

Elements of Structural Syntax

Lucien Tesnière

Translated by
Timothy Osborne and Sylvain Kahane

John Benjamins Publishing Company

August 26, 2015,
Depling, Uppsala

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

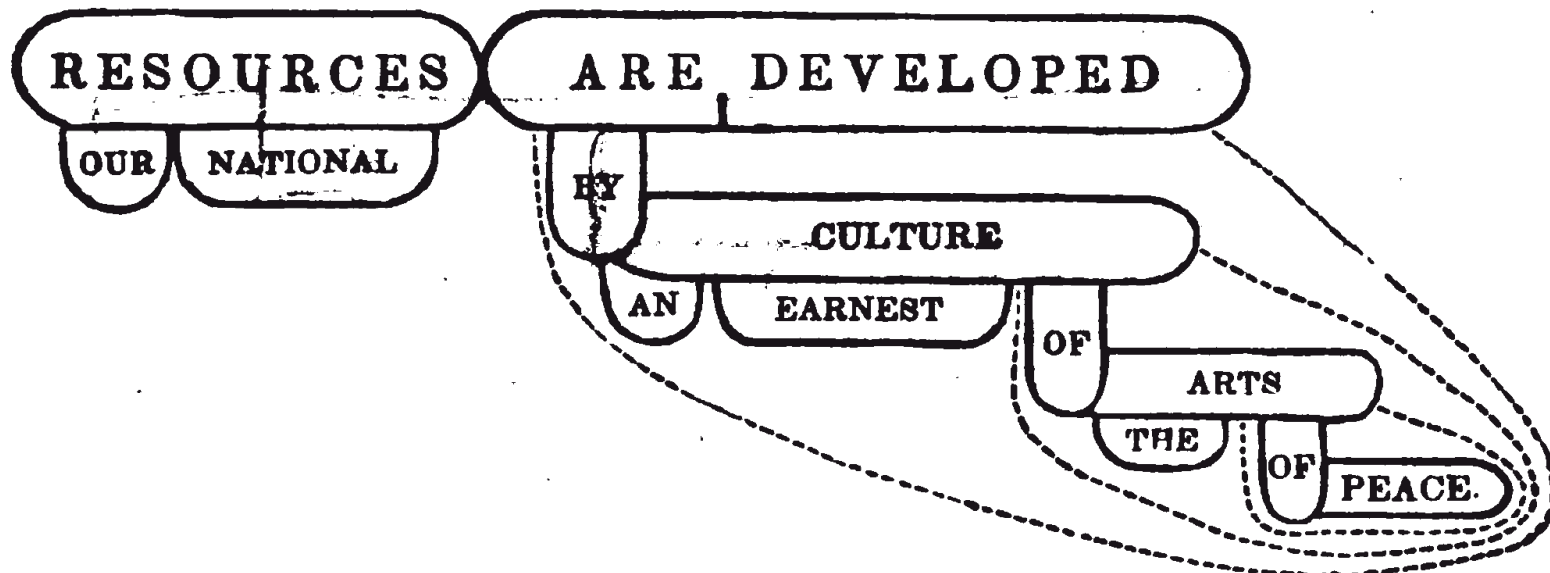
- Why should you read Tesnière?
- What is in the book?
- What is not in the book?

Tesnière is not the first

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

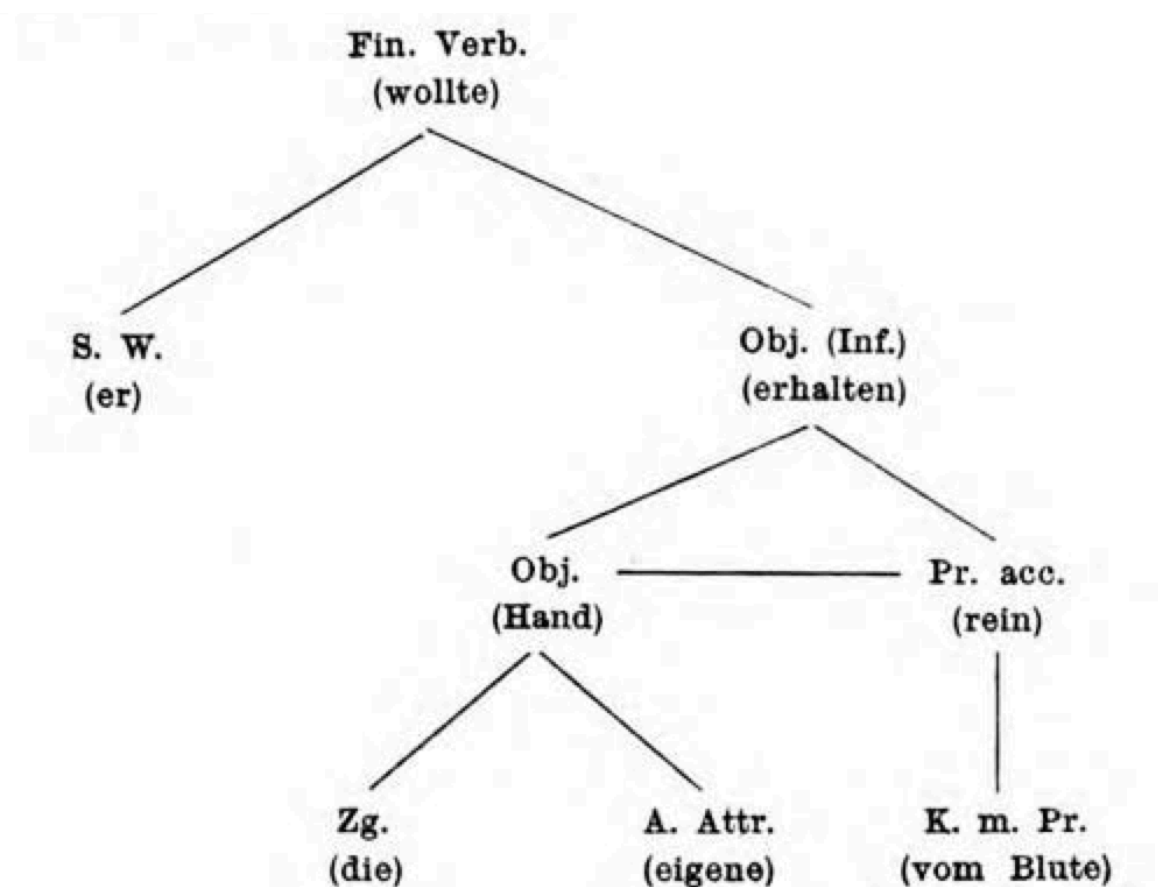
“ Our national resources are developed by an earnest culture of the arts of peace.”

(4.)



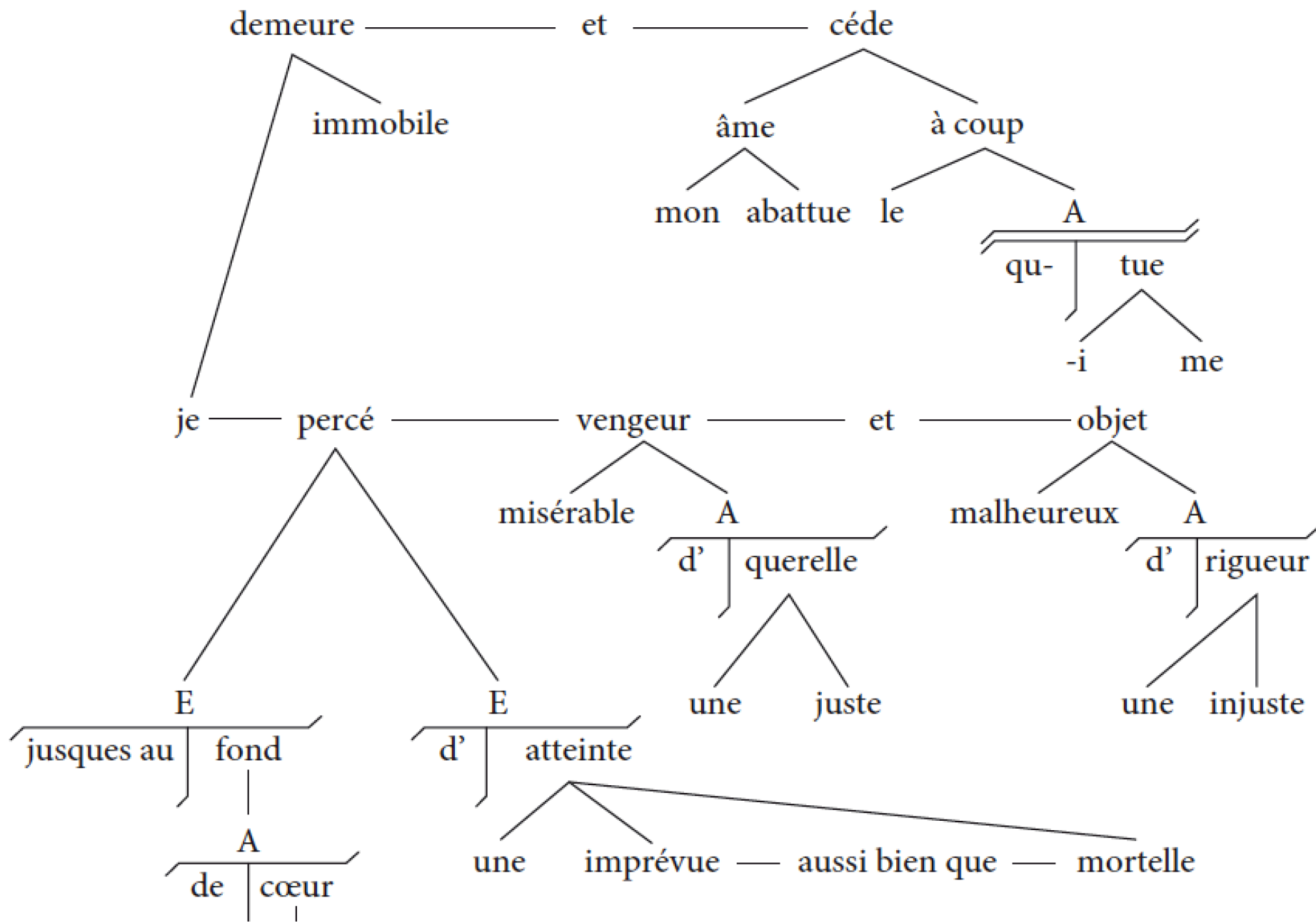
Tesnière is not the first

- 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

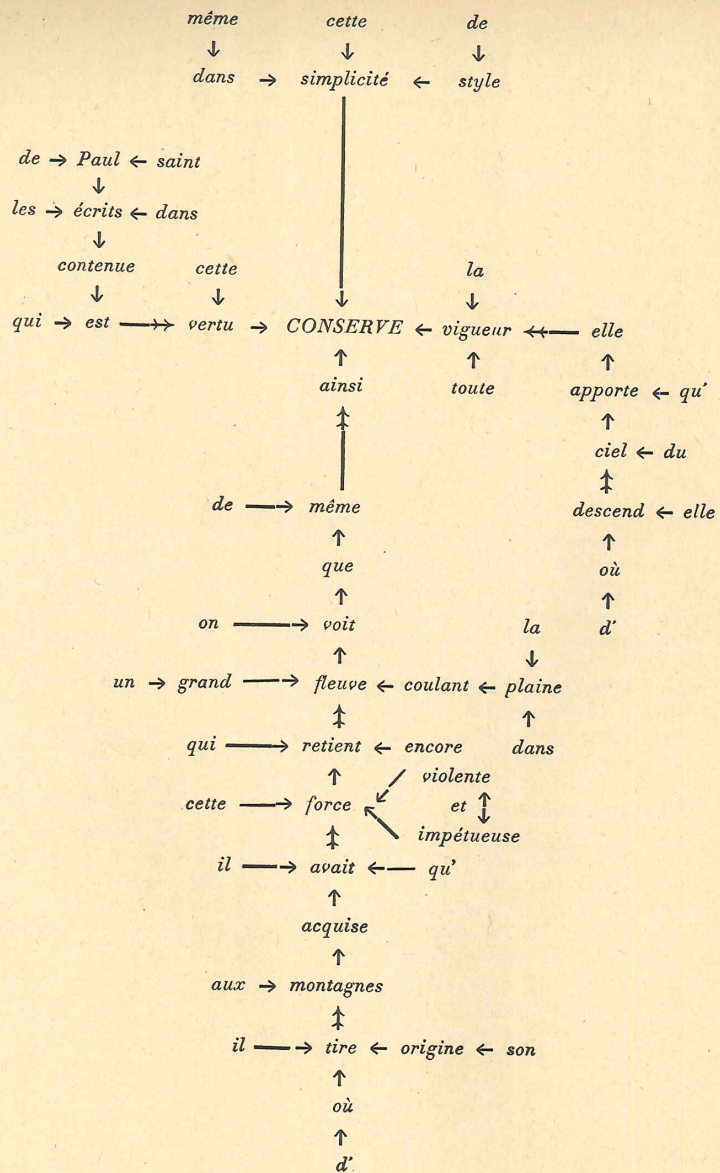
- born in 1893 in Normandy (France)
- German housekeeper and several holidays in Germany
- baccalauréat Latin-Grec in 1910
- next year in England and Italy
- graduated at Sorbonne in 1913 in English and Old Norse
- next year at Leipzig: studied Gothic, Old High German, Middle High German, Old Norse
- 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

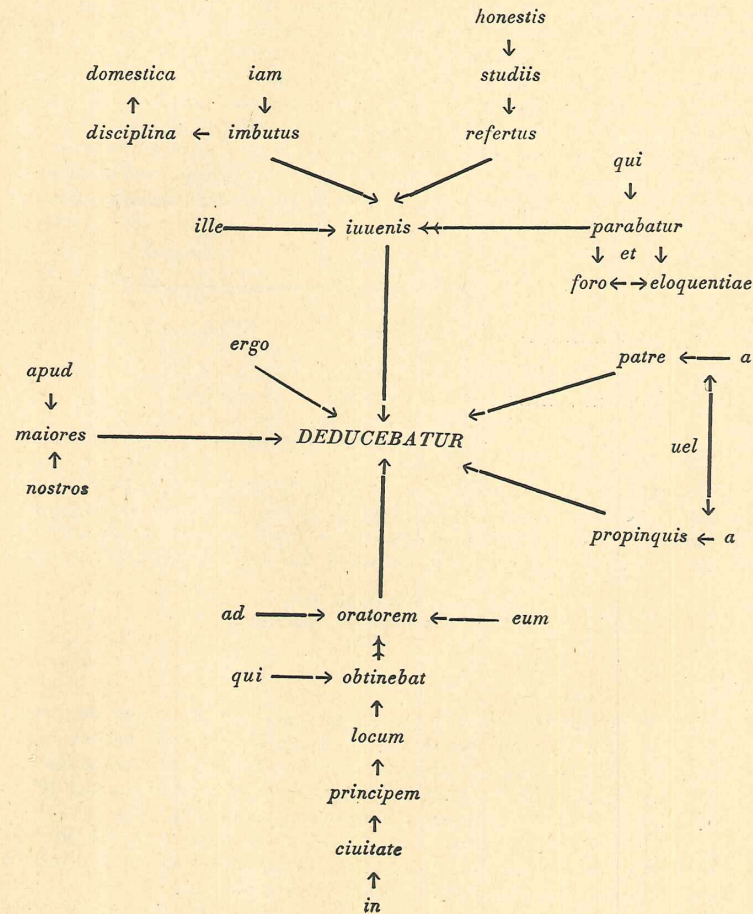
1. Verb centrality

- “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)



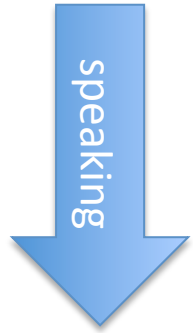
On voit tout l'avantage du procédé, même au point de vue pédagogique, où il permet de souligner que *simplicité* dépend de *conserve* et non de *contenue*, ainsi que pourrait le faire croire une lecture superficielle.

La même méthode est naturellement applicable aux autres langues. Soit par exemple la phrase latine : *Ergo apud maiores nostros iuuenis ille, qui foro et eloquentiae parabatur, imbutus iam domestica disciplina, refertus honestis studiis deducebatur a patre uel a propinquis ad eum oratorem, qui principem in ciuitate locum obtinebat* (Tacite, *Dialogue des Orateurs*, 34). Elle fournit le stemma suivant :

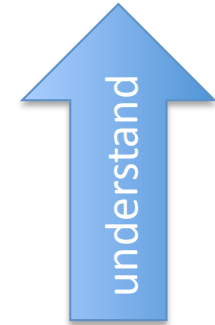


Tesnière (1934) *Comment construire une syntaxe* [How to build a syntax]

2. Stratification

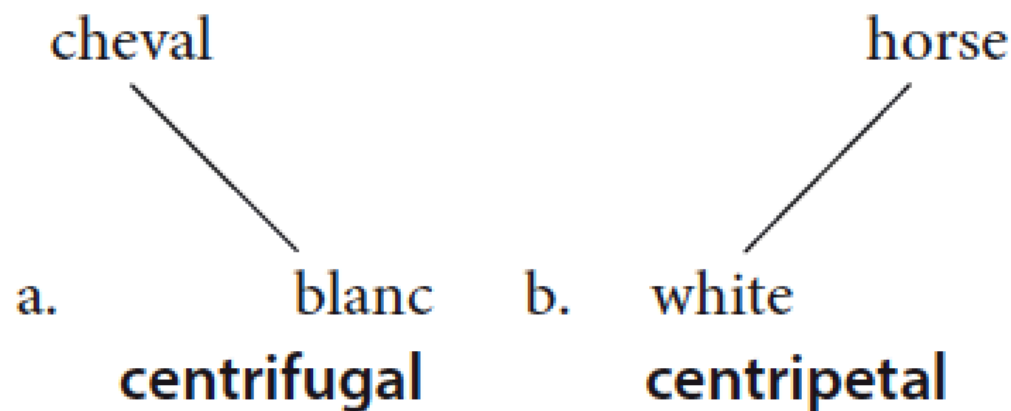


- Two orders:
 - structural order = dependency structure
 - linear order = spoken chain
- “**speaking** a language involves transforming structural order to linear order, and conversely, **understanding** a language involves transforming linear order to structural order”
(Chapter 6, §4).



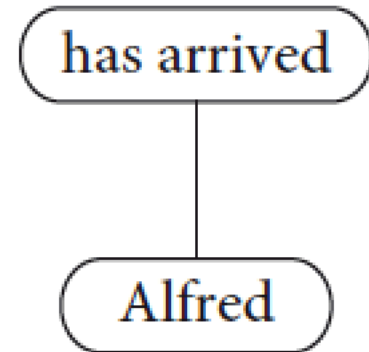
3. Ordering and language typology

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



but no linearized
dependency trees
in the book

4. Nucleus



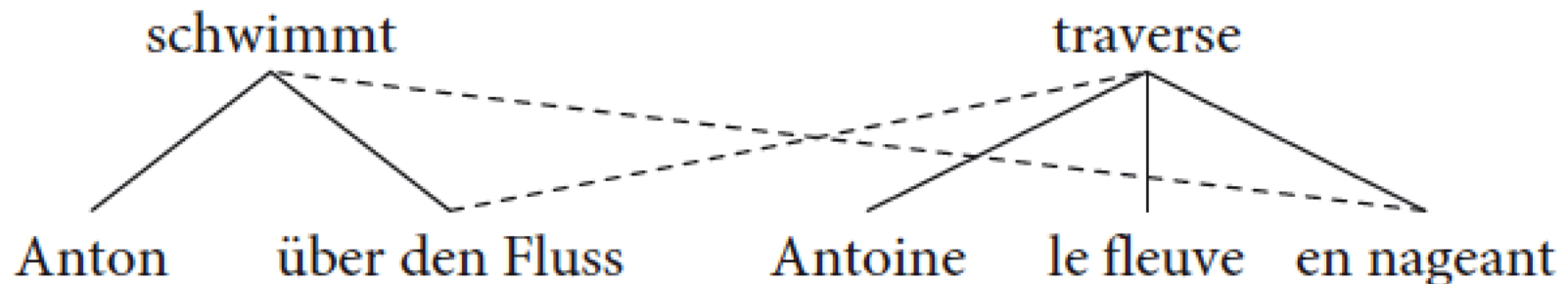
- nodes are occupied by nuclei
 - “...if there are semantic connections that are distinct from structural connections, it is because in the positions where they are joined there are semantic centers distinct from the structural centers.” (Chapter 22, §2)
 - the nucleus is “the set which joins together, 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)

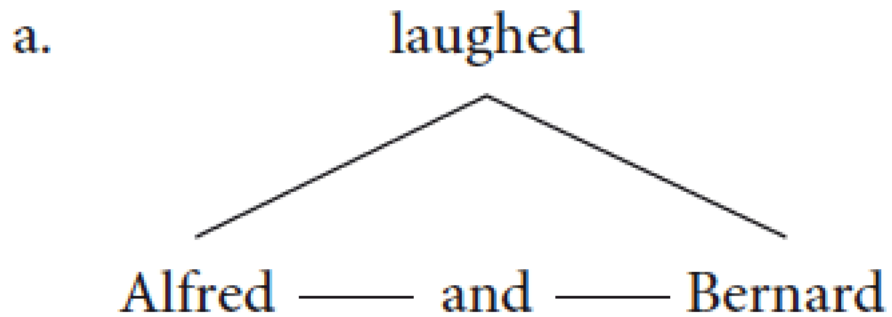
6. Metataxis

- 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)
 - distinction between manner-incorporating and path-incorporating motion verbs (cf. Talmy (1974): En. *Antoine swam across the river* ↔ Fr. *Antoine traverse le fleuve en nageant*, Chapter 131).

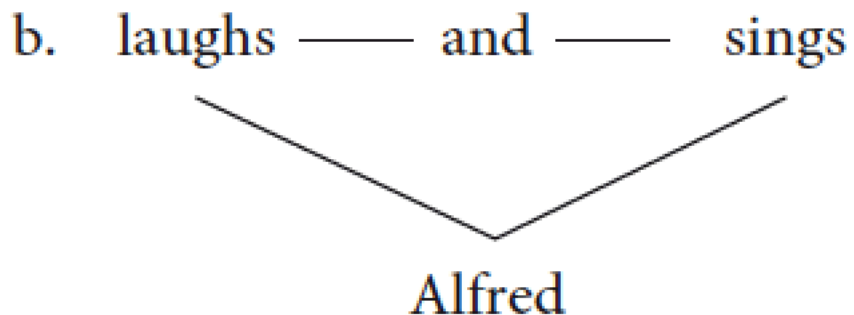


7. Junction

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



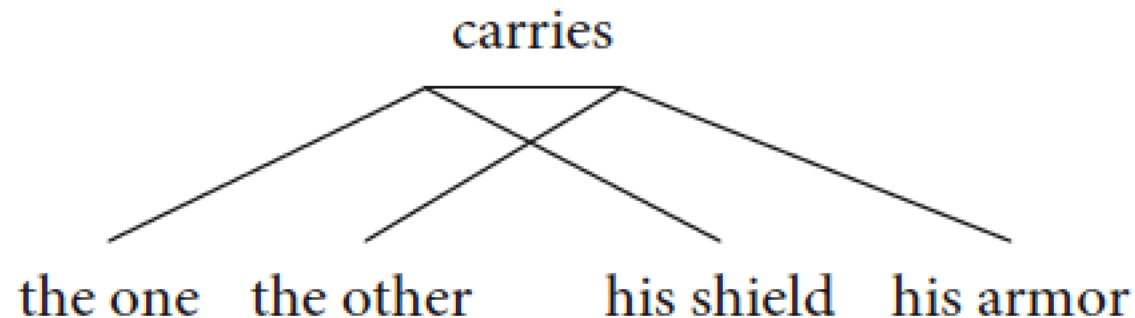
Alfred and Bernard laughed



Alfred laughs and sings

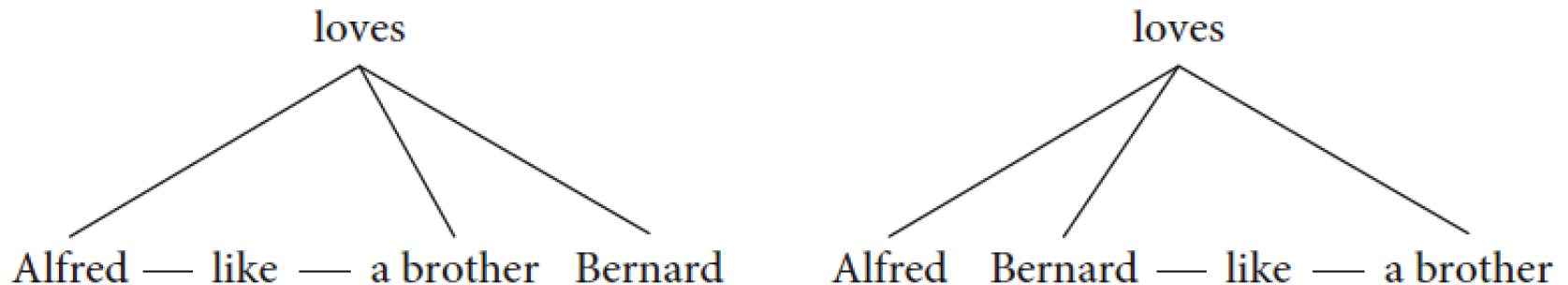
7. Junction

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



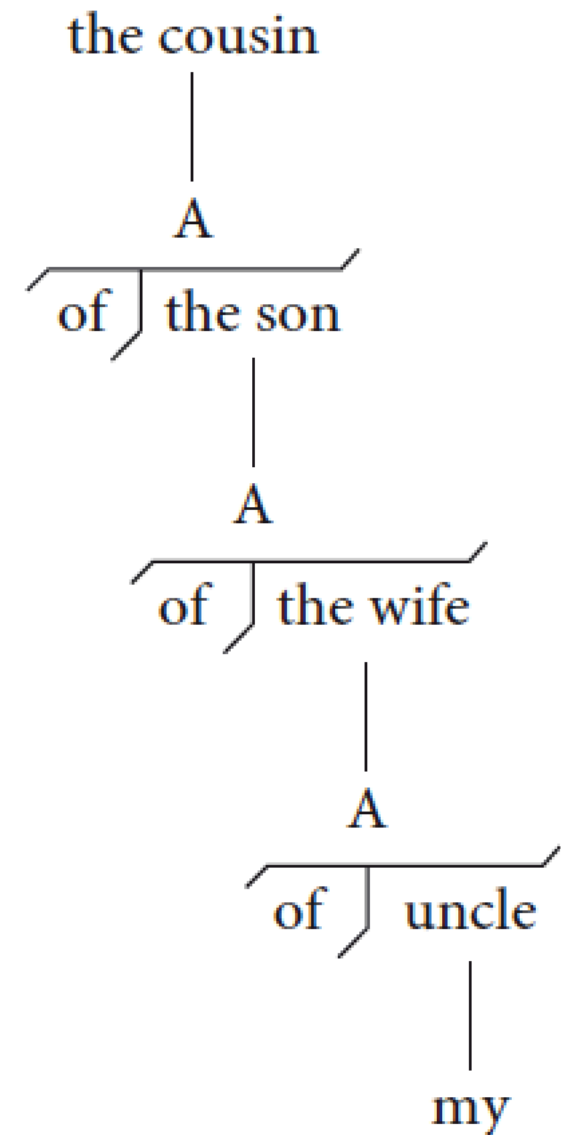
the one carries his shield and the other his armor (Stemma 273, Chapter 146)

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



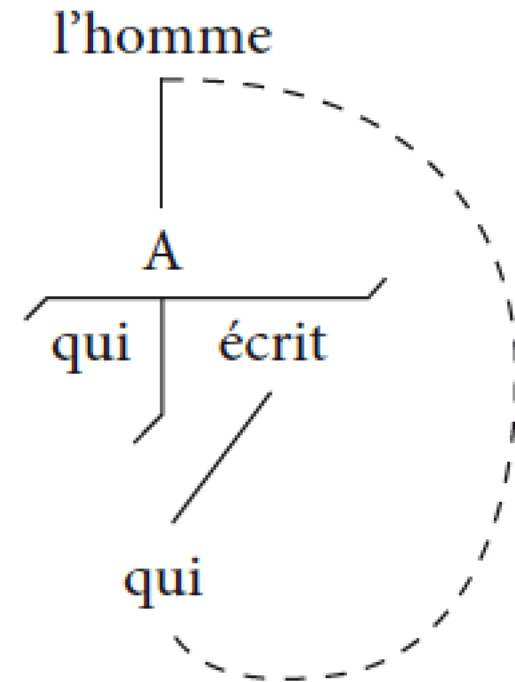
8. Transfer

- 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 translative and a pronoun



Stemma 345

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* anacatadidymic
 - head-final. *See* centripetal
 - head-initial. *See* centrifugal
 - relativizer. *See* transfereme
 - right node raising. *See* sentence (catadidymic)