



TECHNISCHE UNIVERSITÄT  
CHEMNITZ

Workshop

The Foundations of Linguistics – Languages as Abstract Objects  
26. – 27. June 2015, Braunschweig University of Technology

# Predecessors: Hjelmslev's Glossematics and Linguistic Realism



Ellen Fricke & Martin Siefkes  
Chemnitz University of Technology

[ellen.fricke@phil.tu-chemnitz.de](mailto:ellen.fricke@phil.tu-chemnitz.de)  
[www.ellenfricke.de](http://www.ellenfricke.de)

[martin.siefkes@phil.tu-chemnitz.de](mailto:martin.siefkes@phil.tu-chemnitz.de)  
[www.siefkes.de](http://www.siefkes.de)

# Overview

1. Louis Hjelmslev
2. Hjelmslev's demands on a theory of language
3. Some important distinctions of glossematics
4. Hjelmslev and multimodal grammar

Louis Hjelmslev

# Louis Hjelmslev (1899 – 1965)

- Danish linguist
- Co-founder of the **Copenhagen school**
- Other members were: **Viggo Brøndal** (1887 – 1942), **Hans Jørgen Uldall** (1907 – 1957)
- One of the most important theoreticians of structuralism

# Louis Hjelmslev (1899 – 1965)

- Together with Uldall, he developed a theory of language called “glossematics”
- *An outline of Glossematics* (1936)
- *Prolegomena to a theory of language* (1963; Orig: *Omkring sprogteoriens grundlæggelse*, 1943)
- Further development of Saussure’s analysis, explicating Saussure’s notions
- **Glosseme** = smallest units of language: e.g. phonological and semantic features
- not identical with Leonard Bloomfield’s “glossemes”, which corresponds to morphemes

# Hjelmslev's demands on a theory of language

# Hjelmslev's basic assumptions

- 1) What makes something a language?
- 2) When is a language identical with itself in various **manifestations**?
  - In *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, Hjelmslev criticised earlier schools of linguistics that concentrated on language change (such as the Young Grammarians)
  - Hjelmslev argues against the “humanist tradition”, which claims that no general regularities can be found
  - **Anti-descriptivist** stance

# Demands on a linguistic theory

- For every **process**, linguists should look for an underlying **system**; for fluctuations, they should search for underlying constancy (cf. **Saussure**: langue vs. parole)

“Voices raised beforehand [...], pleading that we cannot subject to scientific analysis man’s spiritual life and the phenomena it implies [...], are merely aprioristic, and cannot restrain science from the attempt. If the attempt fails – not in particular performances, but in principle – then these objections are valid, and humanistic phenomena can be treated only subjectively and aesthetically. If, however, the attempt succeeds [...] it would then remain to perform corresponding experiments in the other fields of the humanities.”  
(**Hjelmslev**, *Prolegomena*: 10)

- **Hjelmslev** states clearly that linguistics should play a leading role for the humanities



# The empirical principle

- Hjelmslev formulated the **empirical principle** as a basis for glossematics

“The description shall be free of contradiction (self-consistent), exhaustive, and as simple as possible. The requirement of freedom from contradiction takes precedence over the requirement of exhaustive description. The requirement of exhaustive description takes precedence over the requirement of simplicity.” (Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena*:11)

- Hjelmslev regarded glossematics as distinguished from previous theories of language by this empirical principle
- It has to be **set above all other principles** in linguistic theory
- **But what is empirical about this principle?** We'll see in a moment

# Induction in linguistic analysis

“In linguistics, we usually call this method of procedure inductive. It may be defined briefly as a progression from component to class, not from class to component. It is a synthetic, not an analytic, movement [...].

It inevitably leads to the abstraction of concepts which are then hypostatized as real. This realism (in the mediæval sense of the word) fails to yield a useful basis of comparison, since the concepts thus obtained are [...] not generalizable beyond a single language in an individual stage. All our inherited terminology suffers from this unsuccessful realism.” (Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena*:12)

- **Induction** is the basic principle of “previous linguistics”, Hjelmslev claims
  - from individual sounds to phonemes (classes of sound)
  - from individual meanings to general or basic meanings (of lexemes)
  - etc.

# Induction in linguistic analysis

- **Induction**: generalisation from observed facts to general rules (David Hume)
- Hjelmslev points out that categories (class concepts) in traditional grammatics are won by induction from properties of observed category members
- In language: e.g. grammatical categories such as genitive, perfect, subjunctive, or passive, are **applied to different phenomena** in various languages (e.g. Latin and Greek)
- Inductive analysis can't ensure a self-consistent and simple description
  - Other **methods of description and evaluation** have to be found (cf. Martin Neef's argument for a phonology independent of phonetics)

# Hjelmslev's deductive approach

- Hjelmslev proposes a **deductive** approach
- Only the unanalysed text can be regarded as **empirical data**

“If the linguistic investigator is given anything [...], it is the as yet unanalyzed text in its undivided and absolute integrity. Our only possible procedure, if we wish to order a system to the process of that text, will be an analysis, in which the text is regarded as a class analyzed into components, then these components as classes analyzed into components, and so on until the analysis is exhausted.” (Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena*: 12-13)

# Relation of theory and empirical data

- Principle of **arbitrariness**: A theory should be independent of previous experience

“It constitutes what has been called a purely deductive system, in the sense that it may be used alone to compute the possibilities that follow from its premisses.” (Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena*, 14)

➤ This principle ensures that a priori methodology (e.g. search for symmetries) is allowed (Hjelmslev’s father was a mathematician!)

- Principle of **appropriateness**: Premises which explain certain empirical data are postulated as generally as possible.
- **Arbitrariness** ensures that limits of experience do not determine the theory; **appropriateness** guarantees its explanatory value.

# Hjelmslev on realism in linguistics

“Thus, if linguistic theory [...] is set in relation to the concept of reality, the answer to our question, whether the object determines and affects the theory or *vice versa*, is ‘both ... and’: by virtue of its **arbitrary** nature the theory is *arealistic*; by virtue of its **appropriateness** it is *realistic* (with the word *realism* taken here in the modern, and not, as before, in the mediæval sense).“ (Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena*, 15)

- In the *Prolegomena*, Hjelmslev distinguishes between three different types of **realism**:
  - **Mediæval realism**: hypostatizing concepts as real (opposed to nominalism)
  - **Modern realism**: analysis starting from the empirically given
  - **Naïve realism**: supposes that the objects in the domain of a science are directly empirically given

# Glossematics and linguistic realism

- The **generative paradigm** building on Noam Chomsky's understanding of language equates "language" with "language knowledge"
- Theories of grammar in this narrow sense only consider language competence
- In Chomsky's **competence vs. performance** distinction, "performance" is banned from linguistic investigation
- So-called **traditional grammar**, as well as **structuralist** approaches are not considered as grammar theories (Sternefeld & Richter 2012; cf. Neef 2014)
- It has been shown (in work by Jerrold J. Katz, Paul Postal, and Hans-Heinrich Lieb, among others) that this paradigm is contradictory
- Linguistic realism (Neef 2014) can be regarded as a new paradigm in linguistics

# Glossematics and linguistic realism

- Linguistic realism regards language as an **abstract object**, an assumption shared by Hjelmslev and structuralism generally, which regards language as a sign system
- Glossematics is a theory of language of which **not all aspects** (assumed categories and properties) **are empirically accessible**
  - Cf. the arbitrariness principle
- The **empirical principle** together with the **principle of arbitrariness** ensures that consistency is placed over empirical verification of theoretical categories
- Hjelmslev's reflections lend themselves to a **criticism of approaches that draw theoretical categories from the empirical data**



# Double articulation

- Double articulation is described by Hjelmslev as the relation from **figurae** [e.g. phonemes, graphemes] to **signs** [e.g. morphemes]
- Languages have a limited repertoire of **figurae**
- Figurae distinguish signs / meanings and follow **combination restrictions**

# Characterising languages

“Languages, then, cannot be described as pure sign systems. By the aim usually attributed to them [communication; M.S.], they are first and foremost sign systems; but by their internal structure they are first and foremost something different, namely systems of figurae that can be used to construct signs.” (Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena*: 47)

- Language is a sign system in regard to its external functions
- However, in its internal functions, it is a system of a limited set of figurae with combinatorial constraints allowing the construction of an unlimited set of signs
  - This is relevant for psychological aspects (language acquisition, memory, ...)

# Some important distinctions of glossematics

# Expression and content

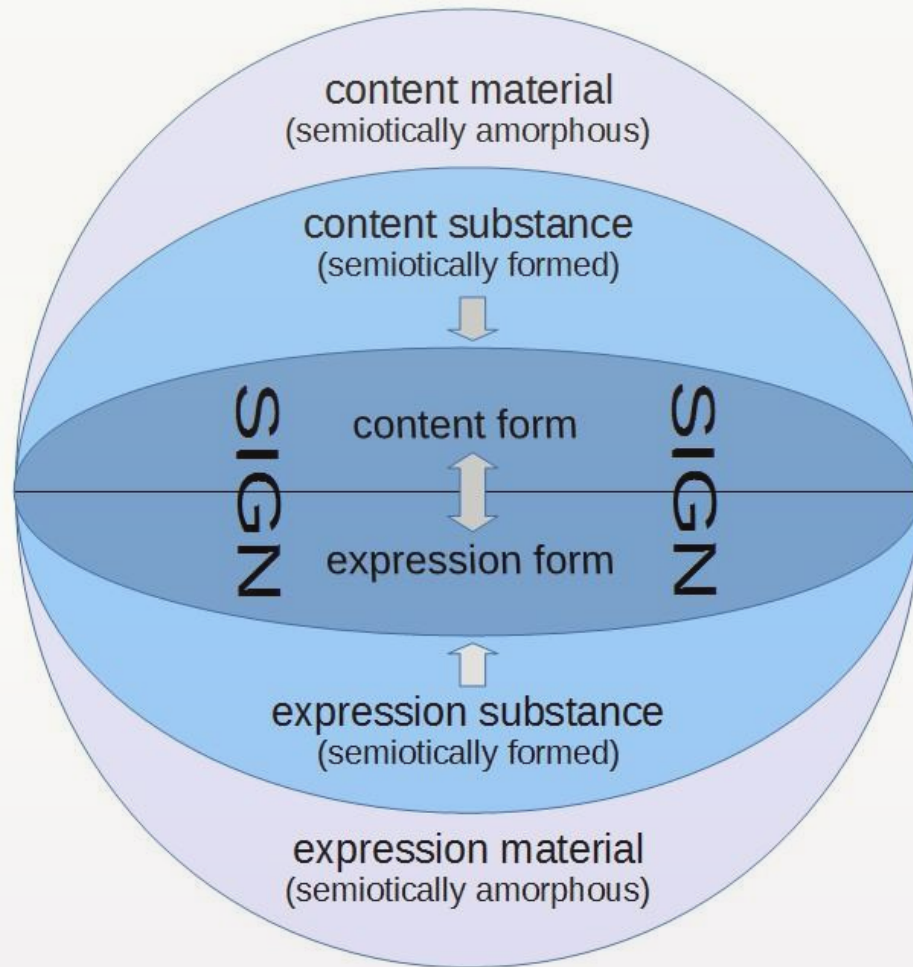
- Two planes of a text: **expression plane** vs. **content plane**
- Cf. Saussure's dichotomy **signifiant** vs. **signifié**
- The planes are only defined by their interdependence, neither can be identified on its own (→ **Saussure**)
- Both planes are similarly structured:

**material** vs. **substance** vs. **form**

# Expression and content

material vs. substance vs. form

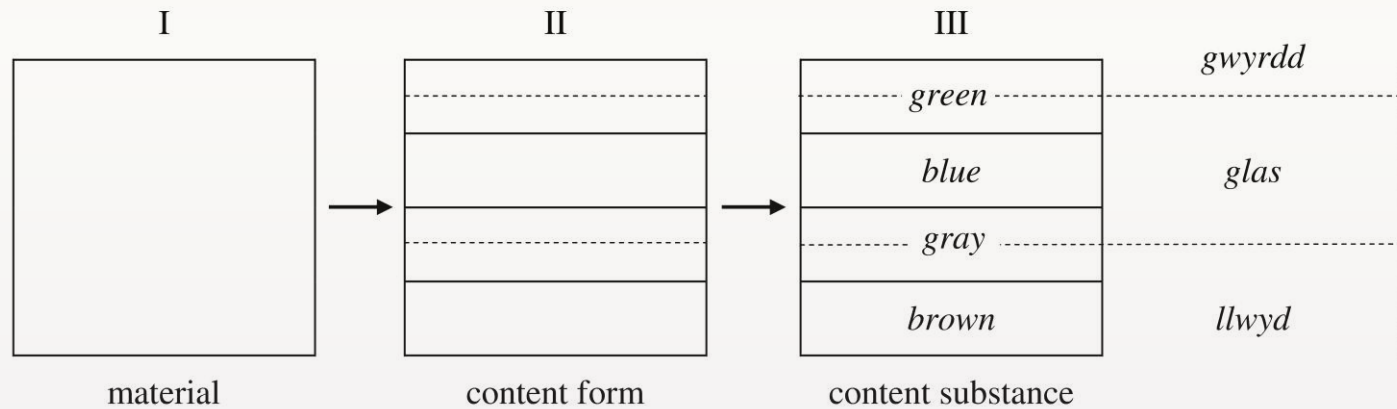
1. **material**: amorphous, semiotically unstructured
2. **substance**: semiotically formed material
3. **form**: structure (defined by oppositions, i.e. distinctions on the respective other plane)
  - only the form (on both planes) constitutes the **sign**!
  - **Substance sciences** (e. g. phonetics) do not belong to linguistics proper



*Figure 1:*  
Hjelmslev's sign model (after Nöth 2000: 81).

<i>green</i>	<i>gwrdd</i>
<i>blue</i>	<i>glas</i>
<i>gray</i>	
<i>brown</i>	<i>llwyd</i>

*Figure 2:*  
Terms for the colour spectrum in English and in Welsh  
(after Hjelmslev 1963: 53).



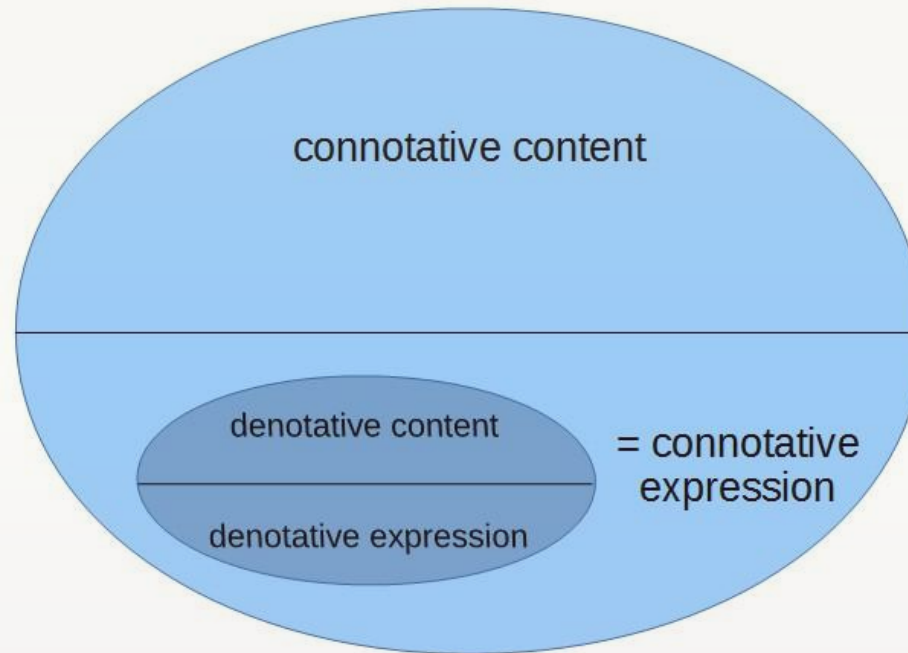
*Figure 3:*  
The relationship between form, material, and substance illustrated for  
the colour spectrum (following Trabant, cf. Krampen 1981: 152).

# Tests for determining units

- by paradigmatic exchange: **replacement** test
- by syntagmatic exchange: **commutation** test
  - **figurae**: “minimal change” on the other level in the **replacement** test
  - **-emes**: limited number of correlates on the other level in the **commutation** test

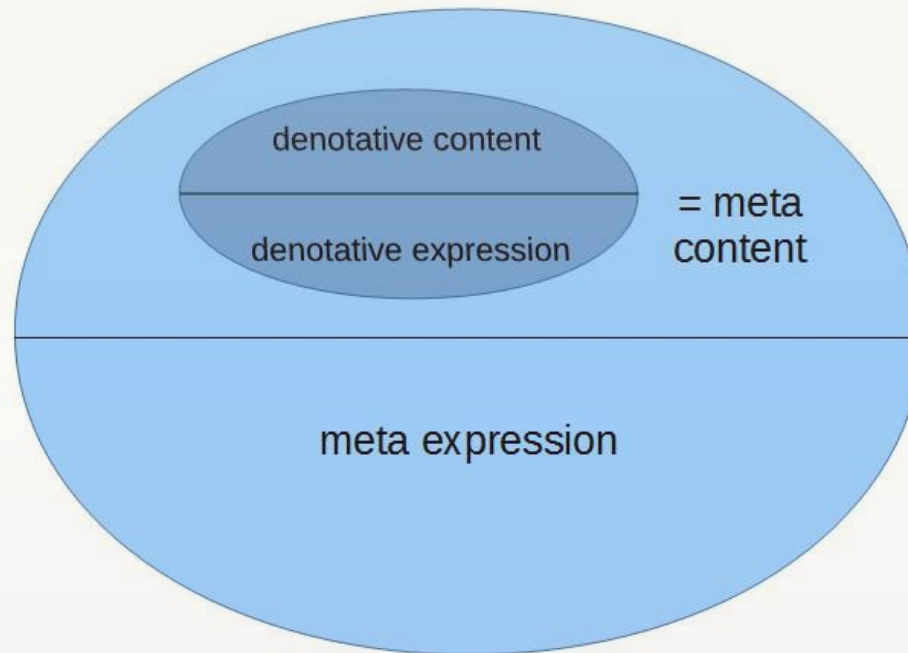


# Recursive use



*Figure 4:*  
Hjelmslev's model of a connotative sign (cf. Nöth 2000: 86).

# Recursive use



*Figure 5:*  
Hjelmslev's model of a meta sign (cf. Nöth 2000: 87).

# Hjelmslev and multimodal grammar

# Language in different manifestations

- Glossematics doesn't privilege **speech** over **gesture**, and criticises the dominance of phonetics
- The integral text is the only 'input' for analysis

“The long supremacy of conventional phonetics has, moreover, had the effect of restricting the linguists' conception even of 'natural' language in a way that is demonstrably unempirical, *i.e.*, inappropriate because non-exhaustive. It has been supposed that the expression-substance of a spoken language must consist exclusively of 'sounds.' Thus, as has been pointed out by [Eberhard und Kurt Zwirner] in particular, the fact has been overlooked that speech is accompanied by, and that certain components of speech can be replaced by, gesture, [...] very nearly all the striate musculature, cooperate in the exercise of 'natural language'.”  
(Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena*: 103)

# Towards multimodal grammar

- Thus, **Hjelmslev** explicitly includes **gesture**, **facial expression**, and **body posture** in language
- In glossematics, these are not separate “sign systems” or “modes”, but an integral whole
- Each language gives a different **form** to a previously amorphous **material**, forming it to a **substance**
- Language (= pure **form**) **manifests** itself in different **substances** (modes)
- For each language, a **multimodal grammar** has to be developed that includes all modes (= **substances**)

# Towards multimodal grammar

- One **form** (= single language) can manifest itself in different **substances** (e.g. **sound** and **gesture**)
- **Hjelmslev** (Prolegomena: 103) explicitly points out that (following Saussure) **substance** cannot be used to define a language
- **Hjelmslev** is thus not only a predecessor of **linguistic realism**, but also of **multimodality**!

# Bibliography

- FRICKE, Ellen (2012), *Grammatik multimodal: Wie Wörter und Gesten zusammenwirken*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter.
- FRICKE, Ellen (2013), “Towards a unified grammar of gesture and speech: A multimodal approach”, in: Cornelia Müller, Alan Cienki, Ellen Fricke et al. (eds.), *Body – Language – Communication. An International Handbook on Multimodality in Human Interaction*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, vol. 1, 733–754.
- HJELMSLEV, Louis (1936), *An Outline of Glossematics*. Kopenhagen: Levin og Munksgaard.
- HJELMSLEV, Louis (1963), *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. Translated by Francis J. Whitfield. First published as (1943): *Omkring sprogteoriens grundlæggelse*. Kopenhagen: Munksgaard.
- JOHANSEN, Jørgen Dines (1998), “Hjelmslev and Glossematics”, in: Posner, Roland, Klaus Robering und Thomas A. Sebeok (Hg.) (1997–2004), *Semiotik / Semiotics. Ein Handbuch zu den zeichentheoretischen Grundlagen von Natur und Kultur*. 4 vols. Berlin: de Gruyter, vol. 2: 2272–2289.
- NEEF, Martin (2014), “Das nächste Paradigma: Realistische Linguistik”. *Muttersprache* 2/2014: 105-120.
- NÖTH, Winfried (2000), *Handbuch der Semiotik*. 2nd, revised ed. Stuttgart: Metzler. 78–87.
- SIEFKES, Martin (2015), “Sturm auf die Zeichen. Was die Semiotik von ihren Kritikern lernen kann”. *Schriften zur Kultur- und Mediensemiotik Online* 1/2015: 7–42.