LOUIS HJELMSLEV

On 30 May 1965, in Copenhagen, Louis Trolle Hjelmslev succumbed to a long and tragic illness. He was only sixty-five.

Hjelmslev had been Professor of Comparative Linguistics at the University of Copenhagen since 1937, the third occupant of the distinguished chair first held by Vilhelm Thomsen, and the immediate successor in it of his teacher, Holger Pedersen. Since 1956 he had also been Director of the University's Institute for Linguistics and Phonetics, which he himself had founded. He is survived by Vibeke Mackeprang Hjelmslev, whom he married in 1925.

In the history of our science, Hjelmslev already occupies a secure place in the very first ranks of the great and original thinkers—of whatever nationality and tradition—who have placed us most heavily in their debt. But it is fitting for us to remember, as he himself was proud to do, the strength that he derived from the Danish linguistic tradition, which he described with moving affection and respect in his Inaugural Lecture (Hjelmslev 1937).[1] 'It is the tradition to be untraditional', he declared, finding within that paradox the seeds of a freedom, independence, and detachment to which he ascribed the special character of Danish linguistics. These qualities, which he delighted in pointing out in the work of his predecessors, particularly that of Rasmus Rask, are certainly most eminently exemplified in his own career.

He was born in Copenhagen on 3 October 1899, the son of Johannes Hjelmslev, who later became Professor of Mathematics at the University—and whose inductive 'natural geometry', as his son never failed to observe when the subject arose, lay poles apart from the principles and methods that were to provide the foundation of glossematic theory.

Louis Hjelmslev's preoccupation with language began early. He once told me—as the kind of childhood memory to which one attaches some special significance—that he was still quite a young boy when he one day realized, to his surprise, that in his own pronunciation he made a consistent, although minute, distinction between two words that were homonyms in the speech of those about him. (And he added, by the way, in a characteristically playful tone, that he had always maintained the distinction—observable, but in fact unobserved by his linguistic colleagues.) When he entered the University in 1917 to study comparative linguistics, he had already won a school prize for an essay on compound words in Danish; in 1919 he received the University's gold medal for his prize essay on the Oscan inscriptions. In 1923 he obtained the master's degree, with Lithuanian phonology as his special field. He had studied in Lithuania in 1921,

[1] An English translation of this lecture was chosen by Hjelmslev to head the collection of his selected papers that was published on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday (Hjelmslev 1959). The volume includes a complete bibliography of his publications from 1922 through 1958. Two invaluable appreciations of his scientific career that have been published by Danish colleagues since his death are those of Eli Fischer-Jørgensen (1965) and of Knud Togeby (1965).

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and the year following receipt of his degree he spent as a fellowship student in Prague. There can be no doubt, however, that his study years in Paris—1926 and 1927—were of incomparably greater importance both in his formation as a scholar and in the cultural sympathies to which he remained attached throughout his life.

It was in Paris that Hjelmslev composed his first major work, *Principes de grammaire générale* (1928), which, because of its subject (!), was found unacceptable as a dissertation for the doctorate in comparative linguistics. It reveals not only the impressive erudition of its author, but, what is even more important, also the firm sense of direction that kept that erudition under control and that remained as the guiding factor in all his subsequent work. To distinguish grammatical from nongrammatical conceptions of language and to determine, among the observable and imaginable grammatical conceptions, that one which may be expected to lead to an autonomous and 'panchronic' science of language—these announced aims of *Principes* were later refined and their implications drastically reassessed, but they were never abandoned. Whoever seeks a more than superficial understanding of Hjelmslev's thought and its development must return again and again to *Principes* as to its wellspring.[2] Here also are to be found the most explicit indications of the primary influences on his lifework,[3] the achievements of the four linguistic centers that he singles out for special mention—Geneva and Paris, Moscow and Leningrad—to which, he notes, 'à strictement parler', must be added Copenhagen, as represented by the much less well-known, but nevertheless trailblazing, discoveries of H. G. Wiwel.

Two historical essays in the field of Baltic phonology, published under the title *Études baltiques*, earned Hjelmslev the doctorate in 1932. In the same year, the centennial of Rask's death, he published the first volume of his edition of Rask's selected works, which eventually comprised three volumes in all and to which he added, in 1941, two volumes of Rask's correspondence. This editorial work—tedious, no doubt, in its details—led to a lifelong interest in Rask and to a radical reconsideration of the significance of his work in the history of linguistics.[4] Despite such distractions from the program which he had laid down for himself in *Principes*, and despite the assignment of introducing instruction in

[2] In this sense, one can agree with Togeby when he writes (161): 'Much has been said about the changes in Hjelmslev's theories, but they relate only to details.' Only—such 'details' include, for example, the whole theory of morphemes, which is mentioned incidentally in the introduction to *Principes* as indispensable work that remains to be done in laying the foundations of grammar.

[3] Influences are not to be confused with sources. Hjelmslev later found it desirable to 'emphasize that the theory of glossematics should not be identified with that of Saussure' and to add (1959:32): 'my own theoretical approach had begun to take shape ... before I even knew of Saussure's theory.' Nor are the influences by any means confined to those emanating from the Franco-Swiss and Russian schools. To take but one example, the frequent references made in *Principes* to Sapir's *Language* would suffice in themselves—even without the many indications that Hjelmslev later gave—to demonstrate the profound impression that Sapir's approach had made on him, despite important disagreements.

[4] Hjelmslev's interpretation of Rask's aims (1951) still awaits the careful discussion that it deserves. An important beginning—even though the author explicitly declines to engage in direct criticism of Hjelmslev's views—is to be found in Diderichsen (1966).

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comparative linguistics at the University of Aarhus, where he accepted appointment as docent in 1934, he was able to publish the first part of *La catégorie des cas*, followed two years later by a second part (1935–37). This work was destined to remain incomplete. Like his work on Rask, this detailed exposition of the theory of linguistic content and its application calls for deeper criticism than it has so far received. In view of Hjelmslev's own later references to it, it is hard to accept the opinion that, as a whole, it represents any diversion from his main line of thought, but its place within the development of glossematic theory remains to be definitely fixed.

The year 1935 was also the year in which Hjelmslev and Hans Jørgen Uldall presented their theory of expression-analysis at the London Congress of Phonetic Sciences and the year in which, as Uldall has written, 'glossematics first saw the dark of three o'clock in the morning'. Uldall had returned to Denmark in 1933, after study in England and America. Glossematics was the result of an intimate collaboration, begun soon thereafter, in which he and Hjelmslev had striven to bring together under a unified theory securely based principles of analysis and description of both content and expression. They confidently expected to be able to present the theory in finished form to the Copenhagen Congress of Linguists in 1936, but in fact the *Outline of Glossematics* of that year (whose listing in the bibliographies can still be a source of no little confusion) is, as its subtitle indicates, merely a synopsis of the projected work, followed by a few sample pages. Although their active collaboration continued until the outbreak of the War and Uldall's consequent departure from Denmark, only the first part of the *Outline*—Uldall's part—was ever published. Hjelmslev's Nachlass includes a 187-page *Sprogteori: Résumé*, prepared for publication in 1943, which was evidently intended as a preliminary, compressed presentation of the formal glossematic procedure, to be reworked and expanded in collaboration with Uldall on the restoration of peace. It was apparently the (unfulfilled) hope of an early return to joint work on the *Outline* that in the end decided Hjelmslev against publication. Meanwhile, *Omkring sprogteoriens grundlæggelse* (1943) was to be Hjelmslev's own general introduction to the theory.

As things turned out, *OSG* had to serve in a capacity for which it was never, strictly speaking, intended. Inevitably, in the absence of the promised *Outline*, there was a strong temptation to use what Hjelmslev had expressly called prolegomena as a succedaneum for the formal theory itself. And inevitably, after André Martinet's important review-article (1946), and, particularly, after the volume of *Recherches structurales* presented to Hjelmslev on his fiftieth birthday, where references to *OSG* occur on every other page, there was an increased demand for a translation that would make the work more accessible to the general community of linguists. At the same time, Hjelmslev was most reluctant to yield to the demand, not so much, I believe, because of the labor of supervision that would be required of him as because of his doubts whether the proposed function of the book would be properly understood. 'You must remember', he would say at our working sessions during the sweltering Bloomington summer of 1952, 'that this was intended as a work of—in a certain sense—popularization.' Since the reminder would invariably follow some long discussion of an

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especially thorny point, it would just as invariably be accompanied by a droll smile. He well knew, of course, that *OSG* could be thought of as popularization only from a rather special point of view. He was none the less completely serious in emphasizing that it necessarily makes certain concessions to received notions that would have been inappropriate in a formal presentation of the theory.

His work on the English translation (for which he himself provided the title *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*) (1953) was typical of his generosity and courtesy. When presented with the draft translation, shortly before coming to this country, he had been careful to authorize only a limited, multigraphed edition, exclusively for the use of his class at the 1952 Linguistic Institute. But when, at the Institute, he decided that he could collaborate with the translator in producing a finished version, he gave unstintingly of his time until every page had been reviewed in what amounted to an extra course offered to one student in the foundations of glossematics. If—as he might well have done—he considered it brashness when the translator suggested changes in the text itself, he never revealed any such reaction, but would give serious consideration to each suggestion, often deferring decision until the next meeting to give himself time for further thought. Nor did his interest in the work cease with its publication. As late as 1960, when, in visibly failing health, he participated in the International Congress for Logic, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science held at Stanford University, he contributed new material and conferred with the translator about changes for the revised edition that appeared in the following year (1961). He had, one felt, made a decision of no small importance to himself in agreeing to the translation. Once made, the decision entailed in his mind serious obligations, which he never shrank from accepting. At the same time, his unique blend of loyalty, frankness, and humor made the work light—certainly for the translator, I dare think also for him.

Two years before the composition of *OSG*, Hjelmslev had written a general introduction to language and linguistic science which is closer to being a real work of popularization, but it is not popularization of glossematics except in the sense that the whole discussion bears the clear stamp of the theory. It is a short book—remarkably short for the many subjects it covers—but it was first considered too long for the series to which it had been contributed. In consequence, it did not appear until 1963, as Hjelmslev's last publication: *Sproget: en introduktion*. A French version of the work has appeared (1966), and an English one is now in preparation.

For Hjelmslev, structural linguistics always remained a program of research—research that is based on, and that constantly puts to trial, the working hypothesis that it is scientifically legitimate to describe language as being a structure. No one was more concerned than he, once he had established the bases of his theory, to 'get on with it' and test the soundness of the theory in its application. His work after 1943 was particularly directed toward exploration of the content plane of language, and nine of the fifteen pieces that he chose for inclusion in *Essais linguistiques* were devoted to such studies. As late as 'La stratification du langage' (1954), however, he returned once more to the theory as a whole, developing some of its farthest implications in a study that ranks in im-

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portance along with *Principes* and *OSG*. Theory and practice were, necessarily according to his principles, indivisible in the study of the most interesting thing in the world—language. 'La langue est la forme par laquelle nous concevons le monde. Il n'y a pas de théorie de la connaissance, objective et définitive, sans recours aux faits de la langue. Il n'y a pas de philosophie sans linguistique' (1959:164). These words, which he wrote in 1938, perhaps best reveal his ultimate inspiration and the source of that extraordinary strength to which we owe all that Louis Hjelmslev was able to give us.

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