Gustave Guillaume 1883–1960

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Foundations for a Science of Language
Gustave Guillaume (1883–1960)
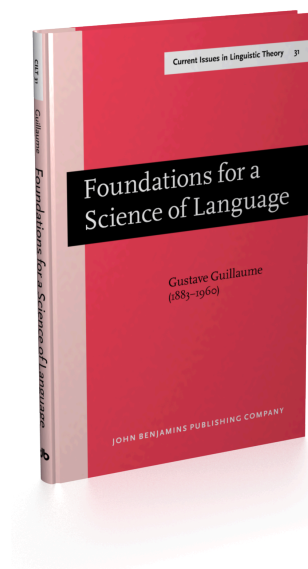[**Current Issues in Linguistic Theory**, 31]
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INTRODUCTION

GUSTAVE GUILLAUME   1883 - 1960

     One of the most striking characteristics of Gustave Guillaume
as a linguist was his single-mindedness, his unwavering purpose. In
the earliest of his writings (1911) he was already concerned with
"the mind directing the act of language", and his lecture of January
28, 1960, written barely a week before his death, depicts the act of
language as "a commutation within thinking man of his momentary
thought into speech" and language itself as "a mechanism commuting
what has been thought into something said". Between these two texts
stretches nearly half a century of probing, of close observation and
ever deeper reflection in an unflagging effort to fathom the relation
between thought and speech, between mind and language.

THE PROBLEM OF POLYSEMY

     Even though it is an oversimplification, one might characterize
the main object of Guillaume's research during the first decade of
his career as a linguist by means of a single question: where do
the various contextual senses of a morpheme come from? As a young
man, Guillaume had taught French to Russian émigrés, and like many
second language teachers, was no doubt confronted with the problem of
reducing the polysemy of grammatical forms to a basic meaning. In
this attempt to get to a deeper level in language he soon saw that
the relation between the "underlying" meaning and the diverse con-
textual senses must be one of *potential* to *actual*, an insight that
led to his first major work. This was a detailed study of the arti-
cle in French (*Le problème de l'article et sa solution dans la langue
française*), published in 1919 and dedicated to Antoine Meillet, at
whose instigation Guillaume had undertaken his studies in linguistics
some ten years before. In later years, the author himself looked
back on this volume with a certain condescension, remarking that it
contributed an idea "overwhelming in its banality: underlying an
actuality there is a potentiality." With hindsight, this idea may
well appear so obvious as to be banal. Yet the fact remains that

some linguist had to adopt it as a starting point for reflecting on
language, and, by the same token, as a basis for the science of lin-
guistics. Guillaume was to spend the rest of his life exploring
language in the light of this potential/actual relationship.

    Guillaume's study on the article is also valuable for what it
can tell us of the author's conception of scientific method and his
lifelong concern with making linguistics a mature, theoretical sci-
ence. Here we have perhaps the best illustration of what Guillaume
had in mind when, in later years, he so often insisted on the impor-
tance of observation in linguistics. Not only must observation be
as meticulous and as extensive as possible, but it must, in order to
be complete, focus on both the physical and the mental, both the form
(the "sign" in Guillaume's terms) and the contextual meaning. In this
respect, as a far-ranging collection of attested examples of the ar-
ticle, each classified according to its contextual nuance of meaning,
Le problème de l'article stands unsurpassed. A similar respect for
observed data characterizes all his work.

    Guillaume never mentioned the importance of observation in lin-
guistics without stressing that it must be accompanied by reflection.
Convinced as he was that, on the mental side, the reality of language
is largely subconscious and so extends far beyond what direct obser-
vation can reveal, he realized that this hidden part can be reached
only by analysis, by reflecting on observed data. He often spoke of
observation and reflection in terms of their results — seeing and
understanding — or in terms of their objects — the perceivable and
the conceivable. And he frequently pointed out that the linguist
must commute between the perceivable and the conceivable in his
effort to understand what he sees and to see what he understands.
Perhaps the most remarkable illustration of this view of linguistics
as a two-way science resides in the fact that Guillaume spent over
twenty years reflecting on what he had observed of the article before
he conceived the theory which permitted him to understand. One reason
it took him so long was that, in order to theorize the article, to
reconstruct its system, he needed the basic parameter for analysis,
and this came from his observing and reflecting on the verb.

OPERATION AND TIME

    The second decade of Guillaume's career was largely concerned
with the problem posed by the answer to his first question: if the
various contextual senses of a morpheme arise as actualized meanings
from a single potential meaning, where does the potential meaning
itself come from? In his attempt to get to a deeper level of language
he sought, as always, to determine the conditions presupposed by that
facet of language he was trying to understand. It was not until 1927

that Guillaume had the insight that provided the cornerstone for all
his later theorizing: he saw that something is potential *before* it
is actual.

     A use of the French subjunctive which opposed it to the indica-
tive had led him to reflect on how we think the possible and the real.
He saw that to represent some event as possible by means of the sub-
junctive mood, the speaker must somehow give it precedence, must
somehow think it prior to thinking it as real by means of the indi-
cative mood. And the only time within which he could postulate that
the subjunctive precedes the indicative was the "thinking time" re-
quired by the mental process of representing a verb. This insight
led him to imagine the system of mood as essentially a single, sub-
conscious operation of thought which can be held up at successive
moments, each such interception giving rise to the formal (grammat-
ical) meaning that characterizes one of the moods of the French verb.
Within two years, Guillaume had published his second major study,
Temps et Verbe.

     This second landmark is certainly significant for the systems
of aspect, mood and tense proposed, but its basic importance lies
in the principle of analysis underlying them: *operative time*. For
Guillaume, a grammatical system is essentially a mechanism in the
mind which produces the several meaningful constituents of the sys-
tem. That is, each of the morphemes belonging to the system arises
at a different moment in this operation of thought, as a potential
meaning determined by its relative position in the operation involv-
ed. As a consequence, each morpheme must be defined in terms of its
position, early or late, in the micro-stretch of time required for
this mental process to unroll. It is this "thinking" or operative
time of a system ("It takes time to think, as it takes time to walk,"
as Guillaume used to say) which provides a necessary parameter for
any language system, permitting the linguist to determine the "no-
tional chronology" of the morphemes involved and to see their re-
spective potential meanings as the consequences of their position
— initial, medial or final — within the system.

     This is why, from 1929 on, Guillaume's scientific work might be
characterized by the motto "think operatively". For him, "everything
in language is process," and to understand any language entity, be it
the most particular use of a morpheme or the most general of systems,
one must first have a view of the process that produced it. The habit
of thinking operatively was so deeply ingrained that, for example, he
tended to replace the term *morphology* by *morphogeny* and *morphogenesis*
with their suggestions of generative processes. For Guillaume, even
when we are not using our language, it resides in the depths of the
mind as an organized set of possible processes, as a programme ready
to be activated by the thinker/speaker.

     Thanks to this persistent attempt to focus on the operational
rather than on the more apparent resultative, Guillaume was able to

obtain a unified view of language. When, in 1916, Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* proposed the *langue/parole* dichotomy, it left linguistics polarized. Guillaume, on the other hand, linked potential language to actual language by outlining the subconscious morphogenetic processes that produce a word, showing that a word, this "miniature bit of art" (to recall Sapir's striking description) must be assembled by the speaker at the moment of need before it can be used in a sentence. In describing how a speaker transits from language as a system of potentialities to an actual sentence whenever he carries out an act of language, Guillaume was able to avoid the predicament of those who attempt to theorize the syntax of a sentence before theorizing the words that make syntax possible, or those who would analyze the functions of words without first analyzing the words themselves. As a result of trying to see everything in terms of operative time, Guillaume was able to get a holistic view of language, to see the potential and the actual as parts of a single phenomenon. This view constituted a major step toward making linguistics a theoretical science, even though, for the time being, it was limited in the main to the perspective of synchrony.


THE NOTION OF SYSTEM

    Guillaume had proposed that the potential meaning of a morpheme resulted from its position in the system. However, this solution to his former problem itself posed a problem: where does the system containing the morpheme come from? That is, if one accepts, say, the system of the French verb or the system of the French article as realities, as subconscious mental components of French, then one must seek out the conditions making these systems possible. Here, then, was an invitation to probe even deeper into language and for the next decade or so Guillaume set himself to this task.

    In the years following *Temps et Verbe*, Guillaume explored the passing from potential to actual, from system to sentence, concentrating mainly on further analysis of particular grammatical systems within the word, for the most part those concerned with representing time within the verb (*chronogenesis* as he called it), but not to the exclusion of the substantive and its formal representation of space. The articles published during this period (collected in *Langage et science du langage*), as well as his study of the verb systems of Latin and Classical Greek (*L'Architectonique du temps dans les langues classiques*), show not only a mind capable of probing beneath the observable facts of usage to find the hidden system, of "discerning the invisible" as one of his early reviewers put it, but also a mind struggling to reach an even deeper level where all the individual grammatical systems of a language can be seen as particular cases of one general system of representation. He was trying

to demonstrate that grammatical systems are content systems and that
as far as grammar is concerned, a language is a "system of systems".
This led him to seek the most general system, that of the parts of
speech, which provides the underlying structural mechanism of the
word. Guillaume, however, was not able to discern this all-encom-
passing system with any clarity until he finally managed to discern
the form of the mechanism of that most transparent of all words, the
article.

       In 1938, Guillaume obtained a position as *Chargé de conférence*
at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* in Paris. Each of the lec-
tures he delivered there over the next 22 years was carefully written
out and preserved in yearly series. During certain academic years,
Guillaume gave more than one lecture each week, a practice resulting
in several yearlong series, here designated Series A, B or C. Some
800 in all, these lectures provide a week by week record of the prog-
ress of his thought and as such constitute a priceless scientific
legacy. It was in 1941 that Guillaume finally saw the mental opera-
tion underlying the system of the article: it consists of a double
movement, the first of which carries from the greatest extent possi-
ble for any notion (the universal) to the least extent possible (the
singular); the second, following on the first in operative "thinking"
time, carries inversely from the least to the greatest extent. To
each movement of the system corresponds a sign: the first, a con-
tractive movement, is expressed by the indefinite article, the second,
an expansive movement, by the definite article. This psycho-mechanism
he depicted by means of the following well known diagram:
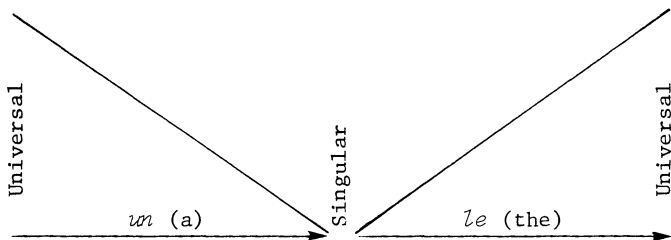
       This constituted an important breakthrough for Guillaume because
it finally gave him an operational view of the system of the article,
on the basis of which he was able to account for the numerous uses
observed years before. It was a matter of determining where the
movement was intercepted to produce the quantitative effect observed
in discourse. However, the significance of this mechanism as a
scientific landmark stretches far beyond the theory of the article
itself.

Reflecting on the *form* of the movements involved here, Guillaume
soon perceived that this mechanism, a device which he called the *bi-
nary tensor*, could provide a representation of any variable relation-
ship based on quantity. He showed how it provided a basis for the
system of grammatical number within the substantive and he evoked it
to depict the relation within the verb between time as an infinite
stretch and time as a finite stretch (the present). On the level of
the word, the binary tensor device permitted him to understand how a
particularizing lexical meaning combines with generalizing grammatical
meaning to receive a part of speech and thereby constitute a word.
Here, then, he found the basis for his theory of the word and, by the
same token, his theory of the parts of speech.

During the ensuing years, further reflection on this similarity
of various systems in regard to their form — a mechanism consisting
of a contractive, particularizing movement followed by an expansive,
generalizing movement — provided Guillaume with a solution to his
problem: the grammatical systems of a language like French, whether
particular sub-systems like that of number in the substantive, or
more general ones like that of the substantive itself, derive their
form from the most general system of the language, that of the word.
In this way 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 reit-
erated in each of the subsidiary categories of words (the parts of
speech). Confronted here with the most general possible form of a
language, Guillaume postulated that this all-embracing language mech-
anism reflects one of the basic capacities of human thought: the
ability to generalize and to particularize. In fact here Guillaume
realized that he had reached the boundary between language and thought
and that if he pursued his reflections any further in this direction,
he would be leaving the domain of linguistics. And yet the solution
he had worked out raised a further problem for the linguist: if each
subsidiary grammatical system derives its form from the system of the
word, where does the system of the word come from?

LANGUAGE TYPOLOGY

It is typical of Guillaume that he did not pause to work out in
detail, with the years of observation and reflection it would require,
the whole theory of the major systems of French — the parts of speech.
Instead, satisfied that he had discerned the basis of the system, in
particular when he described the mental relationship between noun and
verb, he turned his attention to determining the operational condi-
tions giving rise to the word in part-of-speech languages such as
French and Latin. He soon realized that the word has the same gener-
al structure in every Indo-European language although the architecture
of the sub-systems may be different in each language. That is to say,

once he had glimpsed the mental infrastructure of the Indo-European
languages, which gives rise to words necessarily provided with a
part of speech, his constant practice of trying to understand by
turning from a result to its prior generative operation led him to
seek what had brought about this type of word structure. However,
as mentioned above, Guillaume had already reached the confines of
language in his analysis of the act of language, and so, unable to
probe any deeper in synchrony, he was led to adopt a different point
of view. That is, without denying that the part-of-speech structure
is the starting point for the speaker of an Indo-European language,
the potential from which he undertakes an act of language in syn-
chrony, he began to regard this structure as a result from the dia-
chronic point of view. This brought him to focus his attention more
and more on the processes leading to this result, on the means where-
by man over the ages was able to construct this mental edifice per-
mitting him to represent and express his thought with such ease. So
during the last decade of his life Guillaume left particular grammat-
ical systems aside and turned to reflecting on their *glossogeny*
— the progressive edification of the major language structures at-
tested in today's languages — and on the consequences which this new
dimension of investigation held for the science of language.

    Being careful not to foist onto other languages the type of word
he saw in the Indo-European languages — to this end he often used the
more general term "vocable" as being less tainted with Indo-European
connotations — Guillaume attempted to discern the constructive mecha-
nism, the sort of thought processes presupposed by the make-up of
vocables observed in Chinese, in Arabic, in Basque, etc. The result
is certainly one of the most original theories of language ever con-
ceived: the Theory of Glossogenic Areas. This theory constitutes
an attempt to explain how man, over the millenia, has been able to
form the successive mental structures discernible beneath the dif-
ferent types of vocable found today, and how each such general struc-
ture governs the manner in which the architecture of vocables is
realized in particular languages and how the vocables are actually
produced as constituents of individual sentences. In short, this
theory of glossogeny attempts to distinguish the different language
types in terms of one constructional parameter and so to embrace the
whole of language, both in diachrony and in synchrony, as a single
phenomenon.

    Guillaume devoted his last years almost exclusively to the Theory
of Glossogenic Areas and to the conditions permitting linguistics to
outgrow the phase of merely describing usage and become an explanatory
science capable of throwing light on the nature of language. Unfor-
tunately, he died before he could do much more than lay the founda-
tions of this grandiose scientific edifice. What he actually achieved
is more like the plans of a general theory of language — a landmark
perceived on the horizon ahead — than a fully developed theory. Cer-
tainly, his writings do include carefully worked out solutions to a

large number of particular problems, as well as innumerable insights
opening avenues for further observation and reflection. But since
any scientific theory, however well founded is something to be de-
veloped, rectified and ultimately outstripped and left behind, per-
haps his most important legacy will prove to be the method he used
from 1929 on to explore the hidden psychomechanisms of language
processes: analysis in terms of operative time. Because it has
already produced and is producing significant results, this method
constitutes a challenge for any linguist, or at least any linguist
who, interested in the mental nature of language, holds, with Guil-
laume, that language is "a mechanism for commuting what has been
thought into something said."

Walter Hirtle