

Titel: Synchrony versus Diachrony, [Uldall] 031-0030

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Anvendt udgave: Louis Hjelmslev og hans kreds

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Synchrony versus Diachrony. Kr. Hjelmslev's criticism of the diachronic approach to linguistics? more especially, it seems to me, is entirely justified. It is evident that language is never completely static, some change is always taking place in some part of the structure, rather, in de Saussure's metaphor, like a gearbox where one cogwheel or another is always moving. But it is also evident that at any stage in its development a language forms a complete system, which rests in itself, and the significance of whose individual parts can only be understood by reference to the whole. Only by a careful synchronic study is it possible to understand the ways and means of human expression. Nor is diachrony of any real linguistic value unless it takes the form of a comparison of two or more stages in the development of a language, each studied synchronically. The 'stages', of course, are more or less arbitrarily chosen, since a language adheres closely to a certain form only for a very short time indeed. Etymology, conceived of as the study of the development of single words, is pure history, and therefore a social science, which, strictly speaking, has nothing in common with linguistics. The relation is rather like that between history and a biography treating one man's life without considering the general cultural background of his time. Diachrony can explain how a certain element came to have its present form but it seems over-ambitious to say that