

Titel: The theory of glossematics, [MTG] 125-0170

Citation: "The theory of glossematics, [MTG] 125-0170", i *Louis Hjelmslev og hans kreds*, s. 1. Onlineudgave fra Louis Hjelmslev og hans kreds: [https://tekster.kb.dk/catalog/lh-texts-kapsel\\_125-shoot-workidacc-1992\\_0005\\_125\\_MTG\\_0170/facsimile.pdf](https://tekster.kb.dk/catalog/lh-texts-kapsel_125-shoot-workidacc-1992_0005_125_MTG_0170/facsimile.pdf) (tilgået 26. april 2024)

Anvendt udgave: Louis Hjelmslev og hans kreds

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THE THEORY OF GLOSSEMATICS

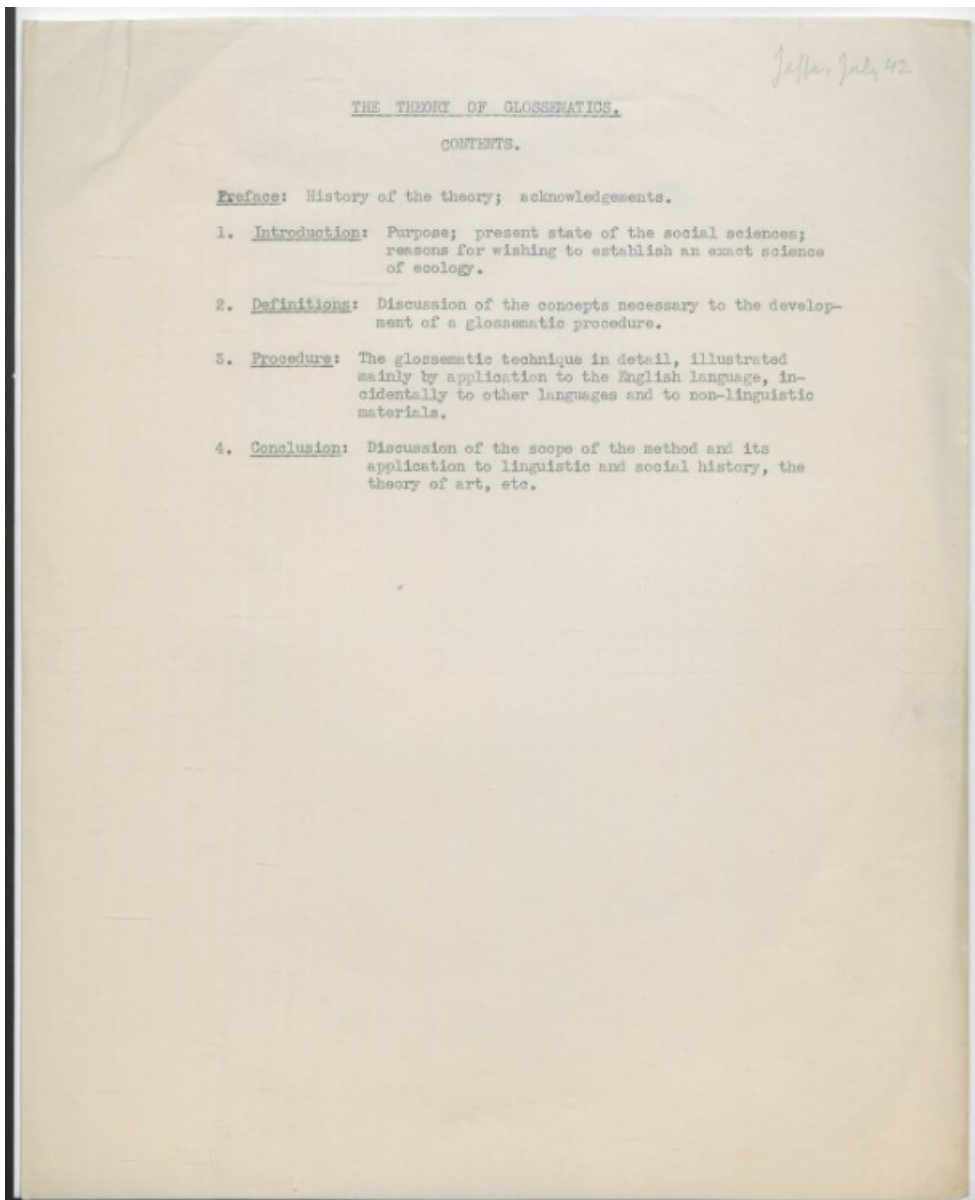
A Study in the Method of Social Science, with Special Application to Linguistics

BY

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Til

LOUIS HJELMSLEV.



PREFACE.

There is a Danish proverb which you will find in nearly all the Danish books that have a preface. It says *forord bryder ingen trætte*, but as I have never quite understood what it means, I refrain from translating.

In any case, I do not really like prefaces, and no book of mine should have one were it not that, in this case, it is necessary to say something about the pre-history of the book.

I came home from America in 1933, my head whirling with a newly acquired smattering of anthropology, with the linguistics of Boas and Sapir superimposed on the phonetics of Daniel Jones, and with the stubborn refusal of the language of the Maidus to conform to any grammatical pattern known to me. In Copenhagen I met a number of linguists struggling with similar problems, foremost among them Louis Hjelmslev, who had already published his *Principes de grammaire generale*, and who was just then in eruption against the psychologism of the Prague School Phonology. I immediately became initiated, and Hjelmslev, Ider, and I started erupting in unison as the *Comite phonetique* of the *Carole linguistique de Copenhague*. We founded yet another phonetic science called *phonematies*, which Hjelmslev and I presented at the London Congress in 1935 in a state of green unripeness. It caused a slight fluttering of the phonetic dove-cote, principally because of its rich and rare terminology. The idea was to analyse and classify speech-sounds entirely on the basis of their functions, with no regard to accompanying platonic ideas on the one hand or physical manifestations on the other.

After the Congress we worked on. By this time both Hjelmslev and I had moved away from Copenhagen, and Ider found it impossible, because of this and pressure of other work, to continue the collaboration, which was a serious loss. In the winter we realized that Meaning could and must be treated by the same method as Sound. The name of our new science was accordingly changed to *Glossematics* ( \_\_\_\_\_, a tongue); it later turned out that even this was too narrow, when we found out that the method had applications beyond language. However, by that time it was too late to change again. "Phonematics" still remains as the name of the application of the method to the phonic substance of language.

We started writing a book, to be called *Outline of Glossematics*, and during the winter, spring, and summer of 1936 we covered, and then discarded, reams of yellow foolscap paper and inflicted a vast number of new terms on the principal European languages with the help of a Greek dictionary; many of these have since been found dispensable, you will be relieved to hear. My time was almost entirely my own in those days, thanks to the Carlsberg Foundation, but Hjelmslev had to fulfill his duties as professor at the University of Aarhus, and so we worked at night, which was all right for me who could sleep in the daytime. In the early morning I would bicycle home through the snow, while Hjelmslev finished his final glass of milk.

In the spring of 1956 we got a publication grant from the Rask-Grsted Foundation - entirely, I believe, on the recommendation of Professor Holger Pedersen; he did not, indeed, endorse the synopsis we presented, but he generously thought that although, or perhaps because, he could not sympathise with our radical and "philosophical" approach, the attempt should not be killed by lack of encouragement. We were also very flatteringly invited to publish the book as vol. 1 of the new series of the Humanistisk Selskab of Aarhus - after we had both read papers about it to the Society.

Our ambition was to have the book ready in time for the Copenhagen Linguistic Congress in the late summer of 1956, and so confident were we that the work was approaching final form, that we had special type cast for our formulae and sent manuscript to the printers as fast as it came out of the typewriter. Which turned out to be not nearly fast enough. Instead of an impressive volume the members of the Congress got a small pamphlet with a few sample pages, which very inadequately illustrated what we were trying to do. It was, as one candid colleague pointed out, decidedly not lecture de voyage; I find it difficult to understand, myself, now, and I tender my sincere apologies to anyone who may have struggled with it. The pamphlet advertised the book as "to be published in the autumn" but, through an oversight on my part rather than by guile, failed to mention which autumn. Hjelmslev's paper on the Morphematic Categories, read at the Congress, was considerably better glossematics, and so was his monograph on Case, although that was conceived before the revolution.

In the following years we were both too pre-occupied with other things to make glossematics our main concern, but the work went on whenever time could be found for it, and Hjelmslev wrote a number of articles about it and lectured on it, both at home and abroad, and we discussed it furiously in the Cercle linguistique de Copenhague. And the theory kept on changing. In 1958 we both read papers at the Phonetic Congress in Ghent and at the Ethnological Congress in Copenhagen. And still the theory kept on changing - in fact, publication always seemed to have the effect of precipitating a change.

In the summer of 1959 we both hoped to have a clear stretch of some months to edit the final version of the Outline. Then came the war and, the following spring, the occupation of Denmark, which put an end to collaboration at a time when the current Outline was still only a large collection of notes in duplicate, one copy in Copenhagen and one in Athens.

During all this time we had worked together so closely that neither of us could tell which had contributed what and, incidentally, without ever quarrelling. Since communications stopped I have changed my mind several times on several points, and I imagine that Hjelmslev must have done so too. The present position therefore is that I cannot make him responsible for anything contained in this book while, at the same time, the book would not have come into existence but for him, and a great deal of the theory was actually contributed by him.

Preface, 3.

I have hesitated for a long time to publish on my own but have finally made up my mind to do it, largely because I cannot get on with any other work until the theory has been presented.

My last communication from Hjelmslev was a letter via America announcing that he was publishing a preliminary edition of glossematics in Danish; before I could answer, the U.S.A. had entered the war too. I dedicate my own preliminary version to Louis Hjelmslev in the hope that it will soon be possible to continue our joint work on the Outline.

Cairo, 1942.

H.J.U.