

Notes for the reader

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Pages xix–xxiv of

Foundations for a Science of Language

Gustave Guillaume (1883–1960)

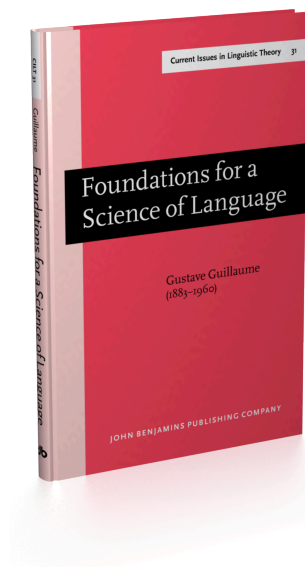
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NOTES FOR THE READER

The purpose of this section is to aid, as far as possible, the interested reader with Guillaume's terminology and ideas. It is acknowledged by those who attended his lectures that Guillaume was one of the most insightful and stimulating theoreticians that twentieth century linguistics has produced, but one must be careful not to be misled by expectations: he had a very distinctive view not only of linguistic theory, but also of what a language is and how it operates.

One must be careful, therefore, not to read Guillaume with the *idée fixe* that linguistic theory is a form of technology with a specific kind of argumentation, the equivalent of a Euclidean theorem. For Guillaume, theory is concerned with the understanding of that which is not directly observable (the underlying operational system) through the medium of the "inevitabilities" (that which *must* be) in what *is* directly observable. He stresses the importance of observation, likewise the importance of reflection. It is a view of science that is neither mechanist nor reductionist, and in that respect quite different from the traditional nineteenth century (or seventeenth century) views of science held by others. To understand and appreciate Guillaume, it is a difference that has to be taken into account.

There is a particular danger in this regard for a translation: a language relates to its own cultural matrix, and the latter remains foreign even in a translation. An English speaking reader familiar with the psychology of Piaget, with the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, will quickly feel at home in these texts from Guillaume. But a reader reared on the psychology of Skinner, on the Cartesian mechanism of Chomsky, on the positivism of Wittgenstein, may well suffer from culture shock, and not be able (or even willing) to make the necessary adjustments. The danger needs to be kept in mind at all times because in a book of selections a statement or a claim may be separated from its supporting evidence, thus exacerbating any differences of opinion on the proper functioning of scientific method.

LANGUE / LANGUAGE

There are also some very difficult problems in the translation. A fundamental problem, for example, is that the French terms *langue* and *langage* need to be distinguished, but the English term *language* subsumes them both. In translating Saussure the traditional solution has been to translate *langage* as *language* and to use *langue* as a technical loan word. In the final analysis, this has not worked, since *langue* and *parole* have commonly been explained as meaning *language* and *speech*, which returns us to square one.

Langage is the whole phenomenon of language, which includes human language, language systems, use of language, written language, foul language, any kind of language. It is open-ended, boundless, and consequently unknowable, as indicated by Saussure: "...le tout du langage est inconnaissable." *Une langue*, on the other hand, is "The tongue of one nation as distinct from others", to borrow a definition from Dr. Johnson.

Consequently, after much soul searching, the translators decided to use the terms *tongue/language* to translate *langue/langage*, fully aware that this leads to certain infelicities, and to an unexpected extension of meaning for the English word *tongue*, though possibly not significantly more than that given by Saussure to French *langue*. It may be noted, for example, that we commonly speak of "the mother tongue" (never "the mother language"), and that it is not unknown for linguists to speak of "the tongues of men."

This solution to a perennial problem, while it still presents difficulties, is made more digestible by the fact that Guillaume (as in Part One, Chapter Three below) replaces the Saussurean formula

$$\textit{langage} = \textit{langue} + \textit{parole}$$

by a slightly different (and improved) terminology:

$$\textit{langage} = \textit{langue} + \textit{discours}$$

Since *discours*, unlike *parole*, is easy to translate, the Guillaumean formula becomes in English:

$$\text{language} = \text{tongue} + \text{discourse}$$

Discourse in this sense does not require a paragraph; any connected, articulated language is discourse in the Guillaumean sense.

THE TONGUE/DISOURSE DISTINCTION

A fundamental key to understanding Guillaume is a clear grasp of the tongue/discourse distinction. Tongue is the system, and discourse is what is produced by the use or exploitation of the system. Guillaume, in fact, in an interestingly original way makes a process model out of what in Saussure is a purely static dichotomy: he links the two with the act of language, which has its own underlying time, as in Figure One:

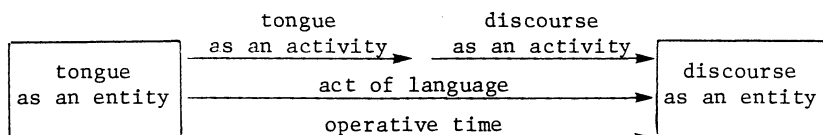


FIGURE 1

Because there has been, and still is, so much confusion over these fundamental linguistic concepts, a concrete analogy is helpful in making clear what Guillaume intended by these terms. We may use a child's construction kit (such as a Meccano or Erector set, or Leggo blocks) as an analogy for tongue, and the constructions that the child makes (trucks, houses, helicopters, bridges) as an analogy for discourse, as in Figure 2 (which may be compared directly with Figure 1).

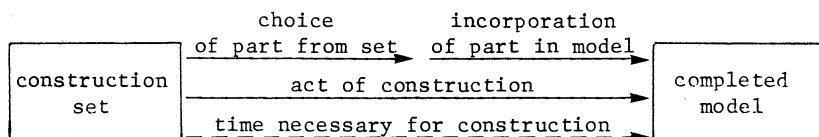


FIGURE 2

This analogy makes clear that a tongue is not a set of sentences, but a set of paradigmatically related parts that can be fitted together syntagmatically in significant ways to form an infinite variety of sentences. Similar views (though without the explicit operativity) are to be found in Hjelmslev and Jakobson (the latter, for example, distinguishes the paradigmatic from the syntagmatic axes of language). The analogy also illustrates what Saussure meant when he said that the sentence belongs to *parole*, not *langue* (CLG 172). It is a fundamentally different viewpoint from that of linguists who define a language as a set of sentences.

SEMIOLGY/PSYCHOSYSTEMATICS/PSYCHOMECHANICS

Guillaume does not use the term *sémiologie* in the Saussurean sense of "a science of semiotics", but more or less equivalent to Hjelmslev's term *expression* (For Hjelmslev *content* relates to the Saussurean *signifié* and is therefore meaning; *expression* relates to the Saussurean *signifiant* and is therefore the morphosyntactic means of conveying content). Because Guillaume uses the term *expression* in his own technical sense (see, for example, Part Four), Hjelmslev's more familiar terms could not be used here; consequently we have used the term *semiology* to translate *sémiologie*; the term means the totality of signs (Saussurean *signifiants*) that a language utilizes.

For Guillaume the grammatical systems of a given tongue are content systems, systems of meaningful contrasts that the semiology, with its irregularities, reflects only imperfectly. This view (which parallels those of Hjelmslev and Jakobson) is discussed comprehensively in Part Three: it has been characterized as a "grammatical semantics." The study and analysis of these content systems falls within the domain of *psychosystematics*, since they are necessarily mental entities, and Guillaume uses the prefix *psycho-* to identify mental elements.

Psychomechanics is the term used for the study and analysis of the mechanical processes of the act of language: choice of lexeme, grammaticalization of lexeme, operation of systems, and so on. *Psycho-semiology*, as may be expected, deals with morphological shape at a potential or mental level.

SYNOPSIS

Guillaume uses the term synopsis for motivated syncretism, that is for two (or more) separate but in some way similar elements that share a common morphology (e.g. the dative and ablative plurals of the Latin noun declensions, or such English verb forms as *talked* which serve as both preterit and past participle).

SAISIE = PREHENSION

It is a truism that $1 + 1$ does not, strictly speaking, equal 2, since 2 is another distinct unit, a new *saisie* which replaces the two original units (e.g. $1 + 1$) by amalgamating them into a new whole. A *saisie* is therefore a mental grasp of a new integral whole; we have translated *saisie* by the word *prehension*, again with the regret that, stylistically, we seem to have produced the Leaden Echo rather than the Golden Echo.

The term *saisie* is an important one. The existence of derivations is clear evidence that there are *stages* of processing, and that this processing will be carried as far as is necessary for the purposes of expression. At whatever point this processing is cut, a new *prehension* is achieved. There are three universal prehensions (common to all languages): that of the radical (basic lexical notion), that of the word or vocable (no matter how different the words of different languages may be), and that of the sentence.

SUPPORT/IMPORT/INCIDENCE

Guillaume's syntax is essentially that of a dependency grammar, but of a quite original kind. Unlike Tesnière, who bases dependency on the verb and its valencies, Guillaume sees dependency as a matter of *incidence*, wherein a lexical *import*, when it finds a *support* elsewhere, thereby establishes a syntactic relationship. The lexical import of *old* in *old book*, for example, finds a support in *book* and thereby establishes a relation of external incidence in the first degree. Similarly *very* in *very old book* has an import which finds a support in *old*, thereby establishing a relation of external incidence in the second degree, the normal role of predication for an adverb. The germ of this idea, though not developed in such terms, is to be found in Jespersen's *primary*, *secondary*, *tertiary*. (In Guillaume's terms Jespersen's secondary has external incidence in the first degree, and his tertiary has external incidence in the second degree).

Jespersen's *primary*, which is the keystone of any such system (on which all the rest is dependent) is the substantive. For Guillaume the incidence of the substantive is no longer external but internal (see the section in Part Five), a feature which gives it syntactic independence and allows it to be the support of other (secondary) elements.

The questions raised by these brief comments require the preparation of a book-length study of this kind of dependency syntax, a task which is presently in progress (see Hewson *forthcoming*). Although these questions are of very great interest to many linguists, discussion of them must consequently be postponed.

CONCLUSION

There is, of course, no way that a few brief comments on terminology can provide an adequate introduction to the work of a linguist as original and as provocative as Guillaume. These notes will have

served their purpose, therefore, if they succeed in providing a preliminary map that will enable the reader to find his basic bearings and avoid the most obvious pitfalls.

John Hewson

Quebec City, December 1983.