Why and how a glossematic analysis of Mam?
Una Canger

BACKGROUND (FOR THIS PRESENTATION)
In September 1969 I submitted my PhD thesis to the University of California, Berkeley. The title of the thesis was: *Analysis in Outline of Mam, a Mayan Language*. The analysis was carried out on the basis of Hjelmslev's theory.

CHOICE OF THEORY
Basically, I am not a linguist with special interest in theory. I am above all fascinated by languages and how speakers use them.

So why on earth did I decide to base my description of the Mayan language Mam on a theory as exotic as glossematics and with no true model or example to lean to or to learn from?

In fact, I did so for want of better.

While studying in Berkeley I had been exposed both to the traditional American structuralism and to the alternative American theory, Chomsky's transformational grammar. Neither one of them recognizes the linguistic sign, that is a morpheme is not composed of a content and an expression, is not two-sided, but simply flat.

In addition, Chomsky's idea that all languages can be analyzed the way he analyzed English simply revealed his lack of knowledge of languages. In contrast Hjelmslev knew languages and referred in his writings to many languages that are not Indo-European.

My background for rejecting the American types of structuralism so vehemently was undoubtedly also that I had some knowledge of Hjelmslev's theory.

MY BACKGROUND FOR CHOOSING HJELMSLEV'S THEORY
What background and preparation did I have to imagine that I should be able to carry out this hazardous experiment?

I had attended Hjelmslev's course on morpheme categories over several semesters. This was during my first or second year of studying linguistics, and it was interesting and informative, but Hjelmslev's answer to most questions did not help much. He would typically say: " experience shows".

I had also written a paper on the category of comparison in which I analyzed that category in the following languages, Danish, Polish Hungarian and Welsh, using what I

had learned about correlation from Hjelmslev's lectures.

However, my strongest argument for choosing glossematics as my theoretical framework was probably that I studied at the University of California in Berkeley where Francis Whitfield was professor of Slavic languages. Apart from being a slavicist Whitfield was the American translator of Hjelmslev's Omkring sprogteoriens grundlæggelse, published with the title Prolegomena to a Theory of Language, and he had probably immersed himself into glossematics more than anyone else. And he agreed to be my thesis advisor.

My original reason for choosing to study in Berkeley was in no way Whitfield's position there, but the strong emphasis on native American languages at Berkeley.

THE PROCESS

My description of the process should be taken with a grain of salt. After all it took place more than 50 years ago. Another matter is that the thesis is not my bedside lecture, and due to external circumstances I have gone back to Mam only sporadically since then. Until now I have not studied the thesis carefully since it was submitted. It makes tough reading.

I did field work in the Guatemalan village of Todos Santos Cuchumatanes in the year 1966-67, some ten months, and again in the summer of 1968, some two or three months. The outcome of the fieldwork was 15 notebooks (in all some 2.200 pages) with elicitation notes and some 30 recorded and transcribed texts. The texts are stories and reports of various kinds told by over 20 different individuals ranging in age from 16 to 83. Many of the texts were transcribed by an informant and later retranscribed by myself in collaboration with the informant who had produced the first transcription.

My memory of exactly what I did in the academic year of 1967-68 - between the two periods in the field -   is vague. I was teaching since I did not have a scholarship. But I am sure that I studied and analyzed my field notes, and met with Whitfield in order to discuss the project. I have the same vague memory of the fall of 1968. But I clearly remember the spring semester of 1969: I worked on Glossematics and wrote the Introduction to the thesis which is a 43-page introduction to the glossematic theory. I am sure that this led to a number of meetings with Whitfield for discussions.

What I also remember is the production of the actual analysis of the language and description of this analysis: I would spend a week writing some ten pages, then meet with Whitfield with my ten pages. We would sit down together, and he would read the pages I had brought, commenting on them as he went along. I would then go home, rewrite the ten pages, and write ten more that I would get comments on at our next meeting. It was about ten pages a week from May and all through the summer of 1969.

For my analysis and description I had access to Whitfield's translation of Résumé which at that time was still unpublished, and obviously also Hjelmslev's various published articles, but I did not know Hjelmslev's Forelæsninger which is a series of unpublished lectures that he delivered in 1942-43. They represent a more hands-on description of how to analyze a language in applying the glossematic approach to a Danish fairy tale. Why Whitfield did not suggest that I look at these Forelæsninger I do not know.

THE RESULT

The thesis consists of:
- the already mentioned introduction to glossematics
- some 245 pages of the analysis.
Every section of the analysis is richly exemplified with Mam sentences from the texts compiled during field work. In addition, the basics of the Mam verb system and sentence structure is presented in a 16-page Informal outline (p 64-80) "in order - I write -   to provide some basis for an easier understanding of the subsequent analysis and the examples with which this analysis is illustrated."

The analysis is divided into three operation series I-III

I   analyzes the material, that is all languages, into a content line and an expression line

II   performs the analysis with the function **solidarity**
                  the result is: creative style
                                          normal style
                                          archaizing style

III   performs the analysis with the function **selection**.

Since the result of operation series I consisted in dividing the language into a content line and an expression, all subsequent analyses are twofold: first the expression line is analyzed and then the content line. Thus every operation in series II and III have two sections: one analyzes the expression line and the other the content line. In some cases the operation of the expression line will be empty.

Let me give a quote to show you how the content line is viewed. On page 83 I write:

I cannot adequately give examples of content units, particularly not of units that are as complex as nexias and nexus. Presenting them as expression units that are divided into words, as I have done above, may give the impression that there is a perfect correspondence between the two planes, which is obviously not the case. It might therefore be more appropriate not to give the examples in Mam at all, but rather to present a literal translation of the sign contents in the order in which they appear. This would no doubt make it easier to avoid looking at the units as expression units, but it would probably make it almost impossible to read the examples, and English translations would still be necessary. Instead I continue to use the Mam sign expressions as a simplex way of representing the sign contents – **ma** is thus shorthand for 'recent past', etc. – with the added warning, however, that the sign expression and sign contents are not the objects of the analysis.

After operation series II in which full texts, chapters , and paragraphs have been identified, we get to operation series III which is where most linguistic descriptions would begin. Here I have inserted the mentioned 16-page "Informal outline" between the two Op-series, where I give a presentation of Mam sentence structure and verb system. The purpose is to "provide some basis for an easier understanding of the subsequent analysis and of the examples with which this analysis is illustrated" (p 64).

After nexus have been singled out, the following analysis in operation series III results in derivates which are called /characteristics/ and /nexus themes/. We learn that the /characteristics/ will later be found to be made up of the categories tense, voice and mood in terms of substance.
We read:

> This analysis is in accord with the observation that tense, voice, and mood are categories that characterize not specifically the verb, but the whole nexus, and that it is only a matter of usage that formants for the extense morphemes are attached to the verb. (p. 100)

The analysis thus continues leading to ever smaller units, first in the expression line and then in the content line.

An important feature is that elements arrived at in an operation are further subjected to a paradigmatic analysis with correlation with the purpose of identifying which is the intensive term and which is the extensive one of the category.

TODAY, HOW DO I LOOK AT THIS PROCESS AND ITS RESULT?

The thesis reveals that my understanding of how Mam functions was comprehensive. However, my choice of describing the language with the glossematic theory has unfortunately made this understanding well hidden. On the other hand, I do not regret my choice. For the informed and patient reader my analysis and knowledge of Mam is there, and I learned much in writing it.

Correlation, the study or analysis of the members of a category is an unknown concept in most linguistics today. The simple fact that the meaning of the word *big* is comprehensive, while the meaning of the word *small* is narrow is certainly a characteristic of human language that should not be ignored in a description of any language.

The procedure of describing language with the glossematic functions may seem exotic. But then most languages of the world are exotic, and I find it equally exotic that linguists today still blindly hang on to grammatical concepts that were devised for Greek a couple of millennia ago.

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mainstream theory, despite considerable efforts to test ideas on exotic languages, happens to have looked almost exclusively at thsoe languages which differ little form Indo-European with regard to the phenomenon at issue. [Head-marking and dependent-marking grammar, [Lg. 1986]]