What Structuralism Is Not

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Abstract. *Structuralism remains so ill-defined that there is little agreement on when it began and ended – indeed whether it has ended – or on who embraced it, who resisted it, and who resistently embraced it. Adding to the difficulty is the widespread tendency to fall into 'the mythology of doctrines', whereby diversity get erased within a school of thought and even the whole period dominated by a school. To gain a better understanding of what we mean by structuralism, this paper applies the structuralist approach to meaning as a value generated by difference: it examines what structuralism is not, focussing on six features widely ascribed to it. Structuralism is not (1) a unified movement, (2) a rejection of history, (3) a denial of subjecthood, (4) taxonomy without process, (5) anti-mental (or anti-meaning) or (6) anti-social. Those whom we lump together as structuralists were as aware of what separated them as of what joined them, often more so. They varied in their attitudes toward history, subjecthood, mind, meaning and society, enough that a rejection of any of these cannot be taken as an essential feature of structuralism, even if found in the work of some in the period, some of the time.*

1. Introduction

Structuralism designates the approach to language analysis which brought linguistics into the modern era and turned semiotics from an outline programme into an academic discipline. It made the synchronic study of language into a recognised science and helped to shape the whole of the humanities and social sciences into their present form. It is possibly the most important development in understanding the human experience of the last hundred years.

Yet it remains so ill-defined that there is little agreement on when it began and ended – indeed whether it *has* ended (see e.g. Haspelmath 2020) – or on who embraced it, who resisted it, who resistently embraced it (see Joseph 2019), and whether the form it took in linguistics is continuous with or separate from that in semiotics, cultural anthropology, psychoanalysis, literary and feminist theory or the many other fields in which it has been applied. Many accounts of structuralism are based largely on reductivist characterisations by people aiming to distance themselves from it. The distancing is typically more rhetorical in nature than taking the form of sharp, substantive breaks from structuralist concepts and methods.

The fullest treatment to date, François Dosse's *History of Structuralism* (1991–92), is a work that we are fortunate to have. It is based on first-hand accounts by most of the surviving key figures, which Dosse has sifted so that the self-justifications and occasional accusations they contain are set in proper context, allowing readers to judge them fairly. It has its limits, certainly: centred on Paris and the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), Roland Barthes (1915–1980), Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) and Louis Althusser (1918–1980), it keeps other figures and fields in the background. Linguistics appears almost as a satellite, despite its being the field in which structuralism originated.[70] Dosse's coverage of linguistics and semiotics is sketchy and at times erroneous, especially when it ventures outside France; it is little concerned with what structuralism has meant on a global scale.

In striving to understand better what 'structuralist' has stood for, one should be mindful of the decades-long struggles of people such as Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) against being boxed in by it (see Joseph 2020a). To be classified as a structuralist brought with it a powerful set of assumptions which structured how their work was read, and

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70. The 'structuralism' of psychologists in the USA at the start of the twentieth century (on which see Joseph 2001) had little if any residual effect on the structuralist poetics and linguistics which was first signalled in Tynianov & Jakobson (1928) and Jakobson, Trubetzkoy & Karcevskij (1928), and was certainly less significant than the contemporary echoes of Gestalt psychology and phenomenology.

even their direct challenges to supposed structuralist tenets were taken as following those tenets. Bourdieu once told an interviewer:

> I even think that one of the obstacles to the progress of research is this classificatory mode of functioning of academic and political thought, which often hamstrings intellectual inventiveness by making it impossible to surpass false antinomies and false divisions. The logic of the classificatory label is very exactly that of racism, which stigmatizes its victims by imprisoning them in a negative essence. (Bourdieu 1990, 28)

The parallel between the classificatory labels and racism does not of course equate the two morally: we should strive for a world without racism, but do we really want to let go of structuralism as a category? For my part, on the contrary, I want to understand it better, use it better – take better care of it, and with it.

Having tried and failed for a long time now to understand what structuralism is, in this chapter I shall come at the problem from the opposite direction: looking at what it is not. That is after all a quintessentially Saussurean approach, since the semiotic value of a sign is defined differentially and negatively. I shall consider six ways in which structuralism is typically characterised, ways which do not stand up to scrutiny, or at least go wobbly when subjected to it. Here is my list, with no pretence that this is the first time any of these assertions has been made, though I am unaware of them all having been made jointly. Structuralism was not, or is not:

a. A unified movement
b. A rejection of history
c. A denial of subjecthood
d. Taxonomy without process
e. Anti-mental (or anti-meaning)
f. Anti-social

To be precise, I am arguing that when structuralism is characterised in these ways, it is an oversimplification. I am not trying to oversimplify in the opposite direction, by rejecting these reductivist characterisations totally; rather, the aim is to understand what has

led to them. Not just to present evidence against them, but to complexify the picture by adducing counter-evidence and recognising that variation exists within the paradigm: those who get classified as structuralists produced work to which one or more of characteristics 2 to 6 do indeed sometimes apply, in varying degrees.

2. Structuralism is not a unified movement …

… yet the very use of the term 'structuralism' implies that it is. As scholars of the subject and its history, we ritually acknowledge the diversity, then slip back into using the term. It is not hard to find examples of people asserting that it was a movement or a school, rather than a set of schools. But a highly diverse set it was, in which the individual schools were themselves internally fractious.

In 1969 Quentin Skinner cautioned against what he called 'the mythology of doctrines', in reaction to the idea of 'paradigms' that had arisen in the history of art with Gombrich (1960) and in the history of science with Kuhn (1962). When applied to the history of ideas, Skinner said, 'paradigm' fosters a mythology that how people thought at any given period was more unified than has ever historically been the case (see further Joseph 2015). This needs to be borne in mind when we talk about structuralism. As it happens, Kuhn's avowed inspiration for the idea was a linguist of the structuralist period, Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), and his well-known views of how the structure of one's language inclines one toward certain ways of thinking rather than others (see Kuhn 1970 [1962], vi). The Kuhnian paradigm is a kind of shared language-thought nexus; but no area of enquiry, Skinner maintained, is ever monolingual, as it were.

If I call Whorf a linguist of the structuralist period rather than a structuralist linguist, it is to avoid lapsing into Skinner's mythology of doctrines – but really it just trades one mythology, the labelling of a man, for another, the labelling of an age. Bourdieu's comment quoted above about classificatory labels pertains whether we apply 'structuralist' to individuals or to the time and context in which they worked. The mythology of doctrines turns all the characteristics in my list into essential features of structuralism, then treats anyone

whose work does not display one or more of the positions as an outlier. I am arguing however that none of these was a strong, widely held characteristic of work produced by structuralist linguists (I shall not be obsessive about avoiding the term), and that this work was so diffuse that everyone was, in effect, an outlier.

The reception of Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965) and glossematics offers material for a whole panoply of case studies where the fundamental diversity of structuralist linguists of the mid-twentieth century was all too apparent. Parisians, Pragueans and Philadelphians each heard what was of particular interest to them, and latched onto or rejected that as though it were the whole of glossematics. In the USA, Paul Garvin (1919–1994) took on the role of a dragoman. His efforts to explain glossematics to his fellow American linguists, although intended to build a bridge, tended to dwell on how wide the chasm was. In his review of Hjelmslev (1953 [1943]) the letter H appears before any term when it is a 'form understood in Hjelmslev's sense' (Garvin 1954; see also Joseph 2021a), underscoring that the two fundamental languages in need of translation were not Danish and English, but Linguistic and Glossematic, which tend to be thought of as two dialects of Structuralism.

Garvin occupied a unique position, yet was typical of mid-century linguists in thinking of their field primarily in terms of national schools, not without a sense of nationalist pride attached to them (cf. e.g. Newmeyer on the USA, this volume). In each case, to qualify as linguistics, it needed to be modernist: that was an imposition of the Global North on any field with pretensions to being a science, and it turned whatever was not modernist enough into its Global Southern equivalent.[71] Linguistics made philology its South. In Paris from the 1920s to the 1960s, the Finno-Ugric specialist Aurélien Sauvageot (on whose work see Joseph 2019, Joseph 2022) was the sort of dragoman that Garvin would become in the USA, mediating

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71. As is now generally known, the Global North and South are conceptual spheres which align only vaguely with their original geographic senses. Australia and New Zealand are examples of countries which are largely part of the Global North although in the southern hemisphere, and there are similar examples of Global Southern contexts in the northern hemisphere.

between, on the one hand, the philological traditions which were as close to a native linguistics as could be found in Finland and Hungary, and on the other, the structuralism of his generation of linguists, the students of Antoine Meillet (on whom more below). Structuralism is uniformly modernist, but the modernism itself varies from context to context.

3. Structuralism is not a rejection of history

One often reads that, starting with Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), structuralism aimed to replace diachronic with synchronic linguistic enquiry. Two examples:

> Most linguists work under the assumption (following the Saussurean paradigm) that synchronic linguistics is diametrically opposed to diachronic linguistics, and most of us who teach linguistics continue to insist on keeping the two approaches apart. (Kaye 2002, 800)
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> Saussure makes a number of important distinctions. ... Linguistics must study these arbitrary signs not in a historical or comparative way (diachronically) but in a single language at a single moment in time (synchronically). (Miller 2018)

If their target was indeed to replace diachronic with synchronic linguistic enquiry, Saussure and his successors had terrible aim. Every piece of work Saussure published in his lifetime was diachronic. In fact the very concept of diachronic linguistics was his creation: the comparison of whole language systems at different stages in time, rather than tracing individual elements through time, as was the norm in his day. He wanted to reform historical linguistic method, not abolish it. When we look at the output of linguists usually designated as structuralists, none of them disdains diachronic enquiry; it is always part of their work, and often dominates it – vastly so with a Meillet (1866–1936) or Émile Benveniste (1902–1976), largely so with the Prague and Copenhagen schools. Even Edward Sapir (1884–1939) in the 1930s was publishing articles on Hittite loanwords in Greek (1936) and the effect of a Hebrew loanword on Indo-European phonology (1937).

There is however another dimension to this, which would arise after World War II, when History with a capital H, the Marxist engine driving inevitably toward economic, political and social revolution, became intellectually dominant across the globe. As Lévi-Strauss led the structuralist advance from linguistics into ethnography at the end of the 1940s and into the 50s (cf. Hastrup this volume), when it was taken up more widely, structuralism was received as an alternative to Marxism, particularly because it was possible (though not necessary) to talk about structures as though they stood outside time. 'Structuralism argues that actions are determined (in some way) by social structures rather than as affected but different from social structures. The pre-eminence of structures leads to an indifference (or even hostility) towards history …' (Harvey 2012–20).

Linguistics in this period was allotting progressively more attention to synchronic analysis. Linguists who were Marxists were liberated from worries over this by Stalin's intervention of 1950,[72] clarifying that language is not superstructural, having been 'created not by some one class, but by the entire society, by all the classes of the society, by the efforts of hundreds of generations'. Thereafter it was not structural linguistics that got treated as the enemy by Marxist theoreticians, so much as the extensions of structuralism to fields concerned directly with society and labour. Here there was indeed a gap between structuralist analysis and Marxist analysis: capital-H History was left aside by structuralists, until Althusser's synthesis seemed to prove that a rejection of history was only contingent to structuralism, not essential to it. These methodological debates were inseparable from party-political affiliations, confusing the issues into the early 2000s.

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72. This is not to say that all or even many linguists outside the USSR who were politically Marxist felt inclined to follow the Soviet scientific line, indeed we sometimes find them apologising for it or even, in the case of Sauvageot (1935), attacking it as not truly Marxist (see Joseph 2022).

4. Structuralism is not a denial of subjecthood

Marxists take the structures of structuralism to be in opposition not just to History, but to the Subject. 'Structuralism is not concerned with the role of the active subject, subjects are "determined" by structures' (Harvey 2012–20). Sharing this outlook with Marxists were both more traditional humanists and certain 'post'-structuralists (whose 'post'-ness was itself never clearly definable). Étienne Balibar (1942-) formulates his insightful investigation of this issue as a question: 'Structuralism: A destitution of the subject?' – to which his answer is a yes followed by a pair of buts:

> But this destitution should not in any way be confused with a negation of an apophantic type, in which the annihilation, or inversion, of the predicates of individuation and belonging, or of self-presence and consciousness, constitutes by itself the essentiality of the subject …. But neither should it be confused with a misrecognition of subjectivity or of the subject/object difference, which is precisely the mistake that personalist and transcendental critiques imputed to structuralism, whose slogan in a sense was the substitution of the object (be it a formal, residual, or complex object) for the subject. I believe that, in reality … the typical movement of structuralism resides in a simultaneous operation of deconstruction and reconstruction of the subject … (Balibar 2003, 10)

Balibar is right about the position of structuralism vis-a-vis the Subject being widely misunderstood, and also in his characterisation of it as a simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction. If he exaggerates in calling the substitution of the object for the subject the 'slogan' of structuralism, he signals his awareness of the exaggeration by adding 'in a sense'.

'Subject' is a classic example of a word by which people think they mean the same thing, yet on probing, it turns out to mean very different, even directly opposed things, whether it is phenomenologists arguing against more traditional philosophers or against Marxists, or phenomenologists or Marxists arguing amongst themselves. They think they hold contrary positions regarding the same

concept, when actually it is their concepts which are contrary. But their use of the same signifier masks this.

In saying that, I open myself to an accusation that I am denying the subjecthood of those who talk about the Subject, and asserting that their subjecthood – their command of what they are saying and hence of the position they are taking – is an illusion, because that command is at the very least mitigated by the language, by a trick or a trap built into its structure. The language then becomes the true Subject, with speakers as its Objects. To that charge I plead guilty with extenuating circumstances, in the form of my faith that if the language contains this trap, it also offers the way out of it, and it is up to us, as subjects, to make our way out.[73]

Structuralism is one of several movements that have been characterised as reactions against the so-called 'Cartesian subject', the *I* who says *I think, therefore I am*, and is endowed with an ability, potentially absolute, to turn thought and desire into action. With the denial of subjecthood, as with that of history, we have an accusation that is frequently taken as an original sin of structuralism, attributed to Saussure. But Saussure did not exclude the Subject from linguistic enquiry. His division of *langue*, the socially-shared language system, and *parole*, the utterances produced by an individual speaker, was made precisely in order to distinguish what belongs to each. Although he focussed in his courses on the linguistics of *langue*, he made clear his intention to move on to the linguistics of *parole* – and surely would have done so, had he lived. Despite his statements about the linguistics of *parole*, it is frequently asserted that he meant for linguistics to concern itself with *langue* only, based on the closing sentence of the *Cours de linguistique générale*: "Linguistics has as its unique and veritable object the language system envisaged in itself and for itself" (Saussure 1922 [1916], 317).[74] Out of context, this appears to be a banishment of *parole* from linguis-

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73. Note that I have just fallen into another trap: saying 'we' and 'us' is potentially another mitigation, implicitly denying subjecthood to individuals and locating it instead in some social nebulosity.

74. "[L]a linguistique a pour unique et véritable objet la langue envisagée en elle-même et pour elle-même".

tics; but this sentence, written by the editors of the *Cours* and not found in Saussure's drafts or his students' notes, closes a chapter on language families and types. It is warning against the tendency to imagine that the "genius of a race" leads its language in certain deterministic directions. Saussure consistently rejected purported links between language and ethnicity. In that regard, linguistics should indeed be concerned with the language alone, and not with that race psychology which linked language type to worldview. The closing sentence was read, not as the noble-minded ending of a chapter taking up arms against racial determinism, but as the narrow-minded conclusion of the book as a whole.

The appeal of structuralism lay for many in its repositioning of the analysis of language, thought and action away from the 'Cartesian subject', which, although it rests on an untenable oversimplification of Descartes (see Joseph 2018a, 27, 110), had assumed the status of secular dogma. It was at the centre of debates amongst phenomenologists, Marxists and existentialists with Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) somehow having one foot in each of the first two camps whilst solidly planted in the third. To the younger generation, including Michel Foucault (1926–1984) and Bourdieu, it felt oppressive and ironic that, in order to succeed within the academic system, one had no choice but to assert the idea of free choice, where moreover the freedom was constrained by the tide of History (Joseph 2020a, 113).

Structuralism offered an intellectually respectable way out of the quandary, by demonstrating the existence of socially shared semiotic structures of knowing. This came as no surprise to linguists, who did not need to have it revealed to them that utterances are not the wholly free invention of those who produce them, but follow patterns which constitute what we call grammar. The surprise was that the patterns do not simply exist *in* the language – they actually *are* the language. What creates meaning are not the elements of the language but the differences between elements.

That was a difficult enough revelation for linguists to accept, but for philosophers and social scientists it turned things upside down to have it suggested that, as in language, the patterns of thought and action which they study are not patterned in the way

that a human creator or author patterns things, but by an internal system of differences that gives meaning-value to the signs which constitute everything knowable, signs which are socially shared. Nothing, then, is solely the result of the agentive choices of an individual Subject. Agency is shared between Subject and social structures – and here we find a gamut of positions taken. For some, the denial of *absolute* subjecthood, of unconstrained individual agency, means the denial of subjecthood *tout court*. For others, though, to recognise how social structures or forces constrain agency is necessary to make subjecthood a coherent and meaningful concept. This is at the centre of the projects pursued by Foucault and Bourdieu, who opposed an academic system which threatened to excommunicate anyone who would not follow the party line against the 'voluntarism' which absolute subjecthood endorsed – thus proving the power of the social forces whose existence the dogma denied.

Beyond linguistics, structuralism developed in the 1950s and after under the misunderstanding, tangible in the quotations given earlier in this section and the preceding one, that it was launched by Saussure as a theory denying the role of either Subject or History, dogmatically asserting a reductivist view of language, thought and action as the product of static structures, reproduced by the individual, who is unaware of their existence and yet under their control, quite as much as – or even more than – the individual in Marxism is pulled along by the tide of economic and political History.[75] If the internal consistency of the structuralist system of ideas runs counter to what Saussure intended in launching it, then this is indeed itself a case where we could expect a structuralist to contend that history needs to be set aside in favour of a focus on the conceptual system within its own synchronic terms.

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75. In saying this I join in part with the critical views of Henri Meschonnic (1932–2009), who argued powerfully against what he saw as distortions and misappropriations of Saussure by 'the structuralists' (see Meschonnic 1989, Joseph 2018b) – but only in part, given that Meschonnic, who struggled throughout his career against structuralist linguists of various stripes, lumps them together into the sort of Skinnerian 'mythology of doctrines' which I am contesting.

But that does not amount to a dogmatic denial of history, and whilst it may represent an attenuation of subjecthood, it is a denial only if subjecthood is defined in such an absolute way that any attenuation of it is a denial, in which case all study of grammar is a denial of subjecthood. We then face the paradox that subjecthood has been constructed in terms of a rationality which is recognised and defined by normative language use. Those who defy its rules are liable to be classified within the Foucauldian dyad of unreason and madness and have subjecthood legally denied them.[76] The forfeit of some linguistic subjecthood is the price of legal subjecthood; though to put it that way is an oversimplification, since slaves may have the same linguistic subjecthood as their masters, and 'mad poets' may even enjoy an enhanced subjecthood. But here again the varying definitions of subjecthood mean that like is not being measured against like.

5. Structuralism is not taxonomy without process

The charge in question makes an early appearance in Robert Lees' (1922–1996) 1957 review of Noam Chomsky's (1928-) *Syntactic Structures* (1957). Then, in his 1962 address to the International Congress of Linguists (published in several versions, the last being Chomsky 1964), Chomsky takes up this use of 'taxonomic' as a criticism of his predecessors. Lees' student Frederick Newmeyer points out in his recent paper on the canonical *Readings in Linguistics* edited by Martin Joos (1957) how the ground was laid for it:

> Joos counterposed a 'taxonomic' approach to an 'explanatory' one, opting for the former. The empiricist wing of American structuralism was often described as taxonomically-oriented, since their procedures led to a taxonomic classification of grammatical elements. In the words

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76. A dramatic though not unusual case of this is examined in Joseph (2021b). For Foucault (2006 [1961], 197), unreason (*déraison*) is a moral condition and madness (*folie*) a medical one, 'But as soon as thought, in its scientific speculation, tried to relate madness to its concrete faces, it necessarily met this moral experience of unreason.'

of Charles Hockett: "Linguistics is a classificatory science" (Hockett 1943, 3). (Newmeyer 2019, 318n.)

Chomsky extends the critique back to Saussure, who he says conceives of *langue* simply as an inventory of elements:

> Modern linguistics is much under the influence of Saussure's conception of *langue* as an inventory of elements (Saussure 1916, 154, and elsewhere, frequently) and his preoccupation with systems of elements rather than the systems of rules which were the focus of attention in traditional grammar and in the general linguistics of Humboldt. (Chomsky 1964, 23)
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> The distinction I am noting here is related to the *langue-parole* distinction of Saussure; but it is necessary to reject his concept of *langue* as merely a systematic inventory of items and to return rather to the Humboldtian conception of underlying competence as a system of generative processes. (Chomsky 1965, 4).

But it is clear from the *Cours* and from its source materials that, whilst Saussure characterises the *langue* as a *trésor* – a hard metaphor to pin down since *trésor* can mean anything from a change purse to a storehouse, and either the container or its contents – he maintains that

> It is a *trésor* deposited by the practice of *parole* in the subjects belonging to one same community, a grammatical system existing virtually in each brain, or more exactly in the brains of an ensemble of individuals .... (Saussure 1922 [1916], 30)[77]
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> ... the *trésor* of the *langue* where the generating forms are arranged according to their syntagmatic and associative relations. (ibid. 227)[78]

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77. "C'est un trésor déposé par la pratique de la parole dans les sujets appartenant à une même communauté, un système grammatical existant virtuellement dans chaque cerveau, ou plus exactement dans les cerveaux d'un ensemble d'individus; car la langue n'est complète dans aucun, elle n'existe parfaitement que dans la masse" (the translation is mine). See also Joseph (2016).

78. "Toute création doit être précédée d'une comparaison inconsciente des matériaux déposés dans le trésor de la langue où les formes génératrices sont rangées selon leurs rapports syntagmatiques et associatifs".

That is much more than an inventory (see also Matthews 2001, 5–6). If it is a system of elements, those elements include the grammar, and all the 'rules' whereby the elements relate to one another both virtually (as associative relations) and through their syntagmatic combinations.

Linguists of the next generation take various approaches with regard to taxonomy versus process. Some of Leonard Bloomfield's (1887–1949) students, including Charles Hockett (1916–2000), will extend the behaviourist scruples about psychology to a puristic approach to processes or rules which have to be inferred from comparison of forms, where the forms alone can be directly observed, or indeed instances of the forms. From that perspective, only taxonomy is scientific; the rest is story-telling. But Bloomfield himself, in his "Menomini Morphophonemics" (1939), is very far from such purism, and few signs of it are found amongst linguists in Europe. Here, however, the purported structuralist anti-historicism conspires to create the perception that structuralism is dogmatically focussed on fixed, static elements: what Bourdieu called the *opus operatum*, as opposed to the *modus operandi*.

Although it is now rare to find 'taxonomic' being wielded as a criticism in print, a 2019 blog entry by a young linguist, citing Matthews (2001) as her source, says that "The term [structural linguistics] has recently been used in a third sense, particularly by followers of the transformational generative school. Such linguistics is characterized by transformationalists as 'taxonomic'" (Noori 2019). Once a definition takes root, it can have a long underground life. 'Mere taxonomy' can function, for example, as a convenient explanation for why a history of linguistics course opens its coverage in 1957, as some have done.[79]

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79. In my years at the University of Maryland (1986–93), my colleague and friend David Lightfoot gave a course on History of Linguistics in which the first session was devoted to "before 1957".

6. Structuralism is not anti-mental or anti-meaning

Throughout the twentieth century, analytic philosophy was wrestling with the 'problem' of meaning. Behaviourists argued that to locate it in anything other than what people can be observed doing is to engage in metaphysics and mysticism. By the 1950s Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) had concluded that meaning is use, essentially concurring with Willard V.O. Quine's (1908–2000) view that it is indeterminate in analytical terms. As late as 1970 Hilary Putnam (1926–2016) published an article entitled "Is Semantics Possible?", his answer being yes, but only as a typically "sloppy and impressionistic" social science (Putnam 1970, 201).

If Bloomfield seems to sit on the extreme end amongst linguists, we should remember that linguists were not considered to be the equal of philosophers when it comes to fundamental matters such as meaning. By espousing the behaviourist stance, Bloomfield was, as they say, following the science. He defers to the scientific and philosophical consensus when the context is one which requires him to make a broad methodological statement. In his actual linguistic practice, however, he relies unabashedly on meaning in a traditional sense in order to identify forms and structures in languages. Some of his students aimed for a purer anti-mentalism, George Trager (1906–1992) most notably. Others just skirted the issue.

When in 1950–51 Benveniste undertook a transatlantic effort to develop a structural semantics, it failed on both sides of the ocean, despite the collaboration of Hjelmslev, J.R. Firth (1890–1960), Stephen Ullmann (1914–1976), Hendrik Pos (1898–1955) and others. The problem was not that they were anti-mental, but that conceiving of meaning as containable and analysable using the same methods as for linguistic form is a category mistake, made worse if linguistic meaning is not treated separately from other sorts of meaning, which are potentially limitless. The transcripts of the symposium organised at Nice (Benveniste 1951) show how far those taking part were from a meeting of minds, just on the European side of the Atlantic, let alone across it. It is one of those cases which Quentin Skinner was concerned with, where historical hindsight imposes a spurious consistency on a group or an individual.

7. Structuralism is not anti-social

Here again we are dealing with a two-pronged attack: a Marxist critique of its detachment of language from class struggle, going back to Valentin N. Voloshinov's (1895–1936) (1929) rejection of Saussure's 'abstract objectivism'; and an internal critique of structural linguistics for its idealisation of languages, pushing variation and multilingualism to the margins, along with sign languages and much else. Here is an example of this second critique:

> Saussure's ideas ... gave rise to ... the acknowledgment of the social dimensions of language. But within Linguistics, his insistence that language could be analyzed as a formal system of differential elements, apart from the messy dialectics of real-time production and comprehension, and in particular, his distinction between *langue*, the abstract rules and conventions of a signifying system independent of individual users on the one hand, and *parole*, the concrete instances of the use of *langue* by individuals in a series of speech acts on the other, led to the divergence of interests in two very different directions. (Garcia & Li 2014, 6)

Garcia & Li are right to spot this paradox in Saussure. Despite his repeated insistence that the language is a 'social fact', he does not go into its ramifications, apart from the section of the *Cours* on the *esprit de clocher* versus the force of 'intercourse' (Saussure 1922 [1916], 281–285). The language is deposited 'in identical form' in each member of the speech community (ibid. 38), and observable variation is a matter of *parole*, individual production.

Saussure's erstwhile student Meillet was the chief linguist on the team of Émile Durkheim's (1858–1917) *L'Année sociologique*, and Meillet did talk about social differences in language, though it was in terms of lexicon: the role of the argot of specialised professions in language change (Meillet 1905/6), or the 'noble' and 'peasant' nature of individual words in Latin (Meillet 1932; see Joseph 2020b, 7). In the 1960s Meillet's student Benveniste put forward the view that 'the language contains the society' (Benveniste 1970a, 95; 2012, 79 [2019, 84]) by encoding all the differences and values through which society is constituted. Some French linguists (including Mes-

chonnic 1995, 51) deny that Benveniste was a structuralist, because of his programmatic statements about *énonciation*, enunciation, where the focus is on the act of speaking rather than the language system (most notably in Benveniste 1970b). This highlights another aspect of the mythology of doctrines: whatever label we apply to a person, we want to be able to read their entire *œuvre* within its frame, apart perhaps from juvenilia. But Benveniste's work of the 1930s, when he was appointed to chairs in the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* and the *Collège de France*, was received as being aligned with that of others of the generation that gets classified as structuralist, and in later years he would be closely allied with Jakobson, Lacan and Lévi-Strauss (see Joseph, Laplantine & Pinault 2020). Even if his paper in the first issue of *Acta linguistica* (Benveniste 1939) starts to mark a distancing on certain points, through his whole career there is never what could be called a break from Saussure or Meillet (see also Strickland 1977, 116).

It will be another of Meillet's students, André Martinet (1908–1999), who sets structuralism on a sociolinguistic course, first with his *Prononciation du français contemporain* (1945), then, after his move to New York, with his programme at Columbia University that would produce the work of Uriel Weinreich (1926–1967) and William Labov (1927-). Weinreich's 1954 paper "Is a Structural Dialectology Possible?" makes clear the tension that was felt, whilst at the same time concluding that the answer to the question posed in the title is yes. Sociolinguists would aim to make their work as structuralist as possible, in order to gain respect for it within the linguistics establishment. In France, Bourdieu, who identified Labov as one of his contemporaries whose work he drew upon most (Bourdieu 2004, 13), never refused the label 'structuralist', although he would sometimes subvert it by calling his approach a "genetic structuralism" or a "constructivist structuralism" (see Joseph 2020a, 114–115). It is all about social processes, in language and beyond.

A tension within structuralism, yes – a paradox even – and for some a naive imagining that all the 'messy dialectics' to which Garcia & Li refer could be ignored. But no such imagining can be rightly attributed to Saussure and his lineage, which embraces all the major figures to whom the label of structuralist gets applied.

The worst they can be accused of is to have thought that the best way to unravel the complexity of language is to deal with its various aspects, including the individual and the social, not simultaneously but in turn.

In conclusion: it is our scholarly duty to carry on the never-ending struggle with reductionism – never-ending because of the steady demand for simplified summaries of scholarly work, which is not a bad thing in principle. It is in practice that the problems arise, when we let ourselves lump together 'structuralists' who were as aware of what separated them as of what joined them, and often more so. They varied in their attitudes toward history, subjecthood, mind, meaning and society, enough that a rejection of any of these cannot be taken as an essential feature of structuralism, even if found in the work of some in the period, some of the time.

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