# GYULA LAZICZIUS:
# A HUNGARIAN STRUCTURALIST*

**FERENC KIEFER**

Research Institute for Linguistics
Hungarian Academy of Sciences
Benczúr utca 33.
H–1068 Budapest
Hungary
kiefer@nytud.hu

**Abstract:** Gyula Laziczius was a well-known Hungarian structuralist and the first professor in general linguistics at Budapest University. His major contributions concern phonetics and phonology widely discussed in structuralist circles of his time. The paper reviews Laziczius' most important ideas on linguistics.

**Keywords:** structuralism, phonetics, phonology, general linguistics

**1.**   Gyula Laziczius (1896–1957) was an internationally known and appreciated representative of the structuralist movement. He was the first professor in General Linguistics and Phonetics at Budapest University (1938–1949; the chair was established in 1938, which was the first academic position of this kind anywhere). For political reasons, Laziczius had to retire in 1949, and the chair was suspended, general linguistics became a political issue. However, as a "private" scholar he continued to work until his untimely death in 1957.

His first important article, *On phonology,* appeared in 1930 (Laziczius 1930a), followed shortly by *The phonology of a Hungarian consonant change* (Laziczius 1930b). These papers showed the direct influence, in the first place, of de Saussure and of Prague School functionalism, especially Trubetzkoy and Jakobson. Incidentally, Laziczius made a distinc-

---

* The present article owes much to Sebeok (1947) and especially to Sebeok (1966a).

tion between the Prague School, of which he considered Vilém Mathesius to be the main representative, and the Trubetzkoy School, which to him meant structuralist phonology in the Russian tradition.[1] He was also impressed by Sapir's *Sound Patterns in Language,* which he considered to be the first work based on phonological considerations. In 1932 he published his *Introduction to Phonology* (in Hungarian), which was the first systematic description of structuralist phonology. For Laziczius phonology constituted a separate branch of descriptive linguistics related to, but at the same time independent of, phonetics. The book is divided into three parts: (1) general phonology (principles and methodology, a sketch of the history of phonological theory), (2) Hungarian phonology (the description of the inventory of the Hungarian phonemes, the phonology of Hungarian dialects), (3) historical phonology (an outline of the principles of historical phonological analysis). In contrast to the historical analysis of sound changes in the Neogrammarian tradition, he claims that "Sound changes in language always and without exception occur as mutations".

Laziczius accused traditional dialectology of not taking the functional aspects of language into account. The notion of phoneme was not used in traditional descriptions, consequently it was not clear whether the difference between two dialects was systematic, i.e., phonological, or just accidental. He accused dialectologists of getting lost in details, for "missing the wood for the trees". On the basis of a phonological-functional analysis he proposed a new classification of Hungarian dialects, which—in spite of the fact that it was not quite successful—laid the foundations for a phonologically based analysis of Hungarian dialects (Laziczius 1932, 62–74).

Laziczius sent a copy of his book to Mathesius and to some other members of the Prague Circle. One of the members of the Circle, Ľudovit Novák, later professor at Prešov University, who was well versed in the Hungarian language, summarized the main ideas propounded in the Introduction for the members of the Circle. Favorably impressed by Laziczius' book, Mathesius and his colleagues invited the author to Prague for a short visit. From that time on Laziczius entertained friendly and lively contacts with the members of the Circle. Though he became known as one of the innovators of phonological theory, his Introduction "gives less evidence of this than of his remarkable erudition, his grasp of essentials, the lucidity of his formulation, and his versatility in applying a new technique in a field excessively burdened with tradition" (Sebeok 1966, 14).

[1] Especially the Kazan' school of Baudouin de Courtenay.

**2.**   His second major work *General Linguistics — Questions of Principle and Technique* was published in 1942 (again in Hungarian). The book is divided into twelve chapters: (1) The autonomy of linguistics; (2) The subject matter of linguistics; (3) Bühler's Third Axiom — The place of linguistics; (4) Language as a sign event; (5) Language as a system; (6) Subsystems of language; (7) The unity of language; (8) The distinction between language and speech as a methodological principle; (9) Sign event as a methodological principle; (10) Expression of meaning and expression of emotion; (11) The distinction between synchrony and diachrony; and (12) Other errors of method. Laziczius incorporates the most important findings of structuralism into his book. He draws on glossematics, Prague School functionalism, American structuralism and, most importantly, on the Geneva School. The outcome, however, is not an eclectic imitation of things already known, but an interesting and original contribution to general linguistics. Though he is very critical with respect to some of de Saussure's teachings, he is convinced that it was him who laid the foundations for linguistics as an independent science.

As to the methodological errors encountered in linguistics Laziczius pays special attention to historical linguistics. The strength of historical linguistics—he says—lies in the data. If the historical linguist has data at his disposal, he moves on safe grounds but if there are no data available and he has to rely on reasoning, however cautious his conclusions are, the elements of uncertainty come to the fore. The linguist must know that his conclusions are no longer completely reliable. The system of a historical layer of the language can never be completely reconstructed: in historical terms we can never speak of a system. Laziczius demonstrates this state of affairs by a detailed critical examination of a study by Antal Horger, professor at the University of Szeged, on the history of Hungarian verbal inflection. His conclusion is this: it is completely impossible to arrive at a synchronic system of the past by means of diachronic methodology.

Laziczius takes up again the problem of the relationship between phonetics and phonology. In his early work on phonology he claimed that the two disciplines are largely independent of each other. In his *General Linguistics* he revised this position. Both phonetics and phonology are engaged in the description of sounds but phonology is also concerned with the function of sounds while phonetics is mainly interested in the acoustic and physiological properties of sounds. What is important, however, is that phonology relies on the insights gained in phonetics, consequently there is no unbridgeable gap between the two disciplines. To be sure,

this conclusion is not at all surprising but at the time when Laziczius published his work this was far from being the generally accepted view.

**3.**   Laziczius became internationally known due to his papers presented at international congresses (Laziczius 1936; 1939a) and in international journals (Laziczius 1939b; 1939c; 1945; 1948). His main ideas concerning phonology are summarized in his *General Linguistics* (1942). Laziczius departed from Trubetzkoy's phonological theory on three essential points, which are (i) the definition of the phoneme in terms of psychological notions; (ii) the nature of phonetics; and (iii) the relationship of phoneme to allophone.

With respect to the first point, he in effect joined with most American linguists in sharply rejecting Trubetzkoy's use of "undefined psychological terms", which he considered to be a remnant of earlier psychologically influenced approaches to the study of language (in a way also a heritage of Jan Baudouin de Courtenay and Lev Ščerba). He positioned himself as favoring the sociological approach of certain other Russian linguists who endorsed the view that "le phonème est le contenu social du son", which he considered to be more in accordance with structuralism and with de Saussure's teachings.

He also repudiated Trubetzkoy's conception of phonetics as a natural science. In his view the gap between the two subjects — phonetics and phonology — is not one of principle. In order to bridge this gap one has to reintroduce into phonetics the functional techniques of phonological analysis. The most insightful results in phonetics were obtained in cases in which experiments were guided by linguistic considerations.

Laziczius became most famous internationally for his view of the nature of phoneme. His point of departure was Bühler's well-known tripartite distinction between *Darstellung* (features which refer to the designation), *Kundgabe* (features which are characteristic of the source), and *Appell* (features which constitute the appeal to the destination). Laziczius' first point was that phonemes function in all three aspects and not just referentially; his second point was that, among linguistic signs, one encounters, beside phonemes and allophones, also another category, namely expressive features (which he dubbed *emphatica*), which function only in reference to speaker and hearer but not to the content; and, third, that the allophones function only in reference to the speaker but not either the hearer or the content. In Laziczius' own words: "phonemes are sign-elements which have an equal importance in the function of repre-

sentation, appeal, and expression"; "Emphatica are [. . .] sign-elements
with a double function: their role is limited to the expression and the
appeal [. . .] the variant is a sign-element with one single function: ex-
pression" (Laziczius 1942, reprinted in Sebeok 1966b, 62).[2] He stressed
that all three—phoneme, emphatica and variant—are equally conven-
tionalized. The range of possibilities to express emphatica or system-
atic (in contrast to individual or stylistic) variants is predetermined in
each individual language. They belong to *langue* in the same way as
do phonemes. Individual variants as well as stylistic variants are, of
course, *parole*-phenomena. Another argument for considering emphatica
and genuine variants as part of the language system is that they may
have been phonemes at an earlier stage of language development, or if
this was not the case, nothing prevents them from becoming phonemes
at a later stage in language development.

But what are these emphatica?

> "When we pronounce the Hungarian word *ember* 'man' with a certain af-
> fective force, the vowel of the first syllable often lengthens into /ɛː/. If we
> compare these two words /ɛmber/ and /ɛːmber/, we notice at once that
> there is a difference in quantity between the two first syllables, just as in
> the case of *tör* 'he breaks' and *tőr* 'dagger'. But from the semantic point of
> view, the function of quantity is not the same in the two examples."

In the second case we have to do with two different phonemes, in the first
case, however, the difference is not phonemic.

> "The word *ember,* if pronounced with indifference, without any emotion,
> expresses a different idea from the word *eːmber,* pronounced in an emphatic
> way. [. . .] In the word *ember,* the intellectual element is predominant; in
> the case of *eːmber,* the emotional element prevails."      (Sebeok 1966b, 59)

The sound *eː* as opposed to *e* is an emphaticum.

Laziczius was certainly wrong in putting phonemes, emphatica and
variants on a par, but in stressing the importance of emphatica and in
engaging in a debate over their role with Trubetzkoy, he contributed to
the birth of an important branch of stylistics: to that of phonostylistics.
As pointed out by Thomas Sebeok, Laziczius was the first one (followed
among others by the Swedish linguist Bertil Malmberg) to point out
that the claimed proportional relationship, *phonology* to *langue* equals

---

[2] Whenever possible I am going to refer to the collection of Laziczius' papers and
to the German translation of Laziczius' *Phonetics,* from which certain parts are
reproduced in Sebeok (1966b).

*phonetics* to *parole,* is incorrect, since the allophones are also socially determined (Sebeok 1966a, 16–7). Both *langue* and *parole* can be studied from the point of view of phonology as well as from that of phonetics.

**4.**    Laziczius' view of syntax is based on Bühler's idea of "Zweiklassensystem".   Language fulfils its representational function in two ways. On the one hand, language splits up the states of affairs into objects, processes, etc., into things to be represented in language and assigns to each of them linguistic signs. On the other hand, language also provides means to relate these signs to each other. These means make up the syntax of the language. He cites an example from the French linguist Joseph Vendryes, which shows the two sides of representation most clearly.[3] In Chinook,[4] sentences are split into two parts, the first part contains relational elements, the second the names (signs) for objects and activities, processes. That is, a Chinook sentence has the following form:

(1)   lui elle cela  avec // tuer homme femme  couteau
      he she that with    kill  man     woman knife

which  reads  as

(2)   L'homme a tué la femme avec un couteau.
      'The man killed the woman with a knife.'

The linguist is only interested in the means which the language provides to build sentences but not in the products themselves. For example, it would be meaningless to examine all sentences in Latin which are examples of the *accusativus cum infinitivo,* this would even be impossible. It is, however, an important task to describe the properties of this construction. As a consequence, syntax does not deal with sentences but with constructions, i.e., with the means which the speaker puts to use while constructing sentences.

   Each sentence contains both individual and social traits, since each sentence is a "Sprachwerk höherer Ordnung", a particular speech product of higher order. If the sentence were only social, it would be part of *la linguistique de langue,* and if it were purely individual, it would belong to *la linguistique de parole,* but since it is a mixed category and

---

[3] Cf. Vendryes (1921, 102–3).

[4] Chinook is an American Indian language belonging to the Penutian family spoken in Oregon and Washington.

no *linguistique de langage* exists, it must be excluded from the study of language (Sebeok 1966b, 111–4). No doubt, this is a strange conclusion from today's perspective but it squares pretty well with the structuralist views which Laziczius adhered to.

As for semantics, Laziczius accepts Ludwig Weisgerber's definition of meaning: meaning is the relationship between *signifiant* and *signifié*.[5] The problem with Weisgerber is, however, that he restricted his definition to words. Language does not consist of words only, but also of syntactic means. Consequently, we have to extend the definition of meaning to these means as well. Syntax, too, has a formal side and a semantic side and the investigation of the relationship between these two sides is as important as it is in the case of words. Since meaning cannot be separated from form, semantics cannot be a separate and independent study of language, it must be associated either with lexicology ("lexical semantics") or with syntax ("syntactic semantics", Laziczius 1942, 56–9). In this respect Laziczius has gone far beyond the contemporary views on semantics.

Linguistic signs appear in contexts, and the meaning of words may change according to context. Furthermore, linguistic signs are not independent of the speech situation in which they occur. Thus, a word may be used as a complete utterance in certain speech situations. In fact, in different speech situations the same content may have to be expressed in different ways. The linguistic sign used in a particular situation depends not only on the speaker's intention, but also on what the speaker knows about the listener (*op.cit.*, 45). Laziczius points out that the more unambiguous the situation is, the shorter the linguistic expression can be, and more ambiguous situations require more complete utterances. Here we have *in nuce* what we would call pragmatics today.

Elaborating on his earlier views, Laziczius has important things to say about historical linguistics as well. First of all he considered—quite justified—the Neogrammarian way of doing historical linguistics, still practised in his time, not only outdated but also erroneous. He repeats once again that one can never come to grips with earlier stages of a language system since we will never have all the necessary data at our disposal. Any diachronic investigation works with isolated data which will never form a systematic whole. In lexicology we might be able to discover a great deal about words of earlier ages, but we will never be

---

[5] Cf. Weisgerber (1927).

able to determine the lexical system of the language of earlier times. The same holds true for syntax as well. The historical linguist may be able to reconstruct old forms but the net of relations which held these forms together and made it into a system will slip out of his hands. This does not mean, of course, that it is impossible to describe certain parts of grammar in a systematic way. Historical linguists, however, must always pay due attention to the grammatical system and not just collect and examine isolated facts. Laziczius then goes on to show how a structuralist would tackle the various stages of the development of the inflectional system of the Hungarian verb. He ends up with an explanation which no traditional historical linguist would have thought of (Laziczius 1942, 97–113).

Laziczius was constantly expanding his *General Linguistics:* the revised and expanded handwritten version comprises almost 500 pages (which belongs to the mass of still altogether unpublished manuscripts which the author had bequeathed to one of his friends, János Harmatta, a distinguished philologist, and which is now preserved in the Archives of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences). He considered his *General Linguistics* only as a prolegomenon to his grand design: he wished to prepare the ground for a four-volume work, to be devoted, respectively, to phonetics, phonology, lexicology (morphology) and syntax. Unfortunately, however, he was able to complete only the first of these: *Phonetics* (in Hungarian), which was published in 1944.[6]

**5.**    In his *Phonetics* he starts out with a short history of phonetics followed by a discussion of the problem of phonetic transcriptions. He accused the specialists of Finno-Ugric languages of concentrating on unimportant and unnecessary details in their transcriptions. He described this practice as "the unrestricted hunting for fine phonetic distinctions" (Sebeok 1966b, 160–7). For example, some specialists distinguished eight different quantities and six *o* sounds (a practice which Laziczius dubbed "furor phoneticus"). It is not surprising—he says—that these linguists

---

[6] A second edition with a Postscript by Iván Fónagy appeared in 1963 and a German edition, translated by Wolfgang Steinitz, was published in 1961 in Berlin. Steinitz writes in the Preface that "Gyula Laziczius has written his major works in Hungarian, that is why they have had hardly any international impact". He points out that Laziczius was undoubtedly one of the pioneers of structural linguistics in the 1930s. His *Phonetics* was used as a handbook at several European universities until the end of the 1970s.

were unable to establish the phonemic system of any particular Finno-Ugric language.

The second chapter is devoted to the physiological properties of sounds, the third chapter to their acoustic properties, which is followed by a discussion of duration, stress and pitch. Laziczius has particularly much to say about the problems surrounding the notion of syllable. He shows through the history of the syllable what kind of problems the notion raises and how research has brought us closer to the understanding of the essence of the notion of syllable in spite of the fact that research has led to a dead end in quite a few cases. However, as he points out, one can learn a lot from each failure and that development in science is often based on the dialectics of success and failure. That is why history is indispensable for the understanding of scientific problems.

**6.** Sebeok characterized Laziczius' thoughts with the following words: "In Laziczius, we see the confluence of the best in Russian and American, Swiss, Czech, and Danish linguistic thought, which he enriched from his own nation's resources. . . Laziczius wrote his major works in Hungarian, but he was a scientist in the main stream of modern linguistics, a river which, like language itself, overflows the boundaries of nations, and will not stay confined to continents" (Sebeok 1966a, 20–1).

## References

Laziczius, Gyula 1930a. A phonológiáról [On phonology]. In: Magyar Nyelv 26 : 18–30.

Laziczius, Gyula 1930b. Egy magyar mássalhangzóváltozás phonológiája [The phonology of a Hungarian consonant change]. In: Magyar Nyelv 26 : 266–78.

Laziczius, Gyula 1932. Bevezetés a fonológiába [Introduction to phonology]. Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, Budapest.

Laziczius, Gyula 1936. A new category in phonology. In: Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Phonetic Sciences. 57–60. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Laziczius, Gyula 1939a. Das sog. Dritte Axiom der Sprachwissenschaft. In: Acta Linguistica Hafniensa 1 : 162–67.

Laziczius, Gyula 1939b. Zur Lautquantität. In: Archiv für Vergleichende Phonetik 3 : 245–49.

Laziczius, Gyula 1939c. Die Scheidung *langue–parole* in der Lautforschung. In: Proceedings of the Third International Congress of Phonetic Sciences. 13–23. Laboratory of Phonetics of the University, Ghent.

Laziczius, Gyula 1942. Általános nyelvészet. Alapelvek és módszertani kérdések [General linguistics. Principles and methodological questions]. Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, Budapest.

Laziczius, Gyula 1944. Fonetika [Phonetics]. Királyi Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda, Budapest. [1963: 2nd edition containing a postscript by Iván Fónagy; 1961: German edition, translated from Hungarian by Wolfgang Steinitz, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin].

Laziczius, Gyula 1945. La définition du mot. In: Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure 5 : 32–7.

Laziczius, Gyula 1948. Phonétique et phonologie. In: Lingua 1 : 293–302.

Laziczius, Gyula 1957. Die Kernfrage der Syntax. In: Zeitschrift für Phonetik und allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft 10 : 224–30.

Sebeok, Thomas A. 1947. Review of *Fonetika*. Language 23 : 75–6.

Sebeok, Thomas A. 1966a. Introduction. In: Sebeok (1966b, 11–21).

Sebeok, Thomas A. (ed.) 1966b. Selected Writings of Gyula Laziczius. Mouton, The Hague.

Vendryes, Joseph 1921. Le langage. Introduction linguistique à l'histoire. Albin Michel, Paris. (Reprint edition: 1968.)

Weisgerber, Ludwig 1927. Die Bedeutungslehre — ein Irrweg der Sprachwissenschaft? In: Germanistische-Romanistische Monatsschrift 15 : 161–83.