

# Hjelmslev and the present-day linguistics

Bohumil VYKYPĚL



Colloque Albi Médiations Sémiotiques – Actes

# Collection Actes

## Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1965) Le forme del linguaggio e del pensiero

a cura di  
Alessandro Zinna & Lorenzo Cigana

Editeur : CAMS/O

Direction : Alessandro Zinna

Collection Actes : Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1965). Le forme del linguaggio e del pensiero

1<sup>re</sup> édition électronique : août 2017

ISBN 979-10-96436-01-9

*Riassunto.* In the present paper, I wish to mention some aspects of Hjelmslev's linguistics that seem to me topical for present-day work in linguistics. Two most general aspects are Hjelmslev's scepticism regarding excessive induction and his insistence on the difference between the continuum of empirical existence and the formation of this continuum by man. One of more concrete aspects is the notion of connotative semiotics that may shed light on the notion of linguistic emblematisms. Finally, one should not forget the strong ethos of Hjelmslev's work.

GLOSSEMATICS, HJELMSLEV, LINGUISTICS, STRUCTURALISM, PRAGUE SCHOOL

**Bohumil Vykpěl** (1973) studied Czech and history in Brno (MA in 1996) and Indo-European studies in Brno and Bonn (PhD in 2001), received habilitation in general linguistics from the University of Brno in 2008 (habilitation thesis: *Glossematikstudien. Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen zu Louis Hjelmslevs Sprachtheorie*, Hamburg 2005), was research fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung in Tübingen (2005–06) and the ÖAD in Vienna (2007–08). He is senior research fellow of the Institute of the Czech Language of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Brno. His main research interest is history of linguistics (cf. his *Skizzen zur linguistischen Historiographie*, München 2013).

Pour citer cet article :

Vykpěl, Bohumil, « Hjelmslev and the present-day linguistics », in Zinna, A. et Cigana, L. (éds), *Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1965). Le forme del linguaggio e del pensiero*, Toulouse, Éditions CAMS/o, Collection Actes, p. 73-79. [En ligne] : <[http://mediationsemiotiques.com/cu\\_05](http://mediationsemiotiques.com/cu_05)>.

# Hjelmslev and present-day linguistics

Bohumil VYKYPĚL

(Academy of Sciences, Brno)

The title of my paper should perhaps run rather *Hjelmslev and present-day work in linguistics* or *Hjelmslevian inspirations for present-day linguistics*, for the notion of present-day linguistics is too broad and impossible to be covered in its entirety as linguistics is pursued nowadays by substantially more people than before. Anyway, it seems that most present-day linguists know Hjelmslev only as a name from the distant past of linguistics. I believe that this is a pity because a number of Hjelmslev's thoughts are relevant to the linguistic work of today, even to that of linguists which do not profess structuralism.

1. The first thing to do in order to change the above-mentioned situation naturally is the promotion of Hjelmslev's work. I imagine how it would be beautiful to have a Hjelmslevian volume of the series *Zur Einführung* published by the Junius Verlag (the volume on Ferdinand de Saussure has appeared even in two versions; cf. Prechtel 1994 and Jäger 2010). However, even more beautiful would be a *Hjelmslev-Brevier* as an analogue of the famous *Schuchardt-Brevier* by Leo Spitzer (1922, 1928). In such a Brevier, one could, for instance, read these very enlightening and, at the same time, liberating words: "If a thing looks complicated, it is chiefly because it is looked upon in a complicated way" (Hjelmslev 1973: 120 [1947]). Another thing that liberates, especially today when one is again faced with faith in data in which alone salvation is to be found (this

being, in turn, a sad reaction to the Chomskyan faith in the theory in which alone salvation is to be found), is the Hjelmslevian warning against the endless induction (or “sterile inductivism”, as Hjelmslev put it in his obituary for Sapir; cf. Hjelmslev 1939: 76). An instructive example of the new “inductivist optimism” is the preface to the (otherwise valuable) *Loanwords in the World’s Languages: A Comparative Handbook* by Martin Haspelmath and Uri Tadmor where readers are encouraged to update constantly an internet database of loanwords (cf. Haspelmath-Tadmor 2009: 21); however, a Hjelmslevian sceptic would perhaps remark something to the effect that this is nice, but it is not quite clear what will be achieved by that and when.

2. Besides these general watchwords, some more concrete Hjelmslevian concepts or ideas that I find inspiring can be mentioned.

2.1 Two linguists from the “functionalist camp” of present-day linguistics, Bernd Comrie and Tania Kuteva, have formulated the “emblematic function of language” (cf. Comrie-Kuteva 2005: 201). If we leave aside the story of reinventing the wheel in the work of today’s empirical functionalists (cf. Vykypěl 2009), we can say that it is useful that by formulating this concept Comrie and Kuteva have unwittingly reminded the linguistic public about its forerunner or analogue, namely the concept of the “function of the structure of functions”, formulated in the Prague School of functional structuralism: this concept was first used by Petr Bogatyrev in ethnography and Karel Horálek (1948) applied it to linguistics; developing Bogatyrev and Horálek, Josef Vachek (1989: 193) formulated the notion of the “representative function of linguistic elements”. A student of both the Prague School and Hjelmslev will immediately realize that this Praguian concept and its analogue found in Comrie and Kuteva correspond to the content of the Hjelmslevian notion of connotative semiotics (cf. Hjelmslev 1961: 114–125). Without doubt, from a strictly hermeneutic point of view, connotative semiotics does not simply equal the representative or emblematic function of language. But what I find important is that these concepts are well comparable and their comparison creates a broader conceptual network in which a concrete descriptive-explicative instrument – linguistic emblematisms – can be embedded; in another place, I tried to demonstrate the usefulness of this instrument (cf. Vykypěl 2015: 61–67).

2.2 Another theme which is very popular in present-day linguistics and, at the same time, does not seem to be entirely free of some danger of

inductivism is language contact. One of the sub-themes in research into language contact is the question of the possibility of categorizing genetically languages that have been exposed to heavy language contact. I tried to show that this problem can hardly be solved otherwise than deductively: by axiomatic determination of genetic relationships of the languages in questions (cf. Vykpěl 2015: 15-20). A student of Hjelmslev will not be surprised that a similar solution is found in Hjelmslev (1938).

2.3 I said above that most present-day linguists do not in fact know Hjelmslev. Unfortunately, the same can be said about the Prague School, or more precisely, about the majority of the Praguian ideas and texts. However, the Prague School is partly itself to blame for that since the effort of present-day representatives of the Prague School to promote the past and present of the School is null. In any case, one of the many Praguian texts that deserve to be translated into a language accessible to a wider public is that by Vladimír Skalička in which he delimited the Prague School against Hjelmslev (cf. Skalička 1947-48). Skalička emphasized the differences (in part for pragmatic reasons; cf. Vykpěl 2013: 154-155), but it should not surprise that one may find also congruencies between Prague and Hjelmslev. One of them was touched upon above (2.1); another reveals, as I believe, the sense of one of the key-concepts in Hjelmslev's linguistic theory, namely the concept of *free articulation* that looks somewhat hermetic at first sight.

Vilém Mathesius (1911) formulated the notion of the "potentiality of the phenomena of language"; this notion was then developed in the teachings of the Prague School: in Skalička's (1979: 91 [1935]) "inconsistent nature of language", in Sgall's (2002) "freedom of language" or in the general opposition between center and periphery of language system (cf. Vachek 1966). As to Hjelmslev it may be said that he, in actual fact, based his theory on the strict premise of the "potentiality of the phenomena of language", however implicitly and without reference to Mathesius. We find this potentiality in Hjelmslev's rigorous differentiation between language system and language use: language system is a point of departure, a foothold, a *centrum securitatis* from which one sets out on the journey to the uncertain world, to the *theatrum mundi*; language use is then a sort of bridge, offering a regulated and graded variability or the Mathesian "flexible stability" (cf. Mathesius 1932) of signs and of meanings and pronunciations. Language system is a form with which we shape or try to understand the world – potentially, inconsistently, imperfectly but freely (cf. Vykpěl 2005: 28ff). As is well-known to the students of his work, Hjelmslev tried to provide linguists with various tools for describing language and its

interaction with the world. One of these tools serves for categorization of the elements of language and Hjelmslev has named it *free articulation*: in the light of what was said above, free articulation is to be conceived as a description of the uncertain or unclear world, an attempt at clarification of the unclear world. I think it is obvious that the descriptive-explicative potential of the Hjelmslevian concept of free articulation is far from being exhausted (cf. also Vykypěl 2013: 11-19). At the same time, it is important that, according to what I said above, this tool can be used also by linguists who are convinced that more attention should be paid to language use than to language system.

2.4 In the previous section we saw the beginning of a path leading outside the language. The last example that I wish to mention lies entirely outside the language: it is the question of construction of historical concepts. One is often told that concepts such as nation or Slavicity are social constructs originated in the 19th century and lacking historical grounding in the pre-modern era. It should be remarked to this belief that it is indeed true that these concepts or their more or less explicit formulation may be considered as an intentional phenomenon that originated in the 19th century; but, at the same time, two things should not be forgotten. First, in general, "intentional" does not mean "fictitious". Second, in particular, the fact that there really is an empirical historical foundation of social concepts constructed in the modern era is testified by the existence of disputes over the facticity of the historical phenomena in question when some scholars speak of mere constructs of the 19th century, while others cite various pieces of evidence of these phenomena coming already from earlier times. If the disputing historians would have read Hjelmslev they could realize that this issue is a typical case of neglecting the difference between the continuum of empiricism and the forming of this continuum by man, and they would perhaps become more conciliatory.

2.5 If I am permitted to be personal in conclusion to this section, I would remark that I find most inspiring Hjelmslev's small texts such as those published in *Translatøren* or Hjelmslev (1944a, 1944b). These texts are, as you know very well, not written within the narrower frame of the glossematic theory which is, in the end, tying down and thus making the communication difficult. The only serious problem of them is the fact that they are written in Danish...

3. Finally, I would like to point out a general feature of Hjelmslev's work which remains a permanent inspiration: its *ethos*. It is known, and con-



firmed also recently by an edition of some of his letters (cf. Havráňková, Petkevič 2014: 601–647), that beyond scholarly discussions Hjelmslev was very friendly towards his opponents. As we have learned from the 20th century, there are more important things than science. This friendliness or ability not to be closed in one's own world is congruent with open-mindedness: the ability to see what others do not see. Hjelmslev proved this ability by that he stood up for the Baltic countries occupied by the Soviet Union (cf. Hjelmslev 1946), whereas the poor Archbishop of Canterbury called the Baltic partisans fascists “whose deportation was justified” (cf. Lowe 2013: 352).

Obviously predetermined by this ability to be not illusive is also the result of comparison of three scholars strongly influenced by neo-positivism. The neo-positivist idea of science is remarkably congruent with the radical leftist (Marxist-communist) idea of organization of society (cf. Oravcová 1992). However, the fact that a social totalitarianism is only a potential consequence of a “scientific totalitarianism” which needs additional conditions in order to be implemented can be demonstrated by comparison of Igor Hrušovský, a prominent Slovak philosopher, Rudolf Carnap and even Hjelmslev: Hrušovský came from the neo-positivist scientism to a fusion with the communist Marxism, Carnap merely to enthusing about that the exploitation of man by man has supposedly been done away with in communist Czechoslovakia (cf. Bakoš 1969: 181, fn. 83), and in Hjelmslev there is not the least hint of similar opinions.

## Bibliography

BAKOŠ, MIKULÁŠ (ED.)

(1969) *Avantgarda 38. Štúdie, články, dokumenty*, Bratislava, Slovenský spisovateľ.

COMRIE, B. AND KUTEVA, T.

(2005) “The evolution of grammatical structures and ‘functional need’ explanations”, in TALLERMAN, M. (ed.), *Language Origins: Perspectives on Evolution*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 185–207.

HASPELMATH, M. AND TADMOR, U. (EDS)

(2009) *Loanwords in the World's Languages: A Comparative Handbook*, Berlin, De Gruyter Mouton.

HAVRÁNKOVÁ, M. AND PETKEVIČ, V. (EDS)

(2014) *Pražská škola v korespondenci. Dopisy z let 1924–1989*, Praha, Karolinum.

HJELMSLEV, LOUIS

(1938) “Études sur la notion de parenté linguistique. Première étude: Relations de parenté des langues créoles”, *Revue des études indo-européennes*, n° 1, p. 271–286.

(1939) “Edward Sapir”, *Acta linguistica*, n° 1, p. 76–77.

- (1944a) "Moderne Sprogtænkning", in BRANDT, F. and LINDERSTRØM-LANG, K. (eds), *Videnskaben i dag*, København, J. H. Schultz, p. 419–443; Fr. tr (2015), "La conception linguistique moderne", *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, n° 68, p. 223–248.
- (1944b) "La comparaison en linguistique structurale", *Acta linguistica*, n° 4, p. 144–147.
- (1946) "Estland, Letland og Litauen", *Frit Danmark*, n° 5 (19), p. 7, 10–11.
- (1961) *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, 2nd edition, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press.
- (1973) *Essais linguistiques II*, Copenhagen, Nordisk Sprog- og Kulturforlag.
- HORÁLEK, KAREL
- (1948) "La fonction de la 'structure des fonctions' de la langue", *Recueil linguistique de Bratislava*, n° 1, p. 39–43; reprinted in VACHEK (ED. 1964), p. 421–425.
- JÄGER, LUDWIG
- (2010) *Ferdinand de Saussure zur Einführung*, Hamburg, Junius.
- LOWE, KEITH
- (2013) *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II*, London, Penguin Books.
- MATHESIUS, VILÉM
- (1911) "O potenciálnosti jevů jazykových", *Věstník Královské české společnosti nauk, třída filosoficko-historicko-jazykozpytná*, n° 2; En. tr.: "On the potentiality of the phenomena of language", in VACHEK (ED. 1964), p. 1–32.
- (1932) "O požadavku stability ve spisovném jazyce", in HAVRÁNEK B. and WEINGART M. (eds), *Spisovná čeština a jazyková kultura*, Praha, Melantrich, p. 14–31; Ger. tr.: "Über die Notwendigkeit der Stabilität in der Literatursprache", in SCHARNHORST, J. and ISING, E. (eds) (1976), *Grundlagen der Sprachkultur. Beiträge der Prager Linguistik zur Sprachtheorie und Sprachpflege I*, Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, p. 86–102.
- ORAVCOVÁ, MARIANNA
- (1992) "Rezeption des Positivismus im philosophischen Werk von Igor Hrušovský und ihre Kontexte", in MICHALOVIČ, P. (ed.), *Česko-slovenský štrukturalizmus a Viedenský scientizmus*, Bratislava, Stimul, p. 45–54.
- PRECHTL, PETER
- (1994) *Saussure zur Einführung*, Hamburg, Junius.
- SGALL, PETR
- (2002) "Freedom of language: Its nature, its sources, and its consequences", *Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague*, n. s., n° 4, p. 309–329.
- SKALIČKA, VLADIMÍR
- (1947–48) "Kodaňský strukturalismus a „pražská škola“", *Slovo a slovesnost*, n° 10, p. 135–142.
- (1979) "Typologische Studien", in HARTMANN, P. (ed.), *Schriften zur Linguistik*, Braunschweig and Wiesbaden, Vieweg.

SPITZER, LEO (ED.)

(1922) *Hugo Schuchardt-Brevier. Ein Vademekum der allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*, Halle (Saale), Max Niemeyer.

(1928) *Hugo Schuchardt-Brevier. Ein Vademecum der allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*, 2nd edition, Halle (Saale), Max Niemeyer.

VACHEK, JOSEF (ED.)

(1964) *A Prague School Reader in Linguistics*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

(1966) *Les problèmes du centre et de la périphérie du système de la langue*, Prague, Academia.

VACHEK, JOSEF

(1989) *Written Language Revisited*, ed. by P. A. Luelsdorff, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins.

VYKYPĚL, BOHUMIL

(2005) *Glossematikstudien. Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen zu Louis Hjelmslevs Sprachtheorie*, Hamburg, Dr. Kovač.

(2009) *Empirical Functionalism and the Prague School*, München, LINCOM.

(2013) *Skizzen zur linguistischen Historiographie*, München, LINCOM.

(2015) *Problems of Historical Linguistics*, München, LINCOM.