HJELMSLEV AS A ‘FORERUNNER’ OF THE SEMANTIC MAP METHOD IN LINGUISTIC TYPOLOGY

Lorenzo Cigana (F.R.S.-FNRS)
Thanasis Georgakopoulos (ULiège)
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University of Liège / F.R.S.-FNRS

Workshop
‘History of linguistics and its significance’

02.–06.07.2018
Outline of the talk

1. Introduction
   ➢ Mapping expression and content
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2. Mentions of Hjelmslev in the literature on semantic maps
   ➢ Name dropping, inspiration, or deeper similarities?
Outline of the talk

1. Introduction
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2. Mentions of Hjelmslev in the literature on semantic maps
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3. Hjelmslev’s comparative method
   - Analyzing language specific categories based on general principles
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   - Structuralism vs. substantialism
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1. **Introduction**
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   - Analyzing language specific categories based on general principles

4. **Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps**
   - Structuralism vs. substantialism

5. **Conclusions**
   - Historical: Hjelmslev as a forerunner?
   - Methodological: impact on contemporary methods?
   - Comparative epistemology: dialogue between structuralism and substantialism?
Introduction: mapping expression and content

Figure 1. A map of the Comitative-Instrumental domain (Narrog & Ito 2007)
Introduction: mapping expression and content

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Figure 2. Hjelmslev’s rendering of the category of case in Lak (Hjelmslev, *La catégorie des cas*, 1935)
Introduction: mapping expression and content

Figure 2. Hjelmslev’s rendering of the category of case in Lak (Hjelmslev, La catégorie des cas, 1935)
Hjelmslev in the literature on semantic maps

“Recently, the issue of applying semantic maps to lexical typology—as anticipated already in the early studies by Hjelmslev and Lazard—has also been taken up by Majid et al. (2008) and François (2008)”

(Cysouw et al. 2010: 1)

“The multivariate probabilistic effects, which reflect various salience phenomena, cannot be captured by semantic maps like Hjelmslev’s (1959) [1957] or, more recently, Haspelmath’s (2003)”

(Levshina et al. 2013: 826)
Hjelmslev in the literature on semantic maps

But the first explicit mention of Hjelmslev is in Haspelmath (2003)

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Figure 3. Partitioning of the TREE–WOOD–FOREST semantic domain in three languages (Hjelmslev 1965*: 54)

“Being a structuralist, Hjelmslev used this example to show how different languages carve up the semantic space in radically different ways”

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“(…), but from the present perspective, the differences are not all that great. One could easily imagine the differences to be such that no non-trivial universal semantic map can be drawn. Thus, Hjelmslev's own example can be used to make a very different point, not for relativism, but for universalism of meaning.”

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![Semantic Domain Partitioning](image)

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\[
\begin{array}{c|c|c}
\text{treæ} & \text{Baum} & \text{årbre} \\
\hline
\text{skov} & \text{Holz} & \text{bois} \\
\hline
\text{wald} & \text{foret} & \text{forêt} \\
\end{array}
\]

= TREE (concept)  
= WOOD (concept)

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Figure 4. Partitioning of the TREE–WOOD–FOREST semantic domain in four languages (Haspelmath 2003, inspired by Koch 1998, etc.)
Hjelmslev’s comparative method

Even if Hjelmslev’s diagrams in Prolegomena have paved the way for comparison, they were conceived for an entirely different purpose, namely to show the difference between linguistic form and substance in a reader-friendly fashion.

What is visualized is the theoretical principle underlying comparison, not the method, which is provided elsewhere, i.e., La catégorie des cas (1935-1937)
Hjelmslev’s comparative method

Linguistic comparison cannot be carried out directly, by singling out linguistic units from various languages and comparing them, since each unit has no value per se: its proper definition comes from the place it occupies within the system (the corresponding paradigm or category).

For Hjelmslev, what can be compared is the formal articulation of each linguistic domain (e.g., lexical, morphological, phonological, etc.). Briefly: one does not compare things, but different internal boundaries.
Hjelmslev’s comparative method

The general procedure follows three steps:

1. *Analysis*: the paradigm (category) is set up, by identifying all its constitutive units (*taxemes*) using standard criteria and operations (commutation, etc.);
Hjelmslev’s comparative method

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2. *Distribution*: the units (*taxemes*) are distributed within a up-to-three dimensional space, which represents a category as a system of coordinates (parameters), according to specific criteria and rules (overlapping, syncretism, markedness, etc.); at this step, each unit receives a formal (positional) definition.
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3. **Reduction**: units are further decomposed into components (smallest invariants or *glossemes* = formal version of “distinctive features”)
Hjelmslev’s comparative method

A category is conceived as an area whose boundaries are fixed from a crosslinguistic perspective, and whose formal definition is given morphosyntactically (ex.: case = pure ‘homosexual government’).

What ensures the possibility of comparison (= by superposition) is uniform extension.
A category is conceived as an area whose boundaries are fixed from a crosslinguistic perspective, and whose formal definition is given morphosyntactically (ex.: case = pure ‘homosexual government’). What ensures the possibility of comparison (= by superposition) is uniform extension.

Its ‘intension’ (its semantic substance) is represented by the positive ‘filling’ (graphically captured by the internal area) It is called ‘fundamental meaning’
Hjelmslev’s comparative method

PARAMETERS
1. Fundamental meaning of the category as a whole: 
   direction
Hjelmslev’s comparative method

PARAMETERS

1. Fundamental meaning of the category as a whole: *direction*

2. Up to three (implicational) *dimensions:*
   a. proximity/distance

*Figure 5. Modern English* (Hjemslev 1935: 119)
Hjelmslev’s comparative method

PARAMETERS
1. Fundamental meaning of the category as a whole: 
   direction

   − (Subjective)  
   + (Translative)  
   ± (Dative)  
   ø (Genitive)

Figure 5. Modern English  
(Hjemslev 1935: 119)

2. Up to three (implicational) 
   dimensions:  
   a. proximity/distance
Hjelmslev’s comparative method

PARAMETERS
1. Fundamental meaning of the category as a whole: *direction*

2. Up to three (implicational) *dimensions*:
   a. proximity/distance
   b. coherence/incoherence

*Figure 6. Chechen* (Hjemslev 1935, II: 55)
Hjelmslev’s comparative method

PARAMETERS

1. Fundamental meaning of the category as a whole: *direction*

2. Up to three (implicational) *dimensions*:
   a. proximity/distance
   b. coherence/incoherence

Chechen Ablative receives the ‘cartesian’ definition $+1B+2B$, which is interpreted semantically as

[distance] [without contact]
Hjelmslev’s comparative method

PARAMETERS
1. Fundamental meaning of the category as a whole: direction

2. Up to three (implicational) dimensions:
   a. proximity/distance
   b. coherence/incoherence
   c. subjectivity/objectivity
Hjelmslev’s comparative method

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1. Fundamental meaning of the category as a whole: direction

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Figure 7. Lak
(Hjemslev 1935, II: 166)
Hjelmslev’s comparative method

PARAMETERS
1. Fundamental meaning of the category as a whole: *direction*

2. Up to three (implicational) *dimensions*:
   a. proximity/distance
   b. coherence/incoherence
   c. subjectivity/objectivity

3. Reduction: each unit is further decomposed into ultimate invariants (*glossemes*): $\alpha$, $\beta$, $A$, $B$, $\gamma$, $\Gamma$, $\Gamma_2$ $\leftarrow$ pure structural (formalistic) issue

*Figure 7. Lak (Hjemslev 1935, II: 166)*
Hjelmslev’s comparative method

Conceived as a superposition between languages (structures), linguistic comparison cannot be carried out directly by relying on single forms (cases), since there is no guarantee that these units are uniform (thus comparable) → squinting grammar (Jespersen)
“The very terms ‘locative’ and ‘nominative’ are ambiguous, and their content may vary from a linguistic state to another. The definitions provided are only valid for some particular systems of some languages” (Tr. of Hjelmslev 1935: 100)
Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

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Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

Hjelmslev

The definition of a category, depends on functional facts arranged deductively. This relies on a methodo-/epistemological principle: *structural reduction* (from open to closed sets of elements)

“In order to formulate the problem in a correct way (...) a definition must be given that allows the category to be rigorously delimited without violating the fact, by identifying (...) the semantic zone specific to the category as a whole and by later showing how particular cases are distributed on this scale of meaning”

(Tr. of Hjelmslev 1935: 3)
Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

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(Tr. of Hjelmslev 1935: 3)

Semantic maps

The conceptual space is envisioned as a continuum, and the maps capture bits and pieces of this continuum depending on the focus of each study
Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

Figure 1. A map of the Comitative-Instrumental domain (Narrog & Ito 2007)

Figure 8. A map of typical dative functions (Haspelmath 2003: 213)
Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

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Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

Hjelmslev

“A case, as any other linguistic form in general, doesn’t have many different meanings: it has just one meaning, supporting a single abstract notion from which all different concretes instantiations can be deduced ... to each single unity of the system must correspond a single value”

(Tr. of Hjelmslev 1935: 85)
Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

Hjelmslev

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(Tr. of Hjelmslev 1935: 85)

Semantic maps

Inductive approach that relies on language comparison for identifying the different meanings of linguistic expressions (polysemy), hence resorting to an open set of primitives
Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

<table>
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Figure 4. Partitioning of the TREE–WOOD–FOREST semantic domain in four languages (Haspelmath 2003, inspired by Koch 1998, etc.)
Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

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*Figure 4.* Partitioning of the TREE–WOOD–FOREST semantic domain in four languages (Haspelmath 2003, inspired by Koch 1998, etc.)
## Contrast Hjelmslev and semantic maps

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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Holz</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wald</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>√</td>
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**Figure 4.** Partitioning of the TREE–WOOD–FOREST semantic domain in four languages (Haspelmath 2003, inspired by Koch 1998, etc.)

**Figure 9.** Lexical matrix for the ‘tree/wood/forest’ domain
Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

Figure 10. A semantic map inferred from the data in Figure 9
## Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

<table>
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<th>semantic maps</th>
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<td>1. Domain</td>
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<td>2. Extension</td>
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<td>4. Approach</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Point of view</td>
<td>(hyper-)emic</td>
<td>etic (&amp; emic)</td>
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Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

Hjelmslev

From Hjelmslev’s point of view, the etic operations and labels strongly depend on the general emic structure of language (‘etic’ values are variants of linguistic forms); his approach can thus be defined as hyperemic.
Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

Hjelmslev

From Hjelmslev’s point of view, the etic operations and labels strongly depend on the general emic structure of language (‘etic’ values are variants of linguistic forms); his approach can thus be defined as hyperemic.

Semantic maps

Distinction between:

a. the map = language-independent etic grid, i.e., “a coherent chunk of a universal network”
b. language-specific (emic) categories are mapped onto this universal network of meanings

(François 2008)
Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

Figure 10. A semantic map inferred from the data in Figure 9
Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

Figure 10. A semantic map inferred from the data in Figure 9
Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

**Figure 10.** A semantic map inferred from the data in Figure 9
Contrasting Hjelmslev and semantic maps

**Figure 10.** A semantic map inferred from the data in Figure 9
1. Historical: Hjelmslev as a forerunner?

→ As regards the theory as a whole: no
→ For some specific ideas: yes
   1) structuring the content-plane
   2) … of cross-linguistically comparable semantic zones
   3) … using graphical representations
Conclusions (2/3)

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2. Methodological: impact on contemporary methods?

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  3) … using graphical representations
Conclusions (2/3)

1. Historical: Hjelmslev as a forerunner?
2. Methodological: impact on contemporary methods?

Figure 11. The category of pseudo-vowels of French (1970: 220)
Cf. Vykypěl (2003); Basbøll (forthcoming)
1. Historical: Hjelmslev as a forerunner?
2. Methodological: impact on contemporary methods?

→ No obvious intermediary position between the two frameworks
→ Both theories construct their objects in radically different ways (constructivism vs. realism), which are consequently hardly comparable
Thanks!

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