

# Linguistics between artificiality and art : walking the tightrope of LSP research

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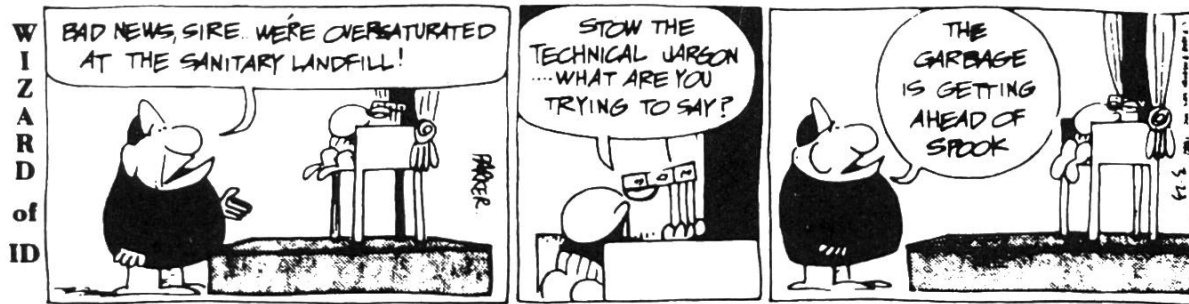
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## Linguistics between artificiality and art: walking the tightrope of LSP research

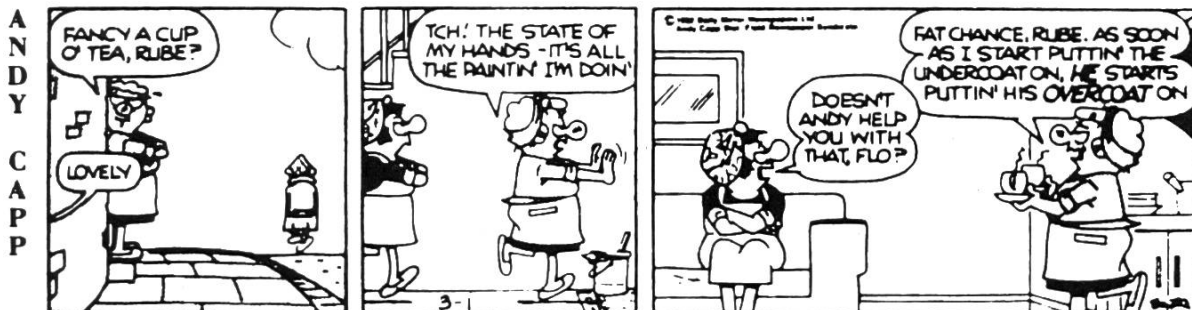
The world may have fallen upon hard times in many respects, yet there are such happy oases of prosperity in the desert of dearth as linguistics. As a field of lively, if sometimes vague, concern, linguistics – at least in the form of applied linguistics – now is in the public eye, displayed even in such august places as e.g. the International Herald Tribune, with a regularity that would be hard to explain were it not for the fact that William Safire's copy obviously is considered worth its fee by the editors. What is even more, LSP is there, too, for all to see, and in the comics section, of all places. *That* I take as real unassailable evidence that LSP has got a foothold on the public imagination. As proof I would like to show you the following series of three strips collected at random in recent months, which incidently seem to me to state the main problems of LSP (Illustration 1). Those jokes at the expense of Andy Capp and Sergeant Snorkel and the little king of Spook are a good illustration of both, the *fort* and the *faible*, in LSP research as well, which is the topic which I will discuss in the next forty minutes.

Actually, the scene of LSP research is anything but clear, and for a while I had toyed with the idea of giving my talk the title *wholesome schizophrenia or, how to make the best of a woolly concept*. There are simply too many dimensions to the conveniently innocent term *LSP* for it to have generated a unified set of rules and perspectives to be followed by researchers. Everytime the postman drops one of those heavy manila envelopes through the slot in your door, you can be sure that some solicitous, albeit professionally egocentric, colleague sending you his latest article, is adding to your plight. Not only does the field abound with a multitude of purposes, from the highly abstract interest in linguistic theory as applicable to LSP to the thoroughly pragmatic research of teaching LSP in the context of narrowly circumscribed technical fields and/or pedagogic situations; there are also afield a good many assumptions in LSP research that may be said to operate like powerful myths within the community of linguists. I think it will be useful to examine some of those myths a bit more closely.

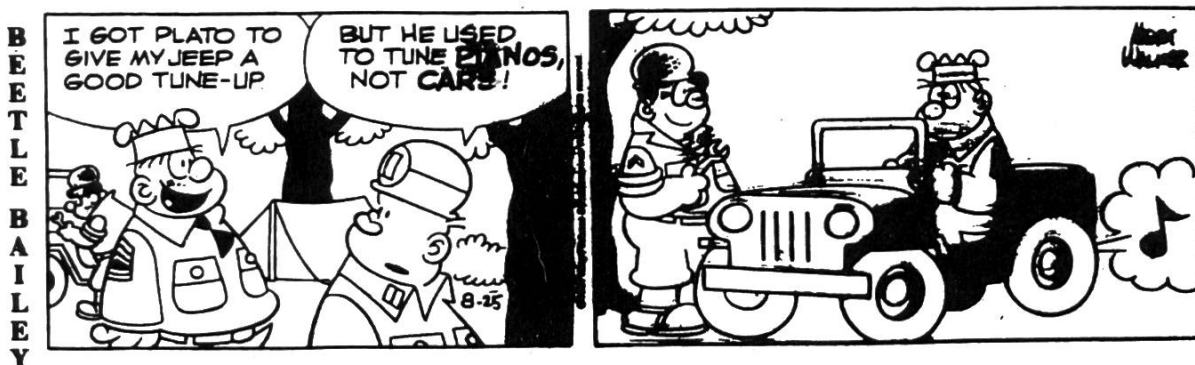
The first one, perhaps most common among linguists as well as the lay public, is that LSP differs as though generically from what is usually called the «common» or «standard» language. If it is to be accepted as a valid base for research, such a distinction has to cope with the dual problem of accounting for the concept of *standard language* and the hy-



The general perception of LSP:  
 in the opinion of the non-specialist and the non-linguist, it is «jargon» (an unintelligible, rejected kind of language)



The typical identification of LSP:  
 contrasting it with standard use of the language (here achieved by syntactic criteria:  
*the undercoat vs. his overcoat*  
 depending on metaphoric charge of lexical item *coat* in collocation)



The characteristic problem of LSP application:  
 intra-LSP polysemy due to conflicting claims of nomenclatures on a finite total lexicon of the language

ILLUSTRATION 1

pothesis of a deviation of LSP from such a standard language. Characteristically, the second assumption has ordinarily been made without so much as the mere acknowledgment of the first one, on which it squarely rests; we have a good many contrastive analyses that conclude either that LSP represents an expanded version of the standard register, or – less frequently – that LSP should be viewed as the result of a reduction process, expansion and reduction both presumably occurring in the lexico-semantic or the morpho-syntactic domain. The very nature of those conclusions should be sufficient to invalidate the hypothesis of a fundamental difference between LSP and standard language, for expansion, like reduction, suggests on the contrary a fundamental sameness, the dissimilarity between the two being rather one of degree. As a matter of fact the entire question hinges on the prior definition of the term *standard language*, and that again has for obvious reasons attracted very few volunteers outside the specific branch of sociolinguistics. My own preference, in this whole predicament, is to shun the assumption that the standard language and LSP are discrete entities because it is not tenable and tends to result in fruitless hypotheses.

Another myth, almost universally held and hardly ever questioned, equates LSP with areas of technological application. As a hypothesis it has the disadvantage of introducing into linguistics the same principle of specialization that has revealed itself with increasing urgency as an obstacle to basic new insights in the field of the natural sciences. It means in effect that we have to postulate exactly as many LSP variants as there are areas of technical application, including the sciences. But once we have included the latter, there is no good reason not to treat the arts in the same way: speaking about music or painting or literature can be as «technical» as discussions on the properties of interstellar space. Now linguists following the «technical» argument will contend that by the analysis of representative language samples «paradigms» of certain technical language variants can be elicited and that – once such variants have been adequately described – those paradigms will eventually permit us to work out models of LSP production. Like the assumption of a basic LSP-standard language difference, this position is held chiefly by partisans of the sociolinguistic approach that is quick to transfer into language research categories of thought which even in a sociological context are by no means unassailable. The entire spectrum of language description based on social discrimination, from dialect and sociolect to technolect and whatever terminology it may produce, is highly unsatisfactory for several reasons, not the least among them being that it is quite arbitrary. ULIJN believes that there are some 300 technical areas to be dis-

tinguished and hence, 300 varieties of LSP. Leaving aside for a moment the fact that other counts will probably arrive at totally different figures, there remains the discouraging fact of an enormous number of quasi-distinct LSP variants which linguistic research presumably should deal with. And this realization may very well be the reason why «technical application» usually seems to be linked to the idea of *occupational* situations, but not to the innumerable other types of human interactions using language in an exclusive way: just imagine a few soccer fans discussing the latest match, or try to listen in on a gang of teenagers conversing with each other, or remember how you used to communicate in the very restricted code of a quasi-private language with your young children. No doubt those speech situations result in language that is as surely *not* standard language as it is widely incomprehensible to the uninitiated outsider. But if the finite number of several hundred occupational variants of LSP merely makes the linguist shudder, the infinite number of socially defined applications of a special register are reason enough to make him put his foot down, restrict the concept «technical» to the occupational sphere, and let his poor logic be hanged!

In any case the multitude of discrete LSP paradigms envisaged in sociolinguistic research – whether or not they are tied to distinct nomenclatures – is about as useful to the linguist as a list of proper names would be to a lexicographer. Actually, of course, the multitude is one of *concepts* but not *words*; for the body of language – phonologically, morphologically, or grammatically – is very much the same for a large area in which the various LSP variants overlay each other: remember the play on the term *to tune*, possible because of two LSP variants competing for the lexical unit, in one of our comic strips. Nevertheless the idea of several hundred language models can hardly please the systematic scholar although, on the pragmatic level of lexicography, it may sound like an attractive job-creating program.

That the equation of LSP variants with fixed areas of technical application is highly impractical in many respects can be shown by reference to an example taken from my own immediate area of concern, maritime English. Here we have a complex of occupational situations that are widely at variance with each other depending on the venue and the purpose, some occurring at sea and others on shore, some having to do with navigation and others with the handling of cargo, the only connecting element being the identity of the deck officer who is required to communicate about all these matters with his counterparts and persons from related services using English as an international *lingua franca*. Does this make maritime English one variant of LSP, or should we distinguish be-

tween the languages of engineering, navigation, meteorology, law, commerce, administration, medicine, and possibly a few others, simply because those subject areas contribute in some measure to the composite idiom?

It is in fact doubtful whether any language act can justifiably be identified as consistently applied LSP. And this brings us to the third prevailing assumption about LSP, which expects it to be a matter of *standard* technical usage. At the basis of this hypothesis there is the view, mentioned before, that nomenclatures form the core of LSP and that consequently terminologies, based on frequency lists and established within specific academic and technical disciplines, form individual LSP variants. The only real problem adherents to this view admit to is that of properly delimiting different terminologies, which presumably can be overcome by expertise in the technical fields. A corollary to that view is the belief, again widely held among lay persons as well as experts, that LSP is «more difficult» than the language used by non-specialists, and that it therefore requires a certain amount of teaching, preferably in conjunction with specific technical subjects.

As far as this view of LSP serves as a guiding philosophy for specialized language handling and training, it has its merits. There can be no doubt that standardization is one of the cornerstones of terminologies, and that it can and should be taught and applied as far as possible in language processing. As a research hypothesis, however, standardization in LSP is largely irrelevant since such an hypothesis fails to distinguish between language as a system and specific language acts, or *langue* as a set of rules and *parole* as their implementation in actual instances of language use. Standardization can be expected at the level of language as system; but it is alien to, and hence unattainable within, concrete language acts where the determining factors simply cannot be reduced sufficiently in order to enforce an identity of *langue* and *parole* even in the average case of LSP. It is only when we cross the threshold into artificial languages – beginning with the code for air traffic control and ending with computer languages and the «languages» of mathematics or chemistry – that LSP can be said to have attained a standardized form, yet these are not normally considered in LSP research.

The matter becomes still more dubious if we leave the assumption that LSP is perforce associated with *technical* pursuits in the narrow sense, i.e. with subjects that are informed by the attributes of closed systems. Yet imagine language acts in health care, or politics, or literary history where nomenclatures and terminologies are utterly arbitrary and transitory if they can at all be considered to exist, and tend to be mixed with

the unmarked general idiom of the speakers. There is always a certain carry-over of linguistic habits between different referential spheres, anyway; it would not be very realistic to believe that pipefitters and housepainters and preschool teachers, while on their jobs, produce nothing but pure pipefittese, housepaintese, and pre-schoolese, to become nondescript speakers of a general language with their personal idiosyncracies at the sound of the afternoon bell! Or to put it into more formal language: such well-known features as idiolects, code-switching and interference affect LSP just like any other language variant, constantly vitiating the principle of standardization at the pragmatic level.

Let us now pass on to a final myth about LSP which has it that the latter has, as if in vengeance for our terrible misdeeds, descended upon us only in the present century, and that it is therefore a decidedly modern phenomenon. The facts are otherwise. As a companion to specialized human activity, LSP has undeniably grown enormously over the past 100 years. This does not mean, however, that such specialization, and hence LSP, had been unknown until the 19th century. Browsing around in my own rather limited institutional library not long ago in connection with an article on lexicography I was preparing, I stumbled upon the following: (cf. Illustration 2)

In this context it is perhaps worth remembering that lexicography generally grew out of the obvious need to explain rare expressions encountered in texts about matters unfamiliar to the typical speaker of a national language – a pure case of LSP, even though a sophisticated one, usually involving lexical material of foreign origin, while such distinct occupational fields as hunting or seafaring and fishing for a long time remained sufficiently within the common sphere of experience so that their terminologies did not give rise to the need for explanation.

Under the influence of the *idée fixe* that LSP is a contemporary problem, and forgetting or ignoring the constant flow of material from the common language stock into specialized domains and *vice versa*, most of the present linguistic research dealing with LSP adopts a synchronous perspective, as though language features did not have their own history. Hence the quest, reinforced by the bias of standardization, for LSP universals within as well as among national languages, and the belief in quantifying methods, all of which presupposes a static language model. This presupposition unfortunately closes the door upon many fascinating questions revolving around the proper *locus* of LSP within the total language context. We might, for example, examine the thesis that a common national language is the necessary result, or stage, of social development, brought about by political ideology or commercial practice,

*P. 3746 Mees*

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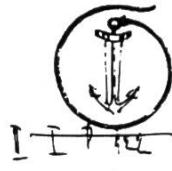
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ILLUSTRATION 2



that recreates to some degree the egalitarian conditions of as-yet little differentiated original societies. The recent rapid increase in the occurrence of LSP thus may possess, beside an obvious technological motivation, a social dimension consisting in the urge to escape from the standard idiom perceived as an extension of an oppressive authority, of popes and princes at first, and now of egalitarian mass culture. To such an extent we could indeed consider LSP in our age a response to a psychic need for social stratification, which in turn would permit us to extend the label of LSP to include sociolect and dialect use. If we do this, we should, however, distinguish such LSP application from earlier linguistic situations when, as e.g. during the Middle Ages, there were no standard languages to dissociate oneself from; differences such as courtly speech vs. common vernacular rather reflect separate worlds of a hierarchic order between which there was no significant communication at all.

But I am afraid I am digressing too far. Let me conclude this scrutiny of some major myths in LSP research and their effect upon that research by a few assurances. For one, myths are not of the same category as truth or falsehood; they are operating principles. Hence action based on myths is not *a priori* fruitless. In certain areas of scientific research, myths have as a matter of fact proved a motivation of much excellent thought, and not every finding about LSP is automatically invalidated for being based on one or several of those four cardinal assumptions. What these latter can be accused of is, rather, that they have prevented the growth of a unified perspective on our subject and thus have been able to offer only very fragmentary reflections instead of a coherent entity. But this circumstance does not detract from the value of much excellent work done at the level of specific inquiry into linguistic facts of pragmatic interest, such as will concern us here during the next few days.

No, what I wished to imply is that linguistic research might have got off to a better start on LSP if it had from the outset recognized some problems that, though perhaps not restricted to LSP, have nevertheless proved annoying. To begin with, there is what I will call the *uniqueness* of a text. Uniqueness is a notion well accepted in the analysis of literary texts *qua* works of art; roughly stated it implies that no two texts are alike and that hence, each one is a law unto itself. Yet if applied to LSP texts, the same notion seems to be curiously out of place to most linguists. Such a reaction can probably be traced to the myth of standardization in LSP which pretends that the technical argument can be neatly separated from the communicative situation. We saw earlier that this is an illusion: the marriage of the two is precisely the gist of uniqueness, the particular constellation of motivating forces that shape each communicative act so as

to make it an historical event as it were, complex and ultimately inimitable. This goes for any text to a smaller or larger degree, whether in art or in technology; and any difference between the two types is one of degree of autonomy. It follows, then, that we should consider our corpus material with extreme care and with constant awareness that we are dealing with autonomous, unique language acts with a very limited typological potential; when we do perform on them our unavoidable linguistic abstractions, we should at least abstract from the integral whole, and not from arbitrarily selected and statistically accumulated features.

Related to the question of uniqueness is that of *authenticity*. Again I wonder to what degree linguistic research in LSP takes proper account of the difficulties which this concept implies. It is of course on the mind of every researcher who works empirically, but it is not so much the authenticity of the entire referential act that should disturb the linguist, not the question what certain statements «mean» and whether indeed the same statements recur in other texts conveying the same meaning. I am concerned rather about the representational aspect involved when items of technical communication are committed to paper. All too often, I believe, we are faced with something we might, in analogy to the fine arts, term «mixed media»: texts about technical subjects, but not necessarily using the LSP medium, even with the inconsistencies to which I drew attention earlier. Examples of such texts are e.g. articles published in many periodicals that are distributed commercially and thus are aimed at both specialists and the lay public. In this case we can almost invariably observe a certain amount of journalistic interference with the straight linguistic implementation of the argument; a corresponding pedagogic interference occurs in textbooks and other teaching materials, prompting the authors to adopt – consciously or unconsciously – an «interlanguage» of sorts that is neither unadulterated LSP nor entirely limited to the standard language. Because of the sheer mass of such mediating text material it would be unrealistic to exclude it out of hand from the corpus of LSP evidence to be used in research, but does it not falsify the picture? An insoluble problem? Perhaps, at least in the context of conventional methods of LSP research.

I will conclude this list of occupational hazards by singling out one more stumbling block to unambiguous research results. That is the occurrence of what I would call *user defects*. Ever since CHOMSKY began to publish his work in linguistics, the international research community has been blessed with certain concepts and terms that have – if I may venture a personal speculation – prevented as much original thought as they have contributed to a remarkable and not altogether healthy uniformity

of perspective. One of those terms that has gained wide currency is *well-formed*; its coinage by CHOMSKY was his way of dealing with the thorny problem of norm violation which in descriptive linguistics is indeed hard to accommodate.

It is rather surprising that the term and its underlying notion never appears to have entered into LSP analysis. Whatever designation we otherwise might employ to describe norm violations in language use – mistakes, errors, deviations, non-well-formed speech – they constitute what I propose to call user defects, which we must expect to occur on the lexical as well as the syntactic level of all kinds of utterance. Yet linguistic research never seems to question compliance of LSP texts with the norms that come to bear on the language material in any single language act. In other words, the thought never seems to be admitted, that an LSP sample might be «contaminated» by individual shortcomings in the producer's performance such as omissions, mix-ups, slips of the tongue or the pen, inattention to or ignorance of the conventions of the language. My own guess is that many supposed LSP features can be proved to represent typical violations of the norms of the standard language, which is all the more likely because the average user of LSP is linguistically unsophisticated, and singularly unsollicitous about his language beyond the limits of terminology. Why, then, is there no distinction made between *well-formed* locutions and others in LSP research? I suspect the answer to be that we are overawed by the presumed technicality of LSP, taking its speakers to be infallible and ourselves to be incapable of making valid judgments, instead of bringing our insights into the language process in general to bear on all evidence.

Having at great length voiced my dissatisfaction with the state of the art in front of the problems we must live with, I may be expected to offer a few positive proposals of my own. I will not pretend to present you with such a flawless model. Instead I will now comment on the thesis given in the abstract of my talk, which claims for language – any language, LSP included – the atomistic principle of operation. The conclusions drawn from that premise may, as I believe, furnish some understanding helpful in sketching at least the outlines of an improved research strategy.

As a behavioral act, human language is an organic process. Our minds have in recent years been sharpened for the implications of the organic view: where we formerly perceived the autonomous entities of kinds and species, we now are ready to discern a vast ecology of being. It may be an exaggeration to say that our view of language is a mirror image of the new *Weltanschauung*, but affected it is beyond doubt: extending the scope of its examination from word to sentence, and from there to the

still larger unit of the paragraph and, very recently, to entire «texts» – leaving aside here the question of what constitutes a «text» –, linguistic scholarship over the last two centuries has at least reflected that growth of awareness – up to a certain point.

That point scholarship has placed in front of a – supposedly – foreign discipline, a – supposedly – heterogenous structure, a – supposedly – irrelevant context or perspective. It represents the futile but nevertheless determined effort to define an LSP – or, even worse, an indeterminate number of LSPs – distinct from all other registers of usage: a nice, well-organized and easy-to-handle set of language items coming as though packed in a box. At the back of this expectation, something like what a Dutch writer calls *drempelvrees* must be lying, the fear to step across a threshold onto different territory, *l'angoisse de franchir le seuil*. Yet we *must* cross that imaginary threshold if we really want to recognize LSP in its real context.

For language being *ἄτομος*, an indivisible whole, LSP cannot be filtered out of it by analysis. Nor is the latter a separate body: it is in fact not so much function as rather, form. Like waves on the sea surface, LSP marks an indefinite number of technical manifestations of language, each communicative act or text corresponding to a single wave building up in time and ebbing away, merging with what were formerly other waves, in keeping with the many forces that shape its transient reality. This image saves the need to speak at length about the historicity of LSP and of arguing yet another time against the dichotomy of LSP and standard language; all the oceans being one vast communicating system, there is a constant flow aiming at leveling out the different norms of particular waves yet imprinting on the surface ever new textures and designs.

Altering our perspective to view each wave as *part* of the ocean, and now recognizing it as a *reduced image* of the entire sea, we perceive by analogy the *structural* situation of LSP: one encapsulated in the other in the manner of a set of Russian dolls, LSP acts, or «texts», are simply microforms of the larger, general phenomenon *language*, following its rules, constituted of its elements – though in small, select numbers – and displaying all its characteristics, albeit on a reduced scale.

How is linguistic research to deal with such a state of affairs? Let us from the outset agree to leave the vast area of pedagogical application of LSP research out of this discussion. There is little congruity of purpose between the latter and the interests of the linguist, although both may believe to be concerned with the application of linguistics. In a sense, the very term *applied linguistics* is confusing. I would prefer to use it for in-

stances where other disciplines than linguistics are involved, and consider our present topic of LSP research in a purer, more theoretical sense.

Accepting the premise of the indivisibility of language, research based on fragmentary evidence is no more fruitful in LSP than in any other language variety. Hence the search for detail does not fill our needs; it is rather like the counting of lions or lances, or like the identification of human or natural features on the paintings of certain epochs by art historians, or by making statistical surveys of the frequency of specific colors or shapes in pictures. Just as lion counts do little to explain the artistic merits of paintings, conclusions that are drawn about LSP from the isolated consideration of lexical or morphological or whatever other single features of however wide a corpus cannot account for the LSP status of individual texts. A more meaningful method in LSP research would be to trace the interplay of the various forces and elements within a given text, and to relate it as an entity to social and psychic motivations while inquiring into its behavioral features that are taking shape through the language material used.

What I am here suggesting is, of course, the eventual replacement of the concept of LSP by a more general one that considers language purely as function, and texts as recorded evidence of such function. This may sound like a subversive suggestion, particularly at an occasion like the present one which is expressly meant to render *hommage au dit mouton*. I see the matter in a different light: by eliminating the LSP theorem from linguistic research, we are not only doing ourselves a service because we shed our self-imposed blinkers, but we also restore to the concept of language a lost and abused form that is not viable in isolation. Let us reserve the LSP label as a useful interim device for use in connection with pragmatic language-handling tasks like the identification of text types for pedagogic purposes and for general hypothesizing, for terminological and lexicographic work. As a tool of linguistic research, the concept of LSP is a many-headed Hydra that needs to be slain afresh each time before another step forward can be made.

Of course we do not introduce paradisiac conditions into linguistic research merely by ridding ourselves of the LSP prejudice, but we *do* exchange the present climate of artificiality for one of art, which makes its own characteristic demands upon the researcher. And here we have company, and find examples which we can safely follow. Literary scholarship has for a long time practiced the kind of holistic research linguists have yet to discover for themselves; and literary texts have long enjoyed the respect of academics treating them as inviolable entities, a respect

which has not been accorded to LSP texts. Yet the parallels are striking enough:

- as in literature, you do not have at your disposal in technical texts stylistic or genre paradigms
- as futile as would be the search for «the elements» of a poem, a novel, a short story, or a play, the expectation of obligatory general marks is in technical texts
- as in literature, we do not study in technical texts abstract ideas but their individual implementation
- as impossible as it is to teach how to write a poem (you can only show how it has been done before) it is to provide generative rules for the construction of technical texts.

Such parallelism is a persuasive argument in favor of an esthetic approach to technical texts. An «analog model» of research based on the paradigm used in literary studies would be built around the concern for integration. Its most significant job would be the constant referral of detailed observation to an evolving *idée maîtresse* within each text, so that eventually not any tangible «elements», but certain rules, relationships, and principles of its total operation become visible in the language material as though on a screen; Henry James, in speaking of the novel, called it the «pattern in the carpet.»

I am fully aware that this model for linguistic research goes far beyond the immediate scope of this meeting which shows an eminently pragmatic orientation. Multilingualism in documentation, foreign language needs in social groups, automated terminology banks, the limits of translatability, the making of glossaries, or questions of the lexicon are subjects that may ultimately be more important to society and hence, to its institutions of higher learning and occupational training, than the philosophic inquiry into the background of language. Yet I think all of us want to find out once in a while where we stand in the larger scheme of things. It has therefore been the aim of this contribution to create some sort of grid in which each single purpose of linguistic work that is here represented can find its functional value – a grid, in other words, that implies neither hierarchy nor haphazard aggregation, but rather an organizing principle bringing to life, in their mutual interplay, the many legitimate perspectives on our common subject.

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