

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

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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 Ha Ni 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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P.S. I should say more about the form/substance opposition, since here lies your main charge against my treatment. But after all the notion of isomorphism is clear enough. Now one may say that one has given a formal description when all the terms used may be indifferently substituted for any other terms, providing only that the same logical relations hold between them. All other terms are substantial.

The mere fact that one can use after of temporal as well as spacial relations does not turn it into a formal term. after is not a formal term when used in such a way that one could not indifferently substitute before for after and vice-versa, since the two terms obey the same logical rules. Nor is it a formal term if one could not substitute above and below for before and after. Within a system of discrete successions, as phonemics is, one could also substitute the relation "father of", since all the logical relations are equivalent -- at least if one takes after in the sense "immediately after", as is usual in phonemics. If of course if means "anywhere after" then this meaning would formally include "ancestor of" (or for that matter "descendant of").

It is not necessary that a formal term should have any application whatsoever outside a given domain. What is necessary is that it should be applicable, whenever the logical relations are the same. The relation "simultaneous with", if taken in the substantial sense, has no application in phonemics (as opposed to feature-analysis); but formally it has an application, for "simultaneous with" obeys the same logical rules as "being in the same word with", and hence, if formally used, must include this. (If A is simultaneous with B, and B with C, A is simultaneous with C -- and this holds if one substitutes "is in the same word with" for "simultaneous", etc.).

In other words a term is formally used if all substitutions are synonyms when they do not (in the context) affect the calculus of relations.

And here, I think, one may lay one's finger on another reason why distribution is regarded as more "formal" than composition. In a logical calculus, all the rules are either rules of distribution (known as "rules of formation") or else rules presupposing such rules (e.g. rules of transformation -- cf. Bar-Hillel's last article in Language). Composition does not enter into the picture at all -- it has no need to, since the terms are defined exclusively in respect to their relations to other terms in the calculus; and a calculus tells one how terms behave, not "how they are made up" -- it would be meaningless to ask how they are made up, since they have no make-up. (It is a notational fact, and not an arithmetical fact, that the sign "plus" is made up of two strokes; yet if one were (absurdly) to regard arithmetic as a "language", the composition of the sign would be just as interesting as its behaviour.) Yet since mathematics serves as a model of the "formal", is it not natural to take distribution as "eminently formal"? I believe that this that lies behind a lot of stuff in Harris and such people. They have the algebraic model in front of them. It is a ridiculous model to take for a science like linguistics which begins with complexes and seeks to break them up.

For the purpose of my paper, differences in substance were identified with differences in medium, but other differences could equally well be treated in the same way. For instance "paradigmatics" and "syntagmatics" may be treated as two substances having the same form. Every relation in the one has a logically equivalent relation in the other. It is for this reason that a contrast is profitable, although there is no immediate logical opposition. I am here using "syntagmatic" in its commonest sense (adopted in my booklet). On the other hand the genuine logical opposition between rules of substitution and rules of combination cannot be treated in this way, for they are not isomorphic. It is a tautology to say that a unit may be substituted for itself, but not a tautology to say that it can combine with itself (as in congruence). Whereas in syntagmatics (the relations of units in combination -- not the rules for their combination) there is the corresponding tautology: namely that the unit occupies the same segment as itself.

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