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PÉREZ-LEBOUX, ANA; MIHAELA PIRULESCU; and YVES Roberge. 2018. Direct objects and language acquisition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


[david.medeiros@csun.edu]


Reviewed by MARGARET THOMAS, Boston College

The nine essays in this collection do not dwell on the well-known contrast between ‘formalism’ and ‘functionalism’ in linguistics as discussed in Newmeyer 1998, although they are not irrelevant to that debate. What they do dwell on is various senses of the word form and its derivatives, as they have been used in Euro-American history and philosophy of linguistics since the nineteenth century. Together, the chapters form a mosaic of scholarship on studies of language that variously incorporate diverse meanings of the terms ‘form’, ‘formal’, and ‘formalism’. The assembly of chapters does, indeed, have a mosaic-like character in that it comprises independent, nonoverlapping texts. Chapter authors sometimes remark on how the edges of their topic approach those of other authors, but the individual contributions have not been forced into a unified tableau. The text presupposes some exposure to the history of western linguistics and to the history of philosophy. It would make bracing, but not impenetrable, reading for linguists without that background. Although only one of the nine authors has an affiliation in the United States, most chapters center on the work of well-known US-based scholars.

Following a scene-setting preface by editor James McElvenny (iii–viii), JUDITH KAPLAN’S Ch. 1 (1–33) offers an analysis of ‘formalism’ in the sense of the diagrams or figures that comparative-historical linguistics has used to visually communicate genealogical (‘vertical’) relationships among languages versus the (‘horizontal’) spread of features across languages spoken by adjacent populations. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Kaplan reports that scholars first conveyed these facts in words and verbal metaphors, then adopted lists, tables, and graphic displays. All of these are ‘formal’ moves in that they distill complex relationships (of descent and of influence) into tables, trees, waves, or Venn-diagram-like figures, where the strategic arrangement of data in two-dimensional space implies a specific position of those data vis-à-vis neighboring data.
Kaplan concedes at the beginning of her analysis that these diagrams or figures ‘highlight certain notions of relationship while removing others from view’ (3), because they typically prioritize either genealogical descent (e.g. trees) or crosslinguistic spreading (e.g. waves), and rarely both. She demonstrates how visual aids both reveal and conceal by analyzing their use in twentieth-century textbooks directed at beginning linguists. The chapter ends with an exposition of digital-era efforts to visualize vertical and horizontal relationships simultaneously in $n$-dimensional space while remaining faithful to the complexities of the data. Kaplan singles out multi-dimensional scaling as one promising technique. Unfortunately, her account of it is hampered by poor reproduction of the examples she cites (one in full color), as they appear both on the printed page (26, 28) and in the online version of her chapter (available at http://langsci-press.org/catalog/book/214).

Kaplan’s case study of graphic representation in comparative-historical linguistics stands alone at the head of this collection as the only paper that takes ‘formal’ to mean ‘amenable to summarizing complex facts and relationships in graphic form’. The attention Kaplan pays to student textbooks, however, returns at the end of the book. In between, the remaining eight chapters seem to fall into three sections.

Chs. 2 through 4 address specific figures in the history of linguistics who make provocative use of the concept of ‘form’, or the partially overlapping concept ‘structure’, in their analyses of language phenomena. James McElvenny contributes a study pairing Columbia University anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942) with German philologist Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–1893) (35–58). Both scholars responded to the then-current claim that speakers of so-called ‘primitive’ languages freely and unsystematically alternate in their pronunciation of speech sounds, so that their words lack the fixity that characterizes languages not considered ‘primitive’. Boas denied that ‘alternating sounds’ existed in the Native American languages that he studied. He attributed the perception of instability to outsiders’ awkward or uncomprehending attempts to map novel foreign-language sound units onto the units of their own familiar languages. By dismissing ‘alternating sounds’ as an illusion, Boas amassed support for the superiority of his fieldwork-based anthropological methods as opposed to the armchair philology of his rivals and, influenced by Heymann Steinthal’s (1823–1899) development of Humboldtian ideas, set his sights on capturing the unique ‘inner form’ of a language.

Von der Gabelentz, by contrast, accepted reports of ‘alternating sounds’ and added examples from Samoan, Malay, and Australian languages. He then incorporated these observations into his campaign against the Neogrammarians’ assertion of the exceptionlessness of sound rules. Further, citing the same Steinthalian notion of ‘inner form’, von der Gabelentz enlarged on the phenomenon of ‘alternating sounds’ to propose revisions of the comparative method, revisions that promoted his doomed argument for a genealogical relationship between Basque and Berber. In these ways, Boas and von der Gabelentz took different stances in the debate about ‘alternating sounds’, but each scholar used the occasion of the controversy to bring forward support for his own ongoing claims about the ‘form’ of human languages. The reception of their projects differed, of course: Boas is lionized for modeling how to ‘capture and catalogue phenomena within a universalizing system’ (55), while von der Gabelentz ‘died early and disappeared’ (54).

Jean-Michel Fortis’s Ch. 3 (59–88) explores the inspiration for Edward Sapir’s (1884–1939) use of the terms ‘form-feeling’ and ‘pattern’ in his acquaintance with aesthetics and with Gestalt psychology. Fortis makes the important point that to Sapir a ‘sound pattern’ was not a mechanical contrastive relationship, but rather a configuration in which phonemes attract or repel each other according to whether speakers considered them to hold the same function or semantic role. For example, Sapir asserted that due to the existence of pairs like /wife/ vs. /wifes/, English speakers feel that /f/ is closer to /v/ than, say, /p/ is to /b/ (61). This kind of unconscious form-feeling—sometimes ‘form-drive’ or ‘formal play’—comprises speakers’ ‘intuitive grasp of complex patterns’ (67). According to Sapir, it operates in language acquisition and diachronic change, inter alia. It also infuses speakers’ compliance with cultural norms, which (in Fortis’s felicitous take on a version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, borrowed from Allen 1986) resembles less a compulsory imposition of culture on the content of thought than how a trained musician instinctively adheres to
a musical score (73). Ch. 3 closes with Fortis’s exploration of the probable sources of Sapir’s notion of form-feeling in late-nineteenth-century German scholarship. Granted the scope of Sapir’s extralinguistic, extra-anthropological interests in philosophy, psychology, poetry, music, art, and psychoanalysis, among other fields, Fortis has to survey a wide horizon to locate possible inspirations for the Sapirian key term ‘form-feeling’.

Ch. 4, by Els Elffers (89–114), examines a different facet of Sapir’s work. She compares Sapir’s (1917) distinction between ‘historical’ sciences (sociology, anthropology, linguistics, etc.) and ‘conceptual’ sciences (physics, chemistry, biology, etc.) to Jerry Fodor’s (1935–2017) independently developed 1974 typology of ‘special’ (economics, psychology (hence, linguistics), etc.) as opposed to ‘basic’ sciences (physics—uniquely). Elffers finds common ground between the two scholars’ paired distinctions: first, because the historical/special sciences (among which both scholars locate linguistics) create generalizations that admit exceptions (96, 98); and second, because unlike the autonomous conceptual/basic sciences, the historical/special sciences can be resolved to more basic kinds of knowledge (102–3). Sapir’s 1917 essay elaborated his taxonomy of sciences in a rebuttal to fellow Boasian Alfred Kroeber’s (1876–1960) argument that human culture, as the target of anthropology, is ‘superorganic’, that is, not reducible to biological elements. To Sapir, the historical sciences study ‘chunks of reality’ (95) that lack the idealized, predictable traits of objects of the conceptual sciences; therefore, they retain their autonomy from conceptual sciences experientially, albeit not conceptually. Fodor would seem to agree with Sapir, in contrast to Kroeber: he gave the name ‘token physicalism’ to the fact that the physical events the special/historical sciences describe are reducible to events studied by basic/conceptual sciences, while the terms of those events cannot be so reduced. Ch. 4 ends with a discussion of the origins of Sapir’s versus Fodor’s taxonomies. Elffers attributes Sapir’s stance to German philosophy of science that contrasted how Geisteswissenschaften (roughly, the humanities plus social sciences) versus Naturwissenschaften (natural sciences) form concepts. The former grasps at what is individual in the object of study, while the latter factors out what is individual. She attributes Fodor’s development of token physicalism to the combined influence of his teacher Hilary Putnam and his colleague Noam Chomsky.

Elffers’s Ch. 4 orbits away from the theme of ‘form’ in the history of linguistics, never using the word or its derivatives in their relevant senses. However, perhaps Sapir and Fodor presuppose a concept of form in their shared understanding of the nature of generalizations in the historical/special sciences. Alternatively, perhaps it would make sense to integrate Ch. 4 into an informally defined second section of the book, alongside Chs. 5 and 6. These papers shift attention to formalism and its intersections with structuralism, and the disciplinary status of the two.

Bart Karstens’s Ch. 5 (115–39) addresses the relationship between the early-twentieth-century Russian avant-garde movement in art and literary studies known as ‘formalism’, and the structuralism of linguistics and anthropology. He starts out with two structuralists who opposed formalism: linguist and Prague School member Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975) and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009). According to Karstens, what Mukařovský rejected was ‘mechanical formalism’, a style of criticism that analyzed the devices that transform language into works of art. By contrast, the target of Lévi-Strauss’s criticism was ‘organic formalism’, which Lévi-Strauss felt (perhaps erroneously: 124–26) artificially separated language form from content, analysis from interpretation, syntax from the lexicon, and, furthermore, was wedded to rigid linear ordering of linguistic elements. Beyond mechanical and organic formalism, Karstens proposes a third option, ‘systemic formalism’, which he identifies with a 1928 paper coauthored by Yury Tynjanov (1894–1943) and Roman Jakobson (1896–1982). Writing as the Prague School worked through the relationship between formalism in literature and structuralism in linguistics, Tynjanov and Jakobson (1928) argue that study of literary texts benefits from Saussurean conceptual tools (synchrony/diachrony, langue/parole), from the vital role that function plays in structuralism, and, perhaps most of all, from structuralism’s orientation to systems and to the existence of hierarchically ordered systems within systems. To Karstens, systemic formalism induced a ‘fundamental shift in thinking’ (130) that made way for deep versus surface levels of analysis in
language, as in culture. He underscores the role of Jakobson in disseminating a synthesis of systemic formalism and structuralism across domains of the study of language, across disciplines, and across national borders.

John E. Joseph’s Ch. 6 (141–74) begins by acknowledging a perverse practice in modern linguistics, wherein many generativists identify their own work with the systematicity of language—a core concern of structuralism—while denying any allegiance to ‘structuralism’ because they associate that label with the 1940s descriptivism that they discredit as atheoretical. Joseph’s topic, however, is a different ‘resistance embrace’ (141) of structuralism in the work of two mid-twentieth-century French scholars, Émile Benveniste (1902–1976) and Aurélien Sauvageot (1897–1988). In an apparent inversion of the contemporary practice, Benveniste positioned himself as a supportive elaborator on structuralism, while tacitly undermining that stance in his last thirty years of publications. For example, Benveniste trafficked in words, not sounds or forms (143), and he put speakers, not parole (or langue), at the center of his trademark concept of ‘enunciation’ (165–67). Moreover, in a seemingly post-structuralist touch, he invested writing with a role in linguistics (169). Joseph considers Benveniste’s heterodox structuralism evidence of his ambivalent attachment to it. On the one hand, Benveniste appreciated structuralism’s pursuit of systematicity in all things, and he acknowledged the glamour that it brought to the discipline. On the other hand, he mistrusted the basic drive of structuralism to reduce the complexity of language by distilling away the rich linguistic particulars that he found so rewarding.

Sauvageot has a lower profile in the history of linguistics, and a smaller role in Joseph’s essay. Like Benveniste, Sauvageot was a student of Antoine Meillet (1886–1936), who was himself a direct student of Ferdinand de Saussure. Also like Benveniste, Sauvageot was ambivalently attracted to structuralism, trapped between his loyalty to his teachers and his attachment to old-school philology, in particular, to the study of Finno-Ugric languages. Joseph walks the reader through a specimen of Sauvageot’s work on Finnish, showing how he balanced his approach/avoidance relationship with structuralism.

A point of interest throughout Joseph’s essay is that he identifies formalism as ‘the “structural” part of structuralist linguistics’ (164). This provides a bridge to what might constitute the last section of the book, three chapters that bring discussion of ‘form(ali)sm’ to bear on generative linguistics—‘formalism’ being a term the modern usage of which may not be quite as fraught as ‘structuralism’. Ryan M. Nefdt comes back to this point at the end of Ch. 7 (175–95). But first, he pinpoints a common complaint against generativism, namely, that in its sixty-year history it has undergone so many radical changes as to threaten its scientific status. Nefdt states this complaint as an instance of ‘pessimistic meta-induction’ (177), which in essence asks, ‘Well, if every one of your earlier theories has proved inadequate, why should I believe that the current one will hold up?’.

The middle of Nefdt’s chapter is taken up with recounting how each stage in the development of generative theory—from transformational grammar to principles and parameters to minimalism—‘distanced itself from the methodology of its predecessor, postulated different objects and advocated different ends’ (179). It is Nefdt’s judgment that with the passage of time ‘linguistic theory saw a decrease in formalization and an increased resistance to it’ (178), but that, according to his structural realist analysis, successive versions of generative theory ‘display structural continuity notwithstanding variation of theoretical commitment’ (186). In support of this claim, Nefdt cites three observations: that different iterations of generative theory all (i) account for the same sentences, (ii) generate infinite output from a finite input, and (iii) can be represented hierarchically, as in tree structures (187). He raises the question of whether the shift from derivational to constraint-based grammars troubles the continuity he perceives across the history of generativism, but ends up dismissing this threat as tractable as long as both kinds of grammars yield the same outcome (189).

Nefdt’s parting comments return to an observation that, among others, Joseph makes (this volume, 142): that generativists associate the label ‘structuralism’ with the style of linguistics they rebelled against in the mid-twentieth century. Nefdt objects that there is ample continuity between 1940s structuralism and 1970s generativism: he cites recursion, transformations, axiomatic
methods, and the concept that a grammar generates the sentences of a language as having all been anticipated before Chomsky’s earliest publications (191). Thus Nefdt alleviates the worries of ‘pessimistic meta-induction’, finding a theoretical storyline that flows from before the articulation of generativism to all its manifestations to date.

If Nefdt’s commentary on generativism ends before Chomsky in the 1940s, Geoffrey K. Pullum’s Ch. 8 (197–223) begins in the 1920s to recount developments in logic and mathematics that cleared the way for the appearance of generative grammar. Pullum’s goal, however, is not so much to rectify the historical record as to root out conceptual misunderstanding that he perceives among modern generativists. First, generative grammar misuses the term ‘rule’, which is ‘something that we can follow … or break’ (202). To Pullum, there are no true ‘rules’ in generative grammar: wh-movement, for instance, does not guarantee that who, what (etc.) will necessarily appear at the beginning of a clause. Rather, he considers descriptive grammars’ claims of grammaticality to be normative statements, in the sense that they define a linguistic system. They are constitutive, not regulative.

Pullum moves on to a second correction, about the salience of formalizing a grammar, by which he means ‘the use of mathematical and logical tools to make theoretical claims more explicit’ (207). To Chomsky, famously, a generative grammar is a maximally explicit one—but Pullum points out examples aplenty of inexplicitness in generative grammars, and proposes instead a model-theoretic alternative for formalizing syntactic description, based on constraint satisfaction. By these lights, grammaticality can be conceived ‘as approximate compliance with certain structural constraints on the form of sentences’ (219); Pullum then offers some examples of how to formally represent normative statements (to the unconvinced, ‘rules’) using mathematical and logical tools. Ch. 7 continues in the same feisty vein: among other targets, Pullum disrupts the notion of universal grammar and develops his earlier assertion that grammatical constraints are best viewed as having normative force, in the sense that they ‘can make our words or actions more predictable to others’ (220), emphasizing that normativity is not to be confused with a species of prescriptivism.

The book under review concludes with Ch. 9, by Nick Riemer (225–64). Riemer’s essay turns on what he calls the ‘unique form hypothesis’, namely, ‘the assumption that each language has a single form, which it is the role of linguistics to characterize’ (225). Riemer’s prize attestation of the unique form hypothesis is by France’s Minister of National Education Jean-Michel Blanquer, who dismissed proposed gender-inclusive language reform in a 2017 tweet: ‘There is a single French language, a single grammar, a single Republic’ (226). Riemer does not cite any explicit articulation of the hypothesis by a linguist. No matter: he makes the case for widespread implicit consent across ‘contemporary “structural” or “formal” linguistics—those varieties of the discipline … that posit a unique underlying “form” of language and set out to characterize it’ (226). The rules of structural or formal linguistics ‘tend in a single direction: … bringing complex facts under the scope of general rules, and [deriving] the diverse manifestations of speech, sign, and text from the operations of a unique and singular grammar’ (226). Riemer derives objections to the unique form hypothesis from writings by Ludwig Wittgenstein and by Pierre Bourdieu, and from scholarship on translanguaging, then asks why linguists themselves have so little questioned it. His answer is that, despite the left-leaning politics espoused by many linguists (in the US, at least), the political epistemology of the discipline reinforces capitalist exploitation by presupposing that speakers are free, rational agents who have at their disposal full access to a code that they use at will, unconstrained by class, gender, ethnicity, or other impositions from the outside—in short, speakers who seem modeled on the image of ideal market-economy consumers (237).

The horizon darkens further. Riemer asserts that a reductionistic and totalizing impulse in formalism/structuralism discounts heterogeneity and complexity in general, and distracts attention from elements of a culture that are not ideal, but that could be altered for the better. Worse, near the end of Ch. 9 Riemer examines textbooks directed at beginning linguists, and finds that their tutorial of the unique form hypothesis ‘habituates [students] to a certain acceptance of arbitrary symbolic authority—their lecturer’s—which will be rapidly reactivated outside the university in the figure of their employer, landlord, or political “representative”’ (257). Against this nightmare—
ish outcome, Riemer calls linguists to avoid training students in merely how to abstract, reduce, and generalize language data in the classic manner that he associates with formalism/structuralism, so that linguistics may instead become ‘a site of pluralistic and reflexive exchange’ (260).

In brief, this volume brings together one paper on graphic formalism in linguistics (Kaplan); three on the notion of ‘form’ as a constituent of linguistic theory (McElvenny, Fortis, possibly Elffers); two that discuss the disciplinary status of formalism in linguistics and that variously bring structuralism into play (Karstens, Joseph); and three that presuppose the formal character of generative linguistics, then open it to criticism (Nefdt, Pullum, Riemer). McElvenny’s theme of ‘form(ali(ism))’ is a fairly thin common denominator, but no matter, these are all provocative essays, invitingly presented and written by scholars at the tops of their respective games. They are well worth reading closely. They would also be rewarding grist for a graduate seminar, or a Zoom- or in-person-based collegial reading group.

An additional notable attribute of this text is that it is the first volume in a new series, ‘History and philosophy of the language sciences’, for which James McElvenny serves as series editor. It is produced by Berlin-based Language Science Press, a ‘born-digital scholar-led open access publisher in linguistics’ (https://langsci-press.org/about) founded in 2013. Language Science Press now sponsors twenty-nine diverse series across many subfields of linguistics, all publications in which are freely downloadable, thanks to the support of 115 funding institutions worldwide. Their books may also be purchased in hardback. The text under review has already been followed in the same series by three other volumes on the history and philosophy of linguistics, two edited collections and a monograph, with more in production. Language Science Press specifies that publication entails no fees for authors or readers. Miraculously, their workflow protocols aim to move manuscripts from submission to publication in around six months, including anonymous review. All of this is good news for linguists regardless of where they stand with respect to forms, formality, or formalism.

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Program in Linguistics
Eastern, Slavic, and German Studies
Boston College
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467
[thomasm@bc.edu]


Reviewed by Hongyuan Dong, George Washington University

In this book, Zhongwei Shen provides a complete account of the phonological history of Chinese, from Old Chinese in the first millennium BC to Modern Mandarin. Drawing on his own re-

1 This book can be downloaded as a whole or as individual chapter PDFs at http://langsci-press.org/catalog/book/214.