

The basic flaw – and the inspiring ideas

Rebooting Glossematics

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Peter Harder

Overview

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- 2. The basic flaw in glossematic thinking
- 3. Reversing the approach: why substance comes first
- 4. Rebooting the inspiring ideas: a language-centred point of departure for a general, substance-based theory?
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1. Introduction: Structuralism vs Structure

- The usage-based and variationist revolution
- The flight from structure - and the need to reboot it
- Usage fundamentalism vs the three modes of being of language: Language-in-society, Language-in-the-mind, and Language-in-use

1. Introduction: Structuralism vs Structure

- All three modes of being are structured (in overlapping but different ways)
- So let's abandon the dichotomy 'structure vs usage'!
- By analysing the flaws in glossematic thinking about structure, we may pave the way for a general rethinking of the role and nature of structure
- The basic problem is the misguided structuralist step from 'language HAS structure' to 'language IS structure'

2. The basic flaw in glossematic thinking

- There are two sources of the misconception: One linguistic, the other philosophical
- Linguistic (Saussure): disregarding all non-linguistic properties, basing description solely on properties that relate to other linguistic properties
- That is a *descriptive* choice – which leaves only relations between linguistic items as the object of description

2. The basic flaw in glossematic thinking

- Philosophical (Carnap): 'the linguistic turn'
- This *epistemological* choice moved the target from the world of objects to the (meta)language used to capture it.
- Criteria for what a theory should be like therefore were viewed as pertaining to the meta-level, rather than to the object level
- The 'principle of empiricism' (Danish: empiriprincippet) as an example: A theory must be non-contradictory, exhaustive and simple
- Even if all these were understood as fulfilled, we would have no idea whether it was a good theory of language as an object of description or not

The basic flaw in glossematic thinking

- The result of this descriptive-cum-epistemological position was an apparently invincible - but on closer examination self-defeating - conception of the theory of language:
- Not only is language in fact constituted by internal relations (such is the nature of the object – language is a set of purely formal relations)
- --but according to Carnap, descriptions in terms of purely formal relations were actually the only scientifically respectable theories (of ALL conceivable object domains)

3. Reversing the approach: why substance comes first

- As pointed out in Brands (1974) the basic relation postulated for the 'purely formal' system was not actually interpretable as purely formal
- The basic relation proposed for language was 'dependence' (or 'presupposition', cf. Uldall 1957:18), understood in terms of 'conditions on occurrence'
- But this relation does not make sense as a property of a purely formal Carnap-style system – because it needs to refer to 'what is there' (in a world of objects) - including 'what *has* to be there'

3. Reversing the approach: why substance comes first

- You can set up a formal system in such a way that it ***builds in*** dependencies (cf Chomsky)
- But dependencies are defined in relation to the domain in which they are manifested (in this case the body of generated forms)
- If there is no formally characterized population (which there is not in glossematic theory), dependencies need to take their point of departure in an already existing (hence presupposed) set of actual 'occurrences' of phenomena under investigation
- In terms of an (intended) ***formal*** description, this constitutes a ***substance*** domain - which therefore needs to come first, even by the descriptive practices of glossematics itself (cf. also Harder 2016)

3. Reversing the approach: why substance comes first

- Substance properties include dependencies in the investigated domain – but other features as well
- In the case of language, such features include functional relations between language and the rest of the world (including communication and cognition)
- In order to illustrate the claim that substance properties are irrelevant for capturing what constitutes a language, Hjelmslev says that Danish is the same language whether it is manifested in spoken or written form
- This is (somewhat) plausible for ‘expression substance’

3. Reversing the approach: why substance comes first

- But it is less plausible for ‘content substance’: if all meaning was emptied out, and only relations were retained, would that be recognizable as Danish?
- Imagine a diagram of the colour spectrum with different dividing lines for different languages – and then try to remove the colour terms....
- The two planes are not **functionally** equivalent: expression is the vehicle for content, not the other way round
- You can choose to abstract from this substance property (as Hjelmslev explicitly does in OSG) – but that means there will be something missing in your language description (it becomes ‘non-exhaustive’)

4. Rebooting the inspiring ideas

- One might think that this undermines everything that has ever been couched in glossematic terms
- But that is true principally for the hi-falutin' statements of principle – not for descriptions of actual facts about language
- A rebooting can involve several sub-operations:
 - 1. Reconstitute the structure-centred approach as one perspective among others (rather than being the only admissible perspective)
 - 2. Look at specific theoretical positions in the light of this conversion
 - 3. The grand challenge: a general theory of linguistic dependencies

4. Rebooting the inspiring ideas

- The structure-centred approach is a legitimate perspective (among others)
- Since languages have structures, it is okay to take them as point of departure and ask how they relate to each other and to substance domains
- Relations between structural elements such as ‘declarative’, ‘subject’ and ‘verb’ involve both clause structure and speech act potential
- An overall relevant question from this perspective would be, e.g., ‘What *substance* aspects of language tend to be reflected in the way languages are *structured*?’

4. Rebooting the inspiring ideas

- The concept of 'connotation' cf. also Cigana (fc), is my favourite example of how an approach starting with linguistic structuring can throw light on facts outside the closed circuit of formal structuring
- On this point, the potential of a glossematic approach is vastly greater than that of the kind of formalism that is the basis for generative grammar
- Hjelmslev cleaned up a messy area by defining connotation as the meaning of a second-order sign: the meaning conveyed by the choice of a whole sign (rather than merely by the choice of an expression)
- This brings social meaning systematically within the purview of semantics, instead of seeing it as marginal or too fuzzy (e.g., what message does it send to use English words in a particular Danish context?)

4. Rebooting the inspiring ideas

- Another example is the glossematic concept of ‘commutation’
- It has become part of the common lore of linguistics as a way to establish the inventory of distinctive sound segments (and thus does not require rebooting!)
- However, it falls into place rather more naturally in a glossematic approach that recognizes substance as basic:
- We need to have the sounds before we can test their distinctive potential
- And the same applies if we begin with content: moving around on ‘the semantic map’, typology takes its point of departure in the substance and then describes languages by marking out where the converse commutation test yields a positive outcome
- This is preferable to an approach that starts out with assumptions about universal concepts

4. Rebooting the inspiring ideas

- A grand challenge for a rebooted glossematic initiative:
- The general theory of linguistic dependencies?
- Dependency relations are everywhere, and in all linguistic theories
- However, the takes on them vary a great deal and there is no overall coherent framework to bring them together

4. Rebooting the inspiring ideas

- An example is the dependency relations between the verb and nominal arguments in the clause
- On the one hand, the verb is the structural core with arguments as dependents
- On the other hand, nominals are semantically self-contained, whereas verbs are dependent on semantic saturation by nominal arguments
- These two descriptions are not in contradiction, but depend on a coherent overall theory of dependency relations

4. Rebooting the inspiring ideas

- Dependency relations (as pointed out above) are not autonomous facts, but depend on substance properties
- This means that an overall theory of dependencies must be based on an overall theory of relevant substance properties
- In the layered structure of the clause, scope hierarchies involve two converse dependency relations (cf Harder 2010):

4. Rebooting the inspiring ideas

- Higher elements are conceptually dependent on lower element:
(‘declarative’ is conceptually dependent on a propositional content)
- Lower elements are functionally dependent on higher elements:
(propositions cannot be expressed on their own, but are functionally dependent on being part of an illocution such as a declarative)
- In the clausal meaning ‘Lula won’, analysable as ‘Decl (past (win (Lula)))’, neither ‘Decl’ nor ‘past (win (Lula))’ can occur separately

4. Rebooting the inspiring ideas

- These dependencies are clearly substance-based:
- They are rooted in what linguistic elements do
- But there are also purely linguistic dependencies, where the criterion is distributional
- An example is the relation between prepositions and the case forms of complement NPs in languages like German or Latin

4. Rebooting the inspiring ideas

- The theory of grammatical status proposed by Boye & Harder (2012 etc) would fit snugly into an overall glossematically rebooted theory of dependencies:
- To be a grammatical element is to be unilaterally dependent on a lexical host (in relation to which the grammatical element is ancillary and discursively secondary)

4. Rebooting the inspiring ideas

- There are also dependency relations that go outside language – a fact that Hjelmslev and Uldall were very much aware of
- Hjelmslev in one passage (unearthed by Cigana fc) speaks of the ensemble of his utterances as being solidary with his own personal ‘physiognomy’
- From a glossematic point of view, ‘to be’ is to be a link in a dependency relation that begins in linguistic forms....

5. Conclusion

- Glossematics can be rebooted – but only if we turn it on its head!
- Linguistic description must be substance-based (or be extremely ‘non-exhaustive’)
- This doctrine would be fully compatible with everything in the theory, except for the programmatic statements about theoretical and philosophical foundations
- A general theory of linguistic dependencies would be a suitable grand challenge for a rebooting project!

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