

86

THE TWELFTH LACUS FORUM 1985

edited by
Mary C. Marino
Luis A. Pérez



LINGUISTIC ASSOCIATION OF CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

P.O.B. 101, Lake Bluff, Illinois, U.S.A. 60044

GRAMMAR AND MEANING
THE CASE OF NUMBER IN ENGLISH

Walter Hirtle

Université Laval

Introduction

One of the most intriguing, and disquieting, characteristics of linguistics today is the remarkable polarization of attitude it gives rise to. On the one hand we find the seriousness with which linguists regard their discipline, and in this they resemble the adepts of any other field of academic study. On the other hand, few people outside of linguistics share this attitude, and in fact many wonder just what a linguist does, or even is—a consequence of the fact that they attach little importance to his discipline. This intriguing polarization of attitude invites the question: why? When one seeks an answer, however, curiosity gives way to disquiet as we shall see first.

The reason for this singular situation can hardly be that the object of our discipline, human language, is of little importance. On the contrary, it might rather be claimed that there is a certain elevation or nobility in the object whose nature we are trying to probe. After all, without language none of the disciplines could have come into being, and in fact man's intellectual life as we know it would be non-existent. Indeed, language has been called "the pre-science of all science" (Guillaume 1984: 146) to emphasize its importance for human thought and to suggest that without that world view, that "theory" of the universe, provided by our mother tongue science could not have developed. This preeminent position of human language amply justifies the seriousness with which linguists regard their discipline but it renders even more perplexing the attitude of non-linguists.

The Essential Relationship

What, then, can account for the rather disappointing track record of linguistics, at least in the eyes of those who are not personally involved? I would like to suggest that it is due to the fact that linguists in their theorizing have not come to grips with the fundamental problem, namely, to account for the essentially binary nature of language and that, as a consequence, they are

often felt to be concerned with what is secondary, or even trivial, in language. Let me hasten to add that I have not presumed by my own lights to assign the science of language such a task. Others have said it before me. Saussure (1955: 32), for example, said: "... la langue ... est un système de signes où il n'y a d'essentiel que l'union du sens et de l'image acoustique". Leonard Bloomfield (1966: 27) expressed it this way:

To put it briefly, in human speech, different sounds have different meanings. To study this coordination of certain sounds with certain meanings is to study language.

Chomsky (1966: 10) evokes the same idea, though in different terms of course:

The competence of the speaker-hearer can ideally be expressed as a system of rules that relate signals to semantic interpretations of these signals. The problem for the grammarian is to discover this system of rules.

In spite of the fact that these three linguists had quite different views of language, their three statements of principle have something in common, namely that language is binary in nature, that language necessarily involves both mental and physical constituents. In more concrete terms then, the essential thing in language is the relationship between some mental representation (or meaning) and its physical means of expression (or sign), and the moment a linguist misconstrues or loses sight of this relationship, he has misconstrued or lost sight of the reality of his object. This, I claim, is why the science of language has not fulfilled the high hopes quite justifiably placed in it: because linguists have failed to come to grips with this fundamental relationship. In order to justify this claim, I shall be led to examine several unsuccessful attempts to deal with the meaning/sign complex and this will bring us to the core of our subject: how linguistics can get back on track and carry us closer to the hidden reality of language.

One very widespread but, in my opinion, insufficient way of accounting for language usage loses sight of our fundamental relationship. This is the approach that attempts to account for usage in terms of rules, as though language were rule-governed behavior. Now it is certainly correct to say that, for example, some is used for the most part in affirmative rather than negative contexts, but many linguists stop here. Instead of seeking the reason for this aspect of usage, they consider the descriptive rule to be an explanation, as though the rule were one of the ultimate constituents of English. On the other hand, those who keep the meaning/sign relationship clearly in focus will not rest until they can explain this usage in terms of the meaning of some because any word or morpheme is used for, and only for, the meaning it can express. That is to say, we speak in order to convey some message, to express a meaning, so that the motivation for using a sign, any sign, is

the meaning it brings to the sentence. As a consequence, no linguistic analysis can be considered adequate if it fails to account for usage in terms of the meanings involved. In short, language as used by the speaker is a meaning-expressing activity, not rule-governed behavior.

Many, perhaps most, linguists would probably accept this view and so would not lose sight of the fundamental relationship. And yet this relationship is often misconstrued. Why? Why is it so difficult to account for the sign/meaning relationship? After all, since a necessary condition for communication as we know it is that a given sign be linked somehow to a given meaning, can one not simply describe the meaning a given sign expresses and say the sign occurs in discourse whenever that meaning is to be evoked? This is the approach of those who view language usage as a code, with a one-to-one relationship between a sign and its contextual meaning. Some years ago, a great deal of research based on this view was done to the end of developing a mechanism or program for translating from one language to another. Predictably, this research was not a success because of the fact that, as far as language is concerned, a sign such as a word or morpheme can have different meanings in different sentences. That is to say, our fundamental relationship, as observed in actual usage in discourse, is not like the simple one-to-one correspondence found in a code, but rather a complex one involving a sign with numerous, shifting senses.

This view of language usage as a code may appear to us naïve today. Confronted with the remarkable variety of senses a word or morpheme can express in discourse most scholars today accept polysemy as one of the facts of life, and yet few, in my opinion, have managed to deal with it in a manner consistent with what we know about language. Indeed, to my knowledge only one satisfactory approach to the crucial problem of polysemy has ever been proposed. That is, only one approach allows for various senses in usage yet maintains a one-to-one correspondence between meaning and sign as the essential basis for communication as we know it. My aim here is to outline and illustrate this approach, but first I wish to mention other approaches and the difficulties they lead to.

A large number of grammarians and linguists are content to bring out the fact of polysemy and leave it there. They will, for example, present the progressive form as expressing three or four or more "aspects of meaning" (cf. Leech 1971: 15) but they fail to show how the listener knows which one the speaker intends. That is to say, unless some consistent relationship between sign and meaning is depicted, the listener would only be able to guess at what the speaker has in mind, with the consequence that communication as we know it would be impossible.

To avoid this difficulty, some scholars propose that a word or morpheme gets its meaning from the context, that it is by juxtaposition with the other elements in the sentence that, for example,

the progressive takes on its particular nuance of meaning. This certainly corresponds to part of the listener's task, but as a general doctrine of meaning it is inadequate. Thus, to claim that "A word on its own is not meaningful; what it means depends on its context" (Mittins 1962: 1), as one grammarian put it, simply contradicts a fact of common experience, namely, that a word on its own does have some sort of meaning. Furthermore, it entails the indefensible proposition that from a set of meaningless items one can derive a meaningful context, a message. In brief, this approach is unsatisfactory because it would make communication impossible.

This sort of difficulty has led some scholars to reaffirm the one sign/one meaning idea as an indispensable basis for the use of language as a means of communication, particularly in novel situations. The problem remains, however, to accommodate this language-as-a-code approach to the facts of polysemy. One expedient resorted to is basically rather naïve: it amounts to observing the different contextual meanings of, say, the progressive and declaring that there are separate but identical signs for them. Thus, in a work I recently read the author proposes three progressives in English, all pronounced and written in exactly the same way, three homonyms. In like fashion, it has been claimed that there are two homonymic any's corresponding to the two meanings of any discerned by the linguist. Aside from the fact that this expedient simply begs the question (is it sheer coincidence that these similar contextual meanings have identical signs?), there is the problem that a listener or reader would not know which of the identical signs is being used, with the consequence that communication would simply not be possible if there were as many signs as there are contextual meanings.

Most scholars who hold to the one sign/one meaning version of the fundamental relationship as the only possible basis for communication as we know it, would not favour the multiplication of the sign as a means of accommodating polysemy. Rather, they tend to look on the various contextual meanings of a form as related to one another and therefore as deriving from a single "basic" meaning. This approach is certainly more promising than those evoked above because it is founded, not on a failure to recognize polysemy, nor on the chance occurrence of signs in a context, nor on coincidental homonymy but rather on the much more plausible principle that certain notions or meanings are seen as related in the mind of the speaker. Unfortunately, most attempts to find a single "basic" meaning for various contextual meanings are unsuccessful because grammarians generally pick out one of the contextual meanings and consider it "basic". For example, most teaching grammars consider that the present progressive expresses basically "action going on at the moment of speaking" simply because this is the most frequent nuance expressed. Again, one attempt to deal with the polysemy of the quantifier any argues that in every one of its uses, any means 'every', 'all' (cf. Savin 1974), presumably because this is the most striking of its uses. Such attempts, which are often most ingenious, fail to recognize that the relation between two contex-

tual meanings is quite different from the relation between any particular contextual meaning and the so-called "basic" meaning from which it is derived. To confuse the two by proposing one of the contextual meanings as "basic" to the others is like taking one of the symptoms of the common cold, say a sore throat, as the cause of all the others. One must rather seek the underlying condition which gives rise to all the observable symptoms, just as the linguist must seek the underlying meaning of a form, the meaning which gives rise to all its observable senses in discourse. In short, the unicity of meaning that must be postulated to make communication as we know it possible is of the order of a cause and so must be sought, not on the level of the effect, of usage in contexts, but rather on the level of the underlying condition permitting usage.

Meaning as a Potential

Since this is the turning point in these remarks, it may be worth dwelling on it for a moment. What I am suggesting is that many studies of grammar which attempt to find an underlying meaning are looking for the right thing, but they are looking for it in the wrong place. They should not seek the single "basic" meaning from which the contextual senses can be derived among the derived senses but rather on the prior level of a condition permitting all the derived senses. This is a meaning of a different order which the terms "basic" and "underlying" evoke metaphorically but since these two terms are open to misinterpretation, it is preferable to designate it properly as the potential meaning. Inherent in the notion of "potential" is a conditioning relationship with regard to the derived contextual senses, or actual meanings, in discourse. I am, then, suggesting that only on the level of the potential meaning can one find the one-to-one correspondence between meaning and sign which both materializes the essentially binary nature of language and provides a necessary condition for the use of language in communication as we know it. (I might also add that the potential/actual view of meaning provides a framework for reflecting on the vexed question of language acquisition without begging the question by appealing to some innate grammar.)

This, then, is the theoretical stand I wish to take: that only by postulating the existence of a prior potential meaning can we satisfactorily account for the various observed senses of a form in discourse. Rather than develop some of the implications of this stand — they extend to our conception of the very nature of human language — I would prefer at this point to give an example of what I am talking about, and this, not merely to illustrate what sort of entity is being postulated but also to demonstrate how, starting from observations of usage, and guided by a single postulate, one can reconstruct this theoretical entity making use of a method which is, in essentials, that of comparative grammar (cf. Valin 1964). I have chosen grammatical number in English as the example partly because a far more complete account than can be given here is available in print (cf. Hirtle 1982), partly because it is a

problem of considerable intrinsic interest which has been almost completely neglected by linguists and grammarians, but mainly because it provides the least complicated example analyzed to date.

Number in English

I have just mentioned that number is a neglected problem in English and the reason for this is not far to seek. Everyone knows that the \emptyset form of a substantive signifies 'one' 'singular' whereas the -s form (and a few irregular formations like teeth and children) signifies 'more than one', 'plural'. What more is there to say? Most grammar books fail to recognize the polysemy of the two endings and so overlook a very rich and exciting field of usage which appears to be developing rapidly.

Discerning the Potential Meaning

Let us begin with zero ending. By far its most obvious sense is 'one', 'singular' but this should not mesmerize us to the point that we do not recognize other senses. In fact, many grammars do point out that in a number of cases zero ending expresses 'more than one': several elk, many people, two aspirin. To my knowledge, however, no grammar raises the obvious question: how can one sign express such different contextual meanings as 'one' and 'more than one'? Once, however, our attention is focused on the essential relationship between sign and meaning, this question is posed and a second question immediately arises: can this sign express any other senses? The following examples do suggest a third sense:

Elk have a strong characteristic smell.
People are funny.
Aspirin have few side effects.

The substantives here are certainly not 'singular' in sense, nor can they be paraphrased by 'more than one'. They are in fact universal in extensity, expressing what some grammarians call a 'generic' sense.

This gives us three contextual meanings of zero ending. Are there any more? No grammarian of English has failed to point out the sense of 'mass' or 'non-count' in examples like:

There is butter on the table.

However, it took a Jespersen (1954: II, 72-73) to bring out the difficulty they pose: "Here such notions as singular and plural are strictly speaking inapplicable."

Here, then, is the problem for zero ending: how to find a single, potential meaning which can give rise to the usual 'singular'

sense, the frequent 'plural' sense, the occasional 'generic' sense and the 'non-count' or 'mass' sense which appears to have no relationship with the other senses.

If we turn now to the -s ending, a rapid survey will reveal a somewhat similar problem. Besides the usual 'plural' sense, we find a frequent 'generic' use, as in:

Dogs are vigilant.
 He likes games.

Although few grammars mention it, there is a very curious use which adds a third sense to the list:

a strategical crossroads
 a picnic grounds
 a barracks.

Unlikely though it may seem at first sight, the only possible interpretation to be given here is that of 'singular'. And this use appears to be on the increase. Here are some examples picked up in conversation or on television:

... hardly a desirable impression for an
airlines to present

... a terrific end to what has been a
 terrific Olympic trials

You're having a good playoffs, Gregg.

An examination of -s morpheme would not be complete without a mention of its well-known but infrequent use with 'mass' nouns, as in:

The Snows of Kilimanjaro
 The waters of the bay
 The sands of the desert.

More uses might be brought in here, but this will suffice to bring into focus the polysemy of -s and pose the problem of its potential meaning.

Starting from data such as these, one may well wonder how to imagine, to reconstruct, a single potential meaning for each morpheme which could be actualized so as to give rise to all the observed senses in discourse. Fortunately, a means for dealing with such cases of polysemy has been found, a means whereby a single underlying condition can give rise to a number of different consequences. Originally proposed by Guillaume (cf. 1984: 133), this condition is provided by regarding potential meaning operationally, that is by regarding it as essentially a matter of process or movement. Any movement is one, but it can give rise to different results if intercepted at different points of its development. That is, by adopting an operational view of meaning we can postulate

that the potential meaning of, say, zero ending is the possibility of carrying out a certain subconscious mental process. And depending upon whether the thinker/speaker intercepts this process early in its course or late, the morpheme will have one sense or another. Basically Guillaume is trying to describe how we think the meaning of a morpheme in order to explain its different uses. And if we accept that usage is meaning-motivated, that any sign is used for the meaning it expresses, then it is difficult to imagine another way of proceeding.

The crucial point here, then, is an operational view of meaning. Now we tend to regard meaning as static since this is the way it strikes our consciousness in discourse, and so the idea of meaning as movement, as a mental process, is somewhat strange for many people. A glance at how this idea can help us explain the different senses of zero ending will perhaps make this idea more comprehensible.

We can start with the notion of 'number', which is clearly common to three of the senses of zero ending. Furthermore, between these three senses, — 'all', 'more than one', 'one' — there is a consistent relationship of decreasing number. (We shall see later why a relation of decreasing number is proposed for zero ending.) These two facts suggest the form of movement that can be postulated for zero ending: a movement of decreasing number. This can be depicted schematically as in Figure 1:

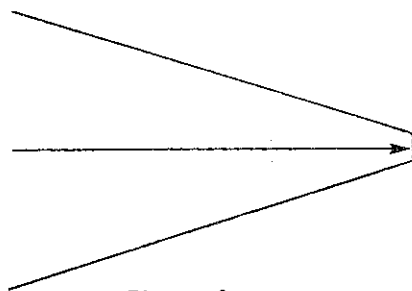


Figure 1

If the movement is intercepted at its final instant, it will generate a representation of minimal number, that is, of 'singular', as in:

I took an aspirin.

If the movement is intercepted earlier, at some instant before its end, it will generate the representation of a greater number, of a 'more than one' sense, as in:

I took three aspirin.
Aspirin were found all over the floor.

If, finally, the movement is intercepted just as it begins, at its very earliest instant, it will generate the representation of a total or maximum number with the sense of 'all' as in:

Aspirin have few side effects.

These three interceptions — at the beginning, somewhere in the middle and at the end — can be depicted as in Figure 2:

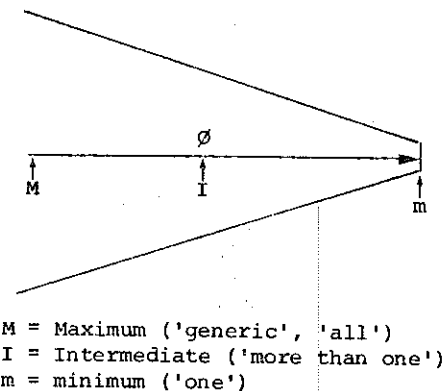


Figure 2

One important point about this correspondence should be emphasized. On the one hand, the only possible interceptions are those indicated: at the beginning, anywhere in the middle and at the end. On the other hand, the only possible numerical senses of zero ending are maximum number ('all'), an intermediate number ('more than one') and minimum number ('one'). That is, all possible cases of representing number are provided for, and this in itself is a significant achievement because it constitutes a necessary basis for any theory of grammatical number.

This, however, is not all that is required of a theory of zero ending. Many problems of number remain to be accounted for — that of 'mass' nouns, for example. Or the difference between a plural expressed by zero and that expressed by -s (three aspirin vs three aspirins) and the reason why most substantives do not occur with a zero plural. Even more intriguing is the fact that the names of many wild animals are found in both plurals (three elephants/three elephant) whereas substantives denoting domestic animals occur in -s plural only. Such apparent inconsistencies of usage can be accounted for if we compare the movement of zero ending with that of -s.

We have proposed that the potential meaning of zero ending is the possibility of a movement from maximum to minimum numbers.

The potential meaning of -s ending is just the reverse: a movement from an initial position, to which corresponds a representation of minimum number ('singular'), through intermediate positions ('plural') to a position corresponding to maximum number ('generic'). This can be depicted as in Figure 3:

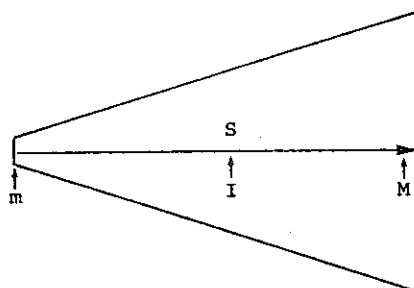


Figure 3

Examples of these uses of -s are:

He stopped at a crossroads. = m (minimum)
 The next three crossroads have = I (Intermediate)
 no traffic lights.
Crossroads should be well = M (Maximum)
 lighted.

We can get a view of the system, the representational mechanism of grammatical number in English, by juxtaposing the two movements, as in Figure 4:

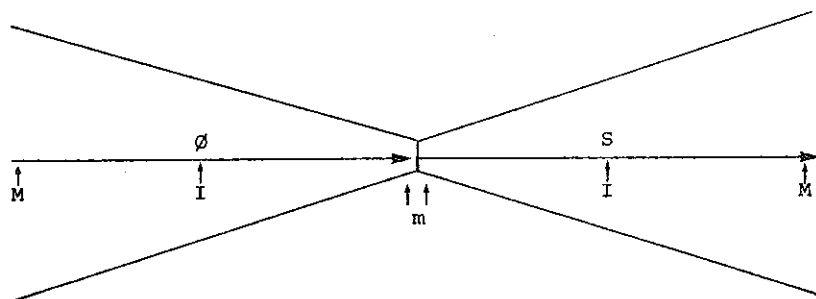


Figure 4

This is a system because it is basically one operation made up of two successive movements, the first contractive, the second expansive in form. And it is the opposition between the two, the second being the reverse of the first, which gives the key to the differences observed in the use of the two endings. Because the -s

movement tends toward more and more, a maximum, whatever representations it gives rise to are characterized by multiplicity; because the zero movement tends toward less and less, a minimum, its representations are all characterized by unicity. That is to say, where -s evokes quantity as discontinue, zero evokes it as continue. Indeed, more than one scholar has pointed out that the system of number is not merely a question of number, of singular and plural, but rather a discussion of the far more general question of quantity. That is to say, the system permits the thinker/speaker to represent the quantity involved in what the substantive evokes lexically, and to represent this space in one of its two possible versions, continue or discontinue. Of course the most frequent expression of something seen as continue is the singular, whereas a discontinue view of something is most frequently expressed as a plural, but these numerical senses remain particular cases of a far more general representational system. Indeed, we have seen that both zero and -s can express other senses, and it is time to examine, from the general point of view of quantity, some of the problems they raise, keeping in mind both the continue/discontinue distinction and the quantitative variation of each.

Problems of Usage

The first such problem is to explain how one can obtain a plural within the field of the continue. A curious restriction on this use in the case of wild animals gives a clue to the answer. It has often been pointed out that uses such as three elephant, many duck and the like are typical of hunters, zoologists, park wardens or other cognoscenti, whereas the common uninitiated speaker would use -s forms here. Now cognoscenti have greater experience and awareness of the species to which the individual animals belong and of which they are specimens. It seems then that when these speakers evoke such animals, the notion of the species provides a sort of backdrop for the individuals, which then appear as manifestations of the continue unity. As a consequence, their behavior is evoked as typical of, or animated by, the species. Support for this explanation is found in the fact that this use does not occur with substantives denoting domestic animals; after all, to the extent that they have been domesticated, such animals have been cut off from species-activated behaviour.

A somewhat analogous situation arises with names of human groups. We often find expressions like 2000 Eskimo, a number of Micmac, where the zero plural is used for a tribe or ethnic group, as though this were an inherent element of the nature of the individuals thus designated and so provides a sort of backdrop against which they stand out. Where the link between the containing whole and the individual is not felt to be so strong, however, only -s plural is found, as in many Canadians, a few Americans.

Thus, one gets the impression that where the *-s* plural evokes a set of individuals with some common characteristic as distinct entities, the zero plural presents them as specimens or subdivisions of a greater entity. This comes out with particular clarity in a small number of words that name a group, for example: a crew, a faculty. *-s* plurals like three crews or several faculties call to mind a set of individual entities. However in common expressions like three crew or several faculty the zero plural brings out the individuals as members of a greater entity by dividing the whole into its constituent parts.

A clear example of the same phenomenon is found with expressions of measure. When we speak of a twelve-foot ladder or a six-mile run the head-word ladder or run provides the entity, the continue whole which is to be measured; the zero form divides it into the appropriate number of units of measurement. Again, one gets the impression of plurality within a continue or whole.

Somewhat similar are cases like a four-door car or a five-bedroom house, which evoke not a measurement but a model or type. As with the substantives denoting ethnicity above, we get the impression of a characteristic determining the very nature of the object, whereas an expression like a many-windowed house (cf. Hirtle 1969) suggests an accidental characteristic. These, however, are areas of usage which require much closer examination before anything definite can be advanced. Indeed, all uses of the zero plural require much more extensive observation and further reflexion because there is, to my knowledge, no full-fledged study of this problem in contemporary English, surely a remarkable lacune for the most studied language in the world.

One of the most interesting manifestations of the difference between the two plurals is provided by the pair three aspirins/three aspirin. The *-s* plural evokes three tablets which contain aspirin; the zero plural evokes the chemical as contained in three tablets. The distinction, which is real though subtle, is that between a plurality of entities containing the same substance and a chemical substance in the form of distinct entities. It is, if you like, six of one, half a dozen of the other because in the final result it amounts to saying the same thing but in getting to that result involves very different processes: multiplication in one case, division in the other.

This should suffice to give some idea of what lies behind this very remarkable characteristic of English — the fact that many substantives have two plurals. Ultimately, it seems to come down to the deriving of a plural either by subdivision of a greater continue or by multiplication of a minimal unit to form a discontinue. Equally remarkable is the fact that we can observe an *-s* singular in a number of words — a growing number if our observations are correct. However, it will not be possible to explore this use here (cf. Hirtle 1982 for details), nor a number of other

uses which deserve close attention: tool names like plier/pliers garment names like trouser/trousers, and other curious uses of *-s* (see Wickens forthcoming); cattle which has neither *-s* plural, nor a singular; cases like zero grams; etc., etc. Before leaving the illustrative example of number and returning to more general considerations, however, a brief comment on 'mass' nouns is called for.

As mentioned above, Jespersen considers that 'mass' nouns cannot be considered to be either singular or plural. Because the traditional view of the system of number offers no other alternative, this observation is, to say the least, disturbing. The difficulty disappears, however, if we adopt the point of view outlined above, namely that the system of number is fundamentally a discussion of quantity, of continue vs discontinue representations of space wherein singular and plural, important though they may be, are particular cases. In the light of the system proposed here, 'mass' nouns which are found only with zero ending can arise only in the field of the continue. Indeed, the most striking impression of such substantives on the level of usage is that of homogeneous, undivided space. That is to say, they are formed in the first movement of the system where continue representations of space are obtained. At what point in this movement? Certainly not at the final instant where a minimal space is defined, a singular, because insofar as these are 'mass' nouns, their lexemes refuse any such 'unit' delimitation. Quantity-wise, a use like:

There's butter on the table.

evokes an indeterminate amount, suggesting an intermediate interception of the zero movement. This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that we also find 'mass' nouns with a 'generic' sense, as in:

Butter is made from cream.

This sense, as we have seen, arises from intercepting the movement at its first instant, before the contractive movement has reduced the substantive's extensity. That is to say, the lexeme of a 'mass' noun can be represented either at a maximum or at some intermediate point, but not at a minimum insofar as quantity is concerned.

What, then, distinguishes such substantives from the internal plural we have been examining? After all, both usually involve an intermediate interception of the zero movement. The distinction between 'mass' and 'count' nouns corresponds to two ways of representing their lexical content, the lexeme. As such it is a lexical distinction, not a grammatical one, though it does have consequences on the grammatical form, as we have just seen.

Considering this a lexical distinction coincides with the view of most grammarians and offers a basis for understanding why, as some scholars have pointed out, the lexeme of theoretically any

substantive in English can be expressed as either 'mass' or 'count'. And so we find expressions like a lot of car for your money or There's not enough telephone booth here for me which have a striking expressive effect because car and booth, which are usually prehended in a 'count' sense, are here used in a 'mass' sense. Conversely, if we speak of different butters we get the 'count' sense of 'different types or brands of butter'. Even more striking is the expressive effect where the lexeme does not lend itself readily to a discontinue representation and yet the substantive is found with the -s ending: The Snows of Kilimanjaro, the waters of the bay. Finally, we can now account for the distinctions illustrated in the following set of examples:

Zero ending ('continue')

'mass': Aspirin is an analgesic. ('Maximum')

'count': Aspirin have few side effects. ('Maximum')

'mass': Is there much aspirin in this medication?
('Intermediate')

'count': I took three aspirin this morning.
('Intermediate')

'count': I took an aspirin this morning. ('minimum')

-s ending ('discontinue')

'count': These aspirins are for adults. ('Intermediate')

'count': Aspirins should be kept out of the reach of children. ('Maximum')

Conclusion

It is now time to get back to the important point all this discussion of number was intended to illustrate, namely that the way out of the apparent impasse of polysemy is to discern the potential meaning of a form, the meaning underlying and giving rise to its various actual meanings in discourse. The potential meaning of a grammatical morpheme can be reconstructed if, with Guillaume, we make the radically simple (and eminently twentieth-century) postulate that it is operational in nature, that it corresponds to the mental process required to produce the observable senses found in discourse. By adopting this operative view, we can, as shown above, both postulate a unique meaning as the mental counterpart of the sign and account for the various senses of the sign in usage. That is to say, this approach permits us to establish one-to-one correspondence between sign and meaning, the *sine qua non* for communication as we know it, while respecting the facts of polysemy because it postulates that any act of language is a process of actualizing the potential provided by our tongue in the infinitely varied contexts of discourse.

Judging by results obtained so far, Guillaume's "operational grammar" as it might be called — "everything in tongue, in fact, is a process" (1984:133) — provides a method of analysis which can be applied to most any problem of systemic meanings. As such, this method is of considerable interest to the linguist since it permits him to account for usage in terms of meaning and thereby come to grips with the essentially binary nature of language — in fact not only come to grips with it, but throw light on it by showing that meaning and sign have a univocal relationship as a permanent potential within the system in tongue but a variable relationship in the ever-changing actual uses of discourse.

All this brings us back to our original concern about the polarization of attitudes with regard to linguistics, and raises the following question: can this new type of analysis help to improve the public image of linguistics? In the ESL classroom, teaching the use of a grammatical form by getting students to appreciate its potential meaning has proved both effective and stimulating, especially at intermediate and advanced levels. And in the field of translation, comparative systematics can make a real contribution, according to Garnier (1985), who makes a comparison of the verb systems of French and English. As more grammatical problems are elucidated, further contributions to such practical fields will perhaps give our discipline more credibility in the eyes of the non-specialist.

However it is not by contributing to the solution of practical problems that linguistics will reach its full stature and merit the esteem of outsiders. This can be achieved only by showing language to be admirable in itself — by showing English speakers that English is a fitting object of wonder, that it is, in fact, man's most admirable creation. (The same applies to French for francophones, Spanish for hispanophones, and so on.) This means giving our graduate students and our undergraduate students and to some degree even our high school students a share in that sense of wonder which any linguist — in fact any man of science — should feel when contemplating the object of his science. And so my whole argument comes to this: language is "a mechanism commuting what has been thought into something said" (Guillaume 1960: January 28). Therein lies the whole purpose of language as a tool of human thought. It is precisely this extraordinary mechanism we have developed for representing and expressing our individual experience that can most readily awaken a sense of wonder. However, it is only to the extent that we as linguists have managed to understand it that we can bring others to appreciate the marvel of human language.

I should like to finish with an example because it is always with the observable reality of usage that our reflexions on language must begin, and end. I hope you will agree that the tongue which permits the following use is a wonderful construction.

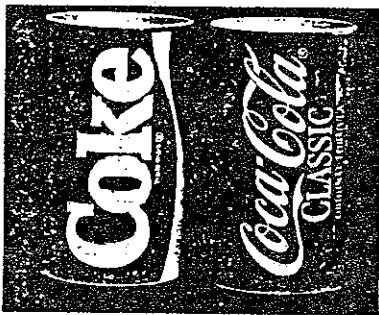
BUSINESS

Hey America, Coke Are It!

In a case that is sure to become a marketing classic, a public outcry forces the return of a national symbol.

Welcome, students, to *Pop Economics 101*. Today's topic is the marketing maneuver of the century, the withdrawal and subsequent reintroduction of "original" Coca-Cola. Was it madness or genius? Would someone like to present the case?

Professor, the Coca-Cola Co. had a problem. The \$25 billion pop market was flat. Brand Coke, while still the leader, was losing market share. Pepsi-Cola, meanwhile, with its "Pepsi generation" campaigns, was strong in the youth



Coke's new team: Will both fit on the shelf?

cohort. With aging baby boomers increasingly concerned about their weight and turning to nonsugar drinks, most growth in the sugar segment was expected to come from the teen drinkers. Coke needed to increase its appeal to the young.

Nicely done. I like the way you toss that jargon around. What were Coke's options? Let's see some different hands.

Coke decided to court teen-agers by sweetening the recipe and calling it "new"

letting anyone know. "They could have" lowered the classic pattern by slipping markets and talking with forward," says Jerry Mc-
tor of Ogilvy
"Maxwell"

time, a
produc
Alter
been in
Coke off th
the company con-
sidered, and
plans to keep the old-
formula drink in circulation under the
name Coke 100 (Coke's centennial year is
1986) or "original" Coke.

But the company elected the most dramatic approach. Was corporate culture a factor?

Quite possibly. Since becoming in 1981, Roberto C. Goizueta aggressively, buying Colu-
dustries, Inc., introducing then Cherry Coke. "H-
life into the com-
Meyers, author
Power
nue."
are
R

r.
re-
said
of th
mark-
have!

References

- BLOOMFIELD, L., *Language*, Holt, Rinehart, Winston, New York, 1966.
CHOMSKY, N., *Topics in the Theory of Generative Grammar*, Mouton, The Hague, 1966.
GARNIER, G., *Linguistique et traduction*, Paradigme, Caen, 1985.
GUILLAUME, G., unpublished manuscript for the lecture of January 28, 1960.
GUILLAUME, G., *Foundations for a Science of Language*, Benjamins, Amsterdam, 1984.
HIRTLE, W., "-Ed Adjectives like 'verandahed' and 'blue-eyed'" in *Studia Neophilologica* (41), 1969.
HIRTLE, W., *Number and Inner Space*, Presses de l'Université Laval, Québec, 1982.
JESPERSEN, O., *A Modern English Grammar*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1954.
LEECH, G., *Meaning and the English Verb*, Longman, London, 1971.
MITTINS, W.H., *A Grammar of Modern English*, Methuen, London, 1962.
SAUSSURE, F. de, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Payot, Paris, 1955.
SAVIN, H.B., "Every any means every" in *Problèmes actuels en psycho-linguistique*, Editions CNRS, Paris, 1974.
VALIN, R., *La méthode comparative en linguistique historique et en psychomécanique du langage*, Presses de l'Université Laval, Québec, 1964.
WICKENS, M., *The -s Morpheme of the Plural in English*, forthcoming.