still better, they are twins of the same embryo.

It can hardly have escaped anybody who is conscious of some of the fundamental ideas underlying the Nature Method (although implicit to a large extent), and who is familiar with certain ideas within contempo-rary linguistic theory (although there application is scarce and examples do not appear abundantly), that there is an intimate relationship between the two. Talking of influence would be unjustified. An inspiration has come into existence, it is true; but the inspiration is *a posteriori,* and—if I may venture such a contention—a mutual one. Practice and Theory seem, in this particularly fortunate case, to have sprung full-fledged from an identical primal source, conscious or no. Practice, like Theory, is based on intuition; but Practice makes a point of keeping silent about the fun-damental ideas, which may remain sheer intuition; on the other hand, loquacity, or, to put it more politely, explicit statements, are the very hallmark of Theory. I have a strong feeling that the quotation given above, well-known to any linguist of our day as a characterization of one great scholar, given by two of his pupils, is equally applicable to that remarkable personality to whom we are paying homage on the present occasion.

English (and presumably some other languages) by the Nature Method and the linguistic theory known as Glossematics were worked out simultaneously and independently of each other; the authors were not mutually acquainted at the time. It was not until after World War II that I came to know *English by the Nature Method*. Shortly afterwards, in Sweden, Arthur M. Jensen confided to me that he had recently been reading my *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*[1] and had been giving them a good deal of thought; this event, incidentally, had taken place on the peak of a Norwegian mountain. The comments he made were so sophisticated, and the questions he brought up were so much to the point, that I could hardly imagine a reader with a better understanding, nor with a more personal insight into the crucial problems. And it should be kept in mind that this conversation was not about applications, nor about their immediate prerequisites, such as phonematic or semantic analyses, or the like: its bearings were upon fundamental theoretical questions only, thus penetrating into the inmost recesses and the extreme implications of the doctrine. This surprised me, not so much because, to the mind of many readers (for reasons better known to themselves), my book is notorious for being difficult reading, but chiefly because this was my first experience of Arthur M. Jensen as a thinker; I had not so far known all the astounding qualities of his rich personality, although his modest demeanour and his unselfish efforts to promote scholarship had made me realize that he was far from being an ordinary business man.

This was no lengthy discussion, and it must be added that, if my memory serves me right, this is the only conversation we have ever had on linguistic theory. I may even add that if I am going in this paper to contribute some remarks on semantic analysis, this is simply because I have a feeling that this must be a point in common; I cannot recall any occasion where semantics was chosen as a topic of conversation between Arthur M. Jensen and myself. I remember once having sent him S. I. Hayakawa's book *Language in Action* (this must have been shortly after the appearance of the 2nd impression, 1946). He told me that he took a vivid interest in this book, and that he thought it had fundamental bearings on his own endeavours.

If the reader will allow one more personal remark, I should like to make it clear that I have never had a hand in the preparation or the execution

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1 In the original Danish version: *Omkring sprogteoriens grundlæggelse,* 1943. See p. 59 n. 7, end.

of the practical work involved in Arthur M. Jensen's ingenious language courses. On both sides—the practical and the theoretical—our collaboration, emanating from common fundamental ideas, has been in administration only.

When in 1946 I was invited to contribute a paper to the Scandinavian Linguistic Symposium at Stockholm[1], it immediately occurred to me that the topic had to be the general problem of semantics[2]. This seemed to me to be the point where Linguistic Theory and the Nature Method had something novel, and strikingly identical, to contribute. Another reason was that the analysis of the linguistic content, and the problem of semantic substance, was an urgent concern of mine since the elaboration of Glossematics. Shortly afterwards, I read a similar paper in Copenhagen to the Historico-Philological Society in a joint session with the Society of Scandinavian Philology and the Linguistic Circle of Copenhagen[3]; the succeeding discussion included valuable contributions by Paul Diderichsen, Svend Johansen, and Kristen Møller. I returned to the subject on several later occasions: in the Royal Danish Academy[4], in the contributions I gave to the European Conference of Semantics[5], in my Prorectorial Address at the University of Copenhagen[6], in my contribution to the Columbia University Bicentennial Publication *Linguistics Today*[7], and in my report to the International Linguistics Congress held at Oslo in 1957[8]. In 1959, at the Conventus Romanus (Fifth International Conference of Linguists, in Rome, sponsored by the Nature Method Institutes), when talking of the commutation test in a paper devoted to that sub-

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1 *Nordiska språkkonferensen i Stockholm.*

2 *Semantikens grundproblem*, delivered (in Danish) October 10, 1946. Unpublished.

3 *Semantikens problem*, November 13, 1946. Unpublished.

4 *Semantikkens grundproblem*, April 28, 1950. A short synopsis has been published in *Oversigt over Selskabets Virksomhed 1949–50*, p. 50 (Copenhagen 1950).

5 *Conférence européenne de sémantique*, held at Nice March 26–31, 1951. The *Actes* of this Conference have been brought out by the Société de linguistique de Paris for restricted use in a mimeographed and unsatisfactory form.

6 *The Content Form of Language As a Social Factor*, 1953. English Translation in the author's *Essais linguistiques*, pp. 89-95 (= *Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Copenhague* XII, Copenhagen 1959).

7 *La stratification du langage. Word* 10, pp. 163–188 (New York 1954). Reproduced in *Essais linguistiques*, pp. 36–68.

8 *Proceedings of the VIII Congress of Linguists*, pp. 636–654 (Oslo 1958). Reproduced in *Essais linguistiques*, pp. 96–112.

ject[1], I deliberately emphasized the linguistic content more than the
linguistic expression, since I was still under the impression that content
analysis was unduly neglected in contemporary linguistics, and that the
problems involved in it were likely to have momentous bearings on lan-
guage teaching, and perhaps especially on the Nature Method, where
certain plerematic theorems enter as implicit basic assumptions.

I shall endeavour here to sum up a few of these basic assumptions, as I
see them now. Considerations of time and space enjoin me to be brief.
·Besides, my presentation will be a rather technical one, and the reader
may find that the ascent is soon getting steeper. I take this to be quite in
the spirit of Arthur M. Jensen. Not only is he an expert himself in
such matters; but whenever we were invited to contribute papers to the
Nature Method Conferences, we used to be requested to talk like erudite
pundits and not to popularize; and what I am going to expound should
not be too far from what a presentation at a Nature Method symposium
would be like, although I may already have trespassed against the pre-
cepts given for such presentations in that I have been talking too much
of the Nature Method without sticking to purely theoretical reflexions.
This will even hold true in the sequel. The special occasion may account
for this and make it excusable.

In order to give a proper description of a method it is sometimes expe-
dient to state what that method is *not* and what it does *not* do. Such a negative
statement is perhaps the one that would lend itself best to show what is
undoubtedly the most salient feature in the nature of the Nature Method:
this method is the one that, by definition, does not resort to *translations*.
Seemingly, this takes us far away from Semantics, at least if Semantics
be taken at their face value. When people ask for the "meaning" of a
certain word or idiom in a language foreign to them, what they really
want is nothing but a translation. But this is not yet the true meaning of
meaning, nor the true meaning of Semantics[2]. And, as we shall see, this
is the very starting-point where the Nature Method meets the needs of
structural linguistics.

A national or a regional language, at a certain stage of its chronological

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1 *Commutation et substitution, deux principes constitutifs du mécanisme de la langue,* October 21,
  1959. A publication is forthcoming.
2 Here, and elsewhere, 'Semantics' is taken to mean the study of content substance *and*
  content form.

transformation[1], *connotes*[2] a definite nation or a definite region, respectively[3]. This faculty of connoting can be found in any part of a language, in any of its four strata[4] and in their mutual relations (R): the sign relation between the two terms included in a sign: the content and the expression: CRE, and the relation (known as *manifestation*) between form and substance: FRS. We may add, for the sake of completeness and of clarity, that, in the case of an ordinary language, the sign relation is a *denotation*, where the expression is the *denotant,* denoting the content as its *denotatum,* and that, where the content is concerned, the manifestation is known as the *designation,* where the Content Form (or the *manifestatum*) is the *designant,* and the Content Substance (or the *manifestant*) is the *designatum*[5,6], whereas, in the frequent case of the Expression Substance being of a phonetic nature, the manifestation is known as the *pronunciation,* whose manifestatum is the pronounced unit[5].

In order to ensure proper scientific designations for the two terms of a connotation (or connotative relation), we shall call the language under observation the *connotant,* and the nation or region connoted by it shall be called its *connotatum*[7].

1　This 'synchronic' restriction to one and only one '*état de langue*' is imperative. Old English did not have the same connotation as Modern English, particularly if the "overall pattern" of the whole English-speaking area is taken into consideration (as is meet and proper). Or—to take an example which has become topical in present-day Danish political discussion —Old Norse as compared to (Modern) Icelandic conveys very different connotations.

2　To speak with John Stuart Mill, *Logic,* Book I, Chapter II.

3　'Nation' and 'region' are here taken to imply (or strictly speaking: to designate; see below (p. 59) national (regional) culture in the broader sense: traditions, beliefs (political and others, including national feeling and regionalism or local patriotism), behaviour (manners and morals), etc. It is worthy of note, incidentally, that in the case of world languages (such as English in our day, Latin formerly) the connotatum may more or less amount to nothing but a mere label (*i.e.,* mere form): the name of the language and the general 'idea' it conveys, and consequently what one might perhaps call a nominalistic connotatum, whereas from a more realistic point of view the connotatum (encatalyzable, though) may be more or less latent (manifested by zero, or manifested by a syncretism of optional substance quantities).

4　*Essais linguistiques,* p. 39 (*La stratification du langage,* cf. p. 57, note 7).

5　Including the special case of *latency,* where the manifestant is a zero.

6　In the distribution of active and passive voice in these technical terms (the *designant* being the *manifestatum,* and the *designatum* being the *manifestant*), concession has been made to conventional ideas concerning the "sense" of the relations: the Form, which is *manifested* by the Substance, *designates* the Substance.

7　Although it is true that the notions introduced here remain identical with the ones introduced in former publications, the nomenclature has to undergo the changes indicated

A denotation is a sign relation of the first degree; a connotation is a sign relation of the second degree, in which the expression plane is a whole denotative language: CRE, and the content plane the connotatum: the nation or region[1]. So if C_d and E_d be taken to mean the denotative content and the denotative expression, respectively, and C_c and E_c the connotative content (the connotatum) and the connotative expression (the connotant), respectively, then the entire relational field $C_d RE_d$ makes the connotative expression (the connotant) E_c, and the formula for a connotative "language" (better: a connotative semiotic) will be: $(C_d RE_d)RC_c$.

Connotants whose connotata differ among themselves are mutually translatable[2]. Connotants which become mutually substitutable[3] if their connotata are subtracted, shall be called *converse* functives. We shall call a substitution between any two converse functives a *transposition;* a linguistic transposition is known as a *translation.*

Since a translation presupposes a manipulation of the entire connotative semiotics, and an operation through which the connotata are subtracted, a translation always implies a consideration of quantities external to the denotative language (or to the linguistic language)[4]. That the Nature Method does away with this external complication, means that it operates conscientiously within the limits of *internal linguistics.* Since internal linguistics is logically presupposed by external linguistics, internal linguistics, being of a higher hierarchic order, must necessarily

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above. Thus, *connotatum* replaces what was formerly called the *"connotator"*, and the connoting language (or, more generally: the connoting functive) must be called the *connotant*. On closer inspection the older nomenclature turns out to be misleading, and *"connotator"*, whether it be taken to mean 'connotant' or 'connotatum' (or, ambiguously, the functional field comprising both of them), runs the risk of causing confusion. Cf. *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, pp. 102 sqq. (Baltimore 1953, from the Danish original (p. 56, note 1); page references are to the Danish original, whose pagination is given in the margins of the English version. A second edition of the English version is presently in preparation).

1 With the designata mentioned on p. 59, note 3.

2 *Prolegomena* (see p. 59, note 7), p. 104.

3 Substitution: Definition 62 in the *Prolegomena* (p. 85 of the English version).

4 Cf. F. de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Introduction, Chapter V: *Éléments internes et éléments externes de la langue.* Since the subtractive operation underlying the translation is in principle of a negative nature, it may perhaps be difficult to see that a translation implies a consideration of external elements such as denotata. Suffice it to say that subtracting is far from being the same as ignoring, and that any translation has to take the subtracted

be of primary concern to structural linguistics[1], and of a higher intrinsic value. This goes to show that the Nature Method is tackling fundamental problems of a particular scientific value.

The Nature Method, then, chooses as a deliberate prerequisite an internal semantic analysis which is carried out by the teacher, or by the person who is going to apply the method. It is of course not a prerequisite for the pupil. The practical aim is a command of the language on the part of the pupil; but the pupil may also be led, step by step, to carry out the internal semantic analysis, and, at the end of the course, to wind it up in a synthesis. And, in the long run, this may even prepare the pupil for comparative research, and provide him with a suitable tool for making comparisons between languages of different structures, including his native language. No better way to prepare coming linguists! But in the course itself the approach has to be an inductive one, and the pedagogical presentation has to be practical, not theoretical; but in order to fulfil the requirements of the empirical principle[2] it has to be the outcome of the linguistic analysis carried out by the teacher. One has the impression that this is the case in the Nature Method. This is what makes the Nature Method deserve its name: it is not only a Nature Method in the sense of a direct method; it is also the method created to unravel the inherent "nature" of the language which is being taught.

Theory and Practice should be equally concerned with variants (of various degrees) and invariants (commutables), and with their respective form and substance. But it goes without saying that the inductive approach carried out in a practical pedagogical presentation has to start from variants (of the highest degree) and from their manifestations. At a primitive stage of a synthetical description, variants are dealt with by means of an enumeration (particularly so in bilingual dictionaries, giving possible renderings in Language B of some item in Language A); this of course has nothing systematic about it, particularly in the case of a more or less random enumeration, and on the other hand it would hardly enter into a Nature Method approach, which is in principle confined to giving one variant of a relatively high degree to start with, and perhaps

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elements (e.g., different languages) into account and to keep them apart; any comparison shares this fate.

1 This does of course not preclude that external linguistics can be considered structural.

2 *Prolegomena*, pp. 11–12, and *passim*.

as the only one the pupil will be confronted with for a long time to come. A pedagogical approach of the monolingual type should, incidentally, not in the least be blamed for resorting to the device of *pointing* at objects, e.g. pictures, since in some way or other the "thing-meant" *must* come in as one possible variant of the highest degree. On the other hand, as far as the manifestation of variants is concerned, substances are of different *levels*[1]; there are reasons in favour of presuming that the thing-meant belongs to a very low level, if by 'low' we mean 'relatively far from direct affinity with the manifestatum', and that the highest level, and the one which lends itself particularly well to manifesting linguistic forms of the content, is one of social apprehension[2]. This, on the other hand, can only be attained through gradual inductive steps, and through a synthesis which must often be unconscious to the pupil, just as it mostly is to the native speaker, and which must very often be left to the pupil's intuition or to his own tentative conclusions.

Sooner or later, the student has to learn (or to pick up, as it were) the variants of lower degrees, and even the invariants, together with their manifestations. The inductive method, through which this is achieved through a gradual synthesis of variants of higher degrees, taking into account single words (and even smaller signs that are parts of words) as well as larger signs such as phrases and idioms, is the real *internal* one. This is how, from a theoretical point of view, we would render the idea of "thinking in the foreign language". To find the manifestation of a variant of lower degree and of an invariant is to find the common denominator. This is very often left to the student's own imagination. But the Nature Method has the disposal of the device consisting in an explicit *formulation,* and makes use of it to a large extent, for variants of all degrees as well as for invariants, for signs of smaller as well as of larger extent. Such a formulation might be called an "internal translation", although the very term "translation" is in a way a fallacy, and theoretically a pitfall. What such a formulation really is, is a syntagmatic *definition,* corresponding to that given by a consistent monolingual dictionary, and identical with the definitions actually required by the method of semantic analysis that we are advocating in glossematics[3].

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1 *Essais,* pp. 51 sqq. (*La stratification du langage*). See also my Oslo Report (*Essais,* p. 109).
2 *Essais,* pp. 52, 55, 109–110.
3 *Prolegomena,* pp. 63–65; *Essais,* pp. 110–111.

Definitions will comprise parts that are still definable, but in the long run definitions will end in *indefinables*. It may be presumed that the last indefinables which are at the bottom of such a system of semantic definitions will be the elements of simple behaviour situations: '*I* am *here*', '*you* are *there*', etc., which in their turn can only be made clear through conclusions from the context of situation, for which in some cases *pointing* may come in useful.

This is then, roughly, how Practice and Theory must meet; and if Practice is based on Theory, the reverse is equally true; both are based, ultimately, on simple behaviour situations.

There is still a very general point in which the Nature Method fulfils the basic requirements of a true scientific pedagogy. Apart from explicit definitions like those mentioned above, and which are given, inductively, at the end and not at the beginning of a presentation, the Nature Method confines itself to facing the student with facts, and leaves him to his own conclusions. It constantly leads the student to exact reasoning—the very ideal of an education in scientific research.