

# HISTORY OF STRUCTURALISM

FRANÇOIS DOSSE

*Volume 2*

THE SIGN SETS, 1967-PRESENT

TRANSLATED BY DEBORAH GLASSMAN

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History of Structuralism  
*Volume 2*

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***Volume 2: The Sign Sets, 1967-Present***

**Francois Dosse**

*Translated by Deborah Glassman*



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To *Florence, Antoine, Cbloe, and Aurelien*

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*Structuralism is not a new method, it is the awakened and troubled  
consciousness of modern thought.*

Michel Foucault



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## Preface

Were there many structuralisms or simply one structuralism? By the end of the decades of structuralism's triumph described in the first volume of *History of Structuralism*, it had become clear that structuralism wove a reality of different logics and individuals resembling a disparate fabric more than a school. However, there were a specific orientation and many dialogues indicating a "structuralist moment." In the mid-sixties, both Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault were trying to bring together the most modern social science research around an effort at philosophical renewal that came to be known as structuralist. In 1966, these efforts reached their apex.

By 1967, cracks started to appear. It became clear that the regroupings of the first period were often artificial, and a general withdrawal of sorts began at this point. Certain of the players sought less-trodden paths in order to avoid the epithet "structuralist." Some even went so far as to deny ever having been a structuralist, with the exception of Claude Levi-Strauss, who pursued his work beyond the pale of the day's fashions.

Paradoxically, while structuralists were distancing themselves from what they considered to be an artificial unity, the media were discovering and aggrandizing this unity. This period of deconstruction, dispersion, and ebb, however, only quite superficially affected the rhythm of structuralist research. Research continued elsewhere, in

the university, and obeyed another temporal logic. May 1968 had contributed to structuralism's institutional success, and this played an essential role in assimilating the program that had lost its blazened banner of a counterculture in revolt to become one of the theoretical, but unarticulated, horizons of social science research.

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# Part I

## *First Fissures*

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## Chomskyism-New Frontiers?

In 1967, Pion published Nicolas Ruwet's doctoral dissertation, *Introduction to Generative Grammar*,<sup>1</sup> in which he presented Chomskyan principles. For Ruwet, as for many linguists, Chomsky was the expression of a radical break with the first structuralist period. Ruwet had discovered Chomsky thanks to an itinerary that took him from Belgium to Paris, where he attended many of the important seminars being held at the time.

Born in 1933, Nicolas Ruwet was first a student in Liege. Dissatisfied with a style of teaching that resembled the pedagogy at the Sorbonne, he left Belgium in 1959 to come to Paris. "I was vaguely thinking about ethnology, but I was also interested in psychoanalysis. I was a musician at the beginning and I had already read a certain number of works in linguistics including Saussure, Trubetzkoy, and Jakobson." From the outset Ruwet was at the confluence of different disciplines, a good indication of the totalizing structuralist imperative. He left Belgium seeking rigor and in the hope of participating in the scientific adventure that was unfolding.

In Paris, Ruwet went to Émile Benveniste's seminar at the Collège de France, André Martinet's seminar at the Sorbonne, and Claude Lévi-Strauss's seminar at Hautes Études. "What was going on in Lévi-Strauss's seminar particularly excited me, at the beginning when he brought in a long article by Roman Jakobson that had just come out in English, entitled 'Linguistics and Poetics.' He was completely car-

ried away by it and read us practically the entire text during the two hours of the class."! In 1962, Ruwet became a member of the poetics program in the Belgian National Foundation for Scientific Research (FNRS): "I was planning to do a thesis on Baudelaire, which I never did."<sup>4</sup> In 1963, he wrote the preface to the collected works of Jakobson, one of the major publications of the period, published by the Éditions de Minuit as *Essays in General Linguistics*.<sup>5</sup> He and his friend Lucien Sebag were both attending Lacan's famous seminar at the time. While on a trip together with Lacan's daughter and other friends in a house that Lacan had rented in Saint-Tropez, Ruwet discovered Chomsky, entirely by accident.

I was alone in the room that Lacan used as a study and there was a little blue book, published by Mouton, lying on his desk. It was Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*. I ordered it right away at the end of the vacation, and found it very interesting, but I did not understand a thing. There were still too many pieces missing."

Despite this fortuitous discovery, Ruwet continued to work along the lines defined by Jakobson and Hjelmslev and wrote an article for *Éric de Dampierre* summarizing the situation in general linguistics in 1964, in which he sang the praises of structuralism.<sup>7</sup>

### The Conversion

In 1964, everything changed. A friend from Liège lent Ruwet a book by Paul Postal which had just come out, *Constituent Structure: A Study of Contemporary Models of Syntactic Description*, in which Postal presented Chomsky's major ideas. "I read it on the train between Liège and Paris. When I got to the Gare du Nord I was a generativist. In the space of a few hours I had walked my road to Damascus. Everything changed. I had to finish my article for *Éric de Dampierre*, but I no longer believed in what I was saying."<sup>8</sup> Ruwet spent the next three years reading everything published on generative grammar and preparing to write his thesis-which he had initially not planned to publish as a book but only in order to get an official diploma and crown a rather interdisciplinary career, like that of most structuralists. In 1967-68, this book quickly became the breviary of the new generation that was discovering linguistics.

Chomsky was not well known in France at the time. Although *Syntactic Structures* had come out in 1957, it was only translated in

1969 at Seuil. Thanks to Nicolas Ruwet, who adopted an entirely new approach with respect to what had come before in linguistics, Chomsky became known in France. In December 1966, Ruwet introduced generative grammar in issue 4 of *Langages*; Chomsky gave him the possibility of working on syntax, which Saussure and Jakobson had ignored. While the search for greater scientificity provided the link between structuralism and Chomskyism, Ruwet saw an advantage in generativism's Popperian conception of science as falsifiable. "The break lies in the possibility of offering hypotheses that can be proved false. This made a deep impression on me." Generative grammar required a precise and explicit theory, which worked like an algorithm whose operations can be applied mechanically. "Karl Popper clearly showed that it was possible to establish a science on the principle of induction." <sup>10</sup> With the double articulation of language on the deep structure of competence and a surface structure of speech, a double universality was postulated. Not only were there established rules and a system, but there were also "a certain number of substantial universals."<sup>11</sup> This quest for universals carried structuralist ambitions even further, ambitions themselves taken from the general principle evoked by Plato in the *Sophist* (262 B.C.), offering "the material foundations of structural linguistics." <sup>12</sup> Plato had argued that the study of a system of signs presupposed a certain limited number of conditions: determining minimal units, their finite number, their combinability and, finally, that not all combinations are possible.

Although May 1968 would also weaken the structuralist paradigm, as we will see, Chomsky's thinking was in phase with the events of the late sixties. But this was due to a curious misunderstanding. In the first place, Chomsky was known as an American radical who protested the war in Vietnam, thereby embodying the very expression of a critical attitude. But even more, the term "generative" in France was understood "in the sense of that which engendered, fruitful moves. We no longer wanted static structures, and structuralism at that point was associated with conservatism. The term 'generative,' although purely technical, had nothing at all to do with all of that."<sup>13</sup> For Chomsky, in contrast, generative grammar meant simply an explicit grammar modeled on the competence of native speakers and it "simply meant the explicit enumeration by means of rules."<sup>14</sup> Thanks to these misunderstandings, generative grammar met the generation of protest, which saw in Chomsky's ideas the means of reconciling his-

tory, movement, and structure. This misperception was fruitful in many ways, including making generativism known in France.

### The Archaeology of Generativism

There was a second misunderstanding. Chomsky's criticism did not address European structuralism. It focused on American structuralism, represented by Leonard Bloomfield and his "distributionist" or Yale School, the dominant form of linguistics in the United States in the fifties. Bloomfield drew his inspiration from behavioral psychology, and considered that it was enough to describe the mechanism of language, to underscore its regularities. These mechanisms were the concern, the meaning of utterances was not. Utterances were to be broken down into their immediate constituents and classified in a distributional order. American linguistics prior to Chomsky was thus essentially descriptive, linear, and based on an assumed transparency between speech acts and their meaning. The systems of opposition emphasized by American structuralism made it above all possible to avoid mentalism. This descriptive, distributional approach was largely inspired by work done in the twenties and that sought to restore the various Amerindian languages. Ethnolinguistics, which Boas and Sapir had been developing on the other side of the Atlantic, removed from Saussureanism, saw linguistics in this light. "Chomsky's rupture has to be understood with respect to the school of American linguistics. The split is clear but there is an undeniable foundation, which is articulation. No theory proposes to analyze sentence structure."<sup>15</sup>

American structuralism, or distributionalism, also moved ahead thanks to the work of Zellig Harris, who described its method in 1951.<sup>16</sup> Like Bloomfield, Harris argued that meaning and distribution corresponded to each other. He defined the principles of an approach based on the constitution of a representative, homogeneous corpus in order to determine the different morphemes and phonemes by means of successive segmentations. To get to these original structures, Harris defined mechanical rules of calculus and eliminated all traces of subjectivism and context. "Functional notions such as the subject of a sentence, for example, were replaced by complex classes of distribution."<sup>17</sup> All forms of speaker intentionality were relegated to somewhere beyond the scientific field of distributionalism. Harris therefore pushed Bloomfield's logic to its limits, and introduced the notion of transformation in order to reach the study of discursive structures

using classes of equivalence. His research led him greater and greater formalism, in order to make different discursive manifestations derive from a limited number of elementary sentences generated by fundamental operators. "Everything in this model depends on the assimilation of meaning to objective information and on the position of a weak semantics."<sup>19</sup>

### The Principles of Generativism

Initially, Chomsky adopted Harris's distributionalism and maintained the explicit character of the approach. But, together with Morris Halle at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he quickly oriented his work in a new, "generative" direction. He rejected the distributionalist imposition of limits to a corpus that did not exhaust the richness of a language. With the intention of going further than a simple description, he sought the more essential level of explanation and therefore denounced economical methods. Initially, he limited his field of study to syntax so as to establish an independent theory and an autonomous grammar. "The end results of this research should have been a theory of linguistic structure in which the descriptive mechanisms used in particular grammars were introduced and studied abstractly without any specific reference to any particular languages."<sup>20</sup> This grammar would take the form of a generative mechanism that revealed possibilities, rather than a corpus serving as the basis for induction.

By its formalism and rejection of meaning, the generative approach upheld the structuralist legacy. "This conception of language is extremely powerful and general. If we adopt it, we consider the speaker to be essentially a machine of the type known in mathematics as the Markov process with a finite number of states."<sup>21</sup> Once the technical hypotheses of the construction of this generative grammar were described in 1957, Chomsky published *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* in 1965, in which he described the philosophical dimension of his approach, rooting it historically and theoretically. Seuil published the French translation in 1971. Starting with the observation that every child learns its mother tongue with remarkable speed, Chomsky argued that a child had the potential to learn any language. But rather than concluding that an initial context determined language acquisition, he argued for universal laws that determine languages as well as universals of language. Every individual therefore possesses an innate



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