

The Twilight of Structuralism in Linguistics?*

Key words: structuralism, linguistics, methodological principles, evolution of studies on language

I would like to start with some general remarks in order to avoid misunderstandings due to the title of this paper. "The question that our title / has cast in deathless bronze"¹ is just a mere trigger, and a signal of reference to animated discussions held in many disciplines of modern liberal arts: philosophy, literary studies, social sciences, aesthetics, cultural studies (just to mention areas closest to linguistics), concerning their current methodological state and future perspectives regarding theoretical research. What I mean by that is, among others, the dispute around deconstructionism being in opposition to neo-positivistic stance, as well as some views on the current situation in art expressed in the volume called *Zmierzch estetyki – rzekomy czy autentyczny?* [*The twilight of aesthetics – alleged or true?*] (MORAWSKI, 1987),² or problems signalled by the literary scholars in the tellingly entitled *Po strukturalizmie* [*After structuralism*] (NYCZ, 1992).³

The statements included in this article are for me one out of many voices in the discussion on the changes observed in linguistics in the context of questions about the future of structuralism. Since in a way the situation in contemporary linguistics (including Polish linguistics) is similar. The shift in the scope of interest of linguistics and the way it is presented may be observed. This is reflected in, for example, titles of the most important conferences held in Poland over the last few years (*Language and Nation, Language and Values, Language and Culture, Linguistic Facts and the Ways of Interpretation, Language in Mass Media, Transformations in Style*, etc.) and of recent publications.⁴

For quite some time now we could observe shifting of the emphasis from issues connected strictly with the structure of language, understood as an abstract system (*langue*),

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¹ A literary reference to Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński's poem "Why Does The Pickle Never Sing" [Translated by S. Barańczak and C. Cavanagh]; cf. also Barańczak, 1997.

² Cf. especially Morawski S.: *Czy zmierzch estetyki?* (pp. 5–173); Galard J.: *Śmierć sztuk pięknych*. (p. 357–18a); Enzensberger Ch.: *Koniec pewnej epoki sztuki* (pp. 507–546).

³ Cf. also Derrida, 1979.

⁴ These were discussed on a few past PTJ (Polish Society for Linguistics) conventions. Cf. also the series: *Język a Kultura (Language and Culture)* (Vol. 1–9); conference in Kazimierz held under the following title: *Światy za słowami (Worlds behind words)*; Puzyńska 1992, and others?

to phenomena involved in broadly understood *parole*, hitherto sidelined by the representatives of once prestigious structuralist (especially generativist) schools. Linguists seem to be more interested in extralinguistic (e.g., social, cultural, and psychological) determinants of language and many aspects of different correlations between speaking and understanding, and thinking and reality. Less importance is attached to creating theoretical models describing the system of language that, to various extent, use structuralist concepts.

The considerations present in this article are connected with a specific situation which may be observed on the intellectual scene of almost entire humanities, not exclusively linguistics. The question addressed in the title of this paper is somehow illocutionary in its scope by throwing doubt whether indeed we may talk about the twilight of the intellectual formation which has possibly had the greatest impact on modern humanities in its entirety and helped its disciplines to self-identify as separate academic fields. All of this refers mainly to linguistics, which was a starting point from which structuralism started to spread onto other areas.

There is no doubt that nowadays we are faced with a redefinition of views on the character, scope, and methods of linguistic research, and with new questions regarding the determinants of scientificity and accuracy in describing language and its products (texts, utterances), and, more generally, growing flexibility of methodological principles. This is manifested in greater liberty in research, a particular type of suspicion towards the dogma of scientific reasoning, and entry points which are located on the borderlines of other academic fields as well as using their methods. An utter methodological pluralism may be observed, which carries with it all the advantages of pluralism, but all its disadvantages as well. It is clear that today's linguistics (and especially semantics and pragmatics) uses the achievements of the borderline sciences and disciplines, such as: psychology, sociology, literary studies, history, philosophy, anthropology, or even theology, to a much bigger extent than it used to do. This results in expanding areas of interdisciplinary studies, which, in turn, allow to show the multitude of aspects in accordance with which one may study linguistic phenomena in much more comprehensive way. And finally, in conformity with the rule of the sinusoidal cultural development, we are facing a certain opposition to the current state of art, and a movement towards the tradition that preceded it.

The turn of the century seems a convenient time for appraising and settling accounts with the bygone era in which structuralism and concepts and methods derived from it played a vital role and contributed to indisputable research achievements and developments. It is both unnecessary and impossible to turn a blind eye to them, just as it was unnecessary and impossible not to recognize the achievements of linguistics upon the advent of structuralism. Simultaneously, however, one must not forget that it was structuralism that consolidated the view on the necessity for inter-subjectivity in terms of many descriptive methods, and verifiability (or at least falsifiability) of the achieved results being one of the defining features of scientificity of research in humanities, including linguistics.

Indeed, one may observe growing interest in multifactorial, psycho-socio-cultural motivation of the products of language and linguistic behaviours. It is, however, important to mention that structuralism, irrespective of its variant, never denied the existence of such influences. On the contrary, this fact was emphasised both by the creator of structuralism, Ferdinand de Saussure, and his many successors, especially those representing the func-

tionalist orientation, which has always been the closest to the humane views on language (e.g., Roman Jakobson, the Prague School, French functionalism; while in Poland: Jerzy Kuryłowicz or the Kraków school of structuralism).⁵

Oftentimes, those central questions and problems of today's linguistics called post-structuralist are not necessarily new: they might have remained in the shadow of structuralist methodologies which aimed at formalisation and modelling of the language system as the main research goal of linguistics. Modelling, in fact, both of grammar and semantic structures by definition aims at simplifying the view in comparison with the experimental linguistic reality, the latter being usually richer than the model which is represented in the language of logic. Nevertheless, it does not diminish the value of modelling as a procedure allowing to present the invariant of the phenomenon that serves as a background for presenting variants and alternations in a transparent way. At the same time, modelling does not and should not equal ignoring external factors having impact on the functioning and development of natural language.

Indeed all those inevitable consequences of modelling and formalisation of simplification of a language being a living organism, the lack of satisfactory conclusions in terms of structuralist theories on semantics, fuzziness of certain structuralist concepts (i.a., *systemic unit*, *meaning substance*, *sense and meaning*, *irregularity of rules*, as well as flexible character of phenomena referred to as *synchrony*, *diachrony*, and unresolved problems of polysemy and synonymy) facilitate reflection upon both: achievements and perspectives of structuralism in late 20th-century linguistics.

The dominance of structuralist methodology resulting in passing over significant issues has been observed in other disciplines, too. The crisis of structuralism which they emphasise manifests in, among others, turning back to questions that had already been posed not answered by structuralism (e.g., those concerning the mimetic character of literature and the problem of fictional reference, the possibility to reveal complete meaning of the text, especially literary text, or discovering "worlds behind words"), but also – using linguistic tools provided by structuralism.

The theses I would like to elaborate on a little (being, however, fully aware of the shortcuts that will have to be used) can be reduced to those two points:

1. One should not speak of the decline of structuralism without indicating how this term is to be understood and defining the scope of the theoretical-methodological principles developed by various structuralist schools.
2. Taking into account the theoretical framework many modern research papers on language and its products are placed within, it seems that, irrespective of all the differences, at the bottom of research into language and describing language, understood as *parole*, there still is the belief of structuralist character of language, although we should be aware that clear division lines between particular categories cannot be drawn.

There is a common agreement that the abstract invariant (though understood in many different ways) should be treated separately from variegated phenomena of the layer of

⁵ Mentioning all important figures would extend the length of this article a few times. However, cf. HEINZ, 1983; KURKOWSKA H., WEINSBERG A., eds., 1979; SAUSSURE F. DE, 1991; POLAŃSKI K., 1993: 520–522.

realisation. In the light of the ways in which certain linguistic problems are solved (*in abstracto* and in discourse) and the methods of description used, one may assume that no theoretical-methodological counterproposal has emerged yet which, standing in opposition to structuralism, would protect the autonomy of linguistics as an academic field.

It may be, therefore, more reasonable to view that as the next step of the evolution of certain structuralist ideas. The fact that some directions (mainly the ones of strictly formal, mathematic, and logic orientation) have already become obsolete does not mean that the next era will not draw on them, which, as the history shows, was often the case.

Structuralism, as it is generally known, has not been a uniform approach. On the contrary: it comprised many different, often diverging, theories and concepts being colourful and multidirectional intellectual formation, still impressive in terms of its scope and abundance of methodological proposals, even if some of its directions have been already abandoned.

It seems that we may distinguish three phases in the development of structuralism:

1. Phase one: The advent of new theory and dominance of functionalist schools which elaborated on and modified de Saussure's approach, at the same time taking, to a certain extent, external factors of the system into account as well as the functioning of the language at the level of text, mainly literary (e.g., Bally, Jakobson) or the functioning of language in culture (e.g. Sapir-Whorf). These factors were also omitted by certain schools which focused on the form only, such as glossematics or the neo-positivist Vienna Circle researching the logical structure of language. The hiatus between the publication of de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1915) and the emergence of the mentioned schools is explained by Heinz by the fact that the approach described by de Saussure was so ahead of his time that they could not be adapted at an instance (HEINZ, 1983: 273).

From the very beginning, the structuralist linguistic schools branched out into two directions:

- towards logic, for example, glossematics, distributionalism, generativism, and logical semantics (i.e., formalist schools);
 - towards more humane approach, that is, taking into account individual, social, psychological factors, as in the case of the majority of European schools of functional interest, and later: sociolinguistics, speech act theory and its derivatives, including modern linguistic stylistics.
2. Phase two: Starting somewhere in the mid-1950s. Formal directions are dominant (mostly developed by the American linguists), heavily based on logic and usually excluding semantics from their scope of interest, for example, Bloomfield's behaviorism or descriptivism, then Harris's and Chomsky's (and their followers') generativism.
 3. Phase three (1970s): Characterised by the increased interest in the meaning,⁶ both the structure of meaning of the lexical subsystem (semantic lexical fields, syntactic semantics) and sentence semantics (generative semantics, semantic syntax, meaning-text model, case grammar). Logical apparatus or the utterances of natural language (explicative semantics) were used for describing the semantic structure of the linguistic units (mostly verbs) and syntactic units. At the same time, we may observe growing interest in *parole*, for example, colloquial language philosophy and "late" Wittgenstein concepts, the speech-act

⁶ Sometimes it is even referred to as the "semantics era", cf. e.g. ARUTIUNOWA, 1976.

theory, language functions and the conditions of considering an utterance fortunate or unfortunate, that is, broadly understood pragmatics with socio- and then later ethno-linguistics, the linguistic stylistics, research into text-creating and style-creating aspects of systemic categories. Finally, cognitive linguistics emerges, inspired by cognitive psychology, ethnography and structural anthropology, looking for prototypes of conceptual models of the meaning.

It should be underlined here that all trends and methodologies developed by the linguistic schools all over the world have always been reflected in Polish linguistics.

Structuralism, understood in its most broad way, means, as it is widely known, systemic approach. It claims that irrespective of the area of research the described objects shall be treated as a system or an element of the system which serves as a background for the interpretation of the phenomena. In this sense, the systemic or structuralist methodological orientation encompassed such various disciplines as: linguistics which developed the basic scope of concepts and ideas, cultural anthropology (Lévi-Strauss, Malinowski), literary studies (Barthes, Doleže), philosophy and sociology (Durkheim, Foucault, Althusser), psychology (Lacan) (HEINZ, 1983: 225–230).⁷ They used the basic conceptual apparatus and main structuralist ideas to a varying extent following the example of linguistics. Often-times, due to the differences in the subjects of study extensive adaptations and changes in a given model were made compared to linguistics, including those in the understanding of the main tasks of structuralism. It is widely known that non-linguist structuralists often define certain terms in a different way than linguists (e.g., *modality* in terms of a sentence and literary text), which sometimes may result in misunderstandings. What remained common for all the disciplines was, however, as it seems, striving for capturing the invariant in the experimental variability by seeking abstract, symbolic pattern of phenomena, though varying, yet still being in certain relations between one another.

In terms of linguistics itself, not getting into too much detail of the differences between schools and directions, structuralism also referred the theoretical doctrines dominant in global linguistics in the second and third quarters of the 20th century. The forwarded theses, despite being quite far from the original de Saussure's points, do not cease to be a significant point of reference for the current state of the research in linguistics. I would mention the following as the most important:

1. Autonomy of linguistics as a science and language as a subject of study does not equal isolation from other scientific areas. The inner workings of language are determined by internal as well as external factors. Therefore, while describing language and its products, the relationship between them and human beings as well as extralinguistic reality (the so-called Ogden/Richards triangle of reference) should not be overlooked. This thesis has been successfully expanded and explored by pragmatics and is still relevant in today's cognitive linguistics and for the concept of the Linguistic Picture of the World.⁸
2. Language is a functional structure, organised hieratically, while the formal units distinguished in this structure may serve various functions: systemic (grammatical and

⁷ Cf. also: DELEUZE, 1978.

⁸ Sometimes also translated as Linguistic Image of the World [translator's note]. Cf. BARTMIŃSKI, TOKARSKI, eds., 1992.

semantic) and communicative. Facts and units can be distinguished as facts and units only if they carry some meaning for a user of the language. It stems from the sign character of language and its social function as a system for communication and a tool for interpreting the reality.

3. As the language is a formal-functional and at the same time evolutionary structure, one should not restrict oneself to describing the elements of formal structure only, but rather include their varying functions and point the changing correlations between form and function(s). Nowadays, as it is stated by (DAUGHERTY, 1993: 160–188), cognitive anthropology (and cognitive linguistics which draws from it) does no longer accept the view that compact formal systems of connected categories can fully reflect all principles of behaviour. One shall, therefore, point to a rather holistic understanding of the cultural knowledge (including linguistic knowledge) going beyond the paradigms set by structuralist linguistics and pay more attention to the conceptual base of the culture. This change of the standpoint is expressed by growing interest in “context-sensitive” semantics, which should, according to Feleppa (FELEPPA 1988, cited in: BUCHNOWSKI, BURSZA, 1993: 11–24), help to interpret linguistic and extralinguistic data on the cognitive structure.
4. Synchrony and diachrony are since not isolated or separated from each other. The linguistic changes take place in a constant manner and due to various factors, though become observable only after some time.

Let us notice that the above theses have characterised the general orientation of functional linguistics (in opposition to formal linguistics, especially at its extremes) from the very beginning of structuralism. The extreme version of formal linguistics was represented, for instance, by the Copenhagen School, while in the US by distributive linguistics (at that time closely related to the formal Copenhagen School) and later on also generative linguistics. These directions are often associated with structuralism understood in its narrowest sense. Both glossematics and distributive linguistics have already had their finest period in terms of their impact in the evolution of linguistics, which was unquestionably significant, especially when it comes to generative linguistics. As their biggest deficiency one may mention (i.a. HEINZ 1983: 225–461) not only eliminating semantics, but also not noticing the relative character of linguistic phenomena and many conditions behind them. Radicalism and one-sidedness of both these scientific directions manifested in:

- treating form as completely isolated from meaning, which defies the dualistic notion of the linguistic sign, and therefore,
- detaching the language from human beings and society, which is absurd.

As many modern researchers rightly claim, natural language, as a product and tool of the human being, shaped along with the development of culture it is a part of, carries the impress of its individual (psychological) as well as social nature.

This psycho-social aspect of language is, therefore, equally important to its formal-logical aspect and both these aspect supplement each other. The relation between these approaches is as follows: even though the formal approach provides distinctive image, it is very narrow, and while “humane” approach is less precise, the picture is significantly richer and multifaceted. Therefore, various research tools should complement each other, and different approaches ought to be treated as complimentary.

The accusation of too great abstractedness and excessive formalism has been recently meted leveled at generativism. These accusations often come from the very same scholars who once used to be a part of this trend and who contributed to its development (e.g., Lakoff, or Jackendoff) (LAKOFF, JOHNSON, 1988). They believe that the natural language becomes barely visible behind the more and more complex formal model and that its features which once were to serve the purpose of precision and accuracy in description, have lead to metalinguistics detached from the living language. Nonetheless, it should be noted that in the new, cognitive proposals put forward by Langacker and Jackendoff the influence of generative semantics is clearly visible (e.g. LANGACKER,1988). And although I share some of doubts expressed by these scholars, I do not think that all of their accusations are well grounded.

It seems as though one of the reasons behind such unjustified accusations addressed at structuralism in modern linguistics may stem from the fact that people sometimes demand more from this approach than it has ever promised to deliver, or that some ascribe certain negligence to it referring to issues transcending its programme by definition, and such problems had never been taken up nor structuralists had ever wanted to take them up. Each methodology, including structuralist methodology, is developed with a certain goal to fulfill and takes into account only those aspects of the described phenomenon which relate to this goal, leaving all other aspects aside, which does not necessarily mean that they are unnoticed and neglected. The wide range of research concepts and methods for describing linguistic phenomena is a mere reflection of the multitude of questions asked by advocates of particular methods.

The unquestioned advantages of structuralist schools, such as their programme tendency to maximum precision in determining research procedures, the accuracy of considerations, uniformity and the lack of ambiguity in using formal symbols, striving for finding the invariant in the complex and diverse experimental reality not only helped it earn its place in the history of linguistics and gain a long-lasting position but also, which is safe to assume, allow the further use of its methodological basis for possibly not yet discovered, new purposes. The vivid ongoing research into semantic and formal (especially syntactic) structure of natural languages in the systemic aspect conducted for instance to examine the possibility of automated translation (BOBROWSKI,1993; DOBRYJANOWICZ, 1992, vast bibliography included) may support this assumption. This draws aside, at least for now, I think, decisive answer to the question about the future of structuralism and dispels any fears concerning its imminent demise.

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The Twilight of Structuralism in Linguistics?

Summary

This article attempts to offer a brief description of the overall situation in contemporary linguistics in the context of the changes taking place. Specifically, it refers to the ongoing discussions in the areas of various contemporary humanist disciplines on the subject of the achievements of structuralism and its future prospects in studies on language. The main theses considered here are: 1. One should not speak of the decline of structuralism without indicating how this term should be understood and defining the scope of the theoretical-methodological principles developed by the various structuralist schools. 2. Taking into account the general principles and methods of the description, as given in the majority of contemporary literature on the subject it may reasonably be supposed that as yet no theoretical-methodological counter-proposal has emerged which, opposing structuralism, would discard all its basic premises while at the same time protecting the autonomy of linguistics as a science. The author endeavours to show that it would be more rational to speak of a successive – and broadly enriched – stage of evolution of the idea of structuralism.

Key words: structuralism, linguistics, methodological principles, evolution of studies on language