

Titel: BREV TIL: Eli Fischer-Jørgensen FRA: unsure (1955-09-11)

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Anvendt udgave: Louis Hjelmslev og hans kreds

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Istanbul 11/9/55

Dear Miss Fischer-Jorgensen, I was glad to have your summary and the article which I will return after re-reading. I am sorry I misunderstood you over the role of substance in glossematics. But in turn you rather misunderstand me about the question of the vicious circle (where by the way did Hjelmslev write — it is a new name to me?). As I said myself (in the review of Tooby's book) there is no vicious circle for those who are ready to choose some distinctions of substance as having a prima facie claim to be likely correspondents with another distinction of substance on the other plane. (Although I would not talk of a 'semantic substance', I'm prepared to allow it for the purposes of argument here.) The vicious circle arises only when all differences of substance are regarded as 'equally good' to begin with. If one is prepared to face the possibility that there may be ten different degrees of vowel-aperture, and also that the language may distinguish between actions performed by men in green coats and actions performed by men in red coats (or even actions performed in the day-time from those performed at night, a distinction which is said to be made in some Amerindian languages), no beginning can be made. Nor, suppose, did Hjelmslev ever assert that anything so absurd would be possible. But he never tells us how it is that we are able to select certain phonetic semantic features in order to apply the commutation-test to them. Actually it is clear that we begin with our own language (and such others of which we have experience) and we assume for instance that the distinction of voice and unvoice is relevant and we assume e.g. that the distinction of aspirate and non-aspirate is irrelevant when we find that 'book' and 'cow' are homonyms in our new language. This does not worry us. But we begin to worry when we find that there are a hundred such homonyms. Two schools of thought then. One school is of the opinion that a semantic link can be found between

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the 'homonyms'— and such people point out that books are made of cow-hide, etc. etc. The other school pursues the idea that a distinctive phonetic feature has been missed. Either school may be right. In other words, just trial and error, which you say is now the recognised glossematic method. But then, what is left of the magic commutation-test after this revision? Here remains the expression-commutation as always applied by the Prague School. But how does one apply this test in the first instance? Not by asking whether the expression-features answer to a ghostly 'content', but by asking whether they answer to some differences of expression in whatever language is taken as starting-point. For instance, the difference between buk and /kau in English. The so-called 'differences in semantic substance' could never be noticed at all if no language had a formal distinction in the expression. Therefore differences in expression can be, and are, noticed when they are never utilised for any semantic function. One deceives oneself entirely if one imagines that one can start from a 'semantic substance'. What one starts from (e.g. in asking 'what do you call a table?') is the expression of another language. To sum up, either the glossematic principle involves a vicious circle, or it adds nothing to the principles already accepted by the Prague School»

Yours very sincerely