



Some notes on historicity

Gregersen, Frans

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7. Some notes on historicity

Rask on correspondences

In Rasmus Rask's famous Prize Essay (Rask 1818 in Rask/Hjelmslev 1932) there is a passage which has some bearing on the issue of whether Rask was really a theoretician of historicity or not. The passage in question is placed right at the end of the first chapter subtitled 'On Etymology in General'. In Niels Ege's translation it is introduced as follows: "The most important and most common special rules for the shifts of the individual letters are the following:" Next we get a classification involving 8 types of letter changes or as the Danish original has it: 'Bogstavovergange'. What Rask actually meant by this word is difficult to say. Louis Hjelmslev in his commentary simply states:

Med ordet *Bogstavovergang* mener Rask overhovedet, ligesom hans forgængere (f.ex. IHRE og VOSS), intet andet end *lydkorrespondens*." (By the word *Bogstavovergang* Rask, like his predecessors (e.g. Ihre and Voss) intends no more no less than sound correspondence). (Hjelmslev 1935: 74, translation by FG).

I have argued that it is not that simple in Gregersen 1987 but that is not at issue here. The problem is rather the type of examples adduced for the types of changes.

Let us e.g. have a look at the first type, called *Interchange of vowels* (Rask/Ege 1993: 48, cf. Rask/Hjelmslev 1932: 64). Consider the following:

a – e – o alternate, e.g. Icel. *bresta brast brostinn*, Swed. *svafvel* Germ. *Schwefel* Dan. *Svovl* [...]

The curious thing is of course that Rask adduces evidence not only from related languages, cf. the three Germanic languages Swedish, German and Danish, but also from inside one language only, in this case from Icelandic. How can this be a particularly instructive example of a type of historical change?

Hjelmslev is full of excuses in his comments on this very passage. He notes first that Rask himself had doubts and expressed them in a handwritten addendum to the passage (Rask/Ege 1993: 53; Rask/Hjelmslev 1932: 70). Secondly, he adduces other evidence that Rask was not satisfied with the examples used here, viz. that he chan-





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ged his mind as to some of the cases further below in the prize essay. Finally, he draws attention to a very important autographed addendum in Rask's private version of the printed book. The addendum is reprinted on page 19 of the commentary and concerns a trenchant critique of the predecessors Vachter, Vossius and Lennep among others. They have not, says Rask, noted the difference between what is peculiar to one language and what is relevant as criteria for relationship in general. The passage finishes by noting a third distinction necessary to the working comparatist:

En tredie Art er den indre Overensstemmelse imellem forskjellige Tilfælde i et og samme Sprog [...] A third kind is the inner correspondence between different cases within one and the same language [...] (Hjelmslev 1935: 20, translation by FG)

We may conclude that Rask was talking about letter or sound relationships (alternations/correspondences) both within one and the same language and between related languages. I shall argue that Rasmus Rask was perfectly consistent and consequently ahead of his time precisely in seeing historicity as inherent in the morphophonological patterns.

Saussure on synchrony and diachrony

How can a historical change be a rule of language? Isn't this precisely what Saussure has taught us never to do, viz. to confound synchrony and diachrony?

The distinction between synchrony and diachrony was the fruit of Saussure's musings on Whitney in the 1890's (Godel 1957 (1969): 43). It was probably the first radical breakthrough to a whole new conception of language and served to sever the human sciences in general in systematic disciplines, concerned with synchronic and panchronic facts and systems and diachronic disciplines concerned with the evolution of systems. The distinction has been taken to be absolute in the sense that either one studies evolution or one studies the facts that are present simultaneously, cf. Saussure:

Il est certain que toutes les sciences auraient intérêt à marquer plus scrupuleusement les axes sur lesquels sont situées les choses dont elles s'occupent; il faudrait partout distinguer selon la figure suivante: [the figure omitted here, it is the well known cross with a horizontal axis from A to B and a vertical axis from C to D] 1^o *l'axe des simultanités* (AB), concernant les rapport entre choses coexistantes, d'où toute intervention du temps est exclue, et 2^o *l'axe des successivités* (CD), sur lequel on ne peut jamais considérer qu'une chose à la fois, mais où sont situées toutes les choses du premier axe avec leur changements. (Saussure 1916 (1967): 115)

Saussure goes on to give his explanation of why it is impossible in the real world of speakers of a language to ignore the distinction. The explanation is psychological. In





the chapter headed 'La dualité interne et l'histoire de la linguistique' Saussure explains:

La première chose qui frappe quand on étudie les faits de langue, c'est que pour le sujet parlant leur succession dans le temps est inexistante: il est devant un état. Aussi le linguiste qui veut comprendre cet état doit-il faire table rase de tout ce qui l'a produit et ignorer la diachronie. Il ne peut entrer dans la conscience des sujets parlants qu'en supprimer le passé. (Saussure 1916 (1967): 117)

Thus for the speakers, for the speaking subject to use a literal translation, diachrony does not exist, it could not exist. Consequently, a history of a language, conceived of as a real history of the consciousness of successive speakers of one and the same language, could only be reconstructed as a series of descriptions of the various *états de langue*. By the same token, history is reduced to a viewpoint while what really exist are speakers – and speakers are all confronted with and implied in creating and manifesting synchrony.

Internal reconstruction

Jean Aitchison writes about the methods of getting to know the past in her impressive bestseller *Language Change. Progress or Decay?* (Aitchison 2001: 23ff). She lists two methods of comparison, viz. comparative reconstruction and typology, and finally adds a third, internal reconstruction, described as follows:

This involves making a detailed study of one language at a single point in time, and deducing facts about a previous state of that language. Essentially, we assume that irregularities in structure are likely to have been brought about by language change. We therefore try to peel these away, in order to reconstruct an earlier, more regular state of affairs. (Aitchison 2001: 33)

Now, this presupposes that there is indeed a way from synchrony to diachrony but note that it is the linguist's way, not a statement about speakers' consciousness. We, the linguists, see various structures as irregular, i.e. not as rule governed, and we remediate this by reconstructing a previous stage of the language where everything apparently was better (i.e. rule governed). The presupposition being that the paradise lost – or at least (pre)history – was strictly rule governed.

The method of internal reconstruction may be improved or put to a much broader use if we take into account not only irregularities but also variation in space, variation determined by speaker variables, and finally stylistic variation. We deduce from the pattern of variation an earlier stage without variation or with another common core around which other variations may have flourished.



Deep structure as history: Rischel on consonant gradation

There is an alternative to the Saussurian view, a view which places historicity squarely at the center of speakers' consciousness. This view came to the fore when the study of morphophonological processes led linguists to propose fully specified lexical entries based on a type of internal reconstruction. Let me consider in some detail a classic paper by Jørgen Rischel on Consonant Gradation. (I might have analyzed Chomsky and Halle's *The Sound Pattern of English* just for fun but then again: Who would read the SPE just for fun?)

Consonant gradation is arguably one of two central processes in the history of the Danish language in that its effects, in conjunction with that of the infortis weakening, changed the sound pattern of spoken Danish. The differences between Danish and the other Scandinavian languages reside primarily in that these particular processes do not apply to the same extent in Norwegian and Swedish. Since the historical development may be charted in considerable detail by using the available written sources and since the stages are natural in the sense that we can account for them by referring to well known phonetic processes, we might be tempted to discuss whether historical gradation is in fact the same process as lenition pure and simple. If we look at modern Spanish *b* and *v* and modern Spanish *g* we see much the same processes at work turning stops into obstruents but as strictly synchronic variation. Thus we might speculate whether an important part of the history of Danish might be construed as a gradual change in tempo but that is not the point here. The point is rather that historical processes are so to speak impressed on the *état de langue* as part and parcel of the morphophonology of present day standard Danish. Thus, synchrony mimics diachrony as it were.

In searching for evidence for lexical entries of a morpheme we list the various phonetic guises the morpheme in question may have. Rischel states at the outset that his aim is to formulate "the rules governing the morphological alternations" as in such instances as 'koge' with a voiced obstruent and 'kogte' with a stop (Rischel 1970: 460). Since these two morphs are variants of the same morpheme we shall have to find a way of writing a lexical entry which gives a reasonably undisputed, fully specified, phonological form which would then be modified by a series of rules converting it to the appropriate phonetic form. These rules would accordingly be postulated as necessary solely on the basis of coexisting forms, i.e. by virtue of the Danish language having morphophonological structures at all. Obviously, not all languages have morphophonologies but Danish most certainly does.

The relationship between this procedure, i.e. comparing all forms of the morpheme in order to decide on the underlying form, and internal reconstruction is not fortuitous. They lead to more or less the same result but in the first case we take this to be evidence that the phonetic surface forms are derived by a synchronic, rule



governed process often involving iterations of rules, in the second, we hypothesize that we have uncovered an earlier stage of the same language. The relationship has of course not gone unnoticed. Thus Rischel notes that: “It is interesting that this analysis agrees with historical facts in cases like *møde* vs. *føde*.” (Rischel 1970: 473).

Basbøll on productivity and the historicity of language

If history resides in synchronic processes such as morphophonology, the question immediately arises whether morphophonology is actually a psychological reality. In order to defeat the absolute dichotomy we have to meet the Saussurian challenge, i.e. to determine if the processes are the construct of the linguist or part of speakers’ consciousness. One way to do this is to do what Basbøll has done together with his collaborators in the Odense Project viz. to look at acquisition data.

Crucially Basbøll started out with a purely linguistic analysis whether we are talking about his path breaking analysis of the Danish *stød* or his and Dorthe Bleses’ work on the acquisition of past tense. First, we get a definition of the syllable. Next, we get an analysis of the *stød* and finally we get the implications of the analysis: It turns out that productivity is the key. Now, productivity is an interesting concept in acquisition studies and thus Basbøll and Bleses study the various verb types in Danish from precisely this point of view.

Danish has at least two main types of verbs: The weak verbs and the strong verbs. The strong verbs are those which still manifest the vowel alternations so characteristic of Indo European verbal morphology. Instead of using endings, i.e. final morphemes, as the means to signal a change of tense, they manifest vowel alternations in the stem, thus *hjælpe hjælp hjulpet* (‘to help’) just as English *sing sang sung* (and by the way *song*).

From the child’s point of view a form is the result of a productive process if it is possible to derive it automatically, i.e. if the process is rule governed. All Danish weak verbs form the past tense by adding something (basically a dental sound) to the stem (except a small class of so-called irregular weak verbs which additionally have vowel changes in the stem yet cannot be classified as strong verbs). The weak verb forms thus unquestionably belong to the speakers’ consciousness, they are rule governed and productive.

Basbøll, however, distinguishes five degrees of productivity (Basbøll and Bleses ms. forthcoming):

At one end of the continuum we have fully productive endings “defined as endings which are (1) normally added to new words, and (2) always added to a normal word-form. [...] At the other end of the scale we have unproductive endings, i.e. endings (1) which do not apply to new words, and (2) where the forms in the pho-



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nological sense behave as part of the lexeme and thus do not signal that more than one morpheme is involved. In between there is a systematic distinction between three levels of semi-productive endings.” (Basbøll and Bleses fthc.: 2). This scale serves to distinguish between relics at one end, i.e. forms which look so alike as to be candidates for morphemes to the linguist yet do not form sets applicable to more than a small number of stems, and at the other end morphemes which serve to characterize the open classes because they apply to any new stem coming in. At one end we have forms like *på fode, til huse, i live, til stede, til mode, på hjerte* etc. versus *på fri fod, til det røde hus, i dette liv, at være ved godt mod, på hjertet*. Paul Diderichsen in his misnamed *Elementær dansk grammatik* comments: “Formen paa *-e* beror paa Sammenfald af gamle Dativ- og Genitivformer. Hvordan de skal opfattes fra et Nutidssynspunkt er tvivlsomt.” (The *-e*-form is the result of a merger of old Dative and Genitive forms. How these are to be interpreted from the point of view of the present is open to doubt) (Diderichsen 1946, 3³ 1968: 110, FG translates).

The reason Diderichsen harbours doubts as to the classification of these forms is that they are not so unique as to be left out of any system whatsoever, yet they do not form part of the modern system because these forms cannot be formed by rule. The rules do not apply to more than a dozen nouns. Does this mean that a dozen nouns have a special category? One might be tempted to follow the lead of Hjelmslev: Why not generalize and say that this particular case is neutralized in all other nouns? But the problem arises as to what triggers it and what the case, if case it is, signifies? I shall not go further into this matter here.

These forms are not productive. They do not form part of the speakers’ consciousness as rule governed processes do, but they are still around, they constitute a layer of language, primarily in the written mode and most Danes would understand them in a text. But they would, the reasoning continues, be processed on the basis of an understanding of the prepositional syntagm as an unanalyzable unit. Furthermore, it would be impossible to use the case ending *-e* as the basis for an analogical change, i.e. for introducing this case in new word forms.

The weak verbs, however, constitute a class which is able to integrate any new verb which comes along and thus do indeed function as the basis for analogical reasoning. If we want to create a new Danish verb indicating the activity to send an sms: *at smse*, we are perfectly able to tell that somebody *smse* yesterday.

Now here comes the problem: The vowel alternations characteristic of the strong verbs are not productive. We have lost strong verbs, we have not created any new ones. But the vowel alternations do constitute a pattern in the language: *æ – a: hjælpe – hjælp; magt – mægte; vagt – vægter*. A whole army of examples could be mustered. Does this mean that the vowel alternations are still part of the *état de langue* by being part of the morphophonological patterning? If Danes feel that these words are akin in some sense, then obviously they are. And a way to find out whether Danes



feel that way, is to tap acquisition data, controlled association and other psycholinguistic facts. Precisely what Basbøll and his colleagues do at the *Odense center for sprogtilegnelse*. In other words: All Danes mimic history, i.e. they derive phonetic surface forms from morphophonologically underlying forms by rules which are akin to, if not directly the same as, the historical rules used by the linguists to derive present day forms from earlier stages.

In the national romantic view of a language the connection between the past and the present is simple and direct – it is brought about by talking: When we use our common language, the past resonates in the words and the constructions founded so long ago by our forefathers. The past talks through us. This was the view blasted to pieces by Saussure. But Saussure apparently did not take into account that any stage of a language is a palimpsest of layers not only in the sense that there are unproductive relics only analyzable by linguists (not by speakers) but also in the sense that the morphological and morphophonological processes might be mechanisms inherited while still not creating a bond with any predecessor at all since speakers are not aware that these processes are ‘historical’. Saussure was right in insisting that the speaker’s consciousness does not know what was but only what is. Saussure also saw that phonetic changes had another logic than grammatical changes so that they might interfere. But he did not see the intimate connection between variation in time and variation within structure. In Danish we have a fundamental distinction between the addition at the end of a stem and the alternation of the vowel within the stem. The first process is reflected in the weak verbs and is comparatively new and awfully productive. The other process is apparent in the strong verbs and in the various patterns relating families of words manifesting a closed set of vowels which by the same token are classified as interchangeable. This process is not productive and represents a more ancient stage. But it is still part of the speakers’ consciousness. History is inherent in the system of the modern language. Rask was right.

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