Louis Hjelmslev and the Danish linguistic traditions

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Abstract. *This paper discusses the position of Louis Hjelmslev in relation to the linguistic millieu in Denmark as it was when he began his career. Hjelmslev gives few clues to his relation to older Danish linguists, but important details may be collected from his papers, first and foremost from his obituaries. The focus of the paper are the two obituaries of Otto Jespersen and Holger Pedersen. While it is evident that Jespersen's brand of pre-structuralism in many ways paved the way for Hjelmslev's own work, his discussion of Jespersen is extremely critical and does not acknowledge much of the heritage. On the contrary. Holger Pedersen, whose methods and approaches only in a few superficial points converged with Hjelmslev's, is treated with respect and full understanding. The key to this enigma seems to lie in the different channels where the obituaries were published.*

1. Aim of the paper

The aim of this paper is to give an overview of the Danish linguistic traditions surrounding young Louis Hjelmslev when he embarked upon his career as a linguist, and to discuss some of the significant influences he received from his education at the University of Copenhagen. Hjelmslev is normally relatively tacit about his predecessors and influences; only occasionally will he lift the curtain and allow us insight into his reflections upon the merits and problems of earlier Danish linguists except his idol Rasmus Rask. Still, when

he does lift the curtain, e.g. in his obituaries of the important fig-
ures from his past Otto Jespersen and Holger Pedersen,[170] there
are clear indications that certain aspects of his attitudes were kept
out of the picture, while other aspects were focused in a somewhat
biased way, to use a deliberately vague phrasing. The special focus
in this paper will be to document these indications and to gauge
their importance for an estimation of what Hjelmslev inherited from
his immediate past.

2. Hjelmslev's acknowledgement of his heritage

In *Essais linguistiques II* (Hjelmslev 1971), we find reprints of
Hjelmslev's obituaries of two of his most important teachers, Otto
Jespersen and Holger Pedersen, right next to each other (see fn. 1).
The texts seem to paint a picture of Hjelmslev as on the one hand a
brave follower of Holger Pedersen's and on the other a sworn enemy
of everything connected to Jespersen's brand. The commemoration
of Holger Pedersen is sympathetic and friendly, whereas the picture
of Jespersen sharply underlines the differences between Jespersen
and real ("real") structuralism, writing off Jespersen's work as a
linguistique de parole, rather than *real* linguistics, i.e. investigation
into form capacities.

My point in this article is that this quite natural impression of
the two texts is not a correct linguistic pedigree. Jespersen was
much closer to Hjelmslev than Pedersen was, and he probably also
played a much more important role in the formation of Hjelmslev's
ideas than the obituary reveals. While Hjelmslev in many ways
continued Pedersen's line of historical linguistics, he was also criti-
cal of many ideas and methods of his teacher and mentor, but this
dissatisfaction is hardly ever spelled out directly. We may trace it
by comparing actual claims by Pedersen with critical remarks on
others in Hjelmslev's papers. In order to achieve a proper frame of
understanding, I will first give a brief overview over the linguistic
milieu in Denmark when Hjelmslev was young, and then go on to

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170. First printed as Hjelmslev 1945 and 1954b; now in Hjelmslev 1971, 41–54 and
29–39.

a tentative description of what the pedigree of Danish structuralism could be.

3. Linguistics in General in Denmark around 1920

Louis Hjelmslev was a student at the University of Copenhagen from 1917 to 1923, when he finished his Master's degree in Linguistics. A glance at the linguistic research carried out at the University of Copenhagen in his formative years[171] will show that two trends prevail. The main body of research was historical linguistics, more or less within the Neogrammarian paradigm, i.e. the treatment of the history of languages according to strict sound laws, within a framework established locally by Vilhelm Thomsen (1842–1927), Karl Verner (1846–1896), and Kristoffer Nyrop (1858–1931) and carried on by important figures like Holger Pedersen (1867–1953), Kristian Sandfeld (1873–1942), and Johs. Brøndum-Nielsen (1881–1976). Another trend was the early brand of studies of synchronic relations in modern languages, established by Otto Jespersen (1860–1943) and carried on by Louis L. Hammerich (1892–1975) and Viggo Brøndal (1887–1942). While this group was much smaller than the group of historically oriented linguists, it was very up front in terms of prominence and modernity. At the same time, the historical paradigm was about to stifle into a pure agglomeration of facts, as documented by e.g. the Grammar of Medieval Danish ("Gammeldansk Grammatik") by the Professor of Nordic Philology Johs. Brøndum-Nielsen (vol. I-VIII, 1929–1974).

In Hjelmslev's brief *curriculum vitae* at the occasion of his promotion as *doctor philosophiae* (Hjelmslev 1932), we see that he acknowledged Holger Pedersen and Kr. Sandfeld from the list above as his teachers at the university. To this list, he adds the orientalist Dines

171. The meticulous lists in Slottved 1978 gives the names and main data of all teachers employed at the University of Copenhagen up to 1977. For a deeply interesting analysis of the scientific and political positions at the university, the power constellations between the university and the state, and the many facets of career planning for young scientists in the period 1870–1920 when Hjelmslev's teachers acquired their positions, see Larsen 2016.

Andersen (1861–1940) and the Latinists A.B. Drachmann (1860–1935) and J.L. Heiberg (1854–1928). For some reason, Hjelmslev does not mention Ferdinand Ohrt (1873–1938), the teacher of Finnish at the university, with whom he had important contact also later on.[172] It is crucial to note that Jespersen is not mentioned in this list of influential teachers, only as the author of *Sprogets logik*. The traditionalists prevail on the brief list, and it is remarkable that the three teachers of the classical base of Indo-European reconstruction, Sanskrit, Greek and Latin, viz. Andersen, Drachmann, Heiberg, figure so prominently. The list has a suspiciously traditional if not downright conservative ring; it is difficult to tell that this young person in fact was a rather revolutionary type.

The following figure gives an overview of the most important teachers:

Professor	Area and period of function Years in (parenthesis) mark the start of a junior professorship ("docent")
Vilhelm Thomsen (1842–1927)	General Linguistics (1875) 1887–1912
Karl Verner (1846–1896)	Slavic philology 1883–1896
Kristoffer Nyrop (1858–1931)	Romance philology 1895–1928
Holger Pedersen (1867–1953)	Slavic philology (1900–1914); General linguistics 1914–1937[173]
Kristian Sandfeld (1873–1942)	Romance linguistics (1905-) 1914–1942
Johs. Brøndum-Nielsen (1881–1976)	Nordic philology (1919-) 1926–1952
Verner Dahlerup (1859–1938)	Nordic philology 1911–1925
Otto Jespersen (1860–1943)	Anglistics 1893–1925
Louis L. Hammerich (1892–1975)	German philology 1922–1958
Viggo Brøndal (1887–1942)	Romance philology 1928–1942

172. Jensen (2021) gives an interesting insight in Hjelmslev's relation to Ohrt. Ohrt's relation to the university was troubled by the fact that he taught only in a very low teaching category, and that he had retired from a high school position due to poor health, cf. Hammerich 1939.

173. On Pedersen's early career, see Larsen 2016, 71–74.

Dines Andersen (1861–1940)	Indian and Oriental Philology 1903–1928
A.B. Drachmann (1860–1935)	Classical philology (1892‑) 1918–1926
J.L. Heiberg (1854–1928)	Classical philology 1896–1925

To enumerate the important teachers at the university does not cover the floor of linguistic discussions in Denmark in those days, however. There were other important milieux, one of them being *the teachers at the high schools*, where an important confrontation between on the one hand a conventional conception of grammar built on Latin patterns, and on the other a modern positivist approach took place. The propagator of the traditional approach was the productive grammarian and language teacher Kristian Mikkelsen (1845–1924), author of a much-used series of traditional school grammars with a historical perspective built in (Mikkelsen 1894, 1911).[174] The propagator of the modern approach was H.G. Wiwel (1851–1910), author of an energetic attack on this tradition (Wiwel 1901). The discussion between the two approaches filled the pages of the important journal *Dania* between 1894 and 1902.

The traditional approach defended the idea that semantic concepts might justify certain ways of describing linguistic facts, whereas the positivists insisted on the form level, albeit without much theory to support how a formal analysis should be carried out. Teachers from the university, like Otto Jespersen and Verner Dahlerup, joined side with Wiwel in his attack on the classical grammars based on Latin patterns. They called for a new approach based on the analysis of the specific structures of the local language, not on (what was thought to be) a more or less illegitimate transference of categories from the classical languages into languages hitherto not described (Jespersen's keyword for this practice has become a household label: *squinting grammar*).

In Hjelmslev's work, we can see that he regularly agrees with the positivist Wiwel, quoting him with great adherence. He must have recognized the analytic shortcomings of Wiwel's approach,

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174. I have given a more thorough description of Mikkelsen as a grammarian in Jørgensen 2011 & 2014.

but Hjelmslev's lifelong preference for approaches that broke away from traditions led him to promote Wiwel's ideas.

Another important arena outside the university was *the dialecto-logical milieu*, which was only about to find its way into institutionalization as part of the university. The most important figure here was the co-creator of the important cartographical description of the Danish dialects, Marius Kristensen (1869–1941), cf. Bennike & Kristensen 1898–1912. Until 1927, he taught at Askov Folkehøjskole, a free teaching institution at high school or bachelor's level, directed towards the interests of the larger farm-owners. In this year, he was given a life-long stipend by the Carlsberg Foundation in honor of his achievements in collection and description of dialectological and historical facts about the Danish language. He taught a few courses at the university, but he never received a formal professorship. His main area of study, the connection between historical linguistics and dialectology, was maintained by a private institute, only much later to be incorporated by the University of Copenhagen (in 1960, cf. Gudiksen et al. 2009, 7). After the incorporation, the Department of Danish Dialectology developed into a stronghold of glossematic methods (cp. Gregersen 2016), but this was still to come in the 1920s.

4. An approach to the concept of structuralism

As we have seen, Hjelmslev was very unwilling to reveal where he got his ideas from and preferred to appear as a rather traditionalistic kind of erudite person, at least at the beginning of his university career in 1932. In order to understand how many of his structural ideas he had from his background, we need a yardstick to measure to which degree structural concepts were current among his predecessors, Pedersen and Jespersen.

Asking for a yardstick in this way takes for granted that the concept of structuralism is clear and evident, but this is hardly the case. Evidently, such a definition is only the accumulation of experience. There is no such thing as an ahistorical definition of structuralism. The definitions used here are derived from Frans Gregersen's meticulous exposé of the historical development lines of the different

schools of structuralism (2006). That Gregersen's historical work here is converted into a catechism, is incidentally an illustration of his main argument, viz. that structuralism as some kind of *gesunkenes Kulturgut* in a broad sense is an important drive in the way concepts are organized within contemporary linguistics.

Structuralism may be defined primarily through confession to the dogma of *the arbitrariness of the (sign) relation between sound and meaning.* Coined by Saussure, but in many ways intuitively clear to thinkers long before him,[175] this idea is of primary importance, excluding the direct influence of external factors on core meaning. This does not mean that elements of iconic or indexical meaning in the Peircean sense qualify as a refutation; after all, Saussure used quite a lot of pages of the *Cours* to argue in favor of a conception of grammar as partly iconic (Saussure (1916) 1974, 180–4 *et passim*). Likewise, it would be impossible to conceive the field of enunciation unless you assume that indexical aspects of many content elements in a language, primarily pronouns and grammatical endings (but not only these), are central.

The second important factor in structuralism is the relation between binary (or ternary) thinking and whole entities.[176] All concepts must divide a totality in two parts: one with a recognizable characterizing item, and the other without it. The salient point is here that the field to be analyzed is conceived as totalities and that the concepts for the analysis cover the field in its entirety. The latter effects will have to be achieved through a dichotomous structure of concepts. All elements within the field must be either positive or negative in their relations to the distinguishing feature (+/-A).

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175. One obvious early case being the dismissal of the claim that parts of words (e.g. *ice* in *mice*, or *ouse* in *mouse* in other translations) build up accumulating meanings for the whole word, found in Aristotle's *De interpretatione* Ch. 4 (Ackrill 1974, 45f).
176. There is an interesting problem here, namely the conception of a totality (*Ganzheit*, *Einheit* or similar). In a furious critique of Hjelmslev, Erik W. Hansen (2009) launches the argument that the empirical facts will never appear to the researchers as parts of whole entities. This is plausible when you consider the matter from an empiricist's point of view, but conceptualisation in science is a different matter, and a purely inductive empiricism will never be able to establish any conceptions of anything, hence, a fortiori, no science.

A simple contrast (the two concepts A and B covering the field are defined positively), will not do, since in such a case, the third possibility – neither A nor B – cannot be excluded (cf. further Stjernfelt, this volume).

The third important assumption in structural thinking is the situation of meaning as an independent zone, outside the realm of psychology or, for that matter, sociology. This criterion is mainly relevant in order to understand early structuralism: it is an important claim for Saussure and his immediate followers. On the other hand, at least since Chomsky's attack on Skinner (Chomsky 1959), language has again been situated in 'the wet ware' (to quote Searle), i.e. as part of a general cognitive science. However, being in the wet ware also means that language has to be seen as integrated in human behavior in general, cf. Harder 2006. The implications of this are difficult to sort out; but at least in this sense, the strong tendency among early structuralists to place language *between* the speakers, not *in* the speakers[177] is an interesting outcome of the ambition to define linguistics as a science on its own. It is an obvious case of a dogma that proves itself to be of little value. Languages do have systematic, autonomous aspects, but it makes little sense to separate language *a priori* from all other aspects of human life.

The fourth assumption behind structural thought patterns is that this approach also has to include the use of structural argumentation. By this, I mean that the results of the analysis will have to be reached through tests building on the commutation test. The classical methods of substitution, elimination, permutation, and connection were in use long before classical structuralism, and they are still used by many linguists, including persons that would never claim to be structuralists. Nevertheless, this methodology has to be seen as a highly characteristic theme.

One more point than the ones we have derived from Gregersen's exposition should be mentioned: the insistence on forms rather than meaning. In a fully-fledged structural analysis, this point would be a simple consequence of the use of e.g. the commutation test: the actual forms to be analyzed would be singled out and identified

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177. Cp. Brøndal's (1943, 54) expansion upon the ideas of Saussure.

through the application of structural tests. Although the commutation test was not applied consistently in the early phases of structuralism, the focus on form aspects was there nevertheless, and that is important in its own right.

Let us resume the five important tenets of structuralism:

a) The analysis must acknowledge that the arbitrariness of meaning is fundamental to linguistic analysis
b) The analysis must be structured on simple systems, mostly binary, and these systems must be used to interpret the whole linguistic field
c) Language is an entity in itself, independent of sociological or psychological structures
d) The analysis of language has to employ structural methods such as the commutation test
e) The analysis of language has to insist on matters of linguistic form, not semantic or pragmatic content taken directly as such

Armed with these tenets, we will now investigate how much structuralism we may find with Hjelmslev's predecessors.

5. Hjelmslev's approach to Holger Pedersen

Firmly rooted in the historical linguistic school, Holger Pedersen produced his results through a meticulous application of his methods to the materials at hand. Pedersen saw himself as taking part in a great chain of accumulating science, viz. comparative historical linguistics; he even left an impressive account of this school in his brilliant introduction to the achievements of his doctrine (Pedersen 1924). This book, wide-ranging as it is, also has its curious aspects. The modern reader will search in vain in the text for many important names from the 19th century, e.g. Hermann Paul or Georg von der Gabelentz. They did not participate in the development of historical linguistics according to Pedersen; hence they did not deserve to be mentioned.

It is pointless to show that Pedersen's *oeuvre* contains few traces of the structuralist's catechism above. Many of the questions raised

by the catechism were simply irrelevant, and a researcher like Holger Pedersen did not waste much ink on questions like the arbitrariness of meaning (Tenet 1) or language as an entity (Tenet 3). Tenet 2 – even in a very wide interpretation like 'economy of linguistic material' – also seems irrelevant. Alf Sommerfelt (Sommerfelt (1954) 1967, 286) sums up Pedersen's methodology nicely:

> Du point de vue de la théorie, Pedersen est resté sur les positions qu'il s'était acquises vers 1900: l'histoire des changements des langues s'explique par les changements phonétiques qui doivent être formulés d'une façon rigoureuse, et par les actions de l'analogie. Au fond, ses méthodes ne différaient pas de celles des néogrammairiens, mais elles étaient bien plus souples. [From the viewpoint of theory, Pedersen remained at the positions he had acquired around 1900: The history of the changes in the languages is explained through phonetic changes that may be formulated in a rigorous manner, and through the effects of analogy. Fundamentally, his methods were not different from the neo-grammarians, but they were more refined.]

An important aspect of Pedersen's work is that it is tied up with philological methods and rules of good philological behavior. In a remarkable passage in (Pedersen 1916), his early and much smaller book on the development of linguistics, he makes a harsh comment on Friedrich (Bedrich) Hrozný's discovery of the Indo-European nature of Hittite. According to Pedersen, Hrozný makes a completely unacceptable move in a scientific context by publishing the grammatical and historical interpretation of the materials from Bogazköy without publishing the actual texts themselves (Pedersen 1916: 30). The rather aggressive tone in the passage[178] may have something to

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178. In this early text, Pedersen commits the brutal *faux pas* of implying that the Czech-born Hrozný, who at that time worked in Vienna, should be 'German'. As an Austrian citizen, Hrozný was in no way German, and as a native Czech, he was furthermore not 'fully Austrian', at least not in Germano-Austrian eyes (Fuchs 1984, 179-181). After 1919, he moved to Prague to teach at the Charles University; his attachment to his Czech origin was clear. Furthermore, Austrian universities were not immediately a part of the German university world. In Pedersen (1924, 151) he is mentioned as a Czech, and the harsh comments have disappeared. Much

do with Pedersen's well-attested national (i.e. anti-German) feelings (Hjelmslev 1954a), but it also shows what expectations a disciplined linguist had to observe in Pedersen's opinion: Before you publish an analysis of a material, the readers need access to the material on which the conclusions are based.

Hjelmslev seems to have been a polite pupil, taking over and continuing many of Pedersen's methods and results, but also raising doubts on the relevance of other practices of Indo-European linguistics. A look at the historical chapters in *Sproget* (Hjelmslev 1963) will prove that the continuity in relation to Pedersen's own introduction to historical linguistics *Sprogvidenskaben i det 19. aarhundrede. Metoder og resultater* [Linguistics in the 19th Century. Methods and Results], (Pedersen 1924) is very strong, apart from the necessary updates, like the inclusion of Anatolian and Tocharian in the Indo-European language family.[179] Hjelmslev made very few contributions to historical linguistics in his research and seems to have taught

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later, in 1941, the value of Hrozný's efforts is fully acknowledged (Pedersen 1941, 3), alongside with the point that philological editions are still necessary for the advance of historical linguistics, but now Hrozný is one of the good guys, taking care of the philological editions, whereas the discoverers of Tocharian A & B have done very little to assist those who wanted to delve into the mysteries of these languages (Pedersen 1941, 7-9).

179. Pedersen's exposé in the impressive 1924 book on the advances of linguistics in the 19th century includes only the classical ten families: Indian, Iranian, Germanic, Slavic, Celtic, Baltic, Albanian, Armenian, Italic, and Greek. Tocharian and Hittite are only mentioned in passing, and the question whether Hittite is Indo-European is not even considered to be finally settled (Pedersen 1924, 291). The rest of the Anatolian languages still had to be discovered. Only on the very last pages are these two families included in the discussion (Pedersen 1924, 291). Since the book is part of a series of works on the achievements of science in the 19th century, this disposition is logical; the discoveries of Tocharian and Hittite were strictly speaking achievements of the 20th century. In his later works, Pedersen provided strong contributions to the inclusion of these two long-extinct branches of Indo-European in the language family (Pedersen 1938, 1941,1944, 1945, cp. Hjelmslev 1954a).

the subject from the same notes throughout his career with very few emendations and changes.[180] He kept himself updated on the recent results of the discipline, though, and he seems to have been capable of reading some of the complex early languages, like Hittite. In this sense, he is the self-appointed custodian of the heritage left from Pedersen, but at the same time, he both expands and restricts this heritage considerably.

We may get an idea of the extent of both expansions and restrictions through a closer look at Hjelmslev's concise introduction to linguistics, *Sproget* (Hjelmslev 1963; Engl. version 1970). In the first long chapter on genetic relations between languages, Hjelmslev introduces a rather complex structural notation of sound laws as correspondences, which is then 'simplified' into the conventional notation mode of Indo-European linguistics (Hjelmslev 1963, 19). One important point is the discussion of the degree of accuracy in sound reconstruction (Pedersen 1924, 248; Hjelmslev 1963, 79–87). Hjelmslev has strong reservations as to how precisely an undocumented state of a language may be phonologically reconstructed. He has a good point against the precision of the reconstruction in his demonstration of the relation between a well-known parent language like Latin and its successors, the modern Romance languages. Using the reconstruction method from Italian, Spanish, French and Romanian, we would arrive at Common Romance forms like **facte, *lacte, *nocte*, where the actual Latin forms were *factus, lac, nox*, or, since the actual base of the development was the oblique forms, *factum, lactem, noctem*. The reconstruction may reconstruct the word stems with precision but has no clue (literally) as to types of inflection that got washed away completely in the successor languages (Hjelmslev 1963, 25). In this way, the Indo-European reconstruction gains in precision, but the greater outlook into discussions of society, religion and homeland is dismissed as pure speculation (Hjelmslev 1963, 82).

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180. The notes are preserved in the Hjelmslev Archive at the Royal Library in Copenhagen (Acc. 1992/5 capsula 98). In the papers are many dates, mainly from the 1940s and the early 1960s, most likely indicating how far he had proceeded through the notes during his weekly lectures.

In other connections, Hjelmslev may also appear a bit like the custodian in the linguistic-historical museum. One of Hjelmslev's favorite arguments for the supremacy of form over substance is the claim that language structures may exist without use (1941, 159; 1963, 119). In *Sproget*, he even ventures to assume that the reconstructed Indo-European language was only a structure; as soon as it had come into existence, it began falling apart into the later language families (Hjelmslev 1963, 81, 118). The structure remains. When the argument is given in Danish, the word for 'structure' is frequently *bygning*, which has the double sense of 'structure' and 'building, house'. While this rather oblique argument cannot be blamed on Pedersen, it shows how deeply rooted Hjelmslev was in the study of the classical dead languages. In its quasi-paradoxical form, the idea of languages existing without use or users also reveals to which extent this phase of structuralism considered language form to be independent of its actual users.

Pedersen's strong affiliation with historical linguistics means that as Hjelmslev's teacher he only marginally offered methodological incentives to Hjelmslev's original synchronically oriented project. In at least one place, though, Pedersen seems to anticipate an idea mentioned by Hjelmslev, namely in the discussion of analogies as repair work, cf. Pedersen 1924, 275:

> Lydlovene betegner bevarelsen av det gamle med samt alle sporene av slid; analogidannelserne søger derimod at udjævne slid-sporene ... Men når sådant reparasjonsarbejde kommer i rette tid, er det i virkeligheden mere konservativt end den fortsatte sliden videre. [The sound laws imply the preservation of the old forms including all traces of wear; the analogy constructions on their part seek to even out the traces of wear and tear ... But when this repair work arrives early enough, it is in reality more conservative than the steady wearing down.]

The same idea is mentioned in *Sprogsystem og sprogforandring* (Hjelmslev 1972, 39):

> Der er ting nok, der viser, at naar det strukturelle udtryk for en form kommer i forfald, sker der udbedringer i strukturen, dersom formen har

livskraft nok til at holde ud. [There is evidence enough to prove that when the expression of a form starts to decay, there will be repair work in the structure if the form has strength enough to hold on.]

Hjelmslev never worked out any detailed thoughts on diachrony, apart from the Danish lecture series "Sprogsystem og sprogforandring" from 1934 (Hjelmslev 1972); how the detail on repair would fit into a structural theory, is not fully clear.

Neither Pedersen nor Hjelmslev held much of philosophy in linguistics. We know Hjelmslev's teasing remarks on anonymous philosophers (1941, 146; 1943, 8), and Pedersen is able to deliver similar attacks (Pedersen 1916, 47):

> … (filosofien har aldrig udrettet andet end fortræd, når den har stukket sit hoved op på sprogvidenskabens område) … [philosophy has never been able to do anything but harm when it has popped up its head in the field of linguistics]

The remark is found in a passage discussing the idea of Franz Bopp that forms of the auxiliary verb 'to be' have agglutinated to the verb stem to form some of the complex Indo-European verb forms. In spite of Pedersen's critique, the idea is still discussed, both for the classical Latin future forms (*cantabimus* – 'we will sing') and for the Latin imperfect (*cantabamus* – 'we were singing'), (cf. Hopper & Traugott 2003, 9, 158f).

The most important methodological discrepancy between Hjelmslev and his teacher is the status of the empirical material. Hjelmslev wrote some critical lines on the ontological status of reconstructions already in *Principes…* (Hjelmslev 1928, 68), but without mentioning Pedersen. Indeed the criticisms is relevant to the majority of Indo-European research; hence, there is no reason to assume that this remark has a specific Danish address. Nevertheless, Pedersen maintained the view that the reconstructed states of language were actual realities. We have already seen how much importance Pedersen ascribes to the access to the relevant philological material, but his preference for empirical approaches may take him even further. He quotes the following passage from August

Pott (Pott, quoted from Pedersen 1916, 60):

> Bei der Vergleichung verwandter Sprachen ist für uns die Kunde der *etymologischen* Übereinstimmung der Laute in verwandten Wörtern und Formen Hauptsache, nach deren Erlangung wir eifrig streben müssen, die der *phonetischen* dagegen mehr ein Sumendum, das wir, wenn es sich uns darbietet, dankbar annehmen, ohne darauf ein so grosses Gewicht zu legen, als auf das zuerst genannte, dem Sprachforscher durchaus unentbehrliche Gut.

> [In the comparison of related languages, the knowledge of the etymological identity of the sounds in related words and forms is of primary importance to us, a thing that we must strive to reach, whereas the phonetic [identity] on the other hand rather is a surplus that we will be happy to accept if it offers itself to us, while we on the other hand do not want to find great importance in this matter, compared to the first-mentioned, which is indispensable to linguistic research.]

This passage does not please Pedersen; on the contrary, in the discussion that follows the quotation, he demands that the exact nature of the sounds involved should also be investigated.

The interesting part of the passage is that Pott formulates a point of view which is easily identified as pre-structuralistic. What matters to him, is the relation between the sounds, not the actual pronunciation. Pedersen dislikes this very much, but read through the imaginary eyes of Louis Hjelmslev, this comment from Pedersen must be a clear case of too much *linguistique de parole*. We have seen how Hjelmslev reduced the status of the reconstructed languages from being fragments of real languages to mere calculations on the basis of sound laws and reconstructive principles. How words were actually pronounced, would have played no role at all to him.

An even more debatable passage (debatable from Hjelmslev's point of view) is found towards the end of the book (Pedersen 1916, 75–76):

> … hvor man næsten synes at mene, at det er sætningen om lydlovenes undtagelsesløshed, der har skabt den nyere sprogvidenskab … Dette er en meget betænkelig forveksling av årsag og virkning. Det er ikke den

teoretiske klarhed. der har skabt de store konkrete fremskridt, men det er de konkrete fremskridt, som har skabt den teoretiske klarhed. Det var erfaring der fremkaldte forestilling om lydudviklingens regelmæssighed, og den teoretiske drøftelse var for en stor del blot et forsøg på at begribe, hvorledes denne regelmæssighed kunne forklares. [… where people almost seem to think that the thesis of absence of exceptions to the sound laws has created recent linguistics … This is a very dubious mistake, mixing cause and effect. It is not the theoretical clarity that has created the big scientific progresses, but the concrete progresses that have created the theoretical clarity. Experience called upon the idea of the regularity of sound development, and the theoretical debate was to a large extent just an attempt to grasp how this regularity could be explained.9

The striking detail in this passage is the claim that the 'concrete progresses' have driven the development of the new methodology. These 'concrete progresses' were in this context reconstructions of prehistoric language situations, and the implied claim that they were based solely on experience clashes evidently with the fact that such reconstruction would be impossible without a theory. Once more, Hjelmslev probably shook his head when reading such passages, his reduction of historical linguistics to mere calculations of sound relations taken into consideration.

6. The importance of Jespersen

In Hjelmslev's work, Jespersen plays an enormous but somewhat shady role. Jespersen is definitely the main source for *Principes*, in which almost every important turn in the theoretical development is won in a long discussion of concepts and ideas collected from Jespersen's work. Yet, in the mature work of Hjelmslev, Jespersen is hardly present as a direct reference any longer. One feature remains, though: whenever there is a sneer at 'philosophers of language' in the later work, the target seems to be Jespersen, rather than the otherwise obvious Viggo Brøndal. However, many of the concepts developed in *Principes* are maintained, and since they definitely owe their conceptualization to a discussion with Jespersen, the predecessor is in a sense still present *incognito* in the later work (Cigana

2020, 247 *et passim*).

In the literature on General Linguistics, Jespersen is often seen as an early structuralist (see also Basbøll, this volume). Such claims are found quite often (cf. Fischer-Jørgensen 1975, 7). Similarly, Jespersen's pupil L.L. Hammerich, professor of German Linguistics at the University of Copenhagen in his memoirs plainly refers to Jespersen's and his own way of doing linguistics as 'structuralism' (Hammerich 1973, 409 *et passim*). In the obituary, Hjelmslev admits this, although somewhat wryly (1954b, 43):

> … c'est ainsi que – malgré l'abîme indéniable qui sépare ses travaux phonétiques du structuralisme moderne – il a pu réclamer avec une certaine raison sur plusieurs points les droits d'un précurseur du point de vue phonémique [It is in this way [through his notorious advances in the direction of a synchronic, systematic approach to language, my addition] that – in spite of the abyss that distinguishes his phonetic work from modern structuralism – he has been able to maintain, with some reason in several points, the claim to be a precursor of the phonemic point of view]

One of Jespersen's present-day followers, Lars Brink,[181] has pointed out how many features Jespersens shares with later structuralism, at the same time as he has made it clear that Jespersen dismissed a number of ideas that in Brink's view distorted later structural approaches (Brink 2011, 85–86). Brink's description points to Jespersen as the initiator of many structuralist practices, like the commutation test, and the distinction between a phonetic and a phonological level in the languages expressed methodologically, although without much theoretization. Brink, who is strongly opposed to the idea of structural analysis, saves Jespersen from turning into a structuralist with the claim that for Jespersen the phoneme is precisely a psychological entity, and not defined through a formal analysis (Brink 2011, 87). Brink's description fits fully with the emphasis given by Basbøll (this volume, sect. 4) to Jespersen's interests in characteristic oppositions within languages. This case is typical of

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181. Cf. Rischel 1989, 59; Basbøll (this volume), sect. 5.6.

Jespersen's methodological liminality: he uses structural oppositions and form elements as two means among others to characterize a language. Jespersen did discuss the concept of the phoneme in his later work, but mainly as an effect of linguistic economy, cf. Basbøll (this volume) sect. 5.1 and 5.5. Rischel (1989, 57 ff.) discusses the problem in detail, including a list detailing the influence of Jespersen on phonetics. His conclusion is that on the balance, Jespersen's main contribution was to 'practical phonetics' (ibid. 57) and that Jespersen was no structuralist in any sense, dogmatic or undogmatic. However, as Rischel points out (1989, 49), certain aspects of his work are clear forerunners, like his 'antalphabetic' system of sound description, which is strongly reminiscent of Jacobsen's feature analysis of sounds.[182]

The grammarian Jespersen has also attracted interest from later structuralists. It is a remarkable fact that both formal and functional linguists (Noam Chomsky, James McCawley) have been able to see their own ideas reflected in Jespersen's work. However, the main question, when discussing Jespersen in this context, is of course whether Jespersen was a structuralist or not when we try to view his analytic praxis in its totality.

Now, if we consider the first four points, Jespersen obviously falls short of most of it. For instance, Jespersen opposed the idea of the arbitrariness of meaning; defending an otherwise difficult position that sound symbolism played an important role in languages, cf. Jespersen 1922: 396–411. However, his defence for sound symbolism is somewhat cloudy; it is difficult to discern whether he actually considered sound symbolism to be of ubiquitous importance, or whether he just wanted to reserve a place for this iconic function in a world where arbitrariness otherwise reigned supreme. The reason for this cloudiness lies in the method of his defence; it consists mostly in reductions *ad absurdum* of rejections of the sound symbolism thesis. However, the sound symbolism is often quoted in comments of Jespersen's work as important. In his review of *Language, its nature, development and origin* (Bloomfield 1922), Bloomfield

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182. Jespersen's antalphabetic system is mentioned with great interest by Bloomfield (1934, 86).

launches a heavy attack on the sound symbolism, while otherwise demonstrating his reverence for Jespersen. In a more positive vein, Haislund ((1943) 1967, 151) points out that Jespersen used sound/meaning-relations to counter the dogma of the Junggrammatiker that sound-laws had no exceptions. Qu Chang-liang (2018) makes a strong attempt at a defence, while at the same time pointing out that sound symbolism does not have to explain everything. It comes as a bit of a surprise that Hjelmslev discusses the idea of sound symbolism in his small introduction *Sproget* (Hjelmslev 1963, 46). Jespersen is not mentioned, and Hjelmslev discards the idea of sound symbolism as pure subjectivism; but still, Jespersen's idea sparked continuous discussion.

Concerning binarism and similar restrictions on form capacities, Jespersen seems to be rather obscure, too. Sometimes he uses binary approaches, sometimes not. In *Sprogets Logik* (Jespersen 1913), we find this fascinating passage right at the beginning in a discussion of the division of the ancient category of *nomen* between nouns and adjectives (Jespersen 1913, 8):

> Sandheden er vel i begge tilfælde den, at een oprindelig klasse er blevet spaltet til to: såsnart een af disse nye underklasser har erhvervet et bestemt særpræg, ligger dæri allerede, at den anden klasse nødvendigvis samtidig må være opstået, om end den fra først af kun har været karakteriseret ved manglen på de træk, der gir den modsatte klasse dens særpræg. [The truth is in both cases probably that one original category has been split into two: as soon as one of these new subcategories has acquired a certain characteristic feature, this entails that the other category necessarily has emerged, even though, from the beginning, it has only been characterised by the absence of those features that yield the special character of the first category.]

This passage is interesting insofar as it *in nuce* contains several features that look extremely like structural thinking. We see a clear-cut case of binarism in the contrast of the two emerging categories, hand in hand with their connectedness; but also a kind of markedness thinking, since only one category is expected to have a positive feature, the other one only characterised through the absence.

This quotation is definitely situated close to Jakobson's brand of structuralism. The passage becomes even more striking when we consider the fact that *Sprogets Logik* was the first book on linguistics that Hjelmslev read[183] – and this passage is found on the very first page of the book, directly after the introduction.

Binarism is also a facet of Jespersen's approach in many other passages of his work, e.g. the characterisation of the main sound distinctions in several European languages (Jespersen 1897–9, 609–616). What is important here, however, is that Jespersen only saw binarism as one possible tool in the linguist's toolbox. What really matters to Jespersen are the empirical facts. If the facts do not offer a binary solution to the observer, no binarism is applied and other solutions are sought. In other words, the passage looks like one of the fundamental dogmas of structural thinking, but the important structuralist's tenet that *all* reconstruction of structures must be filled out by only one type of structure, is not present.

As for Jespersen's syntax the original doctrines of ranks, the definition of junction vs. nexus, and many types of construction seem best to be interpreted as binary structures, cf. Cigana 2020, 236f. Furthermore, the binarism encountered here seems to exhaust the possible structures within the field, so that this aspect of Jespersen's theory may be said to be completely in line with a strong line of development within structuralist thinking (Cigana 2020, 237).

We should keep in mind, though that binarism is not a necessary feature of true structuralism. Considering the position of binarism within important structuralist approaches like Jakobson's line of thinking (Jakobson 1995, 65) or the generative paradigm, which adopted binarism quite late and only after a phase during which flat ternary or even quaternary structures were said to be possible (Kayne 1984, 133–136; Haegemann 2006, 102–105; Rizzi 2013,

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183. According to Hjelmslev 1932, 149, *Sprogets Logik* (Jespersen 1913) was published in the university programme from November 1913, which Hjelmslev's father, the mathematician Johannes Hjelmslev, received as a member of the faculty of sciences. Since professors in those days had their office at home, the book probably lay around for young Hjelmslev to pick up and read in.

4–5),[184] the impression that binarism is a *sine qua non* for structural thinking is tempting. However, Hjelmslev opens the possibility of ternary structures in his theory of markedness, and a different line of structuralism like Viggo Brøndal's used no binarism dogmas, instead relying on a narrow set of mathematico-logic concepts carefully picked from current philosophical theory (Brøndal 1928, 1932, 1940).[185] The unifying aspect of these approaches is that the chosen tool of structuring will have to exhaust the entire space of a linguistic entity to be analysed. In generative metatheory, this point is often connected to Occam's Razor (Haegemann 2006, 17, 104): there is no need to posit more structuring mechanisms if only one set of structuring mechanisms – the binary mechanism – will cover the field. This point was of no concern whatsoever to Jespersen, although he was able to formulate binaristic thinking lucidly, as we have seen.

Concerning the independence of language from psychology and sociology, Jespersen does not seem to have clear-cut opinions either. Language seems inseparable from its users in his descriptions, cf. this passage from Jespersen (1924, 29):

> Grammar thus becomes a part of linguistic psychology or psychological linguistics; this, however, is not the only way in which the study of grammar stands in need of reshaping and supplementing if it is to avoid the besetting sins of so many grammarians, pedantry and dogmatism – but that will form the subject-matter of the following chapters.

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184. I am indebted to Sten Vikner for his assistance with the technicalities of generative grammar.

185. It is quite unclear whether Brøndal ever used commutation tests and similar classical structural devices in his work. Insofar, Brøndal also seems to be on the margin of the artificial structuralist's catechism propagated here. Nevertheless, the intention to cover the empirical matter with a narrow set of structuring devices is so poignant in his approach that he has no problems in defending his positon within structuralism. Although his main idea to collect philosophical ideas and reorganize them as a structuring fabric is a continuation of practices from Jespersen, the decisive difference is the intention to work with a narrow set of structuring elements, an intention which Jespersen did not share.

We almost reach a clear-cut definition in the first sentence, but then we are told that more is to come if we want to avoid being professionally tedious. Jespersens makes it clear that language and psychology are intertwined, but more ingredients are to come. In those days when scientific methods of one branch insisted on the necessity of being different from other branches of science, Jespersen in some sense proved bravery through not being concerned with scientific demarcation.

There is, however, one aspect of Jespersen's grammatical thinking that clearly prefigures structuralism: his insistence on obvious forms as the basis of the analysis and his strong rejection of semantic approaches as the basis of grammatical analysis. This line of thinking is obvious all the way through the little booklet "The System of Grammar"[186] (Jespersen 1933), originally a methodological appendix to *Essentials of English Grammar*. His concept of form is a relatively simple one: are there positive signals that make distinctions in the meaning, or are there not? He does not point to any discovery procedures or analytical concepts when referring to the forms; forms seem to Jespersen to be a simple matter of actual observable morphological or syntactical facts, not disturbed by any methodological, semantic, or pragmatic considerations. This is obvious in the discussion of the concept of case in English (Jespersen 1933, 23–29), one of the longest and most detailed sections of the booklet. The only forms that may pass for case according to Jespersen are the genitive forms; all other phenomena, suggested to belong to the category of case by Jespersen's two main antagonists George O. Curme (1860–1948) or Edward A. Sonnenschein (1851–1929), have to find their place somewhere else.

An interesting aspect of Jespersen's approach is the redefinition of the third person as 'neither speaker nor spoken to' (Jespersen 1933, 29). In this case, he prefers a dichotomous approach in order to avoid obscurities in positive definitions, and at the same time he

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186. The title is identical with Viggo Brøndal's contribution to Jespersen's *Festskrift* from 1930 (Bøgholm et al. (eds.) 1930), cf. Brøndal 1943. In the beginning of Jespersen 1933, the booklet is declared to be an answer to different international linguists, but later in the text, Brøndal's criticisms of Jespersen are also dealt with.

reveals that he conceives the semantic area of person as an entity which must be covered fully by the definition, hence the preference for this approach. In this aspect, the book clearly prefigures a genuine structural approach. At the same time, the booklet reveals that not everything in a language is systematized. Just to take one example, Jespersen refrains from a clear-cut structural approach to word-classes and hypothesizes that the necessary distinctions may be learned through prototypical patterns (Jespersen 1933, 13).

The conclusion is that Jespersen only in certain selected matters prefigures a fully-fledged type of structuralism. To quote the succinct formulation of Lorenzo Cigana: "Otto Jespersen can be regarded as a liminal figure, ushering Danish linguistics to a proper structuralistic approach, yet keeping himself somewhat peripheral to it." (Cigana 2020, 216) However, it is beyond doubt that he prefigured many aspects of structural thinking in the most extensive sense of these words, and it is also beyond doubt that many of his findings tempted a later generation of structuralists to try to reconstruct his achievements within the new framework. Hjelmslev was definitely one of these followers of Jespersen.

In detail, we find Jespersen's spirit quite frequently throughout Hjelmslev 1928, and as mentioned, many of the theoretical achievements from this work were explicitly held all through Hjelmslev's *œuvre*. Jespersen and Hjelmslev agreed on the need to liberate linguistics from the Graeco-Roman tradition (Hjelmslev 1928, 13f). On the other hand, Hjelmslev did not accept Jespersen's definitions of subject and predicate with concepts taken from logic (Hjelmslev 1928, 34); later these concepts never enter Hjelmslev's discussions again. Hjelmslev also criticizes Jespersen's dichotomy of empirical matter (synchronic) and explanation (diachronic) (1928, 56–61); this dichotomy is later split up into two: SYNCHRONY vs. DIACHRONY, cf. Saussure, and FORM vs. SUBSTANCE (Hjelmslev 1943).

The most important theoretical heritage from Jespersen is the conversion of the doctrine of *ranks* into a doctrine of *rection* (Hjelmslev 1928, 128–162). The technical details of this transformation are treated in depth in Cigana 2020; hence this discussion will only touch upon certain supplementary aspects. The doctrine of rection is a generalisation of Jespersen's way of treating matters

of dependency. Hjelmslev asks the relevant and interesting question what the force behind Jespersen's observations might be and concludes with the revival of the time-honoured notion of *rection*. Once more, the difference between Jespersen and Hjelmslev is striking. To Jespersen, the observation of the dependency and the semantic interpretation along rather conventional philosophical lines[187] is enough. Hjelmslev, on the other hand, asks what forces could lie behind this (see Stjernfelt, this volume). The fact that Hjelmslev tries to identify a systemic cause shows very precisely where the difference between Jespersen's and Hjelmslev's brands of structuralism is situated.

An interesting aspect of Jespersen's work is the fact that he seems to be steering in two radically different directions at once, when it comes to scientific metatheory. One side of him is the strong empiricist, insisting on observed facts and the meticulous description of them. He made observations, collected quotations, and developed methods to make observations palatable, like the phonetic alphabets; indeed he contributed strongly both to the development of the IPA and its Danish parallel, Dania's phonetic alphabet. The other side of him is the philosophical side, using models from logic and psychology to explain his observations. Hans Frede Nielsen (1989) has pointed to some challenging contradictions in Jespersen's way of thinking: on the one hand, he thinks that redundancy in a language is superfluous from a communicative point of view (why say the same thing twice). On the other hand, he does not seem to take into account that redundancy is precisely there to avoid misunderstandings in actual communication (Nielsen 1989, 73). Jespersen thought highly of the simplification of inflections in English, pointing to those verbs that like *cut* and *put*, seeing in this a

187. Jespersen seems to find it difficult to disentangle himself from the Aristotelian concept of predicate, comprising both verbs and adjectives, cp. Aristotle's *Categories* Ch. 8 (Ackrill 1974, 24-31), cp. *De interpretatione* 21a38: "... for there is no difference between saying that a man walks and saying that a man is walking" (Ackrill 1974, 60). In the continuous claim that nouns are always first rank, Jespersen seems to continue the Aristotelian dictum that substances are primary: "So if the primary substances did not exist it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist." (Ackrill 1974, 6).

case of "economy in the living tongue" (Nielsen 1989, 74). However, Nielsen points to the fact that out of the 21 verbs in this group, at least 3 have developed new weak past tenses. According to Nielsen, this indicates that the identical forms are not as useful as Jespersen thought (Nielsen 1989: 75). Another "case of inconsistency" is the fact that Jespersen assumed that languages in their earliest stages were most irregular while progressing towards an ideal stage of regularity (Nielsen 1989, 73).

In brief, Jespersen's work presents a wide array of linguistic challenges, but when it comes to theoretical consistency, his solutions are not always as effective or even clear as they might appear to be. When Hjelmslev later thought that Jespersen's main achievement was *la linguistique de parole*, it had to do with the fact that Hjelmslev felt obliged by the empirical aspects of Jespersen's work but found no satisfaction with his attempts at a systematic approach.

7. Why are the two obituaries so different?

Let us return to the two Hjelmslev obituaries, those of Jespersen and Pedersen (Hjelmslev 1945, 1954b). Why this striking difference between them?

The most likely explanation is that they were published under very different circumstances. The obituary of Otto Jespersen appeared in *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia*, whereas the obituary of Holger Pedersen appeared in the official yearbook from the Univ. of Copenhagen. *Acta* was very much the main publishing channel for Hjelmslev's ideas, and in spite of the fact that Hjelmslev in many ways was much closer to Jespersen's projects and intentions, a certain narcissism of minor differences probably took over here. Hjelmslev felt a need to explain at Jespersen's tomb where the differences were, and furthermore, he felt no need to try to reconcile their ideas. After all, Jespersen, even as a dead man, was very much alive. He had educated and encouraged the whole generation around Hjelmslev, including his lost twin H.J. Uldall. Hjelmslev assumed that the readers of *Acta* were best served with a thorough explanation of anything that could possibly separate adherents of Jespersen from the adherents of Glossematics. It seems, too, that

Hjelmslev's personal attitude to Jespersen was always rather dismissive. Gregersen (1991, 177–181) resumes a review of Jespersen's *Language* (1922), which is very critical in many ways. Before writing it, Hjelmslev so to speak asked permission from Holger Pedersen to be critical to Jespersen (Gregersen 1991b, 177). For these reasons, Jespersen is commemorated as a discoverer of substance (Hjelmslev 1954b, 52) – a title that in one sense shows great respect for the deceased. At the same time, no careful reader of Hjelmslev's work will miss the (perhaps unintended) reference to the famous place in Hjelmslev 1943, 46, where the substance is deprived of its independent character and completely subsumed under linguistic form.

The readers of the Copenhagen University yearbook was a quite different group, since the book was distributed among all levels of employees and officials not only at the university. In such a channel, it would be tactless to start arguing about professional differences, no matter what size they might have had. Hjelmslev knew what he owed to his predecessor in the chair of Linguistics and acted accordingly. Probably, it is also important that Hjelmslev owed a lot to Pedersen's personal interests in him and to his willingness to support Hjelmslev in his projects, including those that Pedersen himself could not attach to, cf. Pedersen's recommendation of Hjelmslev's structuralistic approach to a founding council quoted in Gregersen 1991a, 292. Hjelmslev's personal attachment becomes even clearer in the other obituary of Pedersen (1954a). This was originally given as a commemorative speech in the Royal Academy of Sciences and was printed in the publications from this society. The Royal Academy version is much longer and much more personal than the University one. Clearly, a close friendship across generations connected the two men. Hjelmslev had no reason to try to explain what separated his conception of Linguistics as a university subject from Pedersen's in any of these texts – and thus, he did not.

If we look at the core matters, there is little doubt that Hjelmslev was much closer to Jespersen, seen from a larger perspective. After all, Jespersen had touched upon many of the themes and problems that Hjelmslev himself tried to address and to solve. The preference for synchronic description secured closeness, too. Within the field of Historical Linguistics, Hjelmslev really was a plot spoiler, pinpointing

weak aspects of the field and downsizing the ambitions, also well beyond the ambitions of Pedersen, who definitely was no friend of lofty speculation either, as we have seen. However, other forces were at work, too; hence the striking difference between the two obituaries.

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