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*Some cognitive issues of Hjelmslev's Principes de Grammaire Générale in a saussurean perspective*

oral presentation in Workshop: 111 Langage et cognition dans une perspective saussurienne (Daniele GAMBARARA)

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**SOME COGNITIVE ISSUES OF HJELMSLEV'S *PRINCIPES DE GRAMMAIRE GÉNÉRALE* IN A SAUSSUREAN PERSPECTIVE (19<sup>th</sup> ICL, workshop 111)**

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD: this contribution is kept by author's choice in its original form of verbal communication (19<sup>th</sup> ICL, workshop 111) whose reading was planned to take not more than about twenty minutes. An extended and properly prepared version of the speech has been published in the proper article-form in French in the "Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure", 67 (2014). For the publishing proposal of the *Actes*, and in order to avoid redundancy with the French publication (to which we would address the reader), we simply added the bibliography, included a *minimum* of references where it were requested within the text, and translated French quotations from the *PGG*. All translations are thus ours, along with potential errors contained therein.

As the expiration of the deadline for the presentation of the abstract was approximating, I remember I have chosen the topic of my proposal quickly resolving on some psychological issues in Hjelmslev's *Principes de Grammaire Générale* (*PGG*), his debuting work and his very scientific manifesto, which in my opinion are still too little known or anyway too little discussed. In this work Hjelmslev's debts to the linguistic schools of Geneva and Paris is clear perceivable: in sketching both his method and his theory, Hjelmslev draws liberally from notions, interpretative categories and terminology belonging to the Saussure's tradition, namely the *Cours* and its heralds. And yet this reception of ideas is far from being linear and trivial: in Hjelmslev's conception of the relation between grammar and psychology there are some theoretical ingredients which can be connected (of course in a purely theoretical, not historic-philological way) with the some of the ideas Saussure put in his *Troisième Cours*. If so, the thesis of Tatsukawa (1995), concerning the fact that starting from *Cours* and the *Mémoire* Hjelmslev was able to grasp the theoretical line of a "Saussure" who was at the time still unknown (*inédit*), could be also reversed: in some way, the knowledge of Saussure's argumentation might be useful in reconstructing a "Hjelmslev" often considered secondary.

It is well-known that the very first problem Hjelmslev had to face in establishing his method in 1928 was a problem concerning history of science: the search for foundation which characterized the epistemology of the beginning of the Twentieth century. In Hjelmslev's case, the problem is how to draw the disciplinary line that divides grammar and linguistics from the other philosophical disciplines on language, namely logic and psychology. Besides his implicit presupposition, that is the separation between "philosophical" approach and "empirical" research, he asks himself which "object" should have a scientific, *i.d.* general grammar. The line Hjelmslev sketched out rests upon the (not-so-well scrutinized nor much further

discussed) notion of “subconscious”, which can at the same time separate grammar among the two former sciences, defining its autonomous object.

According to Hjelmslev, in comparison to logic grammar has to face the very cognitive complexity of linguistic facts which bring not only the “normalized”, conscious and logical thought but also emotional, affective, imaginative and even perceptive elements into a totality. Facing this kind of complex and “vital” (sic!) totality, linguistics is said to reveal a form of thought that does not follow the strict and imperative rules of logic: linguistic-thought rests upon a mixture of automatisms and unreflected, unintentional associations which establishes a system of general categories. In their turn, such categories are said to *inform* human experience in its wholeness.

On the other hand, from a psychological perspective, the linguistic “habits” upon which the *sujet parlant* rests (namely the communicative needs manifested through linguistic activity) are said to be always potentially conscious; even more: they constitute a pattern – the grammatical organization itself (with particular reference to morphological plane) – which is *always manifested* through the more “phenomenological tangible” expression plane<sup>1</sup>, although far from being completely clear and consciously recognizable. For example, a speaker seems to be always able to recognize values and meanings of larger linguistic elements (syntagmatic construction such as words, sentences, periods, *etc.*); he is also normally capable of recognizing the specific value and meaning of morphological sub-elements in their textual occurrence, such as grammatical morphemes of gender (masculine, feminine, neutral, and so forth); but it is quite difficult for him establishing the paradigmatic value and meaning of the respective morphological category in its wholeness. In other words, the *sujet parlant* doesn’t usually notice that language superimposes a linguistic form on both logical and psychological pure content – a form which is 1. collective and 2. specific.

In this sense, individual representations (*contenus de conscience*) receive a collectivised structure, forming a cognitive resource (a thesaurus) which every speaker can tap into. Grammatical limits tends thus to be perceived not as constrictive impositions but as constructive tools at one’s disposal: the speaker resorts implicitly to this forms through a tacit consent, so that there is no need to conceive language in terms of imperative constraints such as social laws. In discussing this point, Hjelmslev criticizes Durkheim’s sociological model for being way too normative for the study of linguistic categories (*PGG*: § 65).

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<sup>1</sup> In 1928, expression and content are not purely symmetrical, “horizontally” opposite planes, but are rather disposed vertically, going from the more profound and internal pole (content) to the more superficial and “evident” one (expression): the couple can be said to be “phenomenologically oriented” in such a way that in this early stage of Hjelmslev’s thought, “expression” seems to combine both the manifestation and the formative functions.

Furthermore, since language (*la langue*) is said to consist of *expressed* values (that is of content-values which are always coupled or “clothed” by expression-values), it can be studied through an *objective yet indirect* approach; on the contrary, all that can be accessed and studied through introspective (subjective) procedures seems to coincide with pure psychological, non-linguistic, individual and private ideas.

Since grammar relies on subconscious operations, logic cannot claim to explain grammatical structure which belong on the contrary to a specific psychological domain, providing the guarantee of its autonomy: all grammatical facts are psychological facts, but not vice versa. And yet one might be surprised to notice that the psychological, subconscious “ground” of linguistics operations does not completely coincide with their “psychic” constitution. Hjelmslev seems here to struggle between two different positions: on the one hand, the “*faculté du langage*” intended as a psychic, individual and “natural” cognitive apparatus (Hjelmslev even stresses the neurophysiologic base for linguistics “associations” studied for example by Vladimir Bechterev, *cf. PGG*, § 10: 44) and, on the other hand, the “*langage*” intended as a fully potential repository of categories which are realized and reconfigured by particular languages each of them in a specific way. No member of a grammatical category (a case such as “genitive”, for instance) is thus universal, nor categories themselves (“case” or “gender”), which are said to be only general. But what with their system – that is: with *langage* in itself as a categorical pattern, as an “*état abstrait*”?

No easy answer is possible, since Hjelmslev’s own position isn’t very clear about this last point: struggling between a physiological and a semiological point of view, he stresses on the one hand that language has to be rooted in human “universal” constitution, although such a ground cannot but guarantee only a certain, not further explicated uniformity of *languages*<sup>2</sup>, and on the other hand he assumes that even *language* as an abstract, panchronic system is fully “historical” and is only indirectly linked to human “mind and mentality”.

It may be clear, thus, that Hjelmslev’s definition of language (*le langage*) swings between the two saussurean poles of *faculté du langage* and *la langue*: on the one hand, each particular language employs only a small portion of all possible linguistic categories, which are, *as being of psychological nature*, common to the human race as a whole; but on the other hand, Hjelmslev quotes Vendryes, saying that “*les langues représentent l’utilisation pratique de les procédures du langage*”. Linguistic categories, both in their abstract constitution and in their concrete realisations, are ultimately linked to what Hjelmslev calls “linguistic aptitude of man in general”, an idea which may be approximated to some of the formulations which can be found in the *Troisième Cours* and which seem to point out the idea of a “collective mind” deeply rooted in

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, human psycho-physiological nature is said to fail in describing language’s own structure and functioning.

physio-psychological ground, as it has been already stressed by some scholars (Gambarara 2005, Fadda 2008, 2013)

[4 November 1910] We can say that the object to be studied is the hoard deposited in the brain of each one of us; doubtless this hoard, in any individual case, will never turn out to be absolutely complete. We can say that language always works through a language; without that, it does not exist (Saussure 1993: Notebook I, 7a);

[25 April 1911] The social act cannot reside elsewhere than in the individuals added together, but as for any «other» social fact, it cannot be considered outside the individual. If we could examine the deposit of verbal images in an individual, stored, placed in a certain order and classification, we should see the social bond that constitutes the language (Saussure 1993: Notebook VII, 69a);

[19 May 1911] Developing and fixing this product is the work of the collective intelligence. Everything that is the language is implicitly collective (Saussure 1993: Notebook VIII, 91a);

[30 May 1911] The language, in my view, was something located squarely in the collective soul (Saussure 1993: Notebook VIII, 101a).

In our opinion, Hjelmslev's theoretical and terminological struggle may be very well put in contact to Saussure's own gradual refining of his formulations. Already in 1928, and more explicitly in 1934, Hjelmslev seems to make an attempt to settle one of Victor Henri's notorious antinomies: the opposition between individual and social aspects of language. He was led to believe that besides the alternative of placing linguistics and grammar within psychology or within sociology, that is besides the opposition between the individual and the collective, there had to be a third option: a *psychological-collective* perspective, relying on the natural factor shared by individuals. Do not be fooled by easy historical references: Hjelmslev's idea of collective psychology doesn't exactly match the *Völkerpsychologie*, which is rather openly criticized by Hjelmslev (*cf.* "We do not even think to the creation of something like a 'social psychology', since this term would too easily evoke false conceptions" – PGG, § 67: 290). Such a collective psychology derives directly from the so-to-say "cognitive structure" of language itself – I shall quote Hjelmslev's words:

If it's true that language (*langue*) is an "institution" linked to "contingent social reality" [...] it's not less true that language is linked to a *psychological* or more exactly to a psychophysiological reality. If social facts do change infinitely through times, spaces and environments, there has to be a human psychology which derives from human nature itself and which determines the way men behave under given conditions (PGG, § 62: 266)

In general, language is neither exclusively nor especially a social fact. It is firstly a psychological fact. This truth has been highlighted very clearly by Herbart's

school. Linguistics and grammar belong to collective psychology. Social facts can be studied only in the individuals which compose society. Several modern linguists [...], conceiving the sociological issue as a simple aspect of the psychological issue, have recently been supported by the opinion of a renowned sociologist [P. Andrei]. An eminent psychologist [H. Delacroix] has written a fundamental work with the only intention to highlight this truth (*PGG.* § 64: 221).

If we assume a strict and irreconcilable, or at any rate preconceived, opposition between individual (psychology) and social (sociology), Hjelmslev position will escape us: linguistic perspective has always to include (and shall lead to) the natural and psycho-physiological (thus “individual”) side of language, and yet it can be extended to a collective dimension leveraging on the “nature of man in general”, that is the common human cognitive structure. At the same time, it is worth noting that linguistics claims an autonomous position within the psychological domain, since linguistic facts are not *reducible* to psycho-physiological facts: the latter are said only to be the former’s pertinent correlates (*cf.* Werlen 1982). But linguistic analysis shall begin on an internal, morphological ground.

Hjelmslev’s usage of the notion of “subconscious” does reproduce this fluctuation, since this very notion marks at the same time both the mnemonic, automatic feature of linguistic mechanism and the continual avoidance of linguistic facts from individuals and thus its collective determination: speakers are not always conscious

1. of deeper linguistic structures (of smaller morphological unities for instance) they nevertheless utilise and re-actualise as a condition for their linguistic acts, and
2. of the collective, “diffused” nature of such structures, that is of the fact that all speakers refer to common linguistic, categorical resources even for their specific, individual communicative purposes (whence the myths of “incommunicable, private experiences” and of language’s expressive deficiency).

The notion of “subconscious” seems to reproduce a theoretical junction, enclosing and yet exceeding three different problems: the first concerning the relationship between individual and collective, the second concerning the relationship between nature and culture, the third and last concerning the relationship between normative, logical and descriptive, empirical dimensions. As we have seen, the first two problems are answered by stating that *language* holds together individual and social, nature and culture – between *physis* and *thesis* Hjelmslev thus seems to support the third possibility of a *thesis physiseos*, that is: language is *conventional by nature*. The third problem involves the illogical – or at least in Hjelmslev’s words: prelogical – constitution of language. Since the very beginning in 1928, Hjelmslev is looking for epistemological and heuristic criteria to establish linguistics as a general

science of linguistic categories. He rests upon some ground ideas deeply rooted in saussurean tradition:

1. the idea of arbitrariness of signs is declined in a very particular way and may assume quite a counterintuitive role in Hjelmslev's system: the Danish linguist seems to relate arbitrariness with the idea of deliberate choice. One "illogical" peculiarity of categories is that they overlap, encroaching one into the other in their respective usages. In turn, usage is defined according to Sechehaye's *Programme et méthodes* (1908): linguistic usage is arbitrary and relies on the speaker's act of will. The condition of this overlapping depends on the semiological constitution of grammatical categories: they have of course their own particular expression modalities but have also an ineradicable, meaningful ground. This means that within any synchronic linguistic state, the community of speakers tends always to grant an implicit meaning to linguistic categories – this is what Hjelmslev calls the "hypothesis of the meaningful content", an operative postulate which should grant the feasibility of structural description itself. In other words, since categories are a panchronic feature of language, they enter in whatsoever synchronic state as a system (that is: they constitute a system of content-forms), and are thus provided with a specific, yet often subconscious or "sublogical", plerematic substance<sup>3</sup>:

Many linguistic facts show that, even in a form which does not derive directly from a meaningful base, that is depleted of meaningful content since its very origins and in a diachronic perspective, it takes a more or less clear meaning as it enter within a synchronic system. This depends from the suggestive power of form, which was highlighted by Esajas Tegnér. The *sujets parlants* introduce into any form a given meaningful content. The grammatical organization itself rests upon this necessity, although the limits of this force acting within the subconscious are completely ignored. The limitation of arbitrariness, so fruitfully discussed by F. de Saussure, is no easily established since it is difficult to know to what extent the objective analysis matches the subjective analysis. An arbitrary sign can be relatively motivated and in many cases motivation can be completely subconscious (PGG, § 34: 168).

There is here a clear attempt to modulate absolute and relative arbitrariness with explicability or motivation of linguistic values: for instance, if we assume that the

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<sup>3</sup> We should generalise carefully: although Hjelmslev seems to restrict his own domain to grammar, that is to morphological categories (a domain within the content plane, in which his hypothesis seems very well to be applicable *a priori*), he nevertheless speaks also of the phenomenon of "phonetic symbolism" (*cf.* PGG: §§ 38, 39) by which a meaning (or a value?) is accorded to pure expressive aspects. Such "difficulties" depend from Hjelmslev's starting perspective of content being more "profound" and "internal" than expression – a perspective which later would be abandoned. In his later works, the goal of analysis consists in identifying the formal *figurae* separately on content and expression. From this point of view, the hypothesis of the meaningful content becomes an hypothesis concerning substance, which may be useful although not strictly necessary. The same holds true for the "phonetic symbolism", a substance phenomenon, which is an *explicandum* but not an *explicans*.

content of grammatical gender (such as “masculine”, “feminine” and “neuter”) is completely arbitrary in relation to what is expressed through it on a semantic or lexicological plane, and if we assume that synchronic categories can be described only in a synchronic perspective, we may find an explicatory resource in studying the general meaning (ger. *Grundbedeutung*, fr. *signification fondamentale*) of the category of gender itself. If we find out that the meaning of the category of gender relies not upon biological sex but upon the idea of *consistency*, we may be able to explicate some of the irregularities we have to face in interpreting the different *designata* of gender<sup>4</sup> and we may be able to limit the apparent high-level of arbitrariness we have to assign to gender in considering its many irregularities. Hjelmslev’s choice is thus to extend the idea of arbitrariness from the bigger semiological units (on a lexicological and semantic level) to the grammatical, morphological micro-structure.

2. We have seen that according to Hjelmslev the tendency towards the assignation of a specific meaning to grammatical forms lies within the psychological subconscious of speaker’s “collective mind”; by saying that this attribution is subconscious, he says also that the semiological constitution of linguistic categories lies beyond the grasp of any normative, imperative or logical institution such as pedagogic grammars, schools, academic committees, linguistic standardisations and, more in general, any “oligarchic” attempt to superimpose an artificial modification or correction to a particular language. We find here a very deep connection with Saussure’s statement concerning ‘mutability/immutability’ of *langue* and, more precisely, with the specificities of language among other institutions:

[4 November 1910] 1) No other institution involves all the individuals all the time; no other is open to all in such a way that each person participates in it and naturally influences it. 2) Most institutions can be improved, corrected at certain times, reformed by an act of will, whereas on the contrary we see that such an initiative is impossible where languages are concerned, that even academies cannot change by decree the course taken by the institution we call the language, etc (Saussure 1993, Notebook I, 8a-9a);

[19 May 1911] 1) Among the circumstances external to the language itself, we may note that the language is something that all individuals use, every day, all day long. This fact makes the language an institution that is not comparable with others <(civil law, very formalized religion)> (Saussure 1993, Notebook VIII, 95a);

[...] Only grammarians and logicians could renew [...] In this respect also the operation [consisting of a radical change] is too much for the >social<

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<sup>4</sup> That is, the matching between grammatical classification and other taxonomical systems (biological, psychological, etc.): *das Mädchen* designates a ‘little girl’ through grammatical neutral gender – quite an irregularity, from a purely biological or physical classification of experience. On the other hand, the *deduction* of the concrete usages of neuter (applying to a female being) from the *Grundbedeutung* of “consistency” seems not to be an easy task at all (cf. Hjelmslev 1972).



community. It would have to be done by a body of grammarians and logicians (Saussure 1993, Notebook VIII , 96a);

*cf.* Engler's edition: On ne pourrait concevoir un tel changement que par l'intervention de spécialistes-, grammairiens, logiciens, etc.; mais l'expérience montre que jusqu'ici les ingénieries de cette nature n'ont eu aucun succès (Saussure 1968, I II § 1 al. 12, 109 (107), 1223-1224).

3. Once the linguistic-psychological nature of categories has been established, Hjelmslev attempts to go further by saying that for linguistic description of language (and of that natural, prelogical or “daily” thought it expresses) no normative logic shall be adopted; linguistic facts are only linked to “a purely descriptive logic, a psychological logic”:

of course grammar needs a logic, but a broader and more tolerant kind of logic which does not clash with the whims of fluctuating life. The only laws of this kind of logic are of psychological nature (*PGG*, § 5: 23).

The attempts of eradicating from language those elements called “illogical” cannot be successful. They clash inevitably against the very nature of language and grammar, which has no direct link but with the facts of proper descriptive logic, the psychological logic (*PGG*, § 5: 21).

It must be possible to conceive the term “logic” in this larger sense without falling in the same confusion which Steinthal does find himself in “...there is only one logic of *thought*. If this one is commonly called logic, then there is no object left for grammar” [...]. But which name should be given to the theory of thought, if not that of “logic”? (*PGG*, § 5: 23, n. 5).

It seems that Hjelmslev's theory of participative opposition, which rests upon the idea of a “prelogic” (or rather “sublogic”) constitution of language, was developed also in order to answer to this problem. At any rate, such statements show a remarkable resemblance with Saussure's remark about the “semiological life”, and its psychological implications, of language:

[4 November 1910] Since a community does not think logically, or only logically, the language would work on psychologic-logical principles (Saussure 1993, Notebook VIII, 101a).

Such a striking resemblance leads us to believe that 1. Hjelmslev proximity to Saussure's position concerning issues such as the place of linguistics among sociology, psychology and logic and – let us say so – the “cognitive” pertinence of *langue* seems to be greater than one could expect; 2. than the debate about the

cognitive (psychological) aspect of language was all but a secondary feature of 1930s linguistics which would afterwards be abandoned<sup>5</sup>.

4. We would like to stress one last element concerning the alleged “static” aspect of synchronic, general linguistics. We pointed out that the semiological nature of categories is strictly related to this subconscious tendency of linguistic community, acting like a semiotic catalyst. According to Hjelmslev there aren’t categories which are completely depleted of meaning: speaking of grammatical classes which are remnants of previous diachronic linguistic states and are thus meaningless in the considered linguistic state is a pure non-sense. On the contrary, we have to set the priority of synchronic approach in order to recognize the *value* of each grammatical element that enters in a system, synchrony being “the only reality in linguistics”. And yet, according to Hjelmslev synchrony is far from being a pure algebraic state, depleted from its alleged “vital” elements: in his *Sprogssystem og Sprogforandring* (a series of lectures given in 1934 but published posthumously only in 1972) he tries to reformulate the issue concerning synchrony in an explicit attempt of studying the relationship between system and its modifications. In his *work*, a semiological system is said to never be in a resting, stagnant state, but rather to be the dynamic result of an internal *force*, called “norm” (and later redefined as “pattern”), which basically derives from speaker’s mimetic *habitus* and communicative needs. Such a psychological ground allows a semiological system to be always in a dynamic equilibrium, slowly revolving according to its own internal, specific transformative trails or “tension” (*spænding*):

the necessity of keeping the language in a determined form as an exploitable communicative medium is the natural cause for the speaker’s conservative tendency. I would like to stress that this conservative tendency is the only tendency which influences language from the outside. We can think that both the modifications and their directions depend on an effort within the corresponding language, on a tension of within the system. If this is correct, the relationship should likely be reversed: system is moving and tendencies are restraining it from moving [...]. During times of instability, the conservative tendency weakens its grip, leaving the system more free to follow according its self-established lines. When socio-political conditions have stabilized again, the system is restrained once more as the conservative tendency recovers its power (Hjelmslev 1972: 21-22, our translation).

Thus, even if linguistic pattern is conceived as a synchronic game of subtle forces or as a veritable “*champ de tension*” (*Spielraum*), there is nothing in this conception that suggests an anti-historical approach. On the contrary, such a conception seems to support the idea of an *internal temporality* of linguistic structures as a condition for a *panchronic* general grammar. It looks like this conception resembles that particular

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<sup>5</sup> At least in the case of Hjelmslev, this is the main interpretation of those who support the thesis of the “de-psychologisation of linguistics”.

notion of temporality Saussure introduces in the *Troisième Cours*: any semiological system is already a vessel in the sea, and its abstract analysis is always designed to be (or shall always lead to) a synthetic reconstruction of it.

In stressing these four points, we intended to loosen the classical view of the positions here at issue: we are too often led to assume that the classic couples such as synchrony/diachrony, langue/parole, individual/social correspond each other as an uniform, binary interpretative category. In our opinion, a contrastive reading of these questions shows us that

1. the real opposition is not between synchrony that negates any modifications and diachrony that negates linguistic system, but between a synchronic approach which allows a proper distinction between synchronic and diachronic phenomena to be made and a diachronic approach which claims to be the only valid perspective against the anti-vitalistic, static and mechanical description<sup>6</sup>;
2. that Hjelmslev's conception of *language* tries to bring together *langue* and *parole* on a ground in which individual and social issues on the one side, and natural, cognitive and cultural, conventional aspects on the other were deeply interdependent. And yet, such a confirmation of language's complexity does not lead to a confusion: Hjelmslev's attempt to return language to its logical, psychological and sociological complexity *does* rest upon the claim of both language's and linguistics' autonomy. But such an autonomy has nothing to do with the exclusion of all which is not pertinent: even the exclusion of normative logic gives way to the idea of normative logic derived from linguistic "natural" thought.

It seems that, just like for Saussure, also for Hjelmslev the epistemological issues were coupled with a terminological effort: Hjelmslev's notion of "subconscious" do reflect the attempt to find new words for new thoughts, or to tune-up old words for new meanings – a struggle which may very well show its genuinely linguistic nature.

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<sup>6</sup> In this, we recognize Hjelmslev's anti-romantic aptitude. In the 1930s his theoretical attention was almost completely focused in the identification of a solid criterion for a *dynamic synchronic* description: "participation" was the fruit of such an effort (*cf.* Hjelmslev 1934; see also Cigana 2014b).

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