

## THE SCIENCE OF LANGUAGE AND GUSTAVE GUILLAUME

Perhaps only those who are already acquainted with the work of Gustave Guillaume will appreciate the full significance of this volume, *Langage et Science de Langage*<sup>1</sup>. Though relatively few in number, Guillaume's articles appeared over such a long period (some twenty years) and in such a variety of reviews that by making them all easily accessible this collection renders signal service to the ever-increasing number of scholars interested in the theory of the Psychomechanics of Language.

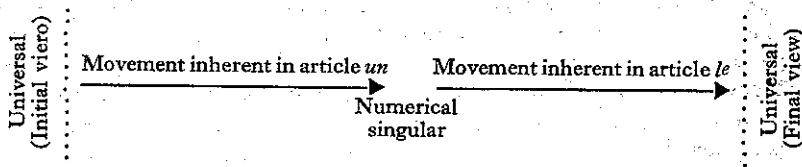
But it is to those who have little or no knowledge of Guillaume's works that this small volume offers the most exciting prospects. Before them lies the adventure of seeing for the first time through the eyes of the explorer who discovered them some of the marvellous processes underlying the phenomenon of language. The astonishment occasioned by a first reading of Guillaume often awakens the feeling that "this is too good to be true." Indeed, it may require, at first, a sort of "willing suspension of disbelief", a refusal to be incredulous, until one has become sufficiently involved in the game to be able to appreciate its rules. And then it comes as a satisfying surprise that these rules are, in the final analysis, those of the twentieth century's favorite game : science.

Though Guillaume was certainly a pioneer, he did not start from scratch. Linguistics, like biology and archaeology, became a modern science in the nineteenth century when its object came to be viewed as something existing not merely in space but also in time. This new view meant the treating of language as a spatio-temporal reality, and provided the axes by means of which the development of languages could be plotted. Nor was the tracing of this development limited to the coordinates found in historical records. States of language that had never been directly observed were plotted with the scientific certainty that they could not have been otherwise.

Guillaume's great merit lay in taking this method, hitherto applied only to the historical development of languages, and applying it to the act of language. He realized that language does not exist for the individual speaker outside of time, as a synchronic abstraction. The language act is, like any other natural phenomenon, a spatio-temporal reality, an event whose existence takes up a length of time. During the stretch of time, short though it may be, in which the act of language takes place, there is a development, an operation, whose result can be directly observed. This result provides the raw material for descriptive grammars as we know them. But the mental operations that produce this result must also be described if the phenomenon in its

1. Librairie A. G. Nizet (Paris) and Presses de l'Université Laval (Québec) with a foreword by R. L. WAGNER and an introduction by R. VALIN, 286 p., 18 F.

singular from the universal, and also toward the universal from the singular.) The two movements, or rather double movement since the second arises at the moment the first expires, provide the content of the two articles *un* and *le* respectively. This system in *langue* can be diagrammed thus :



When used with a noun in a particular sentence, however, an article has a single effective extension, not the whole range of possible extensions from the universal to the singular. This means that when the system in *tongue* is put to use, the double movement away from the universal toward the singular and then away from the singular toward the universal is held up at the point, early or late, which provides the particular extension required by discourse at the moment. Thus if the movement underlying *un* is intercepted very early in its course so that an approach to the singular is momentarily prohibited, *un* will carry into discourse a general idea of considerable extension : *Un enfant est toujours l'ouvrage de sa mère*. But if this same mental operation is allowed to run to its goal, the same article, *un*, will express a very restricted extension : *Un homme entra, qui avait l'air hagard*. Similarly, if the movement *le* is stopped immediately after it starts, the value of a singular will be found in discourse : *L'homme était entré et s'était assis au coin du feu*. When the movement toward the universal is intercepted very late in its course, at its last instant, it provides a maximum extension : *L'homme est mortel*. It is of course possible to arrest these movements at points between their first and last instants and so give rise to innumerable other values to meet the insatiable demands of discourse.

This system thus provides for all possible extensions and, by the same token, for all possible values of the articles in discourse. But this does not satisfy Guillaume. There are finer differences which require an explanation : for example, the anaphoric element which characterizes some uses of *le*, but never those of *un*. Since the singular must have already been attained and the movement of separation from it started in order to give rise to *le*, any reference to the singular must be retrospective with the definite article. In the case of *un*, the movement is toward the singular, so that the reference is prospective. As a result *le* may have an anaphoric nuance (provided the movement is not intercepted too far from the singular) while *un* cannot.

Again, the use of *un* and *le* to express a universal gives rise to different nuances :

Un soldat français sait résister à la fatigue.

Le soldat français sait résister à la fatigue.

Once more the simple system in *langue* provides the explanation. *Un*, which carries the mind toward the singular, offers the distant prospect of a singular

even when the movement is held up before it gets any appreciable distance away from the universal. As a consequence, in the first example above there is the suggestion that the speaker has a typical example in the back of his mind. In other words, *un* may have a maximum extension thanks to its position (the approach to the singular is prohibited) but it remains "anti-extensive" by its very nature — a movement toward the singular. *Le*, on the other hand, carries the mind toward the universal so that in the second example above there is no suggestion of a singular, neither through position nor through movement. *Le* provides a homogeneous universal. Such uses are instructive because they show the extreme values to which the system at its limit positions can give rise.

Taking advantage of certain questions concerning the historical side of the problem, Guillaume goes on to show that a knowledge of the article system in Modern French sheds considerable light on its historical development. Thus, for example, the earliest values of *un* and *le* were those that arise from intercepting the movement very close to the numerical singular. Only gradually did each article become apt to express values further and further removed from the singular. The generalizing values were historically the last to arise. Such considerations lead Guillaume to express the wish for closer cooperation between historical and theoretical linguists.

Lack of space prevents us from sketching, even summarily, the secondary development of the article system: the ill-fated attempt to express internal plurality by means of *uns*; the mechanism underlying the partitive article and its place in the system; the part played by zero article in Modern French. Nor can we do more than mention in passing the elegant explanations of the differences between examples like the following: *les yeux, les œils; boire de bon vin, boire du bon vin; beaucoup de personnes, bien des personnes; parler de la politique, parler de politique, parler politique*. Suffice it to say that, by describing the place in the system of each of the articles in French and by accounting for such delicate nuances of their use in discourse<sup>1</sup>, Guillaume shows that his theory of the article works.

Another result of this confronting of theory and directly observable facts is the growing conviction that Guillaume's works have an unassailable coherence. Whether one is concerned with the system of the article in French or the roots of the verb *aller*; with the apparently broader problems of aspect, declension or auxiliary verbs; with such general questions as the making of a grammatical system or the mental relations between such a system and the signs which are used to express it — in all these questions and many others, the same principles underlie the discussion and the same concept of language is mirrored in the conclusions. This coherence is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that Guillaume's concept of the nature of language took form gradually over the years and was made explicit only after the various studies on more particular problems had been published<sup>1</sup>.

1. The reader curious for more ample verification than can be provided in an article or two is invited to consult Guillaume's first volume, *Le problème de l'article et sa solution dans la langue française* (Hachette, 1919).

2. The articles are here presented in chronological order of their publication, except for the first which has never before been published.

The various parts of the theory, following necessarily on his general view of language, are then not only rigorously consistent among themselves but also in harmony with the perceivable details of discourse. These two facts provide a convincing argument for the scientific validity of Guillaume's theory. They also light up the path to be followed by those who wish to push Guillaume's analysis into hitherto unexplored fields. In the experience of more than one such scholar, it is almost uncanny to remark the extent to which Guillaume's insights foreshadow new finds.

It is a pity that in spite of his tireless efforts Guillaume never did publish what is surely the crowning achievement of a very productive life : the inclusion, as an integral and necessary part of his theory, of the major steps taken by human language as it has progressed through historical time away from its original primitiveness. We saw above that as Guillaume attacked broader and broader problems he was led to crystallize his notions concerning the nature of language. It was only in the last years of his life that he was able to situate this view of language in the vastness of its historical perspective. The resulting theory is of sufficient generality to provide a place both for the mechanisms underlying the act of language as revealed by his own analyses, and for the historical development of languages as revealed by the analyses of comparative grammar. In other words, Guillaume's theory presents language, not as *disjecta membra*, but as a living whole. It is seen as a single phenomenon whether we examine it from the point of view of its history or of its use by the individual speaker. This approach does, after all, correspond to reality : the language we use is not something different from the language which has developed over the ages. Precisely because it provides a view of language as it really is, as a spatio-temporal reality, this theory is very daring.

Unfortunately there is hardly more than a passing allusion to this grandiose view of human language in Guillaume's published writings. He did, however, dwell on it at some length in his lectures at the *Ecole pratique des Hautes Etudes*, so that it is in his lecture notes that we must seek his ideas in written form. The task of reading his notes, covering twenty years of classes, and preparing them for publication is an enormous one. It is to be hoped that these labours, which are already under way, will bear fruit in the not too distant future. Equally to be desired is a volume which would regroup Guillaume's teachings and present them not in the order of discovery, but in such a way as to bring out the orderly procession of his theory, by emphasizing its underlying coherence. Such a treatise, invaluable both for the beginner and for those who are already familiar with the theories of Guillaume, would provide a context for the present collection by bringing out much that necessarily remains implicit in a short article. In the meantime, the reader, be he novice or initiate, will find that the present volume both provides ample food for reflection and whets his appetite in preparation for a further portion of Guillaumian fare.

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