This volume appears now finally in English, sixty years after the death of its author, Lucien Tesnière. It has been translated from the French original into German, Spanish, Italian, and Russian, and now at long last into English as well. The volume contains a comprehensive approach to the syntax of natural languages, an approach that is foundational for an entire stream in the modern study of syntax and grammar. This stream is known today as dependency grammar (DG). Drawing examples from dozens of languages, many of which he was proficient in, Tesnière presents insightful analyses of numerous phenomena of syntax. Among the highlights are the concepts of valency and head-initial vs. head-final languages. These concepts are now taken for granted by most modern theories of syntax, even by phrase structure grammars, which represent, in a sense, the opposite sort of approach to syntax from what Tesnière was advocating.
Our motivation

• Tesnière (1893-1954)
• First publication of *Elements* in French: 1959
• 4132 citations on Google Scholar
• No English translation up to 2015
• A spin-off of Depling
  – Tim and I first met at Depling 2011
  – project started 2 weeks after
  – published by Benjamins in 2015
Subject of the presentation

• Why should you read Tesnière?
• What is in the book?
• What is not in the book?
Tesnière is not the first

- to draw dependency structures
- Stephen W. Clark (1847)

"Our national resources are developed by an earnest culture of the arts of peace."

(4.)

RESOURCES
OUR NATIONAL

ARE DEVELOPED

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PEACE.
Tesnière is not the first

- Franz Kern (1883)
but Tesnière is the first

• to elaborate a complete linguistic theory based on the dependency concept
  – 670 pages
  – 366 stemmas (= dependency structures)
  – dozens of languages studied

• corpus studies => dependency-based representations for the main constructions in numerous and varied languages
  – including very complex sentences:
(Corneille, Le Cid, I, 6, Stemma 361)
Tesnière the polyglot

- born in 1893 in Normandy (France)
- German housekeeper and several holydays in Germany
- baccalauréat Latin-Grec in 1910
- next year in England and Italy
- graduated at Sorbonne in 1913 in English and Old Norse
- next year at Leipzig: studied Gothic, Old High German, Middle High German, Old Norse
- captivity during WWI: studied Hebrew, learned Russian, Low Breton, Latvian, Hungarian
- works as French-English-Russian-Italian-German interpreter
- PhD defended in 1925 on forms of dual in Slovene
- ...
Additional concepts

• Tesnière augmented his dependency-based representations in several ways, introducing many additional concepts
  1. verb centrality
  2. stratification
  3. language typology
  4. nuclei
  5. valency
  6. metataxis
  7. junction
  8. transfer
1. Verb centrality

• “a verbal sentence is one in which everything gravitates around the verb. A nominal sentence is one in which everything gravitates around a noun. In the Russian Dom nov ‘The house is new’, the center is nov (dom → nov). In contrast, in novy dom ‘new house’ the center is dom (novy → dom).”

(letter to Mossé, 1932, BNF, Fonds Tesnière)
On voit tout l’avantage du procédé, même au point de vue pédagogique, où il permet de souligner que simplicité dépend de conserve et non de contenue, ainsi que pourraient le faire croire une lecture superficielle.

La même méthode est naturellement applicable aux autres langues. Soit par exemple la phrase latine : *Ergo apud maiores nostros iuvenis ille, quo foro et eloquentiae parabatur, imbutus iam domestica disciplina, refertus honestis studiis deducebatur a patre uel a propinquis ad eum oratorem, qui principem in civitate locum obtinebat* (Tacte, Dialogue des Orateurs, 33). Elle fournit le schéma suivant:

- **honestis**
- **domestica**
- **studiis**
- **disciplina**
- **imbutus**
- **refertus**
- **qui**
- **ille**
- **juvenis**
- **parabatur**
- **et**
- **foro**
- **eloquentiae**
- **apud**
- **maiores**
- **nosotros**
- **DEDUCEBAT**
- **patre**
- **uel**
- **propinquis**
- **ad**
- **oratorem**
- **eum**
- **qui**
- **obtinebat**
- **locum**
- **principem**
- **civitate**
- **in**

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Tesnière (1934) *Comment construire une syntaxe* [How to build a syntax]
2. Stratification

• Two orders:
  – structural order = dependency structure
  – linear order = spoken chain
• “speaking a language involves transforming structural order to linear order, and conversely, understanding a language involves transforming linear order to structural order” (Chapter 6, §4).
3. Ordering and language typology

- distinction between *centrifugal* (head-initial) and *centripetal* (head-final) structures and languages (Chapter 13) (see Greenberg 1963)
- classification of almost 200 languages (BNF)

```
cheval          horse
   /   \      /   \    \\
 /     \    /     \  \\
|       |  |       |   \\
blanc    white
```

but no linearized dependency trees in the book
4. Nucleus

• nodes are occupied by nuclei
  – “...if there are semantic connections that are distinct from structural connections, it is because in the positions where they are joined there are semantic centers distinct from the structural centers.” (Chapter 22, §2)
  – the nucleus is “the set which joins together, in addition to the structural node itself, all the other elements for which the node is the structural support, starting with the semantic elements.” (Chapter 22, §5)
5. Valency

• “The verb may therefore be compared to a sort of atom, susceptible to attracting a greater or lesser number of actants, according to the number of bonds the verb has available to keep them as dependents. The number of bonds a verb has constitutes what we call the verb’s valency.” (Chapter 97, §3)
6. Metataxis

- mismatches in dependency structure across languages:
  - actant conversions: En. *I miss you* ↔ Fr. *Vous me manquez*, Chapter 123), equivalence with the active-passive alternation (Chapter 125)
  - inversion of dependency direction: En. *I like to read* ↔ Ger. *Ich lese gern*, Chapter 129)
7. Junction

- junction (= coordination) is orthogonal to connection (= subordination)

- Alfred and Bernard laughed

- Alfred laughs and sings

- Alfred
7. Junction

- Part II, Chapter 134–50, 35 pages, including
  - gapping

```
carries
  \- the one
  \- the other
  \- his shield
  \- his armor
```

*the one carries his shield and the other his armor* (Stemma 273, Chapter 146)

- or comparison (*Alfred likes Bernard like a brother*)

```
loves
  \- Alfred — like — a brother
  \- Bernard
```
```
loves
  \- Alfred
  \- Bernard — like — a brother
```
8. Transfer

- Part III, Chapter 151–271 = 270 p.
- Transfer is the tool that allows a unit of one syntactic category to occupy a position usually devoted to a unit of another syntactic category.
  - a French linguist
  - a linguist of France
    - transfer of a noun into an adjective
    - of is a translative
- T-like notation without head:
8. Transfer

- transfer of a verb into a noun
  - I expect something
  - I expect that Peter is coming  
    (analytic transfer)
  - I expect Peter’s coming  
    (synthetic transfer)

- transfer of verb into an adjective
  - l’homme qui écrit  
    ‘the man who writes’
  - qui is both a translatative and a pronoun
Not in the book

• no real criteria for dependency (Garde 1974, Mel’čuk 1988)
  – “The mind perceives connections between a word and its neighbors” (Chapter 1, §3)
• no grammatical functions (but distinction between actants 1, 2, 3 and circumstants)
• no projectivity (Lecerf 1960)
• no formalization (Ajduckiewicz 1935, Hays 1960)
Good reading!
Index

• referral from modern terms to original terms
  – agent. See counter-subject
  – argument. See actant
  – clitic. See personal index
  – complementizer. See transfer (deverbal)
  – dependency. See connection
  – dependency tree. See stemma
  – dependent. See subordinate
  – dislocation (left, right). See projection of actants
  – gapping. See anacatalectic
  – head-final. See centripetal
  – head-initial. See centrifugal
  – relativizer. See transfereme
  – right node raising. See sentence (catadidymic)