

The Phonemic Aspect of Glossematics in a Present-Day Light

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In its heyday, the Glossematic branch of structuralism developed by Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965) and Hans Jørgen ('John') Uldall (1907–1957) was taken to be a gold standard of phonemic analysis. The theory had an overwhelming impact on the linguistic milieu in Denmark and its methods have been continued among younger generations of phonologists up to the present day. Apart from the sometimes rather odd terminology and some strange procedures from those days when what the phonetician heard was the main source for phonemic analysis, we ask how much of this theory is still useful. In this paper, we discuss this question in the light of a concrete analytical problem, namely the Danish stop consonants and the phonemic analysis of them.

Glossematics left two rather brief and sketchy analyses of the Danish stop consonants from Uldall 1936 and Hjelmslev 1951. In our presentation, we will discuss their methodological problems in the light of some present-day analyses of the same sounds. The analysis delivered by Uldall 1936 was the point of departure for a long tradition established by Rischel 1970 and continued by e.g., Basbøll 2005. Recent attempts, like Ács & Jørgensen 2016 and Horslund, Puggaard-Rode & Jørgensen 2022 have tried to revise this tradition and get rid of some of the more unnatural co-classifications included in the traditional analysis, such as the co-classification of the voiceless unaspirated stop [k] and the semivowels [ɰ ɱ] under the proposed phoneme /g/.

The analysis of the stop sounds in Danish is complicated for at least two reasons, as pointed out by Martinet 1937: the distribution of the actual stop sounds is partly defective, and furthermore, the stops sometimes alternate with sounds of a very different nature, such as semivowels. These alternations are the result of a series of sound changes, in which post-nuclear stops developed into fricatives and then onwards into semivowels (or in some cases complete loss), cp. Brøndum-Nielsen (1932) 1968, Skautrup 1944-70. It has therefore been tempting to analyse the stops as if the original distribution was still at work, and only the manifestations had changed; incidentally, this would also correspond roughly to present-day spelling conventions. However, we argue that such an analysis stretches the concept of *phoneme* further than what can be defended theoretically.

Since the preparation of Uldall's and Hjelmslev's analyses is well documented in the correspondence between Hjelmslev and Uldall,¹ it is possible to observe how many of the ideas of Hjelmslev 1951 were sketched already during the preparation of Uldall 1936. In our analysis, we will demonstrate how the broader lines of the concept of *phoneme* with Hjelmslev and Uldall still is valid for present-day analysis but also point out some aspects that seem irrelevant today.

References:

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¹ The correspondance between Hjelmslev and Uldall is now accessible at glossematics.dk