

Course : Linguistics

Level : L2

Lecturer : Prof. Saliha CHELLI

Unit: 1 European structuralism

Lesson 5

Copenhagen School of Linguistics



Louis Hjelmslev



Viggo Brøndal

The **Copenhagen School** was a centre of structural linguistics founded by Louis Hjelmslev (1889-1965) and Viggo Brøndal (1887/1942). The school was one of the most important centres of structuralism together with the Geneva School and the Prague School. The Linguistic Circle of Copenhagen is a local linguistics association of Danish linguists. It was founded in 1931 by Louis Hjelmslev and became soon famous as one of the centres of European structuralism.

The Linguistic Circle of Copenhagen

Their main inspiration was the Prague Linguistic Circle. At the beginning, their main interest was in developing an alternative concept of the phoneme, but developed later into the theory called **glossematics** influenced by structuralism.

The ideas of Brøndal and Hjelmslev were not always compatible. Hjelmslev's more formalist approach attracted a group of followers, principal among them Hans Jørgen Uldall and Eli Fischer-Jørgensen, who would strive to apply Hjelmslev's abstract ideas of the nature of language to analyses of actual linguistic data.

Hjelmslev (1889-1965)

Hjelmslev (1889-1965) a Danish linguist and semiotician, as the key figure of Copenhagen School in the 1930s, was later known for a theory called glossematics. Together with Hans Jørgen Uldall, they attempted to analyse the expression (phonetics and grammar) and the meaning of a language on a coherent basis.

According to Meriam-Webster Dictionary: the **meaning** of **GLOSSEMATICS** is **linguistic analysis based on the distribution and interrelationship of glosseemes**.

A glosseme is the smallest unit (as a word, a stem, a grammatical element, an intonation, or an order of words) that signals a meaning in a language.

and he was interested in a general theory of the signs of communication, semiotics or semiology.

According to glossematics, any scientific study of language must analyze language at a hierarchy of interrelated formal function.

The principal ideas of the school are:

- A language consists of **content and expression**. **Expression** refers to the *form* in which language appears (sounds, letters, signs, gestures) while content refers to the meaning expressed (concepts, ideas and semantic categories)
- A language consists of **a succession and a system**.

Succession (process): Elements come one after another, example: "cat" = c → a → t in a sequence.

System (structure) : Beyond the sequence, each element belongs to a complex network of relations and oppositions.

Example: The phoneme /t/ is defined not by its position alone but by its contrast with /d/, /k/, /p/, etc. In other words, language is not only a chain but also a *network*. Understanding meaning requires studying both dimensions simultaneously.

Content and expression are interconnected by commutation.

The contribution of the Copenhagen Linguistic Circle

More than Saussure, the Copenhagen School is interested in **the langue rather than parole**. It represented in a pure form the idea that language is a form and not a substance. It studied the relational system within the language on a higher level of abstraction.

Membership of the group grew rapidly and a significant list of publications resulted, including an irregular series of larger works under the name '*Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Copenhague*'

In 1989 a group of members of the Copenhagen Linguistic circle inspired by the advances in cognitive linguistics and the functionalist theories of Simon C. Dik founded the School of Danish Functional Grammar aiming to combine the ideas of Hjelmslev and Brøndal, and other important Danish linguists such as Paul Diderichsen and Otto Jespersen with modern functional linguistics.

Among the prominent members of this new generation of the Copenhagen School of Linguistics were Peter Harder, Elisabeth Engberg Petersen, Frans Gregersen and Michael Fortescue, and the basic work of the school is "Danish Functional Grammar."

Some useful links:

Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias: <https://en-academic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/11070476>

Concise History of Language Sciences:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/B9780080425801500465>

Linguistics theory II Course: <https://zaabriinaa.blogspot.com/2011/11/copenhagen-school.html>