

Principles of Linguistic Theory in an Act of Language: The Guillaumean Perspective

Roger J. Davies

Department of English

School of Education

Ehime University

What occurs in an act of language? This question has been posed down through the ages, but because the essence of language exists in the unconscious where it cannot be observed, the answer has proved to be elusive. Language came into being, one might presume, as a way for human beings to represent their being in the universe around them. With the dawning of individual consciousness in prehistory, as people began to think of themselves as separate entities, it became necessary to represent their experiences within certain parameters. This framework was founded on the dual notions of time and space, and it is through language that human beings represent grammatically their place in time and space. The operative systems of verb and noun provide us with our most abstract categories for thinking of time and space. In this way, the grammar of a language provides the form we give to a concept, while the lexical content provides its substance. Grammar is thus not what we think, but how we think it – the very form of our thoughts.

Although we have created this edifice of language, we do not understand how it was done. The reality of language remains largely unconscious, its workings beyond the grasp of the conscious mind. To unravel this mystery, to trace the internal mechanisms of an act of language, is one of the major challenges of the science of language, linguistics.

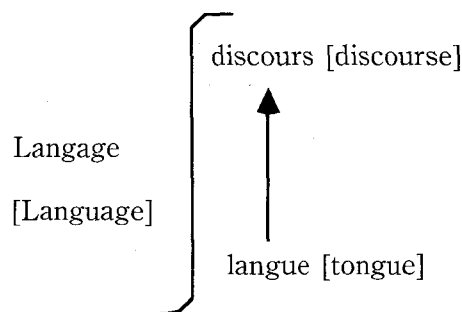
One of the twentieth century's most original and provocative linguists was Gustave Guillaume (1883–1960). At the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes de la Sorbonne* in Paris, he spent most of a lifetime exploring how the mind directs the act of language and the relationships between thought and speech, between mind and language. His studies of the hidden psychomechanisms of language processes eventually led to the creation of an important school of linguistics, known today as Psychomechanics.

Guillaume frequently used spatial representations to illustrate many of his linguistic principles. These visual images serve to clarify concepts that are often difficult to describe in words, and will be used extensively in the following outline of an act of language. Many quotations from the works of Guillaume in their original French are also highlighted, with translations or interpretations provided in English.

*“La langue est un système de systèmes.”*¹

Meillet wrote that “a language involves a system where everything fits together and has a wonderfully rigorous design.” A system is an ensemble of parts and between these parts are relationships which are both necessary and invariant. Guillaume tried to demonstrate “that as far as grammar is concerned, a language is a ‘system of systems’.”² The most general system, that of the parts of speech, provides the underlying, unconscious structural mechanism of the word, which is “the starting point for the speaker of an Indo-European language.”³

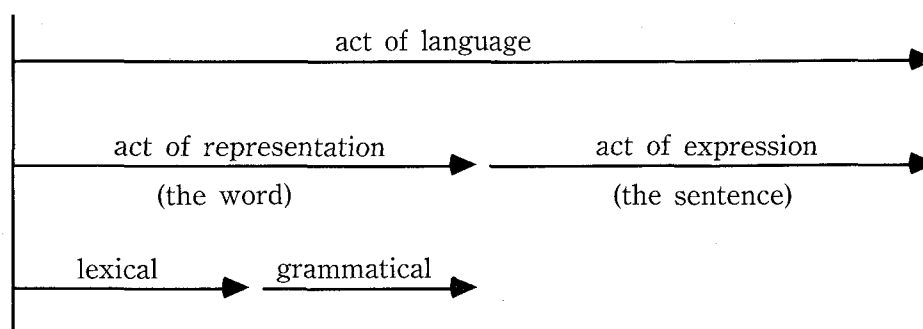
When Saussure proposed the *langue/parole* dichotomy in his *Cours de linguistique générale* in 1916, it revolutionized the world of linguistics, but also left it deeply polarized. Guillaume modified this theory and introduced the concept of operative time in the movement between *langue* and *discours* (tongue and discourse). In so doing he “linked potential language with actual language by outlining the subconscious morphogenic processes that produce a word, showing that a word ... must be assembled by the speaker at the moment of need before it can be used in a sentence.”⁴



Language is an integrated whole composed of two successive entities: tongue and discourse. Discourse is the actual physical reality of language. It is momentary and observable, actualized speech which results from the employment of tongue.⁵ Tongue is the underlying mental content of language. It is permanent, non-observable, and contains all the possibilities of any act of representation. However, everything in language is process, and it is the micro-stretch of time that is required for this mental process to unroll, known as operative time, that provides the necessary parameters for any language system.

*“On exprime à partir du représenté.”*⁶

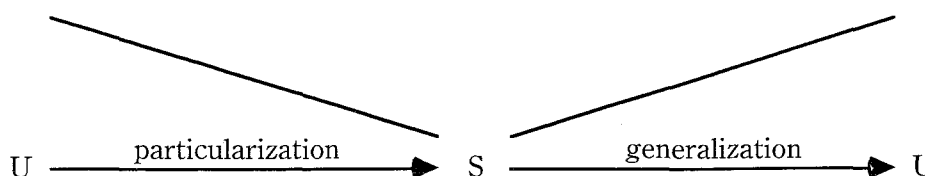
A basic principle of Guillaume's teaching is that expression starts with what has already been represented. If we have something to say (the constant goal of language), we look within, seeking among the representational possibilities permanently established there, to find the words to express what we want to say. In other words, the fundamental role of language is to give linguistic form to the experience an individual wishes to express. To achieve this, we bring experience and the desire to express it into contact with a complex system of meaning in the unconscious. Here we operate a choice among all the potential meanings that permanently reside there to express a certain notion as an act of language. But the individual can only express his experience indirectly, through representation. Thus, any act of language is composed of two successive operations: an act of representing experience and an act of expressing this representation.



*“Les opérations de pensée...sont peu nombreuses.... La plus importante de ces opérations essentielles et potentielles est celle se rapportant au double mouvement de l'esprit en direction du singulier et de l'universel....”*⁷

The structures in tongue are based on a double movement provided by the singular and the universal, the movements of particularization and generalization.

Every individual possesses a language mechanism, a permanent means of analyzing experience linguistically, learned in childhood and acquired with the mother tongue. An act of language is thus the operation by which human beings call on this mechanism to furnish the means with which they can represent and express the experience they wish to communicate. This operation is based on the two fundamental processes of the human spirit: particularization and generalization. Within the Indo-European family it takes the following form:



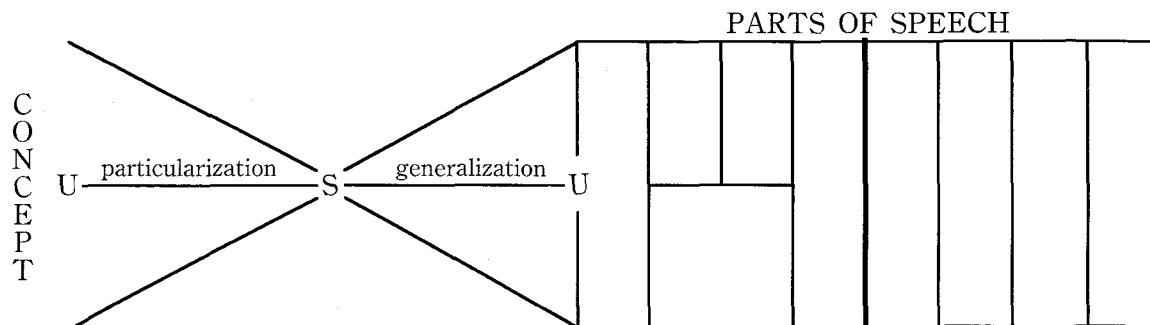
Guillaume called this mechanism a *binary tensor*. It shows “how a particularizing lexical meaning combines with a generalizing grammatical meaning to receive a part of speech and thereby constitute a word....”⁸ Thus, he came to view the grammar of a language as a “system of systems wherein the form of the general system of the word is reiterated in each of the subsidiary categories of words (the parts of speech).”⁹

“La langue est un résultat de glossogénie, les apports fortuits et successives de l’histoire à la pensée constructrice. Le discours est un résultat de praxéogénie, l’emploi du langage dans l’instant. Pour tout moment de son emploi, il est en possession d’une glossogénie (l’institution des rapports entre les apports de l’histoire).”

*“...les rapports systématiques institués entre les apports historiques fortuits...irrationnels eux-mêmes, mais rationalisés par intégration au système de la langue.”*¹⁰

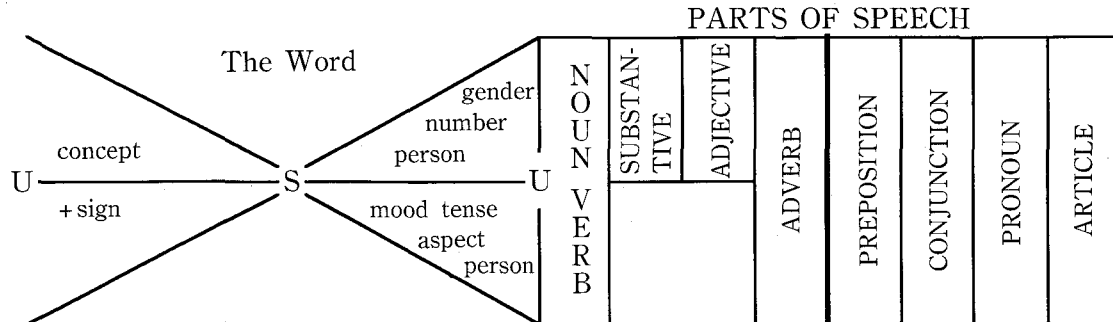
Language has a history. The structures in tongue are the result of thousands of years of gradual build-up, engineered by the collective thought of one’s linguistic community. A child does not just learn words, he or she learns a way to see through language, a language mechanism, which becomes structured in tongue.

In Indo-European languages the vehicle for this process is the word. In this way words are completely constructed unconsciously and then arranged in a certain syntagmal order during an act of expression. At the base of this process is the limitless stock of concepts or notions that every individual has acquired in learning his or her mother tongue. When we decide to say something, we isolate certain of these concepts and call on our language mechanism to give them representation and form. This mechanism is like an operational program, a set of empty neural circuits or pathways, permanently in existence, but not constantly in use. In English, the program, which is the constructional mechanism of the word, takes the following form:



As communicating beings we are constantly lining up our language mechanism on our data bank of concepts. We place certain of them in this program to construct words, which are

delivered in an act of expression as parts of speech. The mechanism is latent, but when called upon, it becomes operational, and words are constructed and assembled in an act of language.



In English the word depends on a double process of particularization and generalization to bring about its construction. During the movement of particularization, the concept which has been selected and placed in the program, is stopped at a particular point and its sign (physical component) is added, producing the word base (semanteme). Successive interceptions of the second generalizing movement give rise to the vector forms (morphemes) which are added to the word base. These include gender, number, and person for nouns; mood, tense, aspect, and person for verbs. A final interception at the end of the operation delivers the part of speech, which integrates and finalizes the word's development.

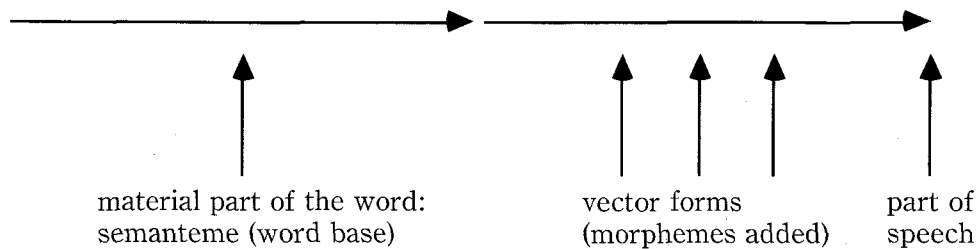
“La loi régnante, en systématique psychique, est celle de la plus grande cohérence possible, tandis qu'en systématization sémiologique la loi régnante est celle de la meilleure suffisance expressive....”¹¹

An act of language starts with some form of experience we wish to express. When we decide to say something about it, we pull out the necessary concepts, give them representation and a form for expression. However, it is important to note that in the semiological system, freedom prevails. Any sign is good enough as long as it is suitable. The only law in constructing signs is that of bare sufficiency. On the mental side of things, on the level of the underlying system of tongue, the law of greatest possible coherence prevails. Mental systems must have a fundamental unity, a systematic coherence. Thus, for example, the system of the verb has acquired on the mental side a unity or coherence which can be considered perfect. In the semiological field (i.e., that of signs), however, a multiplicity of conjugations and numerous irregularities arise in most languages.

“La technique dont fait usage la psychomécanique du langage...pourrait...être nommée linguistique de position.”¹²

“Il faut à la pensée du temps, si peu que ce soit, pour agir en elle-même et sur elle-même.”¹³

When we apply this analytical technique, a linguistic phenomenon is always represented vectorally; i.e., its dynamism is always represented as a vector movement which can then be examined internally by means of successive cross-cuts. By this means, the forms in tongue are brought into the same position that they mentally occupy in the system. The systems in tongue should be perceived as movements, with time required for their accomplishment. In other words, an act of language includes a successivity, a passage from tongue to discourse.



Language is essentially thought seeking expression. But expression can only start with what has already been represented. In Indo-European languages, the act of language, which seems instantaneous but in fact requires time for its accomplishment, consists largely in conveying the semantemes and morphemes preconstructed in the unconscious to their positions as parts of speech. Once these parts of speech are assembled and vocalized by the speaker, we are left with the whole aim of the language act itself — the meaning of the speaker.

Footnotes

1. Guillaume, *Principes de linguistique théorique*, p. 18
2. Hirtle & Hewson, *Foundations for a Science of Language*, p. xv
3. *Ibid.*, p. xvii
4. *Ibid.*, p. xiv
5. Guillaume, *Principes de linguistique théorique*, p. 71
6. *Ibid.*, p. 153
7. *Ibid.*, p. 96
8. Hirtle & Hewson, *Foundations for a Science of Language*, p. xvi
9. *Ibid.*, p. xvi
10. Guillaume, *Principes de linguistique théorique*, p. 58
11. *Ibid.*, p. 130
12. *Ibid.*, p. 185
13. Guillaume, Leçon du 13 décembre 1946

References

- Guillaume, G. (1973). *Principes de linguistique théorique*. Québec: Les Presses de L'Université Laval.
- Hirtle, W. & Hewson, J. (1984). *Foundations for a science of language*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

(1995年4月28日)