

Theses of doctoral (PhD) dissertation

Towards an other kind of linguistics
(Theoretical-methodological issues
of 20th century Hungarian linguistics)

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Aim of the dissertation, definition of the topic

Hungarian works in linguistics usually either present a phenomenon or aim at solving a special problem of linguistic description. However, there are no papers posing questions about the theoretical-methodological background of schools which influence modern Hungarian linguistics.

This approach however may easily become the hindrance to the development of linguistics: if we handle the currently characteristic basic principles of linguistics without scepticism and as self-evident axioms, the most important (i. e. conceptual) problems of linguistics will stay hidden. We can clarify minor issues taking the classical theoretical-methodological framework as the basis, but it does not provide us with the possibility to recognise and solve comprehensive interpretational difficulties or radically formulate new linguistic thought.

I was led by similar considerations when I started to review the theses characteristic of the modern Hungarian linguistics. Studying the principles usually considered unquestionable, I had to realise my doubts were not without foundation. In the theoretical and methodological background of currently canonised schools lie difficulties of such language philosophical origin, which — due to their conceptual feature — cannot be solved within the given descriptive frame, it is necessary therefore to rethink the basic principles themselves and to develop an approach based on different tenets.

In my dissertation I wish to present the stages of this line of thought. Firstly, I analysed the descriptive difficulties of classical linguistics and, secondly, based on experience gained from the above analysis, I make an attempt to outline a linguistic approach, which could mark the path towards a more successful, more adequate concept of language.

An outline of methods applied

Modern Hungarian linguistics mainly relies on the comparative-neogrammarian approach developed in the 19th century and enforced in the 19–20th century; linguistic theories from before this period disappeared completely from the canonised mainstream. This indicates a permanent linguistic tradition originating from the beginning of the 20th century.

Although this almost century-long period of linguistics was characterised by a diversity of schools, the approach on language structure in Hungarian linguistics — or at least its most significant features — was influenced by only a few schools.

The vast majority of publications dealing with 20th century linguistics mirrors structural and (post-)generative approach, or — taking into account the historical research attempts to describe the changes of the language (structure) — neogrammarian or comparative approach. The

prominent place of these four schools is visible in the fact that only their conclusions were included into standard Hungarian grammars and historical linguistic summaries in the last one hundred years, no other school's results could be voiced in these works — at least not in a relevant manner, i. e. extended to the entirety of the concept. These approaches largely govern primary and secondary linguistic education, popular linguistics, language teaching and advanced linguistic studies, while other branches of linguistics (such as psycholinguistics, cognitive linguistics and sociolinguistics) may be found in universities and colleges as complementary studies, in addition to phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic lectures presented traditionally.

Since this scientific situation — with slightly different proportions — is also valid in international relations, I could have studied the theoretical-methodological features of linguistic analysis with reference to linguistics as a whole. However, I believe an analysis of international papers of the extensive literature on the four approaches determining modern linguistics — besides exceeding the possibilities of the dissertation — would not have brought truly significant and new results. Since I did not wish to clarify details, in my opinion, it did not make a difference which path I chose: whether I relied on national or international literature. The issues of classical axioms in linguistics are conceptual difficulties which — due to their language philosophical character obviously do not affect only national linguistics. To a different extent and in a different way they appear in all works in which comparative historical linguistics, neogrammarian linguistics, structuralism or (post-)generative tenets appear, in a more or less determinate manner.

Taking all this into account in my dissertation I present the theoretical-methodological characteristics of currently prominent approaches within the frame of Hungarian linguistics and mainly relying on its literature. I refer to foreign works only when it seems necessary from the line of thought's point of view or when the discussed topic had primarily international literature — as in the fourth chapter.

The analysis of 20th century Hungarian linguistic tradition requires the researcher to place themselves consciously outside the theoretical-methodological frame of the canonised schools and start studying the fundamental theses of classical linguistics aiming at the most extensive study possible. Since no dissertation can undertake to elaborate on in detail all aspects of this critical analysis, in my paper I present determining fractions of the canonised approaches' descriptive difficulties and their language modelling consequences, which in my opinion are suitable for pointing to the background problems of the teachings of traditional linguistics. Consequently, to provide the linguistic theoretical and methodological base of the linguistic model outlined in the second part of the dissertation, firstly, I analysed the language philosophical reasons behind the

paradoxes of habitual word explanations through individual case studies and, secondly, I studied the conceptual origins of characteristic paradoxes of neogrammarian linguistics.

Although all three topics could have been discussed in individual dissertations, this paper is based on the assumption that the analysis of the difficulties of the classical definition of the concept of word, the presentation of the language concept as viewed by neogrammarians, as well as a language concept outlined by the lessons learned from the above, in a compilation and with cross-references to one another, can tell us more and something different compared to what the joint study of other linguistic phenomena or a monographic analysis of the same linguistic issues could provide.

The aim of the critical analytic part of the dissertation was to point out that what lies in the background of seemingly diverse theoretical-methodological issues of comparative linguistics, neogrammarian approach, structuralism and (post-)generative linguistics are actually difficulties of language philosophical origin. I hope that the chapters discussing the debatable points of classical concepts of word and the paradoxes of comparative-neogrammarian linguistics shed light on the fact that what lies behind descriptive problems in all four approaches is the interpretation of language as an independent entity. Although these schools of traditional linguistics do not undertake to describe a language corpus designated based on given criteria, but to record the language of the speakers, their theoretical-methodological principles do not support this view. In the part of the dissertation where I discuss the characteristics of linguistic tradition in the 20th century I aim to present descriptive paradoxes which — revealing the unrecognised contrast between objectives and basic tenets — indicate that the axioms of canonised schools define the language of the speakers as a language existing independently from individuals and circumstances in an absolute manner.

In addition, in two case studies, I hope to shed light not only on the similarities but also on the not so irrelevant difference between the neogrammarian approach and the other classical linguistics approaches. Namely, besides defining the language as a determinate absolute concept, in comparative, structural and (post-)generative linguistics the view of (relative) interpretation of language linked to speakers is present only in a fragmented manner (not connected to axioms), but the same cannot be claimed as regards neogrammarians. Although in this latter stream of canonised linguistics language is predominantly considered as an autonomous entity independent of individual speakers, the speaker-based concept is more emphasised in comparison to other schools of traditional linguistics (influencing the basic tenets as well). In my opinion, the chapters presenting the characteristics of traditional linguistics clearly highlight that although, as a

consequence of this unconscious philosophical ambivalence, the neogrammarian approach is rather contradictory to the unified concept of language present in comparative, structural and (post-)generative linguistics, it is closer to the language of the speakers than the other classical approaches. Namely, the neogrammarians' less emphasised axioms indicating relative interpretation of language — in case they are used consistently — do not view language as an autonomous entity but rather — departing largely from the traditions of the 20th century — as a factor inseparable from the speakers.

To present a convincing and diverse report on the unique philosophical background of modern canonised linguistics and its consequences, I first present, conducting a deep analysis of a defined linguistic issue, the actual appearance of conceptual difficulties of classical linguistics and then, analysing broader connections of a school's language concept, wish to point to the general nature of these issues.

For the former part the critical review of the habitual interpretation of the concept of word seemed ideal: the question of what a word is seems exact enough to be the subject of deep analysis and at the same time — deriving from the fact that word is one of the unit of analysis in linguistic works — its theoretical-methodological aspects are strong enough to serve as the example for individual schools' conceptual aspects of descriptive problems.

A study of the traditional concept of word is not only suitable to be a review analysis of the 20th century linguistic tradition in itself, but — taking into account that words are the generally used elements of linguistic description — it is the best measure of how mature the canonised schools' theories and methods are. Namely, it is obvious that a language concept in which the interpretation of units of analysis lies on shaky grounds is subject to questions of doubt about the knowledge building on these linguistic concepts.

Since word as a linguistic element appears in all linguistic works, the need to clarify its concept — explicitly or less explicitly — is present in all approaches of the canonised linguistic schools apart from the historical-comparative one. From this perspective, reviewing the interpretation of the concept of word from a theoretical-methodological aspect seemed appropriate to illustrate that the same language philosophical issues lie in the background of descriptive difficulties in traditional approaches. Namely by exploring conceptual features of the neogrammarian, structural and (post-)generative linguistics via an analysis of the interpretation of the concept of word by all three approaches, the comparison of axioms connected to the different variants of traditional linguistics and the study of their interaction — apart from one approach — was an inherent part of the study.

With respect to the fact that the chapter discussing the classical interpretations of the concept of word does not contain the comparative linguistics point of view, it seemed logical to introduce the presence of absolute language image in the linguistic tradition through the tenets of this school in the next case study. Since however the interest of comparative linguistics is limited to linguistic kinship questions, it has not developed an explicit concept of numerous language phenomena, consequently, an analytic survey of its linguistics would not be the most suitable way of presenting a diverse concept of absolute language concepts in the canonised schools of linguistics.

However, by critically analysing the neogrammarian linguistics from a theoretical-methodological aspect — besides getting insight into descriptive problems of several thematic areas — I could also study the basic principles of comparative linguistics. It is well-known that the neogrammarian approach is basically a branch of comparative linguistics and as such — although differing from its predecessor in many respects — incorporated many of its theoretical-methodological qualities into its concept, especially into its etymological reasoning of Finno-Ugric and Turkology aspects. From this point of view it is not only feasible but, bearing in mind the undertaking of the dissertation to review traditional linguistics, also advantageous to embed the historical school of linguistic kinship into a neogrammarian context. The joint discussion of the axioms of the two schools made it possible to provide a more refined analysis of identical and different language descriptive motives.

The fact that by critically analysing the traditional linguistics I actually aim to settle the conceptual difficulties of the 20th century canonised linguistics, also justifies the discussion of the neogrammarian approach. By presenting the hidden language philosophical ambivalence of the school I had the opportunity not only to study the descriptive problems arising from absolute language concept in a comprehensive manner, extending it to numerous topics within linguistics, but by a theoretical-methodological analysis of the neogrammarian approach I could, attaching less characteristic features of the concept suggesting a relative approach to a single line of thought, also get specific strongholds for outlining a linguistics defined by speakers and circumstances.

When discussing neogrammarian theory and methodology I put special emphasis on the work of Zoltán Gombocz. Namely, due to his numerous publications and professional activity which is part of international flow he is considered one of the most influential Hungarian linguists, and his life achievement deserves special attention from the point of view of the dissertation in three other respects.

Although the unique ambivalence in interpreting language is characteristic of the neogrammarian approach in general, the elements mirroring absolute and relative concept of language appear in the work of different representatives of the school to a different extent. Having

in mind the objective of the dissertation when providing a critical review of the neogrammarian approach I aim at emphasising linguistic-historical cases in which this ambivalence is more obvious. Since in Zoltán Gombocz's writings this ambiguity is quite striking, the analysis of his work in more detail contributed to preparing a linguistics concept based on speakers. By studying the life achievement of this prominent figure of neogrammarian linguistics, both the theoretical-methodological features referring to the relative interpretation of language, and divergence from the dominant, absolute interpretation of language became more precisely analysable.

Taking into account that in Zoltán Gombocz's writings, besides neogrammarian characteristics — especially in his (word analysis) argumentations connected to language kinship — the theses of the comparative linguistics and in his late publications the structuralist impact are also present, the picture of the 20th century traditional linguistics can be further nuanced by analysing this kind of complexity of the researcher. After presenting Gombocz's work from this perspective as well, I could study the elements of the neogrammarian concept mirroring the absolute and relative language interpretation not only in a relationship to one another but also in direct interferences with the other two approaches of canonised linguistics.

From the point of view of this dissertation it is also of relevance that this highly reputed linguist's life achievement seemed suitable for a comprehensive survey of the 20th century linguistic tradition not only due to his approach to language but also due to his choices of topic. Namely, since in his writings Gombocz discussed numerous aspects of the nature of (the structure of) language (phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics), his publications are diverse enough to shed light on the conceptual ambivalence of the neogrammarian approach as well as the connection between this and other schools.

A theses-like list of results

Although the classical sub-branches of linguistics differ from each other in many respects, according to the conclusion of the study, one determining factor is still the same: their axioms reveal an absolute interpretation of language. This in turn implies a language descriptonal tradition, which could integrate only those schools, which outline an autonomous language entity as the language of speakers, while the theses of schools outside the linguistic mainstream mirror a relative concept of language — as opposed to the absolute concept of language found in the traditional approaches.

Based on this state-of-play it may be concluded that interpretation of language by those schools outside the classical mainstream is significantly closer to the language of speakers. A more

successful linguistics therefore possibly requires a rethinking of the principal modifications aiming at transforming the fundamentals of linguistics, as well as the relative theses — referring to one another and to the review of the traditional absolute language concept — of neogrammarian and other school outside the canon.

Continuing on this path, in the second part of the dissertation I outline a model of language of speakers fundamentally different from those before, which — distancing itself from the tradition — radically transforms the classical way we talk about language: due to this model's conceptual shift in approach both the theoretical-methodological and the linguistic concepts and terms in relation to them gain a radically new interpretation.

In the third major chapter of the dissertation, based on the neogrammarians' tenets, I study the different linguistic manifestations of the mother tongue-community relation (mainly language reformist and language cultivating endeavours). Notably, the less emphasised a thesis referring to the organic relationship between the language and the community is, the more dominant the concept of the existence of an autonomous language in the teachings of any one school will obviously be. By discussing the Hungarian orthologist-neologist conflict I wish to recall a less-frequently cited period of language reform in which the artificially created words were not compared to an ideal language from the past or future, but to the natural standards of the speech community. Comparing this romantic period of neology to later language cultivation or to the image of language of the 19th and 20th century linguistics I was faced with a metaphoric network presenting the language of community in which neither the absolute linguistic form nor the homogenous 'language habit', langue or 'ideal speaker' terms are interpretable: since the network is made up of ad hoc relations between physically detectable individual languages, it may only outline a dynamic and heterogeneous (i. e. relative) community language.

Thus, in the next sub-chapter of the dissertation, by discussing the teachings of comparative and neogrammarian linguistics, I wish to illustrate that this social network is an adequate model not only of community languages, but also seems to be an appropriate metaphor for the discussion of issues of language contact and linguistic kinship. Relying on the so far underrated relative principles of the romantic period and kinship concepts of language dynamism and heterogeneity underestimated from the 20th century until today, I attempt to outline a diverse and inhomogeneous network of languages in which, contrary to the traditionally applied tree model, the languages are not sub-branches of single, absolute predecessors, but joining points of branches of different strength.

Due to all this, I conduct a study of neogrammarian sound law concept explicitly with regards to the social language network in the last major unit of the third chapter of my dissertation.

Consequently, as a result of the study — at least according to my intentions — it may also turn out that the alternation processes in community languages belonging to the network are not determined by rules known from classical linguistics but rather by statistical factors of phonotactic-semantic analogies.

Since the theoretical-methodological analysis of the neogrammarian language concept — due to the research profile of the school — led to a picture of the community language's history (philogenesis), in the last larger section of the dissertation I aim to give an account of the cognitive structure (ontogenesis) of the individual's language, in a model which is organically linked to social language network as a coherent complement to the above outlined notion.

Since, due to their systematic nature, grammars can give the closest account as to how the language is structured in mind/brain, I aim to elaborate on the ontogenetic concept of the language in a manner which connects the statements of classical grammar with the results of cognitive psychological and neurological studies. I approach the issues from a phonological point of view, this line of research seems the most suitable for the study of formation of individual languages: babies obviously consider their mother tongues as a series of acoustic stimuli.

Consequently, in the fourth chapter of my dissertation I elaborate on an ontogenetic notion which differs to a large extent both from standard grammars and from traditional language acquisition theories: according to this concept, we are dealing with a cognitive language network structured by statistical principles and based on phonotactic-semantic analogies, which definitely has certain analogy features, but retains its original holistic, prototypic image.

Since in my dissertation I aim to reveal the theoretical-methodological paradoxes of canonised linguistics while also designing the dimensions of solution by a consequent analysis of the issues, through the two-level model elaborated on in the last two chapters of the dissertation — at least to my intentions — I have managed to outline a coherent language concept rethought in its foundations. Both in its social and individual aspect, I outline a holistic concept of a phonotactically determined, dynamic network, which — due to its socially-cognitively embedded nature — requires that future linguistic researches should not be isolated from other sciences, but rather develop jointly with human ethological, evolutionary and cognitive psychological as well as neurobiological studies.

Publications in the topic of the dissertation

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