Structuralism as one – structuralism as many

Studies in Structuralisms

Lorenzo Cigana and Frans Gregersen (eds.)

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Abstract

This book includes 14 contributions to the study of structuralism as a historical current in the history of European ideas and more particularly in the study of language. The studies combine to contextualize structuralism in both its unity and its diversity, hence the title.

In the first section, the reader is introduced to the broader canvas of disciplines and competing ideas surrounding structuralism. From Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological structuralism, via the philosophical Vienna Circle of logical empiricists we arrive at a sustained juxtaposition of structuralism and phenomenology in various guises: Are they really so incompatible? Finally, we get answers to what separated the American version of structuralism from the European mainstream and to various frequent questions of what structuralism was, or rather was not.

The second section views structural linguistics from without and investigates its legacy in relation to contemporary linguistics, analyzing its relationship to functionalism and its forerunners.

The third section explores structuralism from within, with particular attention to a specific output: Louis Hjelmslev's theory of glossematics. This constitutes the focus from where the immediate past within the Danish tradition is reanalyzed and its heritage for today's semiotics and linguistics is discussed.

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Contents

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The chapters assembled here originate as titles for planned contributions for a symposium to be held at the Royal Academy of Sciences and Letters entitled *StructuralismS*. The idea was to foster the international discussion about the particular period in the history of linguistics thought to be dominated by structuralist thinking (roughly 1916–1957) by looking into differences between various approaches to linguistics and furthermore to look at the influence of this thinking on neighbouring sciences such as anthropology and philosophy. The symposium was first planned for May 2020 and then had to be progressively postponed until we decided to change its format altogether, collecting the different contributions in a volume, i.e. this volume.

This volume may be seen as an instantiation of those efforts towards a critical reappraisal of structuralism that characterize part of contemporary research in the history of the language sciences and philosophy (for an overview see Léon 2013). But such 'reappraisal' would probably be too limiting, the reason being that we are still trying to reconstitute the debate around unsolved issues that belonged to the structural framework as such.

There is no need to reconstruct here the history of the term itself. Suffice it to point to the publication of Ferdinand de Saussure's path breaking *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), in which both a number of key concepts and a specific perspective on the role of the science of language were introduced. Originating with some of the early proponents themselves, the history of the language sciences has coined the term of structuralism to cover the broad trend which succeeded Saussure. It is as such an umbrella-term, neither invented by de Saussure nor prepared in the *Cours*. Nevertheless,

it captured effectively various related schools or groups, focussed on linguistics as the flagship leading the battle against both historicism and atomistic thinking, while endorsing the adoption of a uniform methodology as their main commonalities. Incidentally, the label was so effective that the post-1960a reception felt the need to reuse it in order to establish its own identity, viz. as 'post-structuralism'.

The label is fraught with all kinds of paradoxes – from the most patent ones, concerning its inadequacy *vis-à-vis* the variety of approaches it assembles under only one umbrella and yet capturing *eo ipso* all those trends, including the more elaborate ones, highlighting that while the inadequacy of such a label is legitimately addressed, it is rarely lamented about other scientific paradigms. Aligning with one or the other facet of these paradoxes is often equivalent to making a statement, yet to dismiss their relevance would be tantamount to dismissing a part of the case-studies presented here. In fact, while it is safe to assume that those paradoxes are an inescapable feature of any disciplinary label, it cannot be denied that this problematization is particularly felt in the domain of structural thinking – something that calls for an explanation.

Just to present one obvious example: Arguably the first structural movement to appear on the scene was the Prague school which soon became tied to a specific conceptualization of what is now generally called phonology. The main names are of course Nikolai S. Trubetzkoy (1890–1938) and Roman O. Jakobson (1896–1982), both of whom we will hear more about in contributions below. Now, it is a striking fact that both Trubetzkoy and Jakobson had serious reservations about central Saussurean dogmas, notably the division between diachrony and synchrony (cf. Jakobson 1976; Vilkou-Poustovaïa 2002). Furthermore, it is a central point in Laks and Goldsmiths magisterial treatment of the Prague School as an incident in the continuous *Battles in the Mind Field* (2019) that Trubetzkoy and Jakobson did not agree on a number of important ideological points (see Sériot 1999). Yet no one questions the definition of the Prague school of linguistics as a significant structuralist trend. This would seem once again to leave open the issue of what may then legitimately be taken to be the defining characteristics of structuralism.

While this issue is explicitly addressed in some contributions presented below, it is also reflected both in the multifarious ways in which the contributors refer to 'structuralism', and in the organization of the book itself, which in turn largely depends on the different angles from which the issue is approached or just taken for granted. Boudon (1968) is right in assuming that when we consider the point to be only a matter of keywords, structuralism is prestidigitation ("structuralisme magique", 159) and he is surely right in claiming that "les révolutions structuralistes datent, non du moment où on a compris que les langues, les personnalités, les marches, les sociétés constituent des systèmes, mais du moment où on a imaginé un outillage mental permettant d'analyser à l'aide de théories scientifiques ces systèmes en tant que systèmes" (ibid.). Yet keywords are important, as they reflect the need structuralists have to identify themselves within a movement. Keywords are shortcuts, but symptomatic ones.

More importantly, Boudon seems to forget that structuralism almost never dealt with one or two terms only ('system' and 'structure') but built upon an interconnected network of ideas (structure, system, associations, oppositions, form, substance): only considering one or two of these keywords we may too easily arrive at the idea of a "structuralisme magique".

The Ariadne thread through the labyrinth of sciences is from the start and remains, patently *language* in its broadest possible sense. No surprise here, given the fact that this topic reverberated across all disciplines between 1890 and 1960 through a series of 'linguistic turns' (see Hirschkopf 2019), thus constituting a feature embedded in the structural *Problemstellung* itself. The centrality of language has also to be read in connection with the role it was deemed to play in how institutions – thus also scientific movements – understand themselves. In other words, keywords and labels that describe cultural or scientific paradigms are themselves too considered *effets du langage*, with all the grammatical consequences and stylistic paradoxes this brings along with it. So, using *structuralism*, either in singular and plural form, may appear as a statement (and in many cases it indeed is), while this is hardly the case if the adjective form is used, as in 'structural linguistics'. That usage

seems to encompass almost every kind of modern linguistics in a huge ecumenical effort.

While not always reflecting an explicit take on the matter, these nuances are more or less correlated to the heterogeneous stances concerning the current status of the paradigm itself: Is it worth continuing, maybe reforming – or is it in fact to be discarded altogether? Or, the final option, is it so engrained in the way we think language now that it is inescapable in some form or other? No matter how readers have been inclined to think before embarking on this volume, we believe they will have digested a healthy diet of food for thought on precisely such matters, when they have finished reading.

In order to establish some order, however arbitrary, to the contributions to this volume, we have decided to divide the volume into three sections, gradually descending from a first general level towards one specific version of structuralism, viz. the theory baptized glossematics, thought out by Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965) in a continuous dialogue with Hans Jørgen Uldall (1907–1957). In the first general section, the emphasis is on the transdisciplinary nature of structuralism as such, cutting through, as it were, the domains of anthropology (Hastrup), philosophy, phenomenology and epistemology (Collin, Flack, Stjernfelt) and to American and European linguistics seen as research traditions (Newmeyer, Joseph). This section thus treats what Léon 2013 labels 'generalized structuralism'. The next level concerns the narrower domain of linguistics, in which the structural stance is analysed in contrast to other competing models (Willems & Belligh, Harder, Basbøll). Finally, in the third and last section, we use the first two sections as a backdrop to contextualize a continuous discussion of one specific structrural approach, viz. that of glossematics (Jørgensen, Badir, Graffi, Cigana, Jensen & Gregersen). This section treats structuralisms through the lens of one of the arguably peripheral currents under the umbrella. The treatment might result in a less peripheral status.

Section one thus contains reflections on structuralism at the most general level. We have called it *Structuralism from above*.

Witin this section, Kirsten Hastrup analyses the oeuvre of the French anthropological giant Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009).

She places her emphasis on the quest for grand theory and the explicit universalism of Lévi-Strauss' version of structuralism, thereby delivering another input to the above discussion. An interesting perspective is that Hastrup notes the consistent marginalization of the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss both in contrast to other versions of structuralism in anthropology and in the general intellectual climate: The professional audience gradually lost interest in the grand themes and the inspirations from both psychoanalysis and Marxism.

In the next chapter, Finn Collin considers whether the logical empiricism of the Vienna Circle may legitimately be seen as another version of structuralism. Conventional wisdom would in a sentence featuring both 'structuralism' and 'philosophy' quickly insert the name of Louis Althusser (1918–1990) or refer to the early work of Michel Foucault (1926–1980). Yet Collin argues convincingly that Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970) must be seen as the prototypical logical empiricist and that his programme is thoroughly structuralist (and anti-phenomenological) by stressing the abstract nature of science – a holistic approach and the essential role of formal relations rather than substances. Finally, the fervent anti-historicism of the Vienna Circle reflects the common interests of the contemporary linguists and the philosophical structuralists. We may add that Collin's chapter also highlights the mistrust of the 'subjective' so typical of both logical empiricism and (at least certain strands of) structuralism.

Patrick Flack takes a diametrically opposed track by in the third chapter detailing a number of meeting points in the quickly flowing waters of history between the two currents of thought often thought to be born enemies, viz. phenomenology and structuralism. In Flack's analysis the many meetings have resulted in challenges to the conventional wisdom of both currents. An interesting third party crops up in the discussion of one of them, viz. that of Tran Duc Thao (1917–1993): Marxism. Flack's chapter teaches us to be precise when we use the notions of both structuralism and phenomenology and arguably create a need of plurals for both terms.

Different ways of categorization are the pivot around which Frederik Stjernfelt's contribution revolves. He notes some striking similarities between the ways researchers otherwise so different as

the mathematician and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), the founder of phenomenology Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), the linguist Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965) and the philosopher and literary theoretician Roman Ingarden (1893–1970) developed their theories of categories. Peirce and Husserl worked independently but Ingarden was a pupil of Husserl and in constant dialogue with his work while the possible influence of Husserl on Hjelmslev is still a matter of debate. The four also differ somewhat in what they categorize, and a question thus arises as to how dependent on the substance categorized the systems are. For the theory of structuralism, Stjernfelt's contribution once again questions how specific it is and how fruitful it is to look at structuralism as a structuralist, i.e. stressing its integrated wholistic character.

The two final chapters of this section may be read as complementing each other. Frederick Newmeyer details the relationship between the American structuralists and the European ones in a *tour de force* covering half a century. Again, we are struck by the fact that the Prague school embodied in Roman Jakobson had such a precarious yet important role in the reception of structuralist ideas in the USA. Newmeyer successfully integrates the history of American linguistics with the general history of the growing independence of American universities and the new self-confidence in a specific American way, also in matters linguistic. The result is that structuralism leads to empiricism in the first half of the 20th century while the so-called Chomskyan revolution introduces a theoretical reorientation which in many ways may be seen as 'European' although this very interpretation was explicitly denied by Noam Chomsky (1928-) himself.

John E. Joseph directly addresses the issue of singular or plural of structuralism in his treatment of what structuralism was and is not. The list of negated propositions range from the notion of subjecthood in structuralism to the alleged anti-historical nature of the doctrine. What emerges from this treatment is that while linguists labeled as structuralists diverge and that some of them have been misunderstood or indeed ridiculed for views which were not held neither by them nor by anyone else there is always some truth hidden behind the negated propositions. This is not only the case in the reception of structuralism in text books or pedagogical net

pieces but also in some cases a consequence of polemical stances taken by adversaries. This is particularly obvious in the reception by American scholars from Paul Garvin (1919–1994) to Noam Chomsky (1928-) of European structuralist works. Joseph's paper thus complements Newmeyer's.

Section two, called *Structuralism and other trends in linguistics* juxtaposes 'structuralism' and other kinds of linguistics. While it it is to a certain degree true that structuralism became hegemonic at least in the period between the world wars and until the global triumph of Chomskyanism, core structuralist tenets seem now to be under attack or to be reinvented or refurbished.

In order for their project to be carried through, Klaas Willems and Thomas Belligh have to detail their understanding of structuralism since they want to delineate the legacy of structuralism in contemporary linguistics, notably both where the linguistic currents treated openly declare their reliance on structuralist research and where the currents treated unwittingly builds on structuralist concepts or methods. Willems and Belligh produce a list of five characteristics that are essential for their project. We want here in particular to highlight the notion of an intermediary level between the traditional Saussurean dichotomy of *langue* and *parole*, viz. that of *norm*. The analysis covers a vast field of linguistic disciplines ranging from pragmatics to lexical semantics and grammar, especially cognitive grammar. Special focus is on the treatment of focus constructions by e.g. Knud Lambrecht where the authors reveal the less noticed structuralist roots. In their final section, the authors invoke Hegel's concept of *Aufhebung* as an approach to integrating the heritage of past linguists into the practice of contemporary linguists. It is striking that the next chapter tries to do just this.

Among the many traditions or schools which are treated in the paper by Willems and Belligh we do not find Functional Grammar as inspired originally by the work of the late Simon Dik (1940–1995). Hence, the paper by Peter Harder may be seen as a logical complement treating some of the same issues but precisely from that vantage point, viz. from the Danish version of Functional Linguistics which was equally inspired by Simon Dik and Louis Hjelmslev. Harder shares the analysis of Willems and Belligh that there are

more traces of structuralism to be found in modern linguistics than meets the eye. Harder foregrounds the notion of function as the motivation for structure but takes pains to explain that there is no royal road from one to the other nor that all structure may be explained by function. The characteristic move in Harder's paper is to explode the idea of autonomy, so dear to the early structuralists, in order to embed language in a broader evolutionary perspective.

Whoever says 'functionalism in linguistics' usually goes on to pronounce the name of André Martinet (1908–1999). Thus Martinet figures prominently in Harder's contribution but he recurs in a different capacity in the third paper of this section. Hans Basbøll addresses the important question of delimiting structuralism from what was before it in the history of linguistics. This is not a question of finding the roots of Saussure's thinking, but rather constitutes a quest for the nuances that more or less sharply sets the structuralists off from previous linguists as a significant change instead of an evolution. The cases treated in the paper are those of Otto Jespersen (1860–1943), on the one hand, who clearly thought of himself as someone who had propagated structuralist ideas before they were known as such, and on the other hand the (at least initially) ardent follower of Prague phonology André Martinet. Otto Jespersen makes his appearance also in the next section's first paper.

Section three, *Structuralism from within*, contains five papers focussing on Glossematics as (one version of) structuralism.

Glossematics was the name Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965) and his brother in arms Hans Jørgen 'John' Uldall (1907–1957) adopted for their general theory. What this theory is in fact a theory of, or for, is at the core of several of the papers in this section. The first and the two final papers are results of the research project INFRASTRUCTURALISM (2019–2023) generously financed by the Carlsberg foundation – which incidentally may be one of the main reasons for the existence of this book. The INFRASTRUCTURALISM project has committed itself to making all the published and unpublished papers and relevant letters of Louis Hjelmslev and his circle of collaborators (Hans Jørgen Uldall, Paul Diderichsen (1905–1964), Eli Fischer-Jørgensen (1911–2010), Jens Holt (1904–1973), Francis J. Whitfield (1916–1996), Harry Wett Frederiksen (1916–1974) and

Henning Spang-Hanssen (1920–2002)), available for research in a dedicated infrastructure complete with search facilities and a timeline. We only mention these many names because the project is based on the idea that although we may question whether Louis Hjelmslev let himself be influenced by any other contemporary than Hans Jørgen Uldall (this is actually one of the issues treated in the contribution by Cigana), his ideas were received and transformed in a group of like-minded linguists, arguably a general characteristic of structuralist thought. This was the era of Circles.

Henrik Jørgensen in his paper discusses Louis Hjelmslev's background within the Danish schools of linguistics which preceded him, and which dominated among his teachers at the University of Copenhagen. Jørgensen singles out the two giants in the generation before Hjelmslev, Otto Jespersen and Holger Pedersen (1867–1953) and takes his point of departure in the contrast between the two obituaries Hjelmslev wrote of them. In a thorough discussion, Jørgensen applies a definition of structuralism to each of the giants' œuvre and the result is that Holger Pedersen exclusively belongs to the long 19th century before the advent of structuralism whereas Jespersen in a number of stated ways forebodes a structural approach without having a full-fledged general theory, at least not a formalized one. Jørgensen's paper obviously complements Basbøll's mentioned above.

Semiotics was the name of the science Saussure in a visionary glimpse sketched out in the *Cours* (Saussure 1916 (1967), 33), a science that would study the role of signs in society in general, placing linguistics as just a specialized use of signs. Hjelmslev is credited with being the linguist who opened the door fully to such a semiotics by his reflections on sign systems. Indeed one of three suggestions for a first title for what was to end up as his *Prolegomena* (1963) was 'Sign systems'. Sémir Badir's take on the traditional theme of 'influence' in the history of a discipline, here semiotics, in that he neatly distinguishes between on the one hand 'transmission' and 'heritage' and on the other between 'legacy' and 'descendants'. Hjelmslev did not have any semioticians in his immediate circle and thus he has influenced semiotics through his writings only. But that legacy has been passed on. Badir outlines the legacy and

studies the concepts inherited – and in the process reformed – by the semioticians of three generations of French researchers. Badir's contribution both adds to the discussion of Hjelmslev and semiotics in Joseph's chapter and details the reception of glossematics in the Romance world thus complementing Graffi's chapter which comes next.

It is fascinating to follow the fate of glossematics in Italy as detailed by Giorgio Graffi. Graffi neatly distinguishes three periods in the history of reception, an initial period where glossematics (and structuralism in general) was rejected in favour of the traditional Italian historicist linguistics; a glory period in the post war years and especially in the "age of translations", i.e.1965–75 when most of the structuralist canon became available in Italian; and finally the age of abandonment – i.e. in favour of Chomskyan theoretical linguistics. In bringing in the political environment, especially before the war, Graffi broaches a theme which John E. Joseph has also brought up, the relationship between the fate of structuralism and the political currents in which it is embedded. Was and is structuralism seen as politically progressive or not? Was and is structuralism compatible with currents which are more openly political such as Marxism, or not? It is not irrelevant in this connection that generative grammar was universally seen in the 1970s to be progressive, primarily because of Noam Chomsky's (1928-) involvement in the anti-war demonstrations in Washington and his subsequent political engagement.

One of the central concepts inherited by semioticians and linguists alike is the concept of 'connotation'. The concept in fact did not originate with glossematics but it has passed into the history of the disciplines of linguistics and semiotics via glossematics. Lorenzo Cigana in his chapter details the history and development of the term. He shows that the concept originates in discussions between Uldall and Hjelmslev in the early 1940s about how to conceive the relationship between language and the non-linguistic reality referred to. Gradually the concept is worked into Hjelmslev's semiotic theory and operationalized as 'connotators' which simultaneously may enable the linguist to analyze sentences from two or more different languages as having the 'same' meaning (viz. by

'subtracting' the connotator of belonging to two different linguistic systems) and varieties within the same linguistic system belonging to different genres, styles or dialects, pushing the analysis towards progressively more concrete layers and entities. The analysis makes use of the access to unpublished papers and correspondence which has become possible with the new infrastructure of the project IN-FRASTRUCTURALISM.

We have mentioned Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) above and this towering figure of structuralism is scrutinized from the very particular perspective of his unique relationship, i.e. that of collaboration and competition, with Louis Hjelmslev in the paper by Viggo Bank Jensen & Frans Gregersen. Hjelmslev (and later Hjelmslev and Uldall) started out as collaborators, partaking in the phonological movement. But soon, and the authors detail this development in their paper, Hjelmslev and Uldall develop a markedly critical approach to the Praguians in general and Trubetzkoy in particular. The paper illustrates what both collaboration and competition within the structuralist movement entailed – both in terms of friendship and the opposite, and in terms of theoretically diverging paths: Jakobson branded Hjelmslev's approach as "algebraic"; Hjelmslev on the other hand, denounced the initial psychologism and what he saw as a persistent transcendentalism of the Jakobsonian approach.

We are at the end of this introduction finally ready to offer at least one defining characteristic for all the linguists singled out as structuralists in the contributions assembled here. They all were concerned with what also seemed to have sparked Ferdinand de Saussure's ruminations about general linguistics: The need for an explicit meta-theory of language. We, however, more than a century later than the appearance of the *Cours*, seem to live in a world dominated by some version of inductivism, *pace* Karl Popper's early proof that a strict inductivism is untenable (Popper 1935). That seems to leave preciously little space for general theory or general theories. Structuralists present their own various solutions to this eternal dilemma but they all agree in one respect: In order to see empirical facts as such, we need a guiding theory. It goes without saying, that theories should also be informed by what we see when we do adopt a specific theoretical stance: Empirical work of course

informs both the structure and the content of theories. The various structuralisms discussed in this book should be seen as offers for such guiding theories, offers that remain very real, even today. The contributions invite readers to reflect on what may genuinely be seen as lasting insights and what may be discarded as a theoretical *cul de sac*.

No definitive solution is offered in the volume to the issue of whether structuralism was or is a single well-delimited paradigm or a constellation of stances. As to the latter, we maintain that a multifaceted description is not equal to fragmentation. Our take on the matter is that structuralism can legitimately be considered as both a 'class-as-one' and 'a class-as-many' (Hjelmslev 1943, 92), thus as both equally justified perspectives that reflect structuralism's possible unity *ab externo*, against earlier or coeval trends like atomism, organicism or romantic idealism, and on the other hand its diversity *ab interno*. Once we focus within the delimited boundaries on the different methodological procedures and theoretical stances that were maintained during its (unfinished?) history, we may reveal hitherto hidden or forgotten treasures.

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