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## THE REST OF THE ICEBERG EXPLORING THE OPERATIONAL DIMENSION OF LANGUAGE

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Words do not label things already there.  
Words are like the knife of a carver: they  
free the idea, the thing, from the general  
formlessness of the outside.

Edmund Carpenter<sup>1</sup>

### THE DIMENSIONS OF LANGUAGE

I wonder if you have ever reflected on how long it has taken linguists to discern, even vaguely, the limits of the object of their studies. Not that we have a precise idea of the dimensions of language even today, but I do think we have made some progress. We have all heard of the bad old days when a benighted missionary ("benighted" largely because he was not born in the twentieth century) analyzed some hitherto unrecorded language in terms of the cases, moods and tenses of Latin. Today, everyone deplores this practice, even those who unwittingly analyze some language they do not know in terms of the categories of their mother tongue (often inflated into UG). Nevertheless, it is generally recognized that to grasp the reality of its object linguistics should try to take in the whole spatial dimension of language by extending far beyond the Indo-European languages to embrace, but not strait-jacket, languages of other types throughout the world.

Also widely accepted is the need for linguistics to keep in view the two relationships involved in the temporal dimension of language. At the beginning of the century, Saussure insisted that linguistics must not be limited to the diachronic but must also include the synchronic, lacking which the linguist would fail to see the all-important systemic facet of language which permits us to speak. This doctrine was favourably received and descriptive linguistics soon came into its day. Indeed, the pendulum may have swung too far because when one considers the contemporary scene one gets the impression that many linguists now neglect the historical perspective. Unfortunately, some programs of study reflect this failure to take in the diachronic as well as the synchronic and many graduating students must have the impression that the particular model or set of rules with which they have been indoctrinated springs fully armed from the brain of the ideal speaker (or perhaps from that of the ideal linguist). In spite of such regressions, however, we have made progress because those linguists whose primary interest is to understand the reality of language, rather than create a formal model, realize that what they observe of language, discourse, is the product of a synchronic system, and that this system is itself the outcome of a long diachronic development.

A third dimension which has come into clearer focus in the present century is what I have called elsewhere (1985) the existential dimension. There is nothing new here since language has for many centuries been considered a complex entity consisting of both the physical and the mental, both signs and their meanings, without either of which it cannot exist. What certain scholars did manage to do earlier this century was upset this traditional apple-cart by proposing, in the name of science, that we limit our consideration of language to what is directly observable and measurable. And since we always observe language in the form of sentences, i.e. as discourse, for such scholars language was reduced to "a set of sentences". Not only that. Since we can record and measure the sounds of a sentence but not its meaning, a sentence was then reduced to, in Firth's well known phrase, what "disturbs the air and your eardrums". Although I doubt if any linguists today would defend this extreme of positivism, which banished from linguistics all

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Lowe 1985 (p. 3) from the introduction to *I Breathe a New Song: Poems of the Eskimo*, ed. Richard Lewis.

consideration of meaning, some approaches are still having trouble getting rid of the last traces of "purely formal grammar" and accepting meaning as a full-fledged partner, let alone as the senior partner, in the language enterprise.

That earlier positivist aberration has, by way of reaction, led more and more linguists to take meaning as seriously as the physical form of language had been. A recent discussion with a west coast scholar, Leonard Talmy, gave me a good example of this. He maintained that we must consider meaning as primary — a point I readily agreed with — and then went on to illustrate what he meant. He argued that the "multiplex concept" (an impression of iterativity) can be expressed in a variety of ways: from the plural *-s* of the substantive and adverbs like *often* to the *keep -ing* pattern of the verb (as in *He kept telephoning*). If I have understood him correctly, the fact that the physical means of expression varied was of no consequence since we have here a "gradient". It appeared to me that in attempting to restore meaning to its rightful place he was neglecting the physical form, the sign; if this is so, the pendulum has swung to the other extreme, a position no less detrimental to linguistics. The point I am trying to make is that the linguist interested primarily in the reality of his object, and only secondarily in his theory or model, will take into account both the physical and the mental, will never lose sight of the sign/meaning binarity involved in the existential dimension of language.

To complete this rapid survey of how we try to delimit the object of our study, I shall describe a fourth dimension of language, one which is characteristically twentieth century and is, in fact, inherent in the temporal dimension described above. Since at least the thirties, a growing number of scholars has been interested in the operations lying behind and producing the sentences that constitute the observable, surface manifestations of language. On this continent, partly because of the desire to build a language machine, the main interest has been in syntactic relationships and much time, energy and ingenuity has been expended in attempting to simulate or otherwise account for the mental operations that bring words into relationship with one another. The exciting development here is the widespread recognition, implicit or explicit, that certain mental processes are necessary to produce a sentence, that language has an operational dimension involving mechanisms of thought which, once analyzed, will give us the means of understanding and explaining what we observe. (I suspect that later generations will smile indulgently when they see how long it took us to realize that we have to think in order to speak, just as we have to think in order to walk or even to breathe.) Unfortunately many current attempts to analyze language mechanisms are based on the curious assumption that the constructions of syntax can be analyzed without a prior analysis of the elements composing them, that one can have a theory of the sentence without a theory of the word. As a consequence, this type of analysis has often taken a formalist bent which has led it further and further from the nature of the mental processes proper to language. In short, the operational dimension, the dimension we necessarily exploit every time we speak, consists of two moments — the constructing of words and the constructing of sentences — and a linguist anxious to embrace the reality of language will try to keep the two in view and be ever aware of the relationship between them.

My argument so far is simply this: if linguistics is to help us understand the nature of language, it will make every attempt to be commensurate with its object, to embrace it in at least these four dimensions (cf. *Ibid*:69):

- (1) the spatial dimension, to provide a place for both the Indo-European type and other types of language found on the face of the Earth;
- (2) the temporal dimension, to provide a method valid for analyzing language on both the diachronic and the synchronic axes;
- (3) the existential dimension, to provide a means for dealing with both the mental and the physical in language, both the meaning and the sign;
- (4) the operational dimension, to provide for an analysis of how the speaker constructs both the word and the sentence.

The history of linguistics and the contemporary scene provide numerous examples of scholars neglecting one or the other of the components constituting human language. The future of linguistics, I dare prophesy, lies with those who manage to embrace the whole of this complex reality, which is the object of our science, because the theory

which fails to take into account one or the other part of the iceberg will either move further and further away from its subject and finally lose sight of it, or else suffer the fate of the Titanic.

#### DELIMITING THE OPERATIONAL DIMENSION<sup>1</sup>

It is not easy to delimit any of these dimensions with precision, and perhaps the most difficult to determine is the last, what I have called the operational dimension. I want to focus on this dimension throughout these remarks, restricting comments to a minimal stretch of discourse, a sentence. If you grant that our language produces the appropriate words and sentences every time we want to say something about someone or something, it amounts to recognizing that language is inherently operational. Not only that. If language offers the permanent possibility of producing the appropriate words and sentences, it must also include the means of doing so. That is to say, since this possibility is permanently available to anyone who has acquired his mother tongue, even when he is not speaking or listening; it amounts to postulating the existence of a mechanism making these word-producing and sentence-producing operations possible, a mechanism in the subconscious mind — what some might call a cognitive mechanism, but what I prefer to call, with greater generality, a psychomechanism. This term, first used by Guillaume, came to characterize his theory, the Psychomechanics of Language, the theory providing the background for these remarks.

Quite clearly, one way of delimiting the operational dimension of language is to point out that this subconscious — or better, preconscious — mechanism is necessarily at the beginning of the discourse-producing operation, just as a lawn mower is at the beginning of any operation of mowing the lawn. And this is important because it shows that a description of the word-producing and sentence-producing operations resulting in the discourse one has observed and wishes to explain — the description of these operations, I say, is incomplete until they are traced back to the mechanism permitting them. That is to say, a description of the particular system embodying the psychomechanism involved is essential to our understanding some phenomenon of discourse: to explain a given use of the definite article, for example, it must be traced back to the system of the article described as an operative mechanism; similarly, the metaphorical sense of a lexeme can be explained in linguistics only by tracing it back to the mechanism, permitting one to develop such senses. Of course many scholars have sought and are seeking underlying systems to explain such phenomena — with varying degrees of success. But the very fact of seeking implies that one considers the structure and architecture of a language a necessary pre-condition for any act of language. And this is an important thing to keep in mind if we want to get back to the ultimate linguistic condition for a given sentence.

Important though this recognition may be, however, it is not sufficient to satisfy our curiosity as to why the speaker produced a particular word or sense or syntactic arrangement. Critics of structuralism have often pointed out that there must be something more involved in an operation of discourse-production to account for the specificity of the resulting stretch of discourse. In more general terms, one might say that a description of underlying operative system is a necessary but insufficient condition for explaining observed discourse. What more is required? What else must be present at the beginning of a preconscious act of language to bring into existence that particular sentence?

The problem I am raising here might be put this way: what triggers an act of language? That is, what is it that sets the language mechanism in operation to produce a specific stretch of discourse? What made me produce that last sentence, or this sentence, or this whole talk? Not being the first one to raise this problem, I would like to cite several authors, none of them linguists, who have brought out different aspects of it. First of all a psychologist, William James (1983:245), who appeals to our everyday experience of what precedes an act of language:

<sup>1</sup> A first version of the following remarks appeared in *Mélanges offerts au Cardinal Louis-Albert Vachon*.

Has the reader never asked himself what kind of mental fact is his intention of saying a thing before he has said it? It is an entirely definite intention, distinct from all other intentions, an absolutely distinct state of consciousness, therefore; and yet how much of it consists of definite sensorial images, either of words or of things? Hardly anything! Linger, and the words and things come into the mind; the anticipatory intention, the divination is there no more. But as the words that replace it arrive, it welcomes them successively and calls them right if they agree with it, and rejects them and calls them wrong if they do not. It has therefore a nature of its own of the most positive sort, and yet what can we say about it without using words that belong to the later mental facts that replace it?

It is interesting to note here that James distinguishes two aspects of this prior "mental fact": the intention of saying something and the "thing" to be said, the message. Furthermore he presents this INTENDED MESSAGE as "an absolutely distinct state of consciousness", that is, as something experienced by any speaker. It is a "definite intention" and yet its content is vague and ill-defined, hard to grasp mentally because little of it involves definite images. Even though this content, what the speaker wants to say, may only be divined rather than clearly seen by the mind's eye, it does serve as a sort of background to check the words that come to replace it. Finally, these words, being "later mental facts" — but not yet physical facts — "replace" the intended message, permitting us to talk about it.

I consider this passage from James to be significant for linguists because it helps us discern more precisely the starting point of the act of language, the initial limit of our operational dimension. The intended message is not to be confused with that other necessary pre-condition discussed above, the language mechanism interiorized by the speaker when he learned his mother tongue. For one thing, the system of my language remains the same for me, offers the same possibilities, whatever the sentence I may wish to undertake, whereas what I want to say varies from sentence to sentence. In fact, if, as some would argue, no two experiences, no two states of consciousness are ever absolutely identical, then it follows that the intended message is endlessly variable and this, not only from speaker to speaker but for a single speaker.

There is a second important difference between these two necessary pre-conditions of any act of language, namely where they are to be situated with regard to language. It seems to me obvious, and perhaps most linguists would agree, that our preconscious language mechanisms, as embodied in the system of systems permitting us to produce, to "create" an endlessly varied discourse, are part of our language. On the other hand, the particular experience arising from perception, memory, intellect and/or imagination which constitutes the content of my intended message is quite as clearly outside language. And thank heavens that most of the impressions in our stream of consciousness do not constitute the content of an intended message, or we would have to be talking whenever we are conscious. (It would in fact be a serious pathological disorder if every impression had first to be represented and expressed in language in order for a person to be aware of it.) Another observation will help to illustrate that the intention must exist before the language mechanisms come into play since it triggers their effective operation. It is a common experience to have something to say and to be obliged to wait some time before saying it. (In fact some of you may at this moment have the impression that you do not understand something or that you cannot accept some point but politeness and social convention require you to refrain from languaging this intended message until the question period.) In short, the very awareness of having something to say can only arise before we begin the act of language required to represent and say it.

In our attempt to define as precisely as possible where the operational dimension of language begins, we have identified two necessary pre-conditions: one, outside language, the constantly changing intended message; the other, within the speaker's language, the constant, unchanging mechanism. I should now like to consider what another modern thinker, the philosopher Etienne Gilson, has to say about the intended

message, which he calls "thought in itself", "pure thought" because it constitutes our conscious mental life without any admixture of language:

Tout ce qu'on peut essayer de penser du non-encore-parlé est conditionné par l'impossibilité de le faire sans recourir au langage. La seule chance d'observer la pensée en elle-même serait d'en apercevoir une lueur au moment fugitif où elle descend dans le langage, comme ce rayon vert que jette le soleil couchant au moment de s'enfoncer dans la mer. Mais la pensée devenant langage est déjà langage et d'ailleurs même si l'expérience de la pensée pure était possible, il faudrait user du langage pour la communiquer. On ne peut donc que remonter de la pensée parlée à celle qui se parle, s'efforcer de discerner la future pensée de l'après langage dans celle qui est en train de s'incarner. C'est au moins difficile, car ce que l'on conçoit mal ne peut s'exprimer clairement, mais il n'y aurait pas de langage si cela ne se concevait pas du tout. (*Linguistique et philosophie* pp. 126-127; author's italics)<sup>1</sup>

The most striking point about this passage is the graphic description of what happens at this initial instant when language intervenes: the act of language begins when the intended message slips below the threshold of consciousness to be languaged and thus made communicable. More important, however, the distinction made here between "after-language thought" and "pure" or, as we might say, "before-language thought" provides us with the two external limits between which the act of language unrolls. In this way Gilson evokes clearly what Waldron calls "the central function of human language: ... it mediates between ... experience and conceptual thought."<sup>2</sup>

Such remarks bring into focus the relation, fundamental for a linguist, between thought and language, a relation which, as Gilson implies, involves a double relationship: "thought in itself" before it "descends into language" and conceptual thought arising after the intervention of language. Before-language or "pure" thought is not directly dependent on language for its existence; indeed, it is just the opposite since without some experience to talk about no act of language could possibly get under way, as we saw above. That is, without this "experiential" thought there can be no language, but without language there can be no "conceptual" thought. The stream of conscious impressions making up before-language or experiential thought is usually ill-defined, hard to grasp and in itself unsayable because it does not generally come in sayable units. The system of one's language serves precisely this purpose: to provide the psychic means for REPRESENTING these impressions, for grasping and forming them into conceptual units, as well as the physical means for saying them. These conceptual/sayable units, the elements of after-language or conceptual thought, are called words.

The problem of the role of language in providing conceptual units<sup>3</sup> is posed in a more general way by the following passage from Einstein's *Ideas and Opinions* (p. 327):

<sup>1</sup> All one can try to think concerning the not-yet-spoken is conditioned by the impossibility of doing it without resorting to language. The only chance of observing *thought in itself* would be to catch a glimmer of it at the fleeting moment when it descends into language, like the green ray the setting sun sends out just as it plunges into the sea. But thought becoming language is already language and besides even if the experience of pure thought were possible, it would be necessary to make use of language to communicate it. All one can do then is to work back up from spoken thought to that which is being spoken, doing one's best to discern the future thought of after-language in that which is being embodied. At best, this is difficult because what is poorly conceived cannot be expressed clearly, but there would not be any language if this could not be conceived at all. (My translation)

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Waldron (1985) p. xv. Curiously, Waldron limits pre-language thought to "sense experience", but there seems to be no reason to exclude contributions from other sources such as memory and imagination.

<sup>3</sup> For want of a better term, "conceptual units" is used here to suggest the ordered set of impressions, the representation of experience, constituting the meaning of any word. The term "concept" is used in a more restricted sense, as in traditional usage, for the most highly structured representations such as those expressed by substantives.

What is it that brings about such an intimate connection between language and thinking? Is there no thinking without the use of language, namely in concepts and concept-combinations for which words need not necessarily come to mind? Has not every one of us struggled for words although the connection between 'things' was already clear?

To be noted in passing is the fact that pre-language, experiential thought is not necessarily vague and ill-defined. More important here, however, are the questions evoking the relation between language and thought. At the risk of belabouring my main point beyond your endurance, let me give a two-part answer to the question "Is there no thinking without the use of language?" Yes there is thinking without language, namely what produces before-language thought; no there is no thinking in concepts without language (at least in the sense I am using the term "concept" here) because language is the only means we have of forming concepts from our experience.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, for an idea to enter into rational discourse it must be constructed in the mode of concepts in one's language and given a name. Hence the intimate connection.

Intimate though this connection may be, however, it is not a matter of language simply faxing the intended message. The "struggle for words", a common experience which betokens an important aspect of the double thought-language-thought relation I am talking about, is described in the following scene from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. The passage depicts a character who refrains from waking up a possible interlocutor to begin a conversation because she feels that her intended message cannot be adequately rendered by language.

But one only woke people if one knew what one wanted to say to them. And she wanted to say not one thing, but everything. Little words that broke up the thought and dismembered it said nothing. 'About life, about death; about Mrs. Ramsay' — no, she thought, one could say nothing to nobody. The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low. Then one gave it up; then the idea sunk back again.... For how could one express in words these emotions of the body? express that emptiness there?... It was one's body feeling, not one's mind.

Her intended message — a state of consciousness consisting of thought, emotions, an indefinable idea — exists quite independently of whether or not it is languaged, a fact permitting the subtle discussion of the character's intention to speak. Here then we have a clear case of the necessary prior condition outside language permitting an act of language.

The main point to be brought out by this passage, however, is the relationship between what "she wanted to say" and how words would say it, between, that is, experience and the meaning expressed by a stretch of discourse. Confronted with the extraordinary richness of her particular state of consciousness, the character finds "little words" inadequate because they would break up this complex experience to provide their paltry linguistic representations. This reductionism involved in languaging a particular area of our conscious awareness is often felt by poets and indeed by anyone with something nuanced or complicated to represent and express. As such it provides a clear indication that any representing of a particular experience by means of language involves abstracting from that experience, categorizing its components, even when the speaker's intention is, as in this case, to express it in all its particularity. The important point here is that the meaning of the resulting sentence — "the later mental facts" — is

<sup>1</sup> This is not to limit all conceptual thinking to the strictly verbal, but rather to suggest that without the prior capacity based on language, the ability to think in, say, mathematical concepts could not be acquired. As Einstein observes in the same passage:

We might be inclined to attribute to the act of thinking complete independence from language if the individual formed or were able to form his concepts without the verbal guidance of his environment. Yet most likely the mental shape of an individual, growing up under such conditions, would be very poor.

not simply a replica of the intended message — the "earlier mental facts" — because a linguistic representation is not a mere reproducing but a re-presenting, a presenting in a conceptual manner, which is different from the original presentation made by perception, memory, imagination. Thus the "struggle for words" is an indication of a distance, which may be minimal, between what we have in mind to represent and express and the result of representing and expressing it with the means made available to us by our language.

So far, we have been trying to discern as clearly as possible where the operational dimension of language begins, but the above passage, in evoking the result, also poses the problem of where it ends. One may first be tempted to say that, quite obviously, an act of language ends with the uttering of the final sound or the writing of the final letter of a sentence. But this would be forgetting that language involves both the physical and the mental, and that the physical sign is just a means for evoking a meaning, by definition mental. That is to say, an act of language terminates with meaning. Furthermore, it does not end with the mental content of each individual sign, but with the compilation, or rather the integration of the various meanings expressed by the different words. Whether this is arrived at by interpreting, generating, stratifying, systematizing, functionalizing, making incident, or in some other way is not my concern here. The point is that we end up expressing a sentence meaning, a specific mental content that somehow coheres, forms a whole.

It reminds me of the well known description of a sentence they used to give in school, as "the expression of a complete thought". Although quite inadequate as a definition since it begs the question, this description does correspond to something in our experience: there is a certain sense of notional integration, of a meaningful whole. Indeed, when confronted with a long and complicated sentence, one may even experience a sense of relief on fitting together all its components. And this summatory condition, as it has been called by Guillaume, would appear to be the final moment of an act of language involving one sentence. But this is not the whole story, even for the speaker.

When we speak, we have the impression that our discourse has to do with something outside itself, that we are talking about external reality, reality outside of language.<sup>1</sup> As Roch Valin puts it, in order to have an act of language, someone must say something about someone or something. The "something" one says can easily be identified with the sentence meaning we have just been discussing, but what can the "someone or something" about which it is said be identified with? If our preceding considerations concerning the representation of some experience have not led us astray, it would seem that we can identify it with that experience. Indeed, since we obviously cannot talk about anything that we are not aware of, we can talk about external reality only insofar as it impinges on our experience. That is to say, sentence meaning is always related to something outside language, namely the intended message, which has now, at the end of the operation, become an effected message (effected, it need hardly be said, with widely varying degrees of success). And just as the first moment of the act of language involves bringing experiential thought into relationship with the system of representation, so its final moment involves bringing the sentence meaning produced into relationship with the same content of experience. At this point every speaker hopes that what he has conceptualized and said corresponds closely with what he has in mind to say. At any rate, this is my ardent wish concerning all I have said so far.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR LINGUISTICS

By this time, you may be wondering what these remarks are leading up to. Is this all hair-splitting or does it have some concrete bearing on the problems that we as linguists have to face every day? My whole argument so far has been based on the observations of non-specialists and I have tried not to base my remarks on the postulates of any theory or model. To avoid the impression that what I have said may well concern

<sup>1</sup> I am purposely trying to avoid saying that a sentence talks about "the real world" or "reality" as some authors do because this would suggest to me that the sentence itself is not part of reality.

the ordinary speaker but is of no consequence for the linguist, I would like to bring out a few of the implications involved in the position I have defined.

This position, based on the assumption that meaning is primary in language, is close to what has sometimes been characterized as "the ideational theory of meaning" (cf. Allan 1986:86ff.). Said to derive from Aristotle through John Locke, this theory has been criticized and rejected because the "Ideas" which constitute the meaning of words are "independent of words" and so exist only "in the psyche of the individual" — each individual with his own "Ideas". Obviously, communication would be impossible under such circumstances since the same sign would have a different meaning for each individual. Granted the distinction made above, however, between pre-language, experiential thought, which is independent of words and proper to the psyche of each individual, and conceptual thought made possible by language, the problem can be resolved: it is not our experience itself but our representation of it which constitutes the meaning of words. And since it is through our language that we conceptualize experience, all those who learn the same language have similar means of conceptualizing it and so are able to communicate.

The point of view I have proposed above differs from a related view of language which is fairly widespread, namely that "the function of language is to communicate concepts between people", a view considered by some scholars to be "extremely obvious" (Schank and Kass 1988:182)<sup>1</sup>. Clearly, if one assumes that the role of language is limited to communicating, the operational dimension will be reduced considerably because the whole process of representing the intended message will be excluded. This of course presupposes a very different relationship between thought and language, one where language, something like a telephone system, provides the hardware but is not involved in the message. Reductionist views of this sort leave one with the problem of how concepts come into existence, concepts different for each language and yet similar for each speaker of a given language. The point of view put forward here, that language provides both the means of representing and the means of expressing (hence communicating) what we want to say, supplies the necessary framework for relating individual experience to communicable conceptual units and thus can account for the existence of concepts.

This is not to imply that all the problems involved in language communication have been evoked, let alone solved. Once the operational dimension of language has been examined from the point of view of the speaker, it remains, in good methodology, to examine it from the point of view of the hearer. For the hearer, it is no longer a matter of abstracting conceptual units from an individual experience, but just the reverse: trying to derive the particular experience of the speaker from the sentence meaning just expressed. And since that meaning is never a photocopy of the original, the distance separating the two calls for the hearer to interpret the sentence meaning in the light of the situation, para-linguistic signs, previously acquired knowledge — anything in fact that may hint at what the speaker has in mind. In short, the whole area of pragmatics is involved here, with the delicate and difficult task of determining what is properly linguistic and what is not, of discerning the limits of language.

The approach developed above throws light on another important question in linguistic discussion: the complex problem of the referent. A tendency among linguists and others to consider language a self-contained system cut off from external reality with all its quirks and idiosyncracies has led to considerable discussion of what language refers to, of what it is we talk about. The position adopted here implies that the extra-linguistic, intended message constitutes the immediate referent to which an act of language must be incident if it is to tell us about anything outside of itself. Whether or not the particular experience talked about corresponds to something in extra-mental reality is a very different problem, one we as linguists are ill-equipped to analyze because it involves a

relationship quite outside the limits of language. As such this is not properly a problem for linguistics, so we can, fortunately, leave it others — logicians and psychologists, for example — who are better equipped to deal with it.

Our attempt to define the limits of language in its operational dimension has resulted in a clearer view of the relations between experience and language. It has shown that mental constructs like concepts, and indeed the whole of language, are ultimately drawn from our experience through a process of abstraction. This is, of course, an idea with a long tradition. The fact that so many linguists have lost sight of it and propose innate structures of all sorts to account for mental constructs is due to their restricted field of vision, not to the falsity of the idea that we learn from experience. Failure to trace the act of language to its starting point, where the putting together of words is undertaken, necessarily cuts language off from its beginnings in experience. And this, I would maintain, holds not only in synchrony for every act of language, and in acquiring one's mother tongue, but also in diachrony, throughout the long humanizing construction of the diverse languages we know today. Thus by implication, the point of view that language is the only means we have of forming conceptual units from our experience, of giving the momentary content of our stream of consciousness a certain stability by reducing the complex of impressions to pre-established categories, provides a plausible alternative to current doctrines of innatism. Not that merely adopting this point of view solves the problem of the concept, explains how we acquire the concepts of our language and how a concept is formed in the first place. To do this we must analyze the mechanism permitting us to form concepts, but to my knowledge nobody has yet managed to do this. Everyone is groping in the dark in this respect, but one thing remains clear: only those groping in the right place have a chance of finding what they are looking for.

#### CONCLUSION

The position presented above has been based on our experience of language with no explicit appeal to linguistic theory. Implicit throughout the discussion, however, are the views of Gustave Guillaume, whose pioneering work in exploring the operational dimension of language is as yet little known on this continent. He defines language functionally in terms of a series of three mutations converting what is in itself "unsayable" into "something said".<sup>1</sup> In the following passage, he goes on to describe the first of these mutations, the one we have been most concerned with here, dwelling more on the diachronic than we did above:

Let us now return to the first functional condition met by human language, the mutation of the unsayable into the sayable. We are all acquainted with it: we encounter it when we have to say something subtle, something hard to grasp in our minds. But in the structural history of language, the term *unsayable* applies to something other than what is difficult to express; it applies to what was *before* the sayable existed. What was *before* was human experience, the experience man had from his presence in the physical universe. This experience, because of its vastness, because of its incoherent diversity, because of its internal multiplicity, was not representable and hence not sayable. It belonged to the unsayable. Making it sayable meant resolving its incoherent diversity into series: that lead, that converge into one and the same representation. It is easy to produce examples. Take the experience *tree*: this is a repeated, diverse incoherent experience which, when serialized, leads to the representation *tree*, to making *tree* mentally sayable, and once a suitable sign is found, to making it orally sayable.

<sup>1</sup> This recalls the well known citation from John Locke: The comfort and advantage of society not being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary that man should find out some external sensible signs whereby those invisible ideas which his thoughts are made up of might be made known to others.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Guillaume *Foundations for a Science of Language* (John Benjamins, Amsterdam and New York, 1984, pp. 135ff.)

Elsewhere<sup>1</sup> he expresses the same ideas more succinctly: he describes the act of language as a commuting of our momentary thought into speech. As such, language, for Guillaume, is an eminently human activity, man's means of reducing the turbulence of experiential thought to the relative stability of conceptual thought. In this way language holds a mirror up to experience, permitting reflection, which is our way of getting to know what we think.

Again this is by no means a new idea, and perhaps the final word should be left to the poets. One is reminded here of the reply a poet made when asked if he knew his meaning before he wrote a poem: "How can I know what I mean till I see what I say?" But surely the finest expression of this essentially humanizing role of language is provided by the unchallenged master of the English language when he has Prospero say to Caliban, the semi-human being:

I pitied thee,

Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour  
One thing or other: when thou didst not, savage,  
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like  
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes  
With words that made them known.

(*The Tempest* I, II, 353-358)

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<sup>1</sup> Guillaume, ms. of the lecture for January 28, 1960, f. 2.