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Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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Parts and wholes in language. The case of semantic underspecification[1]

1. Mereological structuralism

The issue of the relation parts and wholes is deeply entrenched in the structural paradigm: Roman Jakobson's famous programmatic statement proves as much, stressing the urgency for structural language sciences to fill the gap left by traditional linguistics:

> In spite of the manifold aspects of interdependence between wholes and parts in language, linguists have been prone to disregard this mutual relationship [...]. A systematic consideration of multiform whole-part relations broadly extends the scope of our science; it allows a systematic analysis of verbal messages with respect both to the code and to the context; it uncovers the complex interaction of the various levels of language, from the largest to the smallest units, and the constant interplay of diverse verbal functions. It introduces time and space factors into descriptive linguistics and, in the search for general, universal laws, is close to proving the scientific verity of Henri Delacroix's keen anticipation: 'Une langue est une variation historique sur le grand thème humain du langage' (Jakobson 1963: 157, 161-162).

The urgency of such a statement has been echoed by later scholars, who stress that "structures have to be studied within a more complete mereological framework" (Sonesson 2012: 84), or that structuralism – in precisely this sense, *i.e.* a paradigm dealing with structures – still defines the scientific horizon of research (Haspelmath 2020). It would be relatively easy to challenge these claims, showing that few agree upon how structures should be conceived to be described (features-binarism being, for instance, just a possibility among others), the descriptive vs. explicatory reach of structures, and whether the very use of "structure" can still be said to be of some interest in modern linguistic and semiotic approaches. The problems that interest us here, however, lie elsewhere: not only was Jakobson's commitment to the "mereologisation" of language science probably

[1] This artile specifies (!) the paper given within the panel "Compositionality, over- or under-summativity? Parts & wholes in Language and Languages" organised by Savina Raynaud, Maria Paola Tenchini and Marco Passarotti at the International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences (Ichols XVI), Tbilisi, 26-30 August 2024.

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to be more inspirational than anything else (*i.e.* more a rallying cry rather than the expression of a fully fledged programme, cf. Albano Leoni 2015), but it is also doubtful whether such a wished-for transposition of linguistic and semiotic phenomena in terms of parts-and-wholes relations can be called, in fact, mereological. Jakobson does not use the term; moreover, the theory that has inherited and further developed the issue of parthood relations is a branch of ontology and metaphysics, hardly of linguistics or even philosophy of language. Is it then legitimate to speak of "mereology" in connection with a paradigm – structural linguistics – that remained, even in its formalistic branches, explicitly or implicitly removed from the methodological and conceptual horizon of the disciplines that provided the formal basis for mereology as we know it – logic, philosophy, ontology and metaphysics? As Albano Leoni correctly stresses, Jakobson "simplifies or, better, fails to highlight the serious difficulties, at least from the point of view of logic and mereology, which, once summoned, require that their rules be respected" (2015: 34; transl. is mine). Mereology, conceived as a set of theories in ontology, is bound to specific constraints, logical framework and formalism (cf. Simons 1987; Lando 2017), which in large part are hardly compatible with the theorisation (and in some cases formalisation) of the structural approach due to their different assumptions and needs: for instance, even when the debate on the linguistic oppositions arose in structural linguistics, the attempts to conceptualise them on logical basis went hardly beyond a given minimum, *i.e.* the classical framework (cf. Nagel 1963; this also applies for instance to Cantineau 1955; Cantineau 1955). This was partly because of the different value assigned to the role of logics and logical formalism, partly because that minimum was deemed sufficient and partly because further efforts to formalise the framework brought dubious results (cf. for instance the question raised by Prebensen 1967 on Hjelmslev's *Prolegomena* which seems to miss the point).

And yet, if the idea of a structure as a whole in which parts are interconnected ("*où tout se tient*") is to be taken other than as a mere "Eideshelfer"[2], a safe common-ground must exist, and the two traditions must converge at least on their basic assumptions, including the priority of relationships over properties, the transposability of the relational patterns across various substances, and the need to establish an inventory as closed as possible of the different types of dependences (cf. Stjernfelt 2023).

To understand in what sense "structures need to be investigated within a more complete mereological framework", we need to make sure which sense of "mereology" are we assuming: either the specific tradition that followed Husserl and was fleshed out by the Polish school of logic (specifically by Leśnienski) into a theory

[2] As Bühler reproached to Gestalt psychologists (cf. Friedrich 2023: 31).

of ontology, foundation of mathematics and logics (and which with various axiomatisations has been further developed into mereotopology, general systems theory, metaphysics and even semantics); or the neutral sense, thus as epistemological discourse on wholes and parts tackled by various disciplines since the turn of XXth century in connection to various and complementary needs (empirical: *Gestalt* psychology), foundational (linguistics) or theoretical (phenomenology). And in this latter case, I believe it would serve better the understanding of this issue to avoid thinking of those disciplines as "regional ontologies": each one of the disciplines could claim prominence with respect to the others[3]. The point here is that one could indeed speak of a "mereological linguistics", meaning a branch of language sciences concerned with rendering linguistic phenomena in terms of relationships between parts and wholes, but that this qualification would be in large part redundant within structural linguistics, once we take into consideration the effort put forward in various measures by those theoreticians who reflected upon the internal structure of the systems of signs.

The reach of such an endeavour is not in question: as Jakobson shows, the issue of parts and wholes informs every level of linguistic analysis, from the interplay between minimal parts or distinctive features (defined not by happenstance "merisms" by Benveniste, cf. Benveniste 1966b: 102-103) to the very general definition of sign. In fact, Jakobson himself seems to suggest that the various linguistic takes on the structure of the sign could be framed mereologically[4], obtaining the following typology:

a. by conceiving language as the expression of thought, language as a whole is taken as coextensive, and hence conflated, with one of its parts, the "signifier";

b. conversely, in its structural definition, language is itself the totality resulting from the association of the signifier and the signified, which need in turn to be apprehended in functional terms, hence entailing two more possibilities:

    1. either to take "sign" (a placeholder for any linguistic element) as a whole, consisting of two parts, the signifier and the signified, since the sign itself is analysed based on such an association.

    2. or to take "sign" as consisting of three parts, namely the signifier, the signified and the relation between them – position which may lead to hyposthatising the relation.

[3] So that for instance mereology is foundational to linguistics, but language is in turn foundational to mereology, so that there is an interdependence between the theoretical need of talking about structures in general terms and the empirical need to add empirical and methological support to this framework.

[4] For example, the outer, perceptible part of the sign, its *signans* was examined deliberately without reference to the whole sign, which unites *signans* with *signatum*, that is, with the intelligible, translatable, semantic part of the total *signum* (Jakobson 1963: 157). We will not tackle Jakobson's idiosynchratic understanding of the *signans* as concrete vs. the intelligible part (*signatum*).

No need to say that this consideration is only relevant if linguistics sees mereology as pertinent, *i.e.* when it sees among its tasks the clarification of such general issues because of deeper implications to follow; and, where such a condition applies, it can be paradigm-discriminative. In fact, the difference between two grammatical approaches, *i.e.,* the grammar of constituents and the grammar of dependencies, can in large part be understood as two opposite ways of resolving wholes (constituents) into parts (relations). Admittedly, this also applies to dependential approaches, where, for instance, Tesnière's valency grammar is a clear example of option b.2, since he explicitly takes the relations as a an extra element (the relation "p → q" yelds "p", "q" and "→"); while Hjelmslev's approach aligns with option b.1., given that he posits any analysis to be carried out upon "bases", *i.e.* the conceivable functions themselves (so that the analysis of "p → q" is an analysis according to → and yields "p" and "q", where "p" occurs as determiner and "q" occurs as determined).

A common rejection of this kind of analysis is based on the claim that it runs counter to how we experience language and its phenomena: some objects indeed function as wholes, and thus analysing them into smaller components means losing the very principle of their functioning. Breaking the sentence into its constituent parts means, for the mind of the speaker, that the sentence as such gets lost. We use language via wholes that convey meaning, not via the combination of smaller parts. Against this objection, structuralism maintained the necessity of such an analysis, under the condition of rejecting atomism. So the emphasis was put on procedures that could keep the organic factor of their own objects (see quotation 1, here below), without falling into the opposite trap, namely of indiscriminate interconnectedness (see quotation 2, here below):

> **Quotation 1.** "§ 5 As a result, a sentence of the type Alfred speaks is not composed of just the two elements, Alfred and speaks, but rather of three elements, the first being Alfred, the second speaks, and the third the connection that unites them, without which there would be no sentence. To say that a sentence of the type Alfred speaks consists of only two elements is to analyse it superficially, purely morphologically, while neglecting the essential aspect that is the syntactic link" (Tesnière 1956 [2015]: 3).

> **Quotation 2.** "The famous motto *tout se tient dans la langue* has been frequently applied too rigidly and mechanically, in an absolute way. But we need to keep the sense of proportion. It is indeed important to recognise that everything is connected, but that not everything is connected in the same way, and that besides interdependences there are also unilateral dependencies and mere constellations […]. 'Structure' does not mean interdependence: the very notion of structure implies the possibility of relative independence between certain parts of the system. Describing a structure means accounting for both dependencies and independencies" (Hjelmslev 1939 [1970]: 114-115; translation is mine).

Here again, however, there was hardly agreement on how to address the issue even in its generality. Jakobson's reference to Sapir's *Totality* as "the first and, unfortunately, almost the only completed instalment of his projected general work on the *Foundations of Language* (1930)" (Jakobson 1963: 157) is an expression of this heterogeneity of views, because one thing is to recognise the part-wholes relationships as a specific *type* of relationships among many others (interdependences, combinations, etc.), but quite another to consider such relationships as the *framework* through which any linguistic relationship can be understood and described as such. It is one thing to research how language *expresses* parts and wholes as concepts; it is quite another to research how language *works* in terms of parts and wholes, and, correlatively, how it can be described in these terms.

At least six principles can be invoked when it comes to defining structures as wholes: Coseriu (1976) identified the first four, namely (1) systematicity, (2) oppositionality, (3) functionality, (4) neutralisability; while the last two are clarification of the first one: (5) holism, *i.e.* parts are mutually dependent so that a change on a part is susceptible to altering other parts, and (6) oversummativity, *i.e.* parts are connected in such a way that one cannot be freely added or removed without altering the whole, which then has priority over the parts themselves. All six principles give rise to various issues, both empirical and epistemological: do they pertain to the description/apprehension of the object or to the object itself? Can a non-structural object exist or function under these terms? If the structural principles constitute the conditions for the apprehension and the description of the object, how is it possible to account for objects that are not totalities (provided that such objects exist)? And so forth. Moreover, all principles have been implemented variously in the description of empirical phenomena. Morphosyntax has been the domain in which the structural principles have been implemented most successfully, given that the very concept of dependence has always imposed itself with some degree of evidence in grammatical tradition in notions such as "government", "rection" or "agreement", and also thanks to the overlap with the Romantic concept of "morphology" (Cassirer 1945). Phonology and phonetics, less so, although phenomena such as Menzerath's coarticulation and the vowel harmony do showcase well the holistic and not-unidirectional nature of the interaction between parts. Semantics has also been treated structurally via the principle of compositionality: on one hand, componential analysis has been the staple methodology of analysis since its development in the late fifties; on the other hand, some important euristic notions were conceived as implementations of the structural (and thus mereological) view, or criticised in the light of lack of structural (and thus mereological) features. The concept of "field", for instance, was declinated variously across different theories (see, for instance, Hjelmslev's "category/paradigm", Bally's "champ associatif", Matoré's "champ notionnel", Trier's

and Weisgerber's "Wortfeld", Porzig's "Bedeutungsfeld", Ducháček's "field", cf. Coseriu-Geckeler 1981: 22-29; on the topic see also De Palo 2019, Diodato 2019):

> "Words within the field are mutually dependent. From the structure of the whole, the individual word receives its conceptual content-related determination [...]. The meaning depends on the meaning of its conceptual neighbours. All join forces to the task in introducing structuring boundaries in the unstructured content of consciousness, of clarifying it, of making it conceptually comprehensible"[5].

The idea of category developed by prototype semantics could also be counted as an instantiation of the notion of "field", in which case the difference between the criticism Coseriu addresses of prototype semantics' "category" and the one he levelled to Trier's "Wortfeld" would interestingly rely on the absence vs. presence of the mereological rationale of "oppositionality": while Trier's theory endorses oppositionality but lacks the necessary methodology to fully implement it operatively (*i.e.* linguistically), prototype semantics' categorisation does not endorse oppositionality on either level (neither theoretically nor methodologically), hence it fails to account for linguistically-conditioned phenomena (vs. extralinguistically conditioned ones) in a structural way (cf. Coseriu-Geckeler 1981: 27).

There is another semantic notion which relies on some assumptions belonging to the structural paradigm – more specifically: compositionality and dependency – while posing an interesting challenge to the very same framework, *i.e.* the notion of "underspecification". In what follows, we will outline these issues and put forward some theoretical considerations.

2. Semantic underspecification and its problems

The notion of "underspecification" accounts for the phenomenon according to which a given feature is absent in the underlying representation but can be provided by context or surface representation, which then is said to specify it (Krämer 2012). The notion does not pertain to semantics but to phonology, as it stems from Chomsky's & Halle's (1968) idea of phonological "underlying representation": phonemic representations of phonetic realisations do not contain all of their potential features, but only the distinctive features necessary to differentiate them from other phonemes. For instance, a phoneme might be

[5] "Die Worte im Feld stehen in gegenseitiger Abhängigkeit voneinander. Vom Gefüge des Ganzen her empfängt das Einzelwort seine inhaltliche begriffliche Bestimmtheit [...]. Die Bedeutung des Einzelwortes ist abhängig von der Bedeutung seiner begrifflichen Nachbarn. Alle schließen sich zu der Aufgabe zusammen, in den Block ungegliederten Bewußtseinsinhalts gliedernde Grenzen einzuziehen, ihn zu klären, ihn begrifflich faßbar zu machen" (1931: 2-3, cit. in Coseriu-Geckeler 1981: 23; translation is mine).

characterised as having the feature [+voice] while being also indifferentiate, and thus "unspecified", in relation to the feature [±nasal].

However, the concept flowed from the original framework of generative phonology into the contiguous domains of grammar, morphology and semantics: it can be found in theoretical linguistics (Archangeli 1988; Egg 2019), morphology (Farkas 1990, Lumsden 1992), lexical linguistics (Geeraerts 2009), prototype semantics (Taylor 1999), psycholinguistics (Frisson & Pickering 2001a, 2001b), conceptual metaphor theory (Feur 2013), and is typically used to account for interfaces between semantics and pragmatics, phonology and phonetics, natural language and sign languages and text and image (Hutchinson *et al.* 2022). The term peaked in the late 1990s and, since then, has gained currency (not without important redefinitions) in computational linguistics: for instance, in machine learning (D'Amour et al. 2020) and natural language processing (Frisson 2009; Pezzelle 2023).

Thanks to this spread, "underspecification" has been generalised and holds for both the signifier and the signified. As a first important consequence, this means that the notion shall not automatically be taken as synonym for "indeterminacy" or "vagueness", which are typically only semantic phenomena, but it can be defined in more neutral (underspecified!) terms as the omission, within a given linguistic systemic element, of one or more instructions (features) concerning its utilisation within discourse – instructions which may be provided by context.

In phonology, for instance, one gets a simpler and more uniform description of the two realisations ['spɪn] and ['phɪn] if they postulate an underlying [p] as underspecified in relation to the feature of [aspiration], and admitting the intervention of a postlexical rule that prescribes the feature [+spread glottis] where [p] is realised in syllable onsets and [÷spread glottis] in all other contexts.

In morphosyntax, "underspecification" can be used to explain the occurrence of *was* in the sentence *Ich zerstöre was mich ärgert*. As Lumsden (1992) explains, *was* is underspecified in relation to the distinction between nominative and accusative (which is neutralised) in connection to it being a neuter form; thus, this makes it the ideal choice to avoid the inconveniece of the constructions with the specified personal forms: **Ich zerstöre wer mich ärgert* (where the +nominative is valid for the clause *wer mich ärgert* which however can not occur as an accusative groupe) and **Ich zerstöre wen mich ärgert* (where, conversely, the +accusative enables the construction of **Ich zerstöre wen*... but excludes the possibility of occurring as nominative for the completive group *wen mich ärgert*) (cf. Lumsden 1992: 417). Allomorphism is thus typically understood in terms of underspecification.

In semantics – the domain that concerns us specifically here – the English verb *to climb* can be said to be underspecified in relation to several contexts or realisations, as Coseriu (2000: 28 ff.) shows:

1. *The monkey climbs the tree*
2. *The monkey climbs up the tree*
3. *The monkey climbs down the tree*
4. *The vine climbs the wall*
5. *The aeroplane climbs at 2,000 feet per minute*.

If we try to extrapolate the minimal semantic features that hold across all these contexts and assure *to climb* to be selected and used in all of them, we will have to conclude that *to climb* only includes the features [+move on a vertically inclined axis] and [+effort], while being underspecified in relation to the other features, provided by either the endophoric (syntagmatic) or the exophoric (pragmatic) context: [up] and [down] (cf. 1-3), [using hands/paws/extremities] and [animate] (cf. 4), [inanimate] (cf. 5).

Now, this framework touches on several key issues in semantics. The relevant ones that appear to have a connection with the problem of parts-and-wholes relationships are the following:

a. the conceptualisation of "meaning" as monosemic, unitary or polysemic;
b. good vs. bad compositionality, *i.e.* the idea of "features" as co-dependent parts vs. features as "removable" parts;
c. the idea of "absence", "omission" or "subtraction" of meaning (and correlatively, its "addition" via context).

We can rephrase these issues in terms of questions: in what sense can a given linguistic element be assumed to have only one meaning vs. several meanings? Is this the only theoretical alternative? In which sense can features (or semes) be said to be absent or omitted in a representation and, conversely, added by syntagmatic combination or contextual realisation? In which sense can this "omission" or "addition" be conceptualised overall in relation to the structuralist vs. atomistic framework? If these questions are to be answered structurally, *i.e.* in terms of the joint requirements of holism and oversummativity, the following stances are to be maintained:

– any "additive" or "subtractive" view on meaning (and corresponding methodology) is highly problematic;
– there is no such thing as 0-1 meaning, *i.e.* "presence" of meaning vs. "absence" of meaning;

– the adoption of underspecification as a rationale warrants (and relies on) the distinction between linguistically encoded meaning vs. encyclopædic meaning.
– Further implications may follow, especially on the overall role of context, yet it is important to see where the problems actually lie when we try to implement the standard take on underspecification as "omission of feature(s)" within a structural/mereological framework.
– The entanglement of these problems leaps out from three issues, among others: firstly and more broadly, the lack of feature(s) displayed by underspecified elements (2.1); secondly, the issue of syntagmatic specification (2.2); thirdly, the issue of so-called "indexicals" (2.3).

2.1. Omission, underspecification and undersummativity

When an underspecified element a given feature is said to be "omitted" or "lacking", the existence of a "gap" is implicitly assumed, which then posits the issue if the [p] of our previous example is underspecified in relation to the feature of [aspiration], that feature is missing while the element is clearly potentially able to support it. In other words, an underspecified element risks being something less than its parts, given that the features that occur as parts of its totality are then omitted, absent or excluded in the underlying representation. The problem specifically lies in the fact that within a structural framework, linguistic elements are considered discrete entities which cannot be divided into parts: the semantic (or phonetic) potentiality included in every element is assumed to be a continuous characteristic, so that contextual features cannot "add" or "substract" anything to or from a given linguistic element which does not lie in its general definition. Moreover, without the very idea of semantic (or phonetic) potentiality, assuring a stable core-value to linguistic elements, it is difficult to know which features may be omitted: if an element can be underspecified in relation to all possible particular (semantic or phonetic) features stemming from context, both the very idea of linguistic underlying representation and underspecification itself become pointless, if not straight circular.

One could claim that such a state of affairs is hardly problematic epistemologically, nor is it incompatible with a structural framework. Let us examine the first aspect. In a sense, the counterargument sounds a lot like the classic saying, "if facts do not comply with a framework, change the framework, not the facts": If the idea of oversummativity does not comply with facts, there is no reason to keep it. Yet, it is worthwhile recalling that a framework is not simply a set of tools that may be used or discarded according to its correspondence with the facts; rather, and in a very strong sense, a framework is constitutive, in the sense that it constitutes the facts that are to be described. So, changing such a claim means

that the whole series of assumptions must be dropped, possibly reverting the approach to atomism. If we examine the second problem, one could claim that the case of an "omission" or "lack of" is not unheard of within the structural framework, as it was, for instance, conceived by Bühler with his idea of "undersummativity" or "subsummativity" ("Untersummativität"; on this cf. Henne 1975: 119-121; De Palo & Diodato 2022). This is, in fact, described as the processes of "suppression, omission, selection and differential effect" (Bühler 2011 [1934]: 399) which intervene in metaphores, in attributive or nominal compounds, but which are actually the expression of the universal feature behind language as such, called the "law of suppression" (*ibid.*).

To me, this idea is theoretically unsustainable and can only be endorsed in a sense (for which it was actually developed), *i.e.* in relation to *abstraction*, the process by which, in any form of apprehension, understanding or analysis, certain aspects of a phenomenon are retained, while others are discarded. Yet once they are discarded, they simply do not enter as parts of the phenomenon as a whole, and conversely, once the phenomenon itself is grasped as a whole, then it is made up of parts which interact oversummatively. There is no other option, since oversummativity is not a neutral parameter (summativity) than can be varied in the positive (over-) or the negative (under-), but a constitutive feature of wholes. If a whole is not defined oversummatively, if it fully resolves into its parts, then it is automatically an aggregate, defined incrementally, not holistically (see below). The point is that Bühler seems to understand things differently and to consider a third option: there are aggregates (the amorph or "*Ungestalten*"), there are incremental entities ("*Und-Verbindungen*"), which are summative (resolvable into parts) and which can "be used to bundle anything with anything else at random" (Bühler 2011 [1934]: 359), and then there are fully structural entities ("*Gestalten*", non resolvable into their parts and thus oversummative). Bühler devotes a great deal of effort to finding linguistic phenomena that substantiate these two possibilities: attributive groups and nominal compounds (Bühler 2011 [1934]: 375-384) are taken as examples of summative relationships, while predicative groups and verbal compounds are examples of oversummative relationships. In the former, the group is not fully cohesive, so that parts can be added or removed without any significant change in the other element of the compound (which is then endocentric); in the latter, addition or removal is not possible since the degree of cohesiveness is such that no head can be distinguished (exocentric)[6]. It is precisely here that undersummativity presents itself:

[6] Bühler asks, which part of *Baumstumpf* should be considered primal – the tree (*Baum*) or the stump (*Stumpf*)? However, this question is not quite equivalent to asking whether the compound is endocentric or exocentric.

> "addition and subtraction take place in one and the same construction. '*Hausvater*' (father of the household) and '*Hausschlüssel*' (house key) are two compounds; the specification of how the relationship is conceived is added and is thus supersummative [...]. The rule is that whatever is incompatible, such as the additional determination 'of wood' in the expression for 'wax matches' and the gold colour on the green tree, is omitted in understanding such composites" (Bühler 2011 [1934]: 406).

Here, then, it is clear that undersummativity cannot be the constitutive counterpart of oversummativity and that it is thus hardly comparable to underspecificity: it deals with aspects which indeed are not relevant and thus are not parts of the whole at hand, while instead the relevant ones come together oversummatively, as parts (*Haus* and *Vater, Haus* and *Schlüssel*). The point is: if "underspecification" is understood undersummatively as the omission from a lingusitic element of any aspect which stems from context or which can be inferred encyclopedically but which is not relevant for the systemic definition, then it simply doesn't work, as the sets of features by which the element may be underspecified would be infinite, and one could claim that an element is underspecified in relation to everything which does not specify it. On the contrary, the features that might be omitted need to be finite, and their omission needs to be understood as a suppression, not as a "lack".

2.2. Incremental vs. distributed specification

The idea that any linguistic element, for instance a word, is provided with a core-meaning that can be enriched via combinations occurring in the endo- or exophoric context poses a problem insofar as this "enrichment" (Recanati 2004: 24 ff.) is conceived incrementally. And this is for two interdependent reasons.

Firstly, such a view perpetuates the anti-holistic take on compositionality according to which the meaning of a sentence or of a group derives not from the whole but from the meaning of part A (apprehended or understood firstly) + the meaning of part B, which specifies A (which is apprehended or understood subsequently) + the meaning of part C, which specifies A+B, and so forth; and thus typically in a linear way, much like in figure 1:

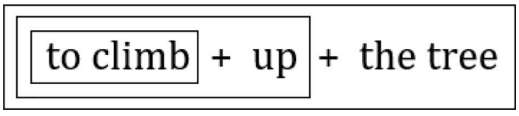


Fig. 1. Representation of the incremental specification of *to climb.*

Secondly, and consequently, this view endorses the idea that the meaning of a part like *to climb* is not derived from the whole, *i.e.* from the interaction between itself and the other constituents within the same sentence or group, but again,

additionally and linearly. Contrariwise, within a structural framework, it would be worthwhile exploring the idea of a "distributed specification", the possibility of *to climb* being specified by *up* must already lie in the semantic potentiality of *to climb* itself. In a sense, therefore, one might claim that *to climb* is specified by *up,* much like *up* is specified by *to climb*. And of course, the same holds for *the tree*, understood as the object purporting the idea expressed by the group verb + preposition[7].

This idea, however, leaves open the major issue, which does not concern the incremental take: from which whole do we start? What is its extension and its boundaries? The question cannot be tackled inductively, and deductively, the answer might ring unsatisfactory (also because we cannot discuss it here in greater detail): a whole, like a sentence, is grasped as a part of another whole, which ultimately connects to the totality formed by the solidarity between the signified and the signifier. Despite the need for more specific criteria for identifying smaller totalities, this take is warranted by the concept of language as a "system of systems", constitutive of this stance. The question of the criteria for delimiting empirical totalities of various extensions – an issue relevant for phenomena like anaphora – must here be left untouched.

2.3. Underspecification and indexicals

The phenomenon of deixis is, of course, well covered in structural literature, and although indexicals are not treated explicitly in terms of underspecification, the idea can easily be brought forth. Pronouns and other shifters (adverbial constructions, demonstratives) can indeed be said to be underspecified in relation to the set of circumstances of their actualisation, so that, unlike other lexical or grammatical elements, they do not have a fixed meaning[8]: their meaning is typically said to depend on context. The problem of whether indexicals have meaning is double: roughly speaking, if we assume them to have a general meaning, such generality cannot be straightforwardly connected to the code (Jakobson 1959), and if we assume them to have a referential meaning, such

[7] The argument of the headedness of syntactic dependences should not disprove this, if one considers that the syntactic dependences were conceived in terms of fractions of content shared by the governing and the governed element. Hjelmslev, for instance, explicitly formulated the idea that the meaning of case has to be found in both the governing and the governed term (cf. Hjelmslev 1935: 54).

[8] Kaplan's theory of indexicals (Kaplan 1989) significantly distinguishes between a constant meaning (called "character") and a context-dependent meaning (called "content"). This theory however does not solve the issue of the general nature of the constant meaning as underspecified, as it reproduces what in different frameworks is known as the distinction between "semantic" (infralinguistic) and "pragmatic" (extralinguistic) levels of meaning: the matter is precisely that the constant meaning has to be "generic" (abstract), and thus underspecified. For an accurate epistemological discussion of such a distinction, although it is applied to constructional grammar (and particularly to the issue of allostructions), see De Vaere, Kolkmann & Belligh (2020).

reference is unavoidably neither singular nor stable[9]. Such complexity made some linguists speak of "lack of meaning", or "meaning-emptyness"[10] of such forms. In this sense, indexicals would be underspecified by definition. Yet once again, the idea of a lack of meaning or the idea of a form that behaves like a pure syntactic operator to be filled or "interpreted", as it were, with contextual content is not compatible with the structural framework: grammatical categories and elements do have a proper meaning which follows from the fact that they are conceived as articulation of the signified conceived as a macro-class of any system of signs. Yet this is not to say that they have a *concrete* meaning: as a matter of fact, linguists from the structural paradigm tried to tackle this issue, finding a way to define the abstract yet non-representational content. The theory of "general meanings" (called "fundamental meanings", "categorial meanings" or "unitary meanings": Hjelmslev 1935, Jakobson 1936, Coseriu 1969; on the whole endeavour, cf. Cigana & Jørgensen 2023) is the solution that was put forward, although its scope goes beyond the issue of indexicals. It has some interesting variations and interactions with philosophical and phenomenological takes, too.

3. A possible early answer to a late issue: the theory of general meanings

Originally developed for the problem of the meaning of abstract grammatical categories vs. the concreteness of the particular meanings (of single morphemes, of lexical units, etc.) but generalised for content *tout court*, the theory of general meanings conceives meaning as intrinsically abstract and potential so that, when it comes to the meaning of indexicals, their content must *contain*, at a code level, the conditions for their various realisations on the level of the message:

> "The peculiarity of the personal pronoun and other shifters was often believed to consist in the lack of a single, constant, general meaning. […] For this alleged multiplicity of contextual meanings, shifters in contradistinction to symbols were treated as mere indices (Bühler). Every shifter, however, possesses its own general meaning. Thus, I mean the addresser (and you, the addressee) of the message to which it belongs […] Indexicals are thus a complex category where code and message overlap" (Jakobson 1957: 132).

The idea is that choosing the right indexical that bears the reference to the meant context is not a haphazard operation, much like choosing the verb *to climb* to use in the various combinations listed above. This very constatation leads to postulating

[9] In other words, specification has its limits too, as however much definite descriptions, indexicals and other determiners specialise the meaning of a term, it will never reach the stage of individual meaning, not even in the case of personal names.

[10] "Language has solved this problem by creating an ensemble of 'empty' signs that are nonreferential with respect to 'reality'. These signs are always available and become 'full' as soon as a speaker introduces them into each instance of his discourse [...] they do not assert anything" (Benveniste 1966a [1971], 219-220).

the existence of a general meaning in these forms[11], as the factor guiding the selection of other complements in the chain and "creating" its own context, as it were. So, in the example of *to climb*, the preposition *up* is not simply "added" to the verb to make it more specific, but it is the verb that selects some determiners and not others (while being potentially compatible with all of them). Thus, *to climb* needs to have a meaning that is general enough to be a priori compatible with its endophoric/exophoric specifications. Put in another way, its meaning needs to be abstract enough to include the potential specifications realised in discourse. It is in this sense that an underspecified meaning is not something *less* than the sum of (the features of) its realisations, but something *more*. For this to be possible, the distinction between linguistically encoded meanings and extralinguistic meanings needs to be combined with the distinction between the ideal (systemic) level and the concrete level of actual usages.

Now, of course one can not expect Jakobson to use the term "underspecification", yet his idea of defining the categories of shifters like gender, number, status and aspect as characterising the participants or the narrated event "without reference to the speech event" (Jakobson 1957: 134) goes in the same direction; and even the categories that do chategorise something "with reference" to the event or the participant, such as person (*ibid.*), can do so because they are *de facto* underspecified in relation to those same circumstances: the category of person in itself, on the level of the code, must indeed be able to stand for all possible participants in any ideal speech event while still posessing a given meaning to allow it to be selected.

The same issue was addressed, in a partially different way, by Sergej Karcevskij in *Du dualisme asymétrique du signe linguistique* (1929), in which he tries to grasp this very feature in mereological terms:

> "If signs were static and each had only a single function, language would become a simple set of labels. It is equally impossible to conceive of a language whose signs would be dynamic to the point of signifying nothing outside of concrete situations. *Thus, the nature* of a linguistic sign must be both static and dynamic, all at once. Called upon to adapt to a concrete situation, it can modify itself only partially; a certain part of it must remain static if the sign is to remain identical to itself" (Karcevskij 1929: 49-50; emphasis is mine).

Karcevskij's stance on stability and mobility of linguistic meaning is also shared by Hjelmslev in the notion of "fundamental meaning", which applies not only to indexicals or shifters, but to meaning in general:

[11] We could also say "core-meaning" (Kienpointer 2008), yet this is problematic precisely from a structural/mereological point of view. We cannot tackle this issue here, but for instance, Corbett's idea of a stable "semantic core" in the meaning of the grammatical category of gender (Corbett 1991) strongly resembles Jakobson's idea of a "principal variant", criticised by Hjelmslev (1939) [1970].

> "Behind the typical particular meanings allowed by the norm, there must be a *fundamental meaning* of a more abstract character, from which the existing or possible special meanings can be deduced. From an abstract fundamental meaning, a determined series of possible particular meanings arises in the norm" (Hjelmslev 1934: 137; translation is mine).

He then represents the idea by resorting to a diagrammatic representation (fig. 2): the *x* marks the fundamental meaning of a given linguistic element, like *to climb*, which has to be abstract enough to include the possible particular meanings realised in combinations such as *The monkey clims up the tree* (1), *The monkey climbs down the tree* (2), *The vine climbs the wall* (3), *The airplane climbs at 2,000 feet per minute* (4), and so forth. Of course, the particular meanings cannot be foreseen, but they don't need to, as *to climb* needs to impart its own fundamental meanings to the syntagmatic combinations and, what is more, disregarding the difference between proper or metaphorical senses. This means that it would also be acceptable to say *to climb on water*, by which the mental image of water creating an inclined and hard surface would be forced on the speakers by the very fact of using the word *to climb*, generating an effect of an unlikely situation of extreme difficulty[12].

Now, when it comes to this diagrammatic figure, it is important to bear in mind that the fundamental meaning (*x*) is not to the particular meaings (1, 2, 3, 4) like a centre (core) is to its periphery: *x* is rather the whole circle (fig. 3), so that *x* is not less than its contextual realisations (1, 2, 3, 4, etc.), but must be conceived as supporting them, as it were, and thus as potentially including them in its own semantic field.

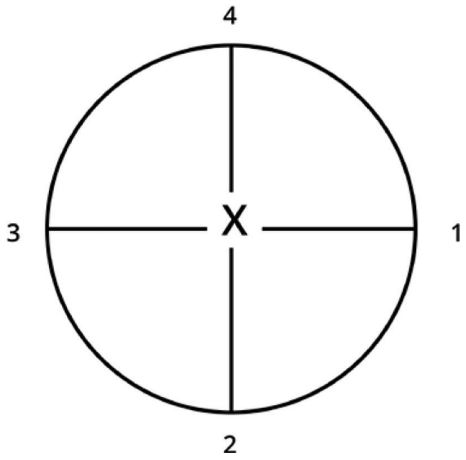


Fig. 2. Hjelmslev's representation of a fundamental meaning (x) (Hjelmslev 1934: 138) coincidentally similar to the relationship between core-meaning and contextual meanings illustrated in Kienpointer 2008: 81, fig. 1).

[12] Something like this actually exists in Italian, where "arrampicarsi sugli specchi" (literally: "to climb on mirrors", the equivalent of the English idiomatic phrase "to clutch at straws") means to attempt impossible and purposeless actions, like the laborious effort to give explanations for unreasonable or unacceptable behaviours.

In a sense, therefore, the fundamental meaning has a set of minimal semantic features and is indeed underspecified *by default* in relation to any other possible realisations, simply because there is no limit to the combinations in which the fundamental meaning of an element may occur, as well as to the effects these combinations may create, given that the semantic features of the element flow into the content of the rest of complements (like *to climb on water*), imposing themselves on their own content, as it were.

In a 1937 essay devoted specifically to pronouns, Hjelmslev also tries to better characterise the very nature of the substance of content connected to underspecified meanings and specifically to indexicals. Following the suggestions put forward by Van Ginneken, he claims that in pronouns "the details of the representation reach zero" and that only a "potential representation" remains (Hjelmslev 1937 [1970]: 201-202):

> "The particularities of pronouns can be explained by the obvious fact that the words belonging to this category do not present any significative content [contenu significatif], no 'semantic' content in the traditional sense of this term. A simple observation of the facts shows, in fact, that the only positive content that can be found in a pronoun is that which is usually found in morphemes. The positive content of the pronoun is purely morphematic" (Hjelmslev 1937 [1970]: 202; translation is mine).

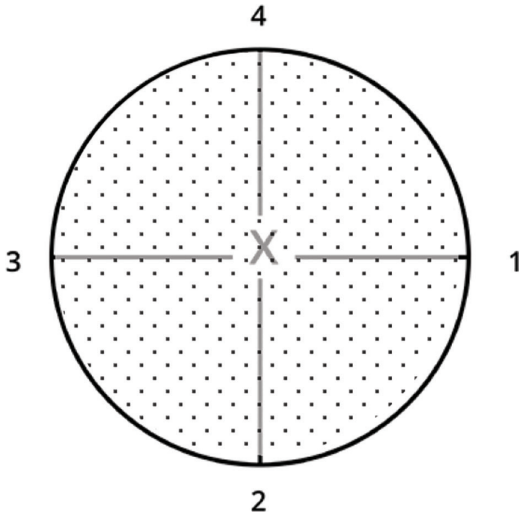


Fig. 3. The fundamental meaning's field (*x*).

We cannot enter into the details of this theory, which postulates that in pronouns, articles are converted and included as a covert category. Yet the point of meaning is still the same: when it comes to the non-specified meaning of pronouns, this

feature is not assumed as a void or a gap, but still as content: non-representational but abstract. This effort is striking in itself, as it shows the endeavour to tackle the issue of underspecification this time on a rather psycholinguistic level, on top of the mereological stance.

Be it what it may, the positions recapitulated here show a collective effort towards a conception of meaning as underspecified a priori, or indetermined by default. Does this mean that the issue of an open-ended list of underspecified features is still there? In the quotation given above, Hjelmslev speaks of a "determined series of possible meanings": so he did tackle the issue, resolving to calculate all thinkable logical variants included in the semantic field or "semantic zone" of a given category. Something slightly different has been done by Coseriu, whose duosemic approach postulates two partial meanings enclosed in an unmarked term[13], *i.e.* an oppositional value and a neutral one (Coseriu 1988 [1992]: 218; see also De Backer 2014: 93); but other solutions have been attempted too, for instance, in a trisemic approach (cf. Cigana 2024). Given the top-down nature of these stances, one might say that, in a sense, within such a framework, the issue is rather evaded, as the general meaning is conceived in itself as *generic* or abstract (Willems 2021: 127 ff.; Willems 2023: 596, 604-605). Indeed, the perspective is reversed: when the articulation of meaning is seen bottom-up (*i.e.* from the concrete meanings to the abstract one), the underlying representation results in being "less" than the sum of its various realisations. Vice versa, if the same articulation is seen top-down (*i.e.* from the abstract meaning to the concrete particular realisations), the underlying representation is necessarily *more* than its particular meanings.

4. Conclusions

The extent of the structural commitment in the "mereologisation" of linguistic phenomena is still to be charted, all the more so as the idea of a "soft" mereology, relying not on a logico-mathematical formalisation but on an idiosyncratic one. The phenomena included under the semantic underspecification, despite the polymorphous nature of this concept and related methodology, are apt to showcase the status of compositionality, which swings between an "incremental framework" (1+1+1...) and an "oversummative framework" (1 ϕ 1 ϕ 1...). Hence, the need to address the issue on an epistemological and historiographical level, investigating the premises and the assumptions included in the very concept of underspecification. If its defining characteristics – the omission of a feature – is described in terms of a "lack of something" – and conversely if specification is to be described in terms of syntagmatic increments[14] – then we will fall outside the structural regard,

[13] This means that Coseriu's stance is more particular than Hjelmslev's, as it holds for markedness when such a phenomenon is encoutered in describing a language.

[14] Interestingly enough, this case could include Jespersen's theory of ranks.

which suggests understanding this notion as a constitutive feature of meaning itself, coupling content-generality with content-genericity. Two ideas are particularly connected to this view: (a) the monosemic stance of "general meanings", which suggests an underspecification by default, but which leaves open the problem of how to account for the possible specifications; and (b) a watered-down concept of context, as semantic underspecification applied to indexicals should show that the idea according to which their meaning is "context-dependent" is non-sensical. This, in turn, could provide the means to reframe the theory of metaphor and to show in which sense the methodology of semantic cores is problematic.

To grasp the full reach and the empirical significance of the distinction between an incremental vs. structural underspecification, however, a more thorough investigation of the conceptual and historiographical premises of such a notion is required – something which is still a desideratum[15].

Summary

The issue of the relations between parts and wholes is perhaps one of the most important theoretical issues of linguistic structuralism, to the point that it can be considered as a defining element of this very paradigm. Its implementation, however, is far from being agreed upon, even more so as it would require an extensive and far-reaching transposition of linguistic phenomena on mereological (or dependential) ground – a transposition that few have consistently attempted beyond programmatic formulations. The notion of "semantic underspecification" showcases this aspect quite well, since it touches on some of the major problems of the framework. Given the momentum this notion has progressively gained in current research, it is worthwhile examining the challenges that it poses to its conceptualisation within the structural paradigm.

Keywords: Gestalt, structure, whole, parts, mereology, underspecification, semantics

Zusammenfassung

Die Frage nach den Beziehungen zwischen Teilen und Ganzen ist eine der wichtigsten theoretischen Fragen des linguistischen Strukturalismus und kann sogar als bestimmendes Element dieses Paradigmas angesehen werden. Ihre Umsetzung ist jedoch nicht einhellig, umso mehr, als diese eine weitreichende Transposition linguistischer Phänomene auf mereologischer Grundlage erfordern würde – eine Transposition, die nur wenige über programmatische Formulierungen hinaus konsequent versucht haben. Der Begriff der „semantischen Unterspezifikation" verdeutlicht diesen Aspekt recht gut, da er einige der Hauptprobleme des Rahmens berührt. Dieser Begriff hat in der aktuellen Forschung zunehmend an Bedeutung gewonnen, sodass es sich lohnt, die Herausforderungen zu untersuchen, die er für seine Konzeptualisierung innerhalb des strukturellen Paradigmas mit sich bringt.

Schlüsselwörter: Gestalt, Struktur, Ganzes, Teile, Mereologie, Unterspezifikation, Semantik

[15] Such task does not lie within the scope of the recent noteworthy publication by Fiorentini & Zanchi (2024), that focused on the empirical problems connected to the various definitions of vagueness.

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