

Louis Hjelmslev and the Baltic countries

Bohumil Vykypěl

Czech Language Institute of the CAS, Brno, Czech Republic

Abstract. This paper deals with texts by Louis Hjelmslev on Baltic topics, in particular an article from 1946 in which he defended the right of the Baltic countries to independence.

Keywords: Louis Hjelmslev, Baltic countries, structuralism, World War II, Soviet Union

In 2005, Axel Holvoet published my book on the phonology of Lithuanian and Latvian viewed through Hjelmslev's glossematics (Vykypěl 2005), which is perhaps the best-looking one of my books. I wish to contribute to his festschrift with a small paper on a topic which is even more thrilling than the phonology of the Baltic languages, namely Hjelmslev's relationship to the Baltic countries.

The external history of Hjelmslev and matters of the Baltic has been described on several occasions (Palionis 1978; Gregersen 1991, I, 174–177; Rasmussen 1992, 3–4, 14–15; Sabaliauskas 2008).

In the summer of 1921, Hjelmslev visited Lithuania as it behooved a student of comparative linguistics. He depicted what he had seen there in two journal articles with the title *Impressions from Lithuania* (Hjelmslev 1922). These articles are, indeed, more impressions than a deeper analysis; only the attempt at characterizing the nature of Lithuanian nationalism is perhaps noteworthy, this being, according to Hjelmslev, an opportunistic reality-nationalism. As Gregersen (1991, I, 175) remarked, Hjelmslev did not see in his 1922-impressions the differences between the individual groups of Lithua-

nians, treating the nation as an ideal whole. Similarly, in a later booklet on the Lithuanian people and their language (Hjelmslev 1930) he wrote in a romantic vein about the antiquity and beauty of Lithuanian or about the *dainos* as the most typical expression of Lithuanian psyche, belonging to a nation that had, in spite of oppression, managed to maintain its own language and culture. Hjelmslev's texts on Lithuania seem to be a typical product of a member of the Western European upper middle class of his time: their middle-class character is manifested by the mentioned "holistic" treatment of the concept of nation; the Western European perspective, in turn, prevented the author, apparently, from seeing more "heroic" or active aspects of Lithuanian history (such as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a regional great power of its time, the foundation of Vilnius University in 1579, the second oldest university in the Baltic region, or some of the remarkable works of Lithuanian literature which are not a few).

Besides these published texts, Hjelmslev also gave several public lectures on Lithuania as well as Latvia and Estonia: 1928 broadcast lecture on the occasion of the Lithuanian national day; 1930 lecture on Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; 1931 lecture on the Latvian language and folk poetry in the Danish-Latvian Association; 1933 lecture on Lithuania in the Danish-Lithuanian Society (see Registrant, 5, 13).

Hjelmslev also had a practical knowledge of Lithuanian as is attested by his letters written in Lithuanian and published by Palionis (1978). Three of them concern the visit to Lithuania in the summer of 1921: Hjelmslev described briefly what he had visited travelling around the Lithuanian countryside, and after returning home, he expressed gratitude for the hospitality he had met with; in addition, we learn that Hjelmslev (1922) was first not accepted for publication in the newspaper *Politiken*, and the author was then promised that the text would be published in the journal *Tilskueren*. More interesting are two other letters: they were written in 1924 when Hjelmslev was studying in Czechoslovakia,¹ and their topic is a lecturer position at the University of Kaunas for which Hjelmslev applied unsuccessfully. It was a different time: a Dane who was awarded a generous Czechoslovak scholarship was writing about his application for an academic position in Lithuania; it was the time before the communist destruction of the eastern half of Europe.

1 See Gregersen (1991, I, 181–182) on Hjelmslev's stay in Czechoslovakia.

The largest text devoted to a Baltic topic was Hjelmslev's dissertation in which he dealt with some intricate problems of Baltic phonology (Hjelmslev 1932); he returned to these questions in a later text (Hjelmslev 1956). Baltic phonology also provided material on which Hjelmslev demonstrated an early version of his glossematic theory (Hjelmslev 1936–1937). These contributions by Hjelmslev to Baltistics have been discussed and analyzed elsewhere (see – besides the special works on Baltic phonology – Sabaliauskas 1979, 225–226; Gregersen 1991, I, 208–218, II, 32–36; Rasmussen 1992, 476). In my view, however, his most important “Baltistic” paper is a newspaper article from 1946 (Hjelmslev 1946). This article was a polemic against an article with the title *Three small anti-democratic states* which had appeared in one of the previous issues of the newspaper. Hjelmslev refuted the claim that the Baltic countries had been fascist dictatorships and that the exiles from these countries were fascists. He defended the right of the Baltic countries to independence and rejected the absurd contention that the Baltic nations had asked for accession to the Soviet Union.²

Having said above that Hjelmslev's early texts on Lithuania are in essence a product of his time, I have to say that his article from 1946 seems, in contrast, not to be typical of the period. Certainly, more detailed research would be needed (of which I am not aware) on the question of how the occupation of the Baltic countries after World War II was reflected in the world. But I am afraid that reactions of the type manifested in Hjelmslev's article were in the minority. For instance, one finds neither in the texts nor in the extensive correspondence of the Czech linguist and Balticist Václav Machek a single mention of the fate of the Baltic nations (see Janyšková et al. 2011; Boček–Malčík 2011–2016), which is, however, rather understandable in a country in which the NKVD arrested in 1945 not a few of its citizens of Russian nationality. More difficult to understand is, in turn, the poor Archbishop of Canterbury, who called the Baltic partisans fascists whose deportation was justified (see Lowe 2013, 352); recently, he has even found a sad continuator in Jean-Claude Juncker who refused to watch in the European Parliament *The Soviet Story* by Edvīns Šnore in order not to support such an “anti-Soviet movie”.

What is remarkable is that Hjelmslev's article also mirrors, as I believe, general features of his thinking which is empirical, contextual and inspiring.

2 The polemic was continued by other authors (see Gregersen 1991, I, 177, fn. *).

First is the empirical foundation: the starting point should always be the experience data, not aprioristic constructions, in this case Soviet propaganda. Next is the structural contextuality or the relative nature of values and the participative character of the inner arrangement of each system as opposed to thinking in absolute terms:³ before World War II the Baltic countries indeed were, as Hjelmslev writes, dictatorships, but not fascist ones and the context in which they existed and in which their leaders had to act was intricate and not that in which contemporary Western democracies existed. In connection with this, what is inspiring – in particular for a historian of the Czech countries – is the comparison sketched by Hjelmslev of the pre-war Baltic countries and the so-called third Czechoslovak Republic (1945–1948): “Men de tre omtalte Personer [viz. the Baltic leaders] var ikke fascistiske Diktatorer, lige saa lidt som Beneš er kommunistisk Diktator i Tjekoslovakiet. [But the three mentioned persons were not fascist dictators, just as little as Beneš is a communist dictator in Czechoslovakia.]” (Hjelmslev 1946, 7).

The third Czechoslovak Republic, with its “socializing democracy” as even Edvard Beneš put it, viz. democracy allowing only those political subjects which agree with a basic socialist programme, may be considered as a left version of the traditionalistic or conservative dictatorships in the Baltic countries in the 1930s.

We can lastly pose the question of Hjelmslev’s motivation for his defence of the Balts. He surely had an emotional relationship with Lithuania as Gregersen (1991, I, 177) remarked. However, as noticed more accurately by Blatt (1965), the reason why Hjelmslev “was immune to Eastern propaganda” was not only his “familiarity with Baltic conditions”, but also his “common sense” (*gode forstand*). Indeed, I think that it is even possible to find eloquent links with his linguistic theory.

Readers of Hjelmslev have perhaps felt a certain utopian flavour in his linguistic thinking (pointed out recently by Cigana in press), based on a belief in the power of theory: in this respect Hjelmslev is a son of his time believing in science and its force. What is, however, striking is that he did not connect this belief with sympathy for totalitarian regimes, as is witnessed also by his text from 1946; thus he stood in contrast to many others professing such a utopian

3 See Cigana (2014) on the notion of participation in Hjelmslev’s theory.

scientism.⁴ The reason is perhaps that Hjelmslev differentiated between *universal* or *realized* (which is necessary) vs. *general* or *realizable* (which is possible) as Cigana (in press) put it,⁵ whereas other structuralists or neo-positivists did not: what is realized is not open for discussion because freedom is the realized necessity as communists used to say in a pseudo-Hegelian manner; “voilà pourquoi, au moins de ce point de vue, l’interprétation essentialiste de cette démarche structurale nous semble échouer” (Cigana in press).

Acknowledgements

The preparation of this article was financed within the statutory activity of the Czech Language Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences (RVO No. 6837809). I thank Mark Richard Lauersdorf (Lexington) for improving my English.

References

- Blatt, Franz. 1965. Louis Hjelmslev død. [Louis Hjelmslev dead]. *Politiken* 1 (6), 6.
- Boček, Vít, Petr Malčík, eds. 2011–2016. *Václav Machek: Korespondence I–III*. [Václav Machek: Correspondence I–III]. Praha: Lidové noviny.
- Carnap, Rudolf. 1968. Úvodní slovo k českému překladu mých článků. [Introductory word to the Czech translation of my articles]. In *Problémy jazyka vědy*. Rudolf Carnap. Praha: Svoboda. 7–8.
- Cigana, Lorenzo. 2014. La notion de « participation » chez Louis Hjelmslev: un fil rouge de la glossématique. *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* 67, 191–202.
- Cigana, Lorenzo. in press. Le langage entre structure, description et possibilités. Louis Hjelmslev. *Écrits choisis. Recueil d’essais publiés en traduction du danois, de l’anglais et de l’allemand*. Lorenzo Cigana, ed. Lausanne: Sdvig Press.
- Gregersen, Frans. 1991. *Sociolingvistikkens (u)mulighed. Videnskabshistoriske studier i Ferdinand de Saussures og Louis Hjelmslevs strukturalistiske sprogteorier*. [The (im)possibility of sociolinguistics: Science-historical studies on Ferdinand de Saussure and Louis Hjelmslev’s structuralist language theories]. I–II. København: Tiderne skifter.

4 For instance, Rudolf Carnap (1968) wrote ingenuously that he was pleased by a Czech anthology of his texts because understanding between Western and Eastern countries was very necessary for making exploitation of one class by another impossible.

5 See especially: “les rapports paradigmatiques ne traduisent pas la normativité qu’on est souvent amené à rattacher à la langue comme système de contraintes prescriptives. Ceux-ci sont au-delà de la dimension prescriptive, car ils représentent les conditions ou le champ de possibilités à disposition du sujet parlant, qui les met en place en fonction de ses besoins communicatifs.”

- Hjelmslev, Louis. 1922. Indtryk fra Litauen. [Impressions from Lithuania]. *Gads danske Magazin* 16, 409–416, 456–464.
- Hjelmslev, Louis. 1930. *Det litauiske Folk og dets Sprog*. [The Lithuanian people and their language]. København: Henrik Koppels Forlag.
- Hjelmslev, Louis. 1932. *Études baltiques*. København: Levin & Munksgaard.
- Hjelmslev, Louis. 1936–1937. Accent, intonation, quantité. *Studi baltici* 6, 1–57.
- Hjelmslev, Louis. 1946. Estland, Letland og Litauen. [Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania]. *Frit Danmark* 5(19), 7, 10–11.
- Hjelmslev, Louis. 1956. Études de phonétique dialectale dans le domaine letto-lituanien. *Scando-Slavica* 2, 62–86.
- Janyšková, Ilona, Helena Karlíková, Eva Havlová, Radoslav Večerka, eds. 2011. *Sebrané spisy Václava Machka*. [The collected writings of Václav Machek]. Praha: Lidové noviny.
- Lowe, Keith. 2013. *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II*. London: Penguin Books.
- Palionis, Jonas. 1978. L. Hjelmslevo lietuviški laiškai. [Hjelmslev's Lithuanian letters]. *Kalbotyra* 29, 108–112.
- Rasmussen, Michael. 1992. *Hjelmslevs sprogteori. Glossematikken i videnskabs-historisk, videnskabsteoretisk og erkendelsesteoretisk perspektiv*. [Hjelmslev's language theory: Glossematics in a science-historical, science-theoretical and epistemological perspective]. Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag.
- Registrant over Louis Hjelmslevs efterladte papirer. [Register of Louis Hjelmslev's left documents]. Available at: https://cc.au.dk/fileadmin/dac/Projekter/Infrastrukturisme/Billeder_til_Infrastrukturisme/Louis_Hjelmslev_-_arkiv_paa_KB.pdf. Accessed: 31. 12. 2020.
- Sabaliauskas, Algirdas. 1979. *Lietuvių kalbos tyrinėjimo istorija (iki 1940. m.)*. [A history of research on the Lithuanian language (until 1940)]. Vilnius: Mokslo.
- Sabaliauskas, Algirdas. 2008. Hjelmslev Louis Trolle. *Lietuvių kalbos enciklopedija*. [Encyclopaedia of the Lithuanian language]. 2nd edition. Kazys Morkūnas, ed. Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos institutas. 212–213.
- Vykypěl, Bohumil. 2005. *Hjelmslevo glosematika ir baltų kalbų fonologija*. [Hjelmslev's glossematics and the phonology of the Baltic languages]. Vilnius: Lietuvių kalbos institutas (Bibliotheca Salensis 1).

Submitted: 10 January 2021