

Do – One Sign, One Meaning?

Walter Hirtle

Fonds Gustave Guillaume, Université Laval

Un signe de langue recouvre, en tout état de cause, un psychisme, et ce psychisme présente régulièrement le caractère d'être un mouvement, non pas un état.¹ (Gustave Guillaume 1987: 52-53)

Do is one of the most remarkable verbs in English. A clear indication of this is the difficulty it poses for ESL students, who, even after much effort to acquire its meaning, can be heard uttering sentences like:

- (1) *I nearly *did* a mistake.

Such errors, probably arising from an overgeneralization, are quite comprehensible given the fact that teachers often insist on how general *do* is, in an effort to give some idea of its meaning, which is so difficult to describe. Expressions of the type *to do an assignment* or *to do the dishes* cause little trouble since they are sufficiently concrete to be readily paraphrasable and often to have a convenient corresponding expression in the student's mother tongue. However when expressions like *to do Shakespeare* or *to do London* arise it is not so easy to provide a satisfactory paraphrase to help learners grasp just what we have in mind when we use them. And when confronted with intransitive usage in expressions like *to do without* or *to make do* or *What's doing?* a teacher can do little but suggest a vague, general type of meaning for *do*, so vague and general in fact that it may well appear to students to be an

invitation to use this verb for representing any process. And yet when they do so they overgeneralize and make mistakes like that in (1).

To describe the meaning of *do* in its full verb usage is no easy task.² One of the most promising ways of approaching the problem is by means of comparison – by comparing the range of applicability of *do* here with that of other verbs, and with other uses of *do* itself. It is well known that much the same range or semantic space as that mapped out by the comprehension of verbs like French *faire* and Spanish *hacer* is divided between *make* and *do* in English. Thus in English we *do* a problem but *make* a mistake, we *do* the cooking but *make* dinner, we *make* a mess but *do* the cleaning. Things are not always so clear-cut, however, since one can either *make* the beds or *do* the beds, *make* one's rounds or *do* one's rounds, *make* a dive or *do* a dive, *make* time or *do* time, though in each of these pairs the sense varies, if only slightly, according to the verb used. Clearly neither *make* nor *do* is sufficiently general to represent all processes in this type of use. To provide an adequate basis for teaching these two verbs, the meaning of each one and their respective range of applicability must be discerned and described with some precision, a task that can be done only through a careful and extensive analysis of usage.

From what has just been said, it seems clear that the lexical meanings of *make* and full verb *do*, though very close in many cases, are distinct. It seems equally clear that in the type of use just mentioned the lexical meaning of *do* is often more abstract than that of *make*, and so it has been called "a general-purpose agentive transitive verb" (Quirk et al. 1985: 138). And yet, abstract though this general factotum sense may be, it cannot be generalized to include the sort of processes represented by *make*. One of the most penetrating attempts to distinguish the two verbs, that in Tobin (1993), brings this out by characterizing *make* as "marked" for 'result' and *do* as "unmarked" for 'result', but this still leaves us with the task of discerning what meaning full verb *do* actually does express, what it is marked for, to explain why it is not simply a generic of *make*, capable of replacing it. It is not the purpose of this paper to pursue this task further, to undertake the extensive examination of different particular uses this would entail. Rather I want to call attention to a curious fact of usage concerning *do* and to follow up the line of thought it opens up.

It is of considerable interest to observe another use of main verb *do* where it appears that *do* can substitute for many other verbs, including *make*. Variouslly called the vicarious, substitute, pro-predication, pro-form or suppletive use, it can be illustrated as follows:

- (2) I was so nervous about making a mistake that I nearly *did* so.
- (3) We asked him to make dinner and he *did* so.

This use with *so* is one of the most frequent where *do* suppletes for another verb, though it can also do so with *it* and *that* (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 874ff. for details). Such examples show that main verb *do* in its suppletive use has a wider field of application than in its general factotum uses. The significance of this observation can be seen if we relate it to the traditional view concerning comprehension and extension: the greater a word's lexical import, the more restricted its range of applicability, and vice versa. From this it follows that in its suppletive use the meaning of *do*, its comprehension, is more general, more abstract than in the full-verb type of use discussed above.

We have here a result of what has been called dematerialization, the historical process of obtaining a more generalized meaning by withdrawing something from the comprehension of a word, from its lexical matter. The result in this case is that, as a main verb, *to do* can be used either with its dematerialized, lexically lightened meaning as a suppletive verb or with its full meaning as a general factotum verb — though even its "full" meaning is, as we have seen, far more abstract than that of most other verbs. From this it appears that in the vocabulary of any speaker of English *do* is an item offering the possibility of two distinct actualizations of its meaning. Actualized to give the full materialization of its lexeme, which can then be opposed to *make*, it expresses in an abstract way a wide, but not unlimited, range of processes. Actualized to give a less than full materialization of its lexeme, *do*, no longer opposable to *make*, is more general in meaning and can apparently supplete for any verb expressing a process. The semantic problem posed by these remarks is, obviously, one of polysemy: *do* can express two different senses, the difference between the two consisting, presumably, in the element of signification originally withdrawn from the comprehension of the full meaning of *do* to produce the meaning of the suppletive.

Granted some such semantic link between the two senses, we are here confronted with a case of polysemy.³ The approach adopted here, Guillaume's theory known as the Psychomechanics of Language, postulates that in such cases there exists one underlying meaning potential giving rise to both. This

potential meaning in liaison with its potential sign constitutes the word,⁴ which is stored as a unit of potentiality in tongue (cf. Saussure's *langue*), the subconscious language system. As a potential, a word's meaning permits speakers to represent a certain range of impressions arising in whatever experience they wish to talk about. In fact it is precisely because words exist as potentials that we are able to represent and express by means of a limited vocabulary our unlimited and endlessly varied experience of the moment (cf. Hirtle 1993). As we shall see, the term "potential" is intended to indicate that meaning in tongue involves not just a feature or core of meaning common to different senses but also the operative conditions necessary to realize it in discourse through one or other of these senses, or actual meanings.⁵

Granted the commonplace that we have to think in order to speak, it follows that part of this mental activity is the operation of calling to the threshold of consciousness, actualizing, one of the senses made possible by the potential meaning. Granted further that, like any other operation, this one takes time – though, being a mental operation, the time it takes is so short we cannot be conscious of it or even measure it – the theory further postulates that it is this *operative time* that makes it possible for the mind to obtain different results from the operation of actualization. That is to say, the fact that the beginning and the end of the preconscious process of actualizing meaning are separated by a positive stretch of time permits the mind to intercept its own operation at the point corresponding to the degree of actualization intended in order to represent the experience one has in mind, the intended message.⁶ Thus, intercepting the operation as soon as it begins would result in a sense involving minimal actualization, whereas intercepting it at its end would result in a maximally actualized sense.

Guillaume (1987: 53) expresses this as follows (my translation):

a sign considered in tongue is the symbol of a movement, and of the whole of this movement. But if we consider the sign in discourse, it never represents the whole movement, but only one state of suspension of this movement, obtained by means of cutting across the very progressing of the movement considered, interrupting it early or late. The principle, altogether general in its bearing, that the linguistic sign in tongue overlies a dynamic development finds an interesting application where it is a question of auxiliaryhood, of the way a verb goes from the state of being a [main] verb to the state of auxiliary.

We shall now apply this general principle to the diverse uses of *do*. Within this operational, psychomechanical, framework, the *ideogenesis* of main verb *do*, i.e. the process of materializing its lexeme, appears to manifest two different interceptions, an earlier one giving rise to the partly materialized sense of the suppletive and a later one giving rise to the fully materialized sense of the full verb. To permit us to understand fully what is going on here, however, we have yet to describe what is added to the meaning of *do* between the two interceptions. That is to say, the key to the problem lies in discerning the lexical element differentiating the two actual meanings, because it appears that the ideogenesis of *do* is held up either before this element is materialized or once it has been materialized. Thus we are brought back to a problem of observation: observing not only the meaning of the full verb, but also that of the suppletive.

Although results are not at present sufficiently confirmed to provide a complete answer to this problem, we can throw some light on the meaning of the suppletive by comparing it with the use of *do* as an auxiliary, a more frequent use than the two main verb uses with which we have been concerned so far. A word of caution is necessary here however because it is not always easy to distinguish between suppletive and auxiliary uses. Visser (1970: 167), for example, lists as cases of "vicarious *to do*" any use without an infinitive or direct object. This leads him to include tag questions, short answers (*Yes I do*) and the like in spite of the fact that *do* in many such cases can take the negation directly, a sure sign of the auxiliary in Modern English. Thus it is clear that in (4) and (4') we have the auxiliary:

- (4) Yes I *do*.
- (4') No I *don't*.

On the other hand, we can say (3) with the suppletive, but not (3'):

- (3') *We asked him to make dinner but he *didn't* so.

Rather, to negate (3) we must use both auxiliary *do* and suppletive *do* as in:

- (3'') We asked him to make dinner but he *didn't do* so.

This confusion between the two uses is found in other authors besides Visser and indicates the need for describing the contexts where suppletive *do* is found and the criteria for distinguishing between it and auxiliary *do*. For Quirk et al (1985: 879) "The major criterion for distinguishing these two is that the main verb *do* has nonfinite forms." Erades (1975: 162-163), on the other hand, establishes a semantic difference. He makes a clear distinction on the level of expressive effect between the suppletive, which merely recalls an activity already expressed, and the auxiliary, which "is used to express some comparison, contrast or opposition with respect to what has been said before." It would lead us too far afield to examine the crucial relation between these two distinguishing characteristics of the auxiliary, and so it must suffice for present needs to restrict comments to uses of suppletive and auxiliary which are clearly distinguishable. For the needs of the topic of the present article, I wish rather to focus on a third distinguishing characteristic: the fact that the range of usage, the semantic space of the auxiliary is not the same as that of the suppletive nor that of the full verb.

Our concern is to compare the lexical matter of suppletive *do*, which, as we have seen, is even more dematerialized than that of full verb *do*, with the lexical residue⁷ of auxiliary *do*. We can begin as we did above, by comparing the range of usage of the suppletive with that of the auxiliary. We have seen that *do* can supplete for verbs of activity, as in:

- (5) I asked her to learn that poem and she *did* so.
- (6) He always wanted to buy an Alfa Romeo and finally he *did* so.

Although it has a wide range of usage, it cannot be used in the following cases:

- (7) *I asked her to know that poem and she *did* so.
- (8) *He always wanted to own an Alfa Romeo and he finally *did* so.

The restriction appears to arise from the lexical difference between *learn* and *buy* on the one hand, and *know* and *own* on the other. According to Quirk et al (1985: 878-879) *do* cannot supplete for verbs expressing a state but only for verbs with "dynamic meaning". Auxiliary *do*, on the other hand, is not restricted in this way, being available for use with verbs expressing either a

dynamic event as in:

(5a) I asked her to learn the poem and she *did*. (cf. ... but she *didn't*)

(6a) He always wanted to buy an Alfa Romeo and finally he *did*.

or a stative event as in:

(7a) I asked her to know that poem and she *did*.

(8a) He always wanted to own an Alfa Romeo and he finally *did*.

Thus auxiliary *do* can be used for stative as well as dynamic events. The fact that it has an even wider range of application than suppletive *do* is clear evidence that its residual lexical matter is even more general, even more dematerialized than that of the suppletive. This establishes a third degree of dematerialization of the lexical content. That is to say, with regard to full verb *do*, which can express a wide range of activities but not those expressed by means of *make*, suppletive *do*, which can substitute for any verb with dynamic meaning must be more dematerialized; and the auxiliary must be at an even greater degree of dematerialization since it can be used with any verb, stative or dynamic, provided it has an infinitive to provide a lexical refill.

Again the problem arises of discerning the element of meaning which has been withdrawn to permit the auxiliary to reach this extreme degree of dematerialization.⁸ Here we are in a better position to spot what we are looking for because the circumstances of usage are more clearly defined: usage restricted to dynamic events as opposed to usage with both dynamic and stative events. Thus it is a matter of finding what element is particular to dynamic events, what distinguishes them from statives. Before undertaking this, however, a more adequate terminology will be adopted. "Dynamic" and "stative" are terms which designate the most common expressive effects resulting from uses of the simple form of the verb but they do not depict what gives rise to these expressive effects, namely the different ways of representing an essential component of every verb: the duration of its event, its *event time*. What characterizes a dynamic event is the impression of development, the impression that each instant of the event's duration may involve a change, that the event consists of a series of different phases; the term *metaphase* has been

adopted to characterize this manner of viewing the duration of an event.⁹ What characterizes a stative event, on the other hand, is an impression of no development, an impression that each instant of the event's duration involves the same situation, that the event consists of a repetition of the same phase throughout the series of instants making up its duration; this manner of viewing the duration of an event is called *monophase*. These more abstract terms characterize certain uses more adequately than do the traditional terms,¹⁰ but their main justification is that they name the way event time is represented, one of the conditions for producing the observed expressive effect, rather than merely the observed expressive effect itself.

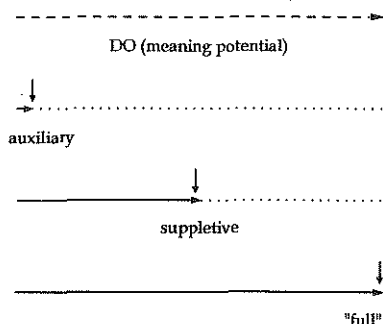
Our problem, then, is to determine the relation between the suppletive, which can provide only a metaphase representation of event time, and the auxiliary, which can serve for either metaphase or monophase representations. It seems clear that the relation between the instants of a monophase event is not the same as that between the instants of a metaphase event — the one involving a mere persistence in time of the same phase, the other an actualization of different phases — and that this difference is at the basis of the widespread distinction in English between dynamic and stative expressive effects (see Hirtle 1987). More precisely, whereas each instant of a monophase event provides for actualizing the same situation, as though there were no possibility of anything intervening between the instants of such events, each instant of a metaphase event makes it possible to actualize some development or change, something new, as though there were the possibility of something intervening between one instant and the next. It is this latter manner of depicting the duration of an event which appears to characterize the meaning of *do* as a suppletive.

Auxiliary *do* goes beyond this monophase/metaphase difference and keeps only what is common to both representations, namely the series of instants making up the duration of the particular event. This, then, appears to be what constitutes the residual lexical content of the auxiliary, its abstract meaning: a stretch of time represented as the duration of an event, whether it be monophase or metaphase.¹¹ Viewed in this way, the auxiliary's meaning is certainly abstract since we can never have the actual experience of a stretch of duration without some event going on. On the other hand, this meaning can be seen to be the outcome of a process of generalization from experience. In fact, our experience of any happening whatsoever necessarily involves an impression of extension in time, of duration. By leaving aside whatever is

particular to any given happening, be it an activity or a state, one is left with only what is common to all happenings, namely a stretch of duration. Auxiliary *do* provides a representation of this impression arising from our experience of every happening, but this impression is so general that *do* auxiliary by itself cannot represent any particular happening and so calls for an infinitive to provide a lexical refill. In short, auxiliary *do* exemplifies a *ne plus ultra* of dematerialization in the field of the verb, and one can understand why so many scholars have overlooked its residual matter and come to consider it to have no meaning at all.¹²

Thanks to this view of *do* auxiliary, there emerges a picture of *do* as a verb in tongue permitting three degrees of materialization in discourse: as a full verb opposable to *make*, as a suppletive verb capable of replacing any verb expressing a metaphase event and as an auxiliary capable of representing the duration of any event. From the point of view of a potential act of language — of the system of tongue ready for, but not engaged in, an act of language — *do* provides a permanent potential for representing duration, event time, in three distinct ways, each permitting a different type of use. That is to say, the potential meaning of *do* includes not only the impressions required to give a mental representation of an unfolding stretch of time within any event (its “common core”) but also the operational program required to actualize this in the three ways described above. From an operative point of view, from the point of view of an act of language starting with *do* as a permanent potential in tongue for representing duration, this entails the process of actualizing the meaning to give rise to one of the three different actual meanings, i.e. one of the senses made possible by the potential meaning. Every time *do* is used, the sense corresponding best to the intended message, to what the speaker has in mind to talk about, is actualized. Held up at its very beginning, at the point when the materialization of the lexeme has barely begun, the operation of ideogenesis gives rise to the minimal matter of the auxiliary: a series of instants representing the prospective duration of the event expressed by the infinitive, whether monophase or metaphase. Held up at some intermediate point, where the materialization of the lexeme is partly realized, it gives rise to the incomplete matter of the suppletive: a series of instants representing the duration of a metaphase event already expressed. Held up at its final point, where the materialization of the lexeme is fully realized, it gives rise to the complete matter (complete for *do*!) of the full verb, opposable to that of *make*. The consequence of the triple possibility of materializing the lexeme in this

way is the degree of generality of the resulting sense: duration of either type, metaphase duration, a certain type of metaphase duration. This in turn conditions the range of application, as observed above: the auxiliary has a range extending to verbs as a whole; the suppletive has a range limited to metaphase events; the full verb has a range further limited to a certain (as yet ill-defined) set of activities. This operational program along with its three possible implementations can be depicted by means of the following diagram:



Starting from a basic tenet of the Psychomechanics of Language according to which a word exists as a potential in tongue and undergoes a process of actualization before its actual existence in discourse can be heard, or observed, I have attempted to see if *do* is one verb in English, if all its uses are conditioned by a single potential meaning involving one operation of lexical materialization. I have tried to show that its three uses are dependent on three different but related meanings in discourse which can be engendered through intercepting at three different moments the same operation of ideogenesis, an operation actualizing different representations of duration or event time. This conclusion remains hypothetical because at the moment several points require clarification. Thus the actual meaning of full verb *do* has yet to be clearly discerned and the conditions of usage of the suppletive have yet to be described and explained from the point of view adopted here. Furthermore, the grammatical question of the relation between *do* as auxiliary and as main verb in the light of the operational potential presented here has yet to be discussed in a more general context including *be* and *have*. On the other hand, the effects that the meaning described here has on the usage of *do* auxiliary have been presented in a recent study (Hirtle 1997), where an explanation for the uses of *do* in positive, negative and interrogative contexts is proposed. This study also

discusses effects on the morphological level, and particularly why *do* auxiliary requires an infinitive to form a verb compound but itself has no nonfinite forms.

Because various points remain to be clarified, the present study must be considered exploratory, indicative of the lines of investigation to be followed to verify the hypotheses put forward. Nonetheless, the evidence arising from various uses examined thus far points to the conclusion that *do* really is a single word with one meaning potential in liaison with its potential sign. Thus we are led to propose both the polysemy and the monosemy of *do*. As a reality of usage, its polysemy is discernible by anyone willing to take the trouble to observe how full verb, suppletive and auxiliary differ in range of application. To explain how one sign can express these closely linked meanings, we are led to postulate its monosemy as a reality in the unconscious mind of the speaker, as a unit of potentiality in tongue to represent duration. All of this brings further confirmation to the one sign/one meaning principle provided we recognize that this univocal relationship exists in language "at a deep level in the mind, at the *level of potentiality*," i.e. in tongue, and not in language as actualized discourse, which "is not seated deep enough in our minds to be other than momentary" (Guillaume 1984: 91).

Notes

1. A sign in tongue always overlies something mental, and this mental component regularly has the character of a movement, not a state.
2. To avoid confusion, it should be pointed out that the term *meaning* is used here, not in the sense of Firth or Malinowski ("Meaning ... exists in the sound's relation to the context") but rather in a Saussurean sense of a word's mental import to the sentence. It will be argued below that a word's mental import to any particular sentence is one of the word's possible senses, the sense most appropriate for the context. Each use of a word thus calls for an actualization of one of the possibilities made available by the word's semantic range, its meaning potential.
3. That is, we are not here confronted with two homonyms, two words with identical signs but quite unrelated meanings, e.g., *pool* (the game vs. the body of water).
4. No attempt is made here to include a discussion of a third necessary component in a word, the systemic grammatical meaning which provides a mental form for the lexical matter of a word.

5. The distinction of terms is important. Expressions like "common feature," "core meaning," "central meaning" and the like reflect what is observed in usage. "Potential meaning," on the other hand, calls to mind the conditions permitting the results observed in usage and so obliges us to think in terms of the mental operations required to obtain each of the results observed to arise from the potential (cf. Hirtle 1989). As Guillaume's earliest studies make clear, this involves a purposive view, a teleological factor, because the speaker actualizes the potential in order to obtain as adequate a representation as possible of the momentary experience constituting his intended message. By thus focusing on causal factors of observed senses, analysis in terms of potential meaning gets beyond the descriptive to the explanatory in the line of scientific enquiry.
6. This crucial point concerning the mental operations (psycho-mechanisms) of language is what distinguishes Guillaume's theory from others. It is probably what is most difficult to appreciate in a first approach to the theory since it entails a paradigm shift, requiring one to think everything in language – and this includes lexemes, morphemes, systems, syntax – in terms of an operation: either as the possibility of an operation in tongue, or as the carrying out of an operation during an act of language or as the result of an operation in discourse. To illustrate the point, I like to evoke an analogy with a physical operation, the opening of one's mouth. Assuming there is a capacity to do so, it is easily seen that this potential can be actualized minimally by intercepting the operation as it begins (e.g., in order to drink with a straw); it would be fully actualized if intercepted as it ends (e.g., when at the dentist's); it can be partially actualized if intercepted anywhere in between the beginning and the end according to the needs of the moment. The point here is that some sort of mental activity in view of an intended result must have preceded and triggered the physical activity of opening one's mouth, and that this mental operation is somehow analogous to the different ways of actualizing the physical operation.
7. I use "residue" by anticipation here. It is intended to suggest that there is some lexical matter left in the auxiliary, but so little that it is often considered to be meaningless.
8. The process of dematerialization alluded to here is diachronic, the mind's attempt to get a more and more general representation of time attached to a sign. The result of this historical development is the highly abstract meaning of *do* auxiliary in English today (see Hirtle 1997), what is acquired on learning English as a mother tongue. In synchrony, when using *do*, a speaker materializes it to a greater or less extent depending on the use intended.
9. The term "metaphase event" is intended to include any type of dynamic event, variously called "actions," "processes," "occurrences," "activities," "achievements", "accomplishments", etc.
10. An example like *Time marches on* clearly involves a monophasic representation of the event, but it is not immediately clear how to characterize its expressive effect, dynamic or stative.

11. I am not taking into account here what distinguishes *do* from the equally abstract auxiliaries *be* and *have*.
12. Even those who assign *do* auxiliary the grammatical meaning of a verb often consider that it has no lexical meaning at all, a view that does not take into account that, by its systemic nature, a word in English consists of a lexical matter and a grammatical form, as well as a physical sign.

References

- Erades, P. A. 1975. *Points of Modern English Syntax*. Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger.
- Guillaume, Gustave. 1984. *Foundations for a Science of Language*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins.
- Guillaume, Gustave. 1987. *Leçons de linguistique de Gustave Guillaume 1947-1948, série C: Grammaire particulière du français et grammaire générale III*. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval et Lille, Presses Universitaires de Lille.
- Hirtle, Walter H. 1987. "Events, Time and the Simple Form", *Revue québécoise de linguistique* 17: 85-106.
- Hirtle, Walter H. 1989. "The Challenge of Polysemy." In Yishai Tobin (ed), *From Sign to Text: A semiotic view of communication*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 135-141.
- Hirtle, Walter H. 1993. "The Word: *Why?*" In André Crochetière, Jean-Claude Boulanger and Conrad Ouellon (eds), *Proceedings of the XVth International Congress of Linguists, vol 1*. Sainte-Foy: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 47-58.
- Hirtle, Walter H. 1997 "Do auxiliary – a meaningful support and operator", *Lingua* 100: 111-149.
- Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London and New York: Longman.
- Tobin, Yishai. 1993. *Aspect in the English Verb: Process and result in language*, London and New York: Longman.
- Visser, F. Th. 1970. *An Historical Syntax of the English Language, Part 1*. Leiden: Brill.