

# On norms and experience in structural linguistics



## LANGUAGE AND REPRESENTATIONS IN LOUIS HJELMSLEV'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE

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**CAVEAT: ENGLISH QUOTATIONS FROM FRENCH WORKS ARE *PERSONAL TRANSLATIONS*, SO THEY CANNOT BE QUOTED IN TURN**



## On norms and experience in structural linguistics

Louis Hjelmslev's theory of language

### Preglossematic phase:

- 1928: *Principes de grammaire générale*
- 1935/1937: *La Catégorie des Cas. Étude de grammaire générale*

### Glossematic phase:

- 1936: *Outline of Glossematics*
- 1943: *Omkring Sprogteoriens Grundlæggelse*



## On norms and experience in structural linguistics

Louis Hjelmslev's theory of language

1. Linguistic “norm”
2. The concept of “experience” and phenomenological description



## 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

1. Refusal of “universal and reasoned perspective”
2. No “hyperlanguage”
3. 1928: Language as means of communicating and sharing “conscience’s contents”
4. Grammar as “prelogical” and subconscious structure
5. Language’s proper contents = *Anschauungen der Anschauungen* (Steinthal)



## 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

“Language is not just the expression of thought, but of the content of conscience in general, and thus not just of intellectual conscience, but also of affective conscience, of emotion and volition ... Instead of saying that language expresses thought, we shall say that it expresses ideas – and more precisely: intellectual, emotional or volitive ideas” (*PGG*: 23-24, n. 1)



## 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

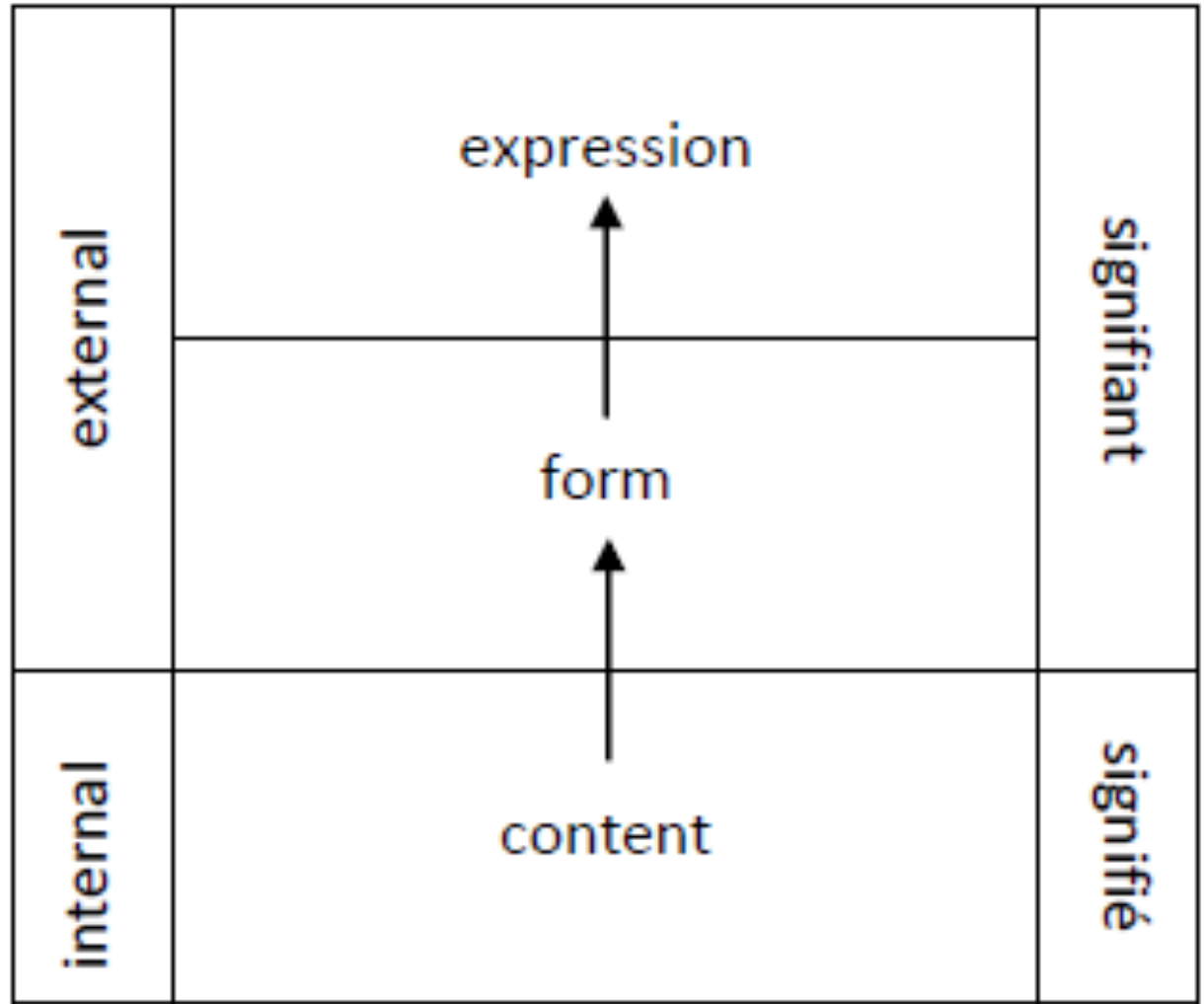
- Issues concerning “expression”
- Idea of synchrony
- Concept of “norm”
- Speaker's sensibility or  
“sentiment linguistique”



# 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's theory of language

*Principes'* problematic definition of "sign" (1928)





## 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

- Synchrony = proper reality for the mind of speakers
- Language as a well-organized system of classes (forms)

Why? Because otherwise  
communication and comprehension  
could not be possible





## 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

“Speakers are continuously led to establish a fixed system based exclusively on an internal causality ... Thus, in any language there is always a state of stability which is almost absolute from the speaker’s perspective, although being quite relative from a diachronic point of view” (*PGG*: 238)



## 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

- Against “logic” and “correctness”

“At any rate, a group establishes a common system which is like an global projection of all individual peculiarities. This system is called “norm”. A norm is thus established within any speaking community whatsoever, within any group of speakers, at a given time, in a given place” (*PGG*: 238)



## 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

- Against “logic” and “correctness”

“The norm, which is based on a kind of social contract, has nothing to do with those irregularities that arise in connection to linguistic usage” [facts of *parole*] (*PGG*: 240)



## 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

- Against “logic” and “correctness”

“The norm, as we conceive it, does not necessarily coincide with the idea of grammatical correctness (*Sprachrichtigkeit*). We should distrust such a term... Grammatical correctness can be considered as something artificial, the privilege of a minority among the speakers; the linguistic state represented by it is always different by definition from the state represented by the saussurean “*masse parlante*”... This kind of grammatical correctness has nothing to do with empirical and scientific grammar: it concerns the normative grammar which in turn has nothing to do with proper linguistics” (*PGG*: 241)



## 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

“System is defined as an abstract and virtual reality. It reveals itself directly in the norm, which defines by means of rules the possible range of variations for each concrete act (*parole*). Usage, defined as the linguistic act of the “speaking mass” ... does not coincide with norm. Usage represents the adopted habit, the totality of the preferred executions. The range of variability is always broader in the norm than in the usage: norm does simply require those distinctions that allow a clear separation to be made between units belonging to the system ... By means of these terminological distinctions, we can say that the system provides a set of possibilities among which usage makes its own specific choices” (*PGG*: 88)



# 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

Speaker's sentiment and *Grundbedeutungen* of morphological categories: towards *La Catégorie des Cas* (1935, 1937) : how are the semantic ground values established? The method and the way of conceiving them differ somewhat between preglossematic and glossematic phases:

- until ca. 1935: induction (bottom-up, starting from particular, concrete meanings and generalizing them + suggestions from anthropology... see Hjelmslev 1934) Substance → Form
- after 1935: deduction (top-down, ground meanings have to fit the linguistic morphosyntactic structure as a whole by checking correlations between forms, syncretisms ecc... see next slide) Form → Substance



# 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

Form = pure differential and negative network of relations

Substance = positive and concrete entities which “fill” the network and manifest it



## 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

- The method in glossematic's phase 1/2:

*the study of substance is a "construction"...*

“but every semantic definition of a form ... is a construction. We shall abandon the illusion according to which there are directly observable semantic facts in which the observer's mind does not enter... What has to be studied is ... an “appréciation” which *may* be carried out by the speakers (including the investigator) ... and which not something “concrete” ... but a concept, a general term or a common denominator. Thus it may be well a matter of a construction, but such a construction shall be grounded on experiences derived from a theoretical system of hypothetical and empirical [comparative] laws...” (Animé et inanimé...” in *Essais linguistiques*, p. 229)





## 1. Linguistic norm

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theory of language

- The method in glossematic's phase 2/2  
  
“in order to describe the meaning ... different procedures may be chosen: we can enumerate the particular meanings [inductive method]; or we can focus on a particular domain in which the repartition of forms appears to be easy enough to motivate [Jakobson Hauptbedeutung]...or we can rather establish by abstraction ... a “concept” or a general term that can cover every particular and possible meaning. This procedure seems to be the only appropriate, since it is in accordance with the general method of science [= deduction]” (“Animé et inanimé”, p. 229)



## 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

- Grammatical cases and “localism”

“Localism is the hypothesis that spatial expressions are more basic, grammatically and semantically, than various kinds of non spatial expressions (...). Spatial expressions are linguistically more basic, according to the localists, in that they serve as structural templates, as it were, for other expressions; and the reason why this should be so, it is plausibly suggested by psychologists, is that spatial organization is of central importance in human cognition” (Lyons 1977: 718)

→ problem: *overgeneralization of localism*; in Hjelmslev it is somewhat limited, since other morphological categories governs other representations than “space” (see next slides)



## 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

- Grammatical cases and “localism”

“Whoever studies the meaningful content of linguistic categories cannot help but notice that those categories are in a way epistemological categories. Between categories of language and categories of thought there is an essential relationship. This does not mean that there is identity: all that can be expected beforehand is that language does ultimately constitute an epistemological system and therefore that the deepest concepts of language are in principle of the same nature of the deepest concepts of logical analysis” (*CdC*: 29)



# 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

1. “The phenomenon designed by linguistic sign is subjective rather than objective. The speaker does not choose grammatical forms according to the external, objective or real state of affairs, but rather according to a principle imposed by the conception or idea (*Anschauung oder Idee*) from which he grasp the objective fact;
2. The conception or idea that is linked to a linguistic form has to be a single idea, a single fundamental meaning (*Grundbedeutung*) whose degree of abstraction shall be high enough to allow us to deduce all different, concrete usages from that form;
3. Linguistic method has to be empirical and not aprioristical... The subjective phenomenon designed by the category of case is the spatial conception. This conception is applied by the speaker to any aspect of the objective phenomenon whatsoever, being it space, time, logical causality or syntagmatic government” (*CdC*: 37)



## 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

“There is no point in maintaining that linguistics could manage perfectly well without reference to any epistemological notion whatsoever. The form of language is a categorical form ... This however is far from saying that this categorical form preexists language. On the contrary, this means basically that there is a specific, categorical form that is revealed by language and only by language. It would be adventurous and ultimately futile to argue that categories revealed by language are utterly different from epistemological categories established by non-linguistic speculation. Rather, it is quite unlikely that a proper non-linguistic speculation could be possible. It is far more plausible that epistemological speculation and the resulting list of categories are at least partially built upon linguistic facts” (*CdC*: 49)

Language categories (forms)	intense (nominal) morphemes	extense (verbal) morphemes	Linguistic ground-meanings (substances)
exclusively homonexic government	<i>case</i>	<i>persona, diathesis</i>	<b>Relation</b> (direction, adherence, degrees of subjectivity)
exclusively heteronexic government	<i>comparison</i>	<i>emphasis</i>	<b>Intensity</b> (scalar degrees)
both homo- and heteronexic government	<i>number-gender</i>	<i>aspect-time</i>	<b>Consistency</b> (compactness, concentration, discreteness)
alternatively homo- and heteronexic government	<i>article</i>	<i>mode</i>	<b>Reality</b> (reality - unreality, desired realisation, non-realisation)



## 1. Linguistic norm

Louis Hjelmslev's  
theory of language

“The theory exposed here ... will have repercussions both in linguistics and in philosophy. Ultimately, I would like to insist on philosophical implications, since by resuming the different dimensions within each category, we were able to set up a table of four aprioristic and basic categories: those of relation, of intensity, of consistency and of reality. The facts of language have led us to the facts of thought. Language is the form by which the world is conceived. There cannot be any epistemological theory ... that could be established without reference to linguistic facts. There is no philosophy without linguistics” (*Essais linguistiques*: 173).



## 2. Glossematics and phenomenological description

Louis Hjelmslev's theory  
of language

“Linguistic form is in principle independent of the substances to which it is applied ... Thus the system is independent of the specific substance in which it is expressed; a given system may be equally well expressed in any one of several substances, e.g. in writing as well as in sounds. The choice of substance for expression is purely conventional and depends on the usage, not on the norm or system. The fact that articulated sounds is the most common means of expression, is not a consequence of any peculiarity inherent in the system, but is due to the anatomico-physiological constitution of man” (*Synopsis of an Outline of Glossematics*, 1936: 3)





## 2. Glossematics and phenomenological description

Louis Hjelmslev's theory  
of language


“Linguistics must then see its main task in establishing a science of the expression and a science of the content on an internal and functional basis; it must establish the science of the expression without having recourse to phonetic or phenomenological premises, the science of the content without ontological or phenomenological premises ... Such a linguistics, as distinguished from conventional linguistics, would be one whose science of the expression is not a phonetics and whose science of the content is not a semantics. Such science would be an algebra of language...” (*Prolegomena*: 79)



## 2. Glossematics and phenomenological description

Louis Hjelmslev's theory  
of language

“It seems reasonable to assume that psychology in particular could provide a classification of lived experience that could be put in relation with linguistic categorical structure; in particular we should expect a fruitful collaboration between linguistics and the most recent psychology, insofar as it has undertaken a phenomenological description of human entourage in terms of immediate experience”  
(*Language*, 1961: 158)



## 2. Glossematics and phenomenological description

Louis Hjelmslev's theory  
of language

- “The semantic substance involves different levels: the extreme levels, which are at the same time the most important and widely accepted, are the physical level, on the one hand, and the apperceptual level (that is the level of evaluations and collective appreciations) on the other hand ... The description of the apperceptual level is the most essential one, since it represents the constant level, that which is presupposed by all the others ... the only one that enables, among other things, a proper scientific description of “metaphors”. ... The semantic description must therefore consist of a progressive rapprochement between language and the other social institutions, as being the contact point between linguistics and the other branches of social anthropology” (“Sémantique structurale”, 1957, in *Essais linguistiques*, p. 118)

linguistics (semiotics)	linguistics/semiotics	formes ↓
collective representations	sociology	« niveau des appréciations collectives » ↓
individual representations	phenomenology	« niveau socio-biologique » ↓
physiological facts	physiology	↓
physical facts	physics	« niveau physique »

P.S.: arrows link different domains in such a way that each lower domain can be explained by the corresponding higher domain. This basically means that language can describe (“can give access to”) physics but not vice versa.



## Bibliographical references

Louis Hjelmslev's theory of language

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