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LE COURS DE LINGUISTIQUE GÉNÉRALE, 1916-2016.

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A Contribution to Epistemology:

Immanency in Saussure and Hjelmslev

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1. Outline

As it was shown by later attempts to reconstruct Saussure's ideations, the reading of *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (CLG) should not be limited just to Bally and Sechehaye's 1916 version (which is ironically captioned by Bouissac (2010) as "The honest forging of a legacy"). If so, some problematic issues about the possibility of a science of language, which are aroused, in spite of the CLG, within Courses of Lectures on General Linguistics (CLGL) (especially the Third) and within *Writings in General Linguistics/ Écrits de linguistique générale* (WGL/ELG), lead us –even more obviously than before– to Greimas's verdict that "[Hjelmslev is] the true and perhaps only successor of Saussure who has been able to make his intentions explicit and formulate them definitively" (Dosse, 1997, p.68). It is in Hjelmslev's Glossematics that we would find a deep and broad idea of 'Immanency', building an onerous algebraic foundation for a science of language accommodating the Saussurean intentions –for example, we can mention such words by Saussure: "[i]n the system of language there is no logical starting point, no fixed beacon that could guide our steps" (ELG, p.40); "[A] day will come when it will be recognized that the fundamental nature of the entities of langue and their relations ought to be expressed by mathematical means." (ibid, p.206)

Extracting (and perhaps modifying) general ideas of immanency from Saussure could and would lead us, not to a binarism of the kind that is found in Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss (which can be seen as an eclectic array of declined Hegelian dialectic), and absolutely not to a binarism of American/Chomskyan approach (which is reproducing old-fashioned Cartesianism), but to a Holism and a non-binary (or binary-free)

approach which are formulated by Hjelmslev in a pseudo-spinozian way. The possibility of such a non-binarism is attained by virtue of Hjelmslev's early notions of 'participation' and 'sublogic' combined with a fundamental acceptance and modification of Levy-Bruhl's 'prelogic'. The other essential component to be mentioned would be his approach to experience, which could not, in any sense, incline to naive realism.

I can also mention, among other elements, the ones playing main roles in his theorizing, which certainly contribute to the general epistemology: eschewing the traditional distinction between 'form' and 'content' by introducing a matrix of entities (expression, content; form, substance); the privileged necessary ability for self-analyzing (which can be called 'reflexivity'); and the foremost conquest of extending the perspective to the whole sphere of knowledge by introducing layers of analyses, making Glossematics an immanent algebraic glottocentric general science.

2. A brief sketch of this concise contribution

To illustrate some basic aspects of immanency in Saussure and Hjelmslev, I will follow three steps: First, alongside a discussion about some general shortcomings of the CLG, I will mention some problematic issues in Saussure in a search for an open, flexible, immanent science. Second, I will show which considerations and modifications by Hjelmslev, regarding Saussure's ideations, are the ones playing main roles in meeting the master's desires; meanwhile I shall consider some essential elements in Hjelmslev's approach to an immanent general science called Glossematics. In the last part, I intend to briefly delineate the special position of Glossematics in the broad sphere of epistemology, and to underline the merits of the revival of this approach.

3. The CLG and the struggles of the sad master

I think that the most important shortcoming of 1916 version of the CLG could be found in its high modality of discourse. Some firm statements, accompanied by some distortions and colorings, aiming at a kind of simplification, and also omitting and ignoring the incomplete sentences in the sources, conceal the uncertainty of Saussure and the contradictions he had been dealing with. Despite opening a ground for some extreme rejections and some ambiguities, this situation caused Saussure's arbitrary and infirm pairs to be described as the absolute Saussurean dichotomies, which have been fixed as classical terms in the history of linguistics. And, in this respect, some essential portions leading to a construction of an immanent, and not transcendent, science of language have been hidden from our sight.

In the situation where multiple points of view create several equally legitimate objects (Bouissac, 2010: 100)**,** Saussure's epistemological decision is to deal with language as a system of differences between terms in which everything is holding together as a whole. But therein, there is no logical starting point.

Saussure declares: “in the system of language there is no logical starting point, no fixed beacon that could guide our steps” (ELG: 40). So any abstract relation that belongs to the system can serve as an initial step toward accessing the whole system. Moreover, any entity or phenomenon in the language is based on relations. There is nothing but complex entities (Saussure, 1968: 274). Accordingly, these determining considerations persuaded Saussure to seek the algebra of language and to construct a calculus for it. Apparently, it could be seen in his abortive efforts to use the Quaternion (ELG: 39). But here is a critical contradiction for Saussure: applying a mathematical tool to the fully **irrational** phenomenon he was engaging with, aside from the risk of falling to a transcendent viewpoint, never seemed to be appropriate.

Now, I intend to list some other essential elements of Saussure’s approach to the science of language, and then we will see how Hjelmslev deals with them:

1. Displeased by the dominant **inductive** method, Saussure prefers a **deductive** method which starts from the system as a whole.

2. Thought and sounds are no more than an amorphous mass. They are the **substance** which can be formed in language. It is the **form** we have to deal with. **Substance** can’t in itself be a *definiens* for a language.

3. Language is a system of signs, where the **sign** is the ultimate unit of study. The signs are defined by the **negative relations** between themselves, between their signifyings, between their signifieds, and by the **positive relation** between the signifying and the signified of each sign.

4. In respect to the concurrent mutability and immutability of language, “**time**” becomes intrinsic.

5. According to the arbitrariness of linguistic signs in the unique institution of *langue*, the system of language is intrinsically “**social**”, though it is embodied in the brains of the “**individuals**”.

6. Though ***langue*** is a “secretion” of ***parole***, it is necessary to draw a distinction between them, and to deal with the first one.

7. Since we are dealing with a system, it is inevitable to distinguish between “**synchronic**” and “**diachronic**” approaches, and to give priority to the first. Ideally, it would be preferable to have a **panchronic** point of view, though this is not clearly defined in Saussure’s works.

4. Hjelmslev’s contribution to Saussure’s ideations

Hjelmslev, who, according to Greimas’s verdict “is the true and perhaps only successor of Saussure” (cited in: Dosse, 1997: 68), fundamentally embraces the master’s basic ideations. He himself singles out

Saussure as an obvious pioneer in his works. It seems that his reading of CLG goes beyond the 1916 version, and is more comparable to the later figures of "Le Maître de Genève".

Going along with the epistemological decision of understanding language as a **system**, Hjelmslev declares that the **textual process** and the relations therein should also be understood by taking into account the fluctuations and changes in the life of language (Hjelmslev, 1961: 9). It is the process that determines the system, but then it is the system that should be presupposed for the presence of any possible process. So in Hjelmslev's terms, the process is concrete, virtual, and open, while the system is abstract, realized and closed. We may regard this consideration as a cornerstone of his thought.

Then, accepting the master's insight of basing any entity of language on relations, Hjelmslev radically defines any object as "nothing but intersections of bundles of dependences" (ibid: 23), and hereby, he delineates his path to meet the ultimate desire of "constructing a **calculus** for the algebra of language" (which is in Hjelmslev's case, the algebra of "*humanitas et universitas*" (ibid: 127)).His labyrinthine calculus –called **Glossematics**- is one of the most not-well-known sophisticated treasures in humanities, a major part of which can be found in his *Résumé*. Hjelmslev's Glossematics is not at all a mathematical system, but it is a unique formal linguistic one. All in all, how does this theory meet its requirement of immanency?

One of the basic issues here is the matter of rationality or logicality of the object under study. The obvious irrationality and illogicality of language is a critical matter for Hjelmslev, and similarly it was an important motif in certain scripts of Saussure. How could it be possible to represent this feature in the theory? Hjelmslev's proposition is a unique one among other Saussurians. He argues that we must deal with language as the **sublogic** system (which is a modification of Levi-Bruhl's **prelogic**) from which both the logic and the illogic will emerge. This is attained by virtue of his fundamental acceptance of Levi-Bruhl's notion of **participation** (for a comprehensive research on this matter see: Cigana, 2014).

To achieve an immanent theory, it is necessary to avoid any axiom or postulate, and not to base one's system on a particular point of departure. In every stage of his theorizing, Hjelmslev insists on meeting this need. But still, there is a decisive principle –called **empirical principle**- which is involved as a guide in every single stage of the theory's elaboration. This principle says: "The description shall be free of contradiction, exhaustive, and as simple as possible", which are all in a pre-suppositional hierarchy (Hjelmslev, 1961: 11). The only touchstone of the linguistic theory is exactly this empirical principle on which the theory itself is based. As a scientist, Hjelmslev needs to determine his own genre in the whole sphere of language. So this principle shouldn't be seen as a geometrical one, but as an essential distinctive feature which determines the very scientific genre.

Hjelmslev constantly attempts to dissolve the postulates deduced from Saussure's posthumous work and the works of other Saussurians, and he wishes to overcome the unnecessary dichotomies therein. Taking into account the list of essential elements of Saussure's approach to the science of language, we can sketch out some of important aspects of Hjelmslev's approach and his modifications of Saussure's ideations:

1. Hjelmslev absolutely insists on the **deductive** procedure of analysis. By **synthesis**, he means to describe an object as a component of a class. But he argues that as we deal merely with relations, the class as a whole has been understood beforehand by virtue of an implicit **analysis**. Any induction of syntheses premises a deduction of analyses. By the way, these two types of procedure would and should be fully compatible (ibid: 31-32).

2. Accepting Saussure's distinction between **form** and **substance**, Hjelmslev states that there is not any separation between them, and that substance lives exclusively by form's favor. So the diagram of planes of thought and sounds provided in CLG (159) is not really suitable. Here is Hjelmslev's alternative: substance is the formed **purport**. The **purport** or matter is any unanalyzed whole which can be formed. However, it couldn't be understood as Kant's **Noumenon**, because the purport could only be defined by its function in the structural principle of language (Hjelmslev, 1961: 50), but, so to speak, we can see it as the whole which Spinoza calls "the **god**" or "the **nature**". Thus, it is the task of Glossematics to study the forms and the substances, while the study of their purport falls into the lot of other sciences.

3. Hjelmslev generalizes the notion of sign to all analytical degrees of language where we can recognize a relation (which is called a **sign function)** between the **expression** and the **content**. As is well-known, he formulates the expression and the content as **planes** which contract isomorphism by virtue of the sign function. In this respect, the signs (in a broader sense) are the goals of analysis. But, in keeping with the notion of **double articulation**, Hjelmslev recognizes that there are always entities which are the constructing elements of signs, and for which the sign function is suspended. He calls these elementary entities, the "**figurae**". In this regard, therefore, **languages** by their internal structure are first and foremost **systems of figurae** that can be used to construct signs.

4. The concept of "**time**", which for Saussure is intrinsic in language, becomes **immanent** in Glossematics. Formulating the system of language as a dynamic one by virtue of introducing the notion of "**tention**" and dealing with the "**process**", Hjelmslev frees his theory from the common transcendent concept of "time". There are only relations between texts and presuppositions between successive entities in the process (see: Hjelmslev, 1973: 110). This, of course, is an illustrious consequence of his immanent approach and could be very controversial.

5. As a regular problem in any dealing with language, the individuality or sociality of language will be raised here. Hjelmslev agrees with Saussure's considerations, but he avoids overgeneralizing the social aspect of language, or on the other hand, reducing it to the psycho-physiological facts. As Cigana (2013: 5) states in best words, Hjelmslev seeks a concept of language which "holds together individual and social, nature and culture – Between ***physis*** and ***thesis,*** he thus seems to support the third possibility of a **thesis-physeos**."

6. One of the precious aspects of his immanent viewpoint is that he treats with the totality of ***langage*** and bypasses the unfruitful duality of **langue/parole**. The disputable Saussurean couple gives place to a catalysis of *langage* as **schema** and **usage**, which exactly represents the form and substance strata of language (Hjelmslev, 1961: Chapter 15; also see: Hjelmslev, 1942).

7. In addition to what we saw on the issue of "time", and as a result, Hjelmslev modifies the relation between **synchronic** and **diachronic** studies as follows: the theory in itself should and would be **panchronic**, so the distinction between synchrony and diachrony won't be exclusive, but the point is that a merely diachronic approach is not relevant for a systematic linguistic description, and subsequently the **diachrony** premises the **synchrony**. It will be done by a dynamic definition of system, a **dynamism** through which we can achieve an understanding of language including all fluctuations and possible changes, regardless of any transcendent concept of time.

As we can see, Hjelmslev tries hard to undermine all premises which could be harmful to a true immanent understanding of language. In my opinion, there is a similar concern in the "Saussure beyond the CLG". Hjelmslev is a radicalized Saussure whose main appeal is to seek an immanent and inevitably holistic approach.

5. Hjelmslev and his epistemological immanency

After all these considerations, Hjelmslev reaches the point where a distinction between **language** and **non-language** should be taken into account. For him, this distinction, which in other paradigms of linguistics is often a separation, will lose its classical absoluteness. The so-called non-language could be relevant only after being formed in language. In Hjelmslev's terms and on the basis of his stratification of language, this is the **form** which is presupposed by the **purport**, so this is the linguistic **schema** which is presupposed by any scientific or non-scientific **usage** of language. Citing Kierkegaard, Hjelmslev (1961: 109) affirms that "in a language, and only in a language, we can 'work over the inexpressible until it is expressed' ". I believe that installing this attitude at the core of his theory is a distinct factor of his unique immanent approach.

As a matter of immanency, the other core feature is that he always tries not to let the theory standing outside or transcending its own analysis. There is an inevitable demand of the theory of language, which I wish to call "**absolute reflexivity**": the Glossematics should be able to define all its own *definiens* and must be susceptible of becoming its own object (Hjelmslev, 1973: 106-107). However, since we are using a natural language in constructing our theory, there are always some undefined or indefinable terms. Here, Hjelmslev's privileged solution is a simple -yet complicated- one: every undefined entity, no matter of which kind, will be defined as the analysis of language is exhausted. This quasi-circular argumentation, in association with his stratification of language, promotes Hjelmslev to insist on his glottocentric science of Glossematics and to provide the general epistemology with this fundamental suggestion: ***Not only must we settle the knowledge of language on an immanent approach, but achieving an immanent knowledge is itself contingent on the analysis of language***.

These last essential deliberations, along with the concept of participation and also his semiotic hierarchy (e.g. see: Badir, 2006), put Hjelmslev's structuralism in a special unique position among other Saussureans and also non-Saussureans.

6- Closure

Following Saussure's ideations to their ultimate consequences, Hjelmslev constructs a paradigm of linguistic thought leading not to a binarism of the kind found in Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss -which can be seen as an eclectic array of declined Hegelian dialectic- (see also: Parret, 1986: 37-49), and absolutely not to a binarism of American or Chomskyan approach -which is reproducing old-fashioned Cartesianism-, but to a holistic and binary-free approach in a quasi-Spinozian manner.

This lineage of Saussurean heritage, which has had a sad history, can be seen as an advantage and –even nowadays– a new paradigm in linguistic and semiotic thinking, and more widely in general epistemology, which is worth practicing and being engaged with.

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