

Preface

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The Cognitive System of the French Verb

John Hewson

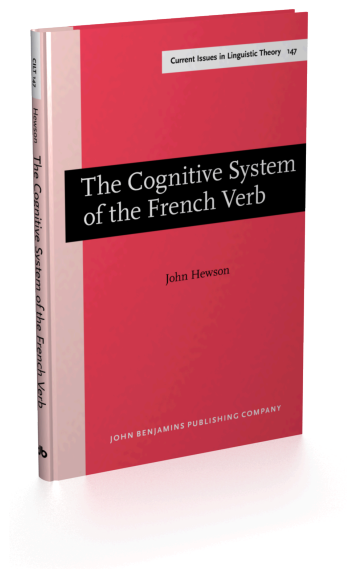
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PREFACE

Such terms as *system*, *structure*, *function*, have been understood in many different ways in twentieth century work in linguistics. In the title of this work, *system* means the *content system* of the French verb, the meaningful system of contrasts, the underlying system of *invariants*, to use the familiar term of Jakobson, that permits the range of surface meanings, of surface usage. This notion of a grammatical system as fundamentally a content system is central to the work of such linguists as Hjelmslev, Jakobson and Gustave Guillaume.

Some of the subject matter of this book has been taught, in one form or another, for over half a century, and I myself have taught it for more than a quarter of a century: the original course was initiated by Roch Valin at Université Laval in Quebec City in the early 1950's. The basic elements may be found as early as 1929, in Gustave Guillaume's *Temps et verbe*, in later articles collected in his posthumous *Langage et science du langage* (1964), and in several of the volumes of his posthumous *Leçons de linguistique* (1971 onwards, thirteen volumes so far published). Nevertheless, there exists no single comprehensive volume, in either French or English, that presents a coherent overview of this material.

When students perceive how this analysis reduces the complexity of the French verb to certain fundamental simple principles, of a kind that could be easily mastered by a child, their response is often "Why wasn't it taught to us like this in the first case?" The answer must be given in three stages. First, one has to know the data before being able to make an analysis of it. Second, a point of view as revolutionary as that presented in Guillaume's *Temps et verbe* and in the later *Leçons de linguistique* takes time to percolate through the educational establishment, although much of it - the analysis of the French aspect system, for example - has now become a commonplace of French grammars, even those used in elementary schools in France. Thirdly, the students taking this course were themselves the first generation of new teachers to have this knowledge. Many have now made use of it in their own language teaching, giving their students sound instruction in such matters as tense, aspect, mood, and voice.

The time has come, therefore, to make this material more easily accessible to the scholarly public, for two reasons. The first of these is that much work has been done, and needs to be reported on, since the development of the original course. The second reason is the steadily growing interest in what has been called

Cognitive Linguistics: Guillaume's endless search for mental mechanisms (hence the name *Psychomechanics* that he gave to his work) is very much a form of cognitive linguistics. The whole of his scholarly life, from his earliest book *Le Problème de l'article* (1919), to his death in 1960, was devoted to the principle that language involves mental processing, and that the operations involved can be discerned through the results that they produce in discourse, a method that parallels historical reconstruction of unobservable protolanguages from their observable daughter languages, as he points out from the very beginning (1919:11-13). Guillaume's ability at this work was much admired by his mentor Meillet, and the French comparativist Louis Havet notes, in his review of *Le Problème de l'article* in the *Bulletin de la Société Linguistique de Paris*, that such work requires "un incroyable don de discerner l'invisible" (1919:158).

There are, consequently, four interwoven threads in the text that follows. The first is the original course as conceived and presented by Valin. The second is the accumulation of ideas and insights from almost thirty years of presenting and explaining the material. The third is composed of references to the thirteen volumes of the *Leçons de linguistique*, Guillaume's lectures at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris. The fourth is the attempt to relate the work done in the Guillaumian school to work done in recent years in Cognitive Linguistics, and to make explicit the cognitive basis of Psychomechanics.

The intended audience is therefore twofold. It includes, first of all, students of the French language, including language teachers, in search of a better understanding of the way that the verbal system operates. It also includes linguists with an interest in the cognitive operations and cognitive systems of languages. To make the task easier for both groups, for an audience confronted with such a novel approach, Chapter Two presents a brief description of the English verbal system, to give an idea of what the method does for English, and to present the fundamental elements from which verbal systems are constructed. Chapter One, on the other hand, has been included to justify the historical and methodological rationale behind the approach: this chapter may be bypassed by students of French who are not interested in the convolutions of twentieth century linguistics.

The ideas in some of these chapters have been previously presented at a variety of scholarly conferences, and published in the proceedings of those conferences. The seven relevant publications are in the Bibliography: Hewson 1976, 1988a, 1988b, 1989, 1990b, 1990c, 1990d.

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