

Titel: BREV TIL: Eli Fischer-Jørgensen FRA: Charles Ernest Bazell (1955-02-11)

Citation: "BREV TIL: Eli Fischer-Jørgensen FRA: Charles Ernest Bazell (1955-02-11)", i *Louis Hjelmslev og hans kreds*, s. 1. Onlineudgave fra Louis Hjelmslev og hans kreds: https://tekster.kb.dk/catalog/lh-texts-kapsel_004-shoot-wacc-2005_0099_004_EFJ-Bazell_0210_p1_bP0_TB00004/facsimile.pdf (tilgået 02. maj 2024)

Anvendt udgave: Louis Hjelmslev og hans kreds

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Istanbul 11/2/55

Dear Miss Fischer-Jørgensen,

I hope you received the brief replies to your questions by the 15th. But small matter if you did not, since as I said, there were no important misinterpretations, and none at all for which you could be to blame; I wonder if you could let me have a copy of the critical part of your presentation (even if it has melted butter on it)?

A few more details.

"Intrinsic similarity" and "composition" are of course quite distinct when it comes to different mediums, since then intrinsic similarity has no application at all, whereas one may still distinguish between isomorphism of composition and isomorphism of distribution. In a conventional phonemic transcription, the letters may be said to have the same formal distribution as the phonemes they represent, but not the same formal composition. Whereas, if the different features were represented each by invariable letter-parts, they could also be said to have the same formal composition as the phonemes.

Of course, to say that two wholes (e.g. the wholes constituted by phonemes divisible into features) have the same formal composition, is to say that the distribution of the parts (up to the level of the whole, but not beyond) is the same (e.g. that if nasality combines with coarseness, but not with vocalicity, then e.g. there is a dot which combines with a stroke but not with a circle and so on, in the compositionally equivalent graphic system). So statements of formally equivalent composition may be turned into statements of formally equivalent distribution. But the reverse is equally true. Statements on the distribution of phonemes can be turned into statements on the composition of words.

But this points to an important terminological error in my paper, to which I am grateful that you have indirectly drawn attention. When opposed to intrinsic, distribution does not have the same meaning as when it is opposed to composition. In the former case it means only distribution among substantially defined units. Within a given medium, this distinction is naturally superfluous, since however they are defined, the units will be of like substance. But of course within the given medium, the distinction between "composition" and "intrinsic similarity" is also (with the relatively trivial exception made in my letter) also superfluous.

My terminological solution is to separate the opposition intrinsic/extrinsic from the opposition compositional/distributional. They are parallel oppositions, but the one should be general, and the other apply specially to a given medium. There is hence another confusion that I ought to have dealt with. My fault, according to you, is that I made a false distinction. The fault was rather to make a false identification. Anyway I was wrong.

I am looking forward to the studies you announce, especially to that on the overlapping manifestations of phonemes. This is closely connected with the question of the "arbitrary", on which I am grateful to have your agreement in principle. I wish you could have dealt with this in your paper for 'ota. For instance the Japanese distribution ka ki fu is not to be set on a par with the conceivable distribution fa fi hu, which would not be easy to motivate -- hence in the latter case one would be more inclined (other things equal) to assume "accidental gaps" in the distribution. This is the only criterion which (in "Linguistic Form") I added to those which you gave (in the second paragraph, consisting of one and a half lines, on p.10 -- did you recognise that this was what I meant by it?). As for "Linguistic Form" in general, nobody approves of it, but most people seem to approve of some part. You are nearly the first (actually you are the second) to approve of my geographical parallel. I accept your extension of the analogy, which can be developed.

Yours sincerely

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