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On the obvious ability of people to speak

Walter Hirtle

Ab actu ad posse valet illatio

In a recent note Lamb (1996) argues that we must take into consideration "the obvious ability of people to speak" if we are to reach "an understanding of language that is grounded in reality", implying thereby that the individual's capacity or potential for producing discourse is part of this reality. This way of viewing language, as a dyad, a twofold entity made up of observable sentences and the non-observable ability or potential for producing them, is reminiscent of the *langue—parole* dichotomy proposed by Saussure in 1916, and the competence vs. performance dichotomy proposed by Chomsky nearly fifty years later. Since neither of these proposals has found widespread acceptance, at least in the English speaking world, one may wonder what would justify making an apparently similar one so recently. The question is of interest because it involves, as we shall see, the efforts of linguists throughout the century to find solid bases for linguistics as a science.

It is well known that Saussure had conceived a means of reconstructing the system of vowels in Proto-Indo-European to explain their historical development down to attested examples in the earliest texts of the different Indo-European languages. Imbued with this comparative method in historical linguistics—observing attested examples, trying to understand the data by conceiving some prior state of affairs, explaining the data by describing the process whereby each of the attested examples can develop from the prior system¹—Saussure attempted to adopt the same scientific approach for language in synchrony by eliminating the historical dimension, the temporal parameter. To explain observable *parole*, he proposed *langue* as the necessary state of affairs, the system governing the usage of individual speakers. Saussure's notion of *langue* has been interpreted in different ways, one of which, suggested by Saussure himself (1955: 25, 31, 38, etc.), is that it is the language of the community without the particularities of individual usage, a sort of norm. As such, language-as-*langue* came to be considered an abstraction, a purely theoretical construct which has no observable role to play in actual speaking because the community does not speak, only individuals. In fact, Saussure did not attempt to justify its existence by

working out, as he had done for the theoretical construct in his historical studies, either the system of *langue* or the processes whereby the facts of *parole* could be shown to be the consequences of that system. It is therefore not surprising that his view of *langue* was not widely accepted as part of the reality of language.

Such abstractions were, in any case, given short shrift by most linguists during the heyday of positivism in the English-speaking world. It was not until Chomsky proposed his competence—performance dichotomy that the idea resurfaced, but in a different form: language-as-competence is the prerogative of the ideal speaker. Thus competence, not to be found in any real speaker with his or her limitations and subject to all the accidents involved in producing discourse, is also an idealization. Although it may be a useful conception for some purposes, it is not linked, through the actual operations undertaken by a speaker, to perceivable discourse. That is, both *langue* and competence are pure inventions of the linguist having no existence outside the linguist's imagination, and so providing no description of the speaker's language ability or potential (to use a more general term). Small wonder, then, if the very notion of language-as-a-potential is treated with suspicion, and even outright derision, when such renowned linguists fail to provide a satisfactory account of it.

It remains, however, that two such failures are not sufficient grounds for considering language-as-a-potential to be merely an explanatory expedient with no real existence, something like the ether of nineteenth-century physics. After all, we assume that the notion of a potential is a necessary component of other situations: the moment we see someone riding a bicycle or playing the piano we know that they have acquired the ability to do so and that this ability exists whether that person is actually performing or not. Similarly, when we hear someone speaking, we have no choice but to assume that they have acquired the ability or potential to speak that particular language. That is to say, it is "obvious" for us that language-as-a-potential, far from being just a figment of the linguist's imagination, really does exist in the speaker's mind. Equally obvious, this potential exists whether one is actually involved in speaking or not, being, in fact, a permanent acquisition of any person, barring accidents. Even research on the necessary neurological support in the brain is beginning to provide external evidence that some such mental potential is a reality. That is to say, language-as-a-potential is a permanent, albeit hidden, feature of the linguistic landscape which can be avoided only if we turn our backs to it. It would seem, therefore, that the linguist's imagination can best be employed in attempting to reconstruct this part of reality, and not in wittingly ignoring it.

The real problem for linguistics, then, is not whether this potential exists in the preconscious mind but rather how to come to grips with it—how to analyze it, how to describe it, how to relate it back to observable data—and this problem is inescapable for anyone who wants to understand and explain human language. As in other sciences based on the data of observation, it is a matter of finding the way to approach an area of reality whose existence appears to us necessary even though we cannot know it through observing it directly but only through observing its results. The approach one adopts will be determined in large part by the way one first conceives of this ability, by the initial vague notion one forms of what a language in its most elemental form is. This often uncritical assumption we make concerning the nature of language is important because it conditions what we look for in the data. Conceiving of it as the system of either an ideal speaker or a community of speakers has proved inadequate. The problem for linguistics as a science, which by definition attempts to embrace the whole of its object, is this: how can our language potential be conceived in terms of an ability acquired and exercised by the individual speaker?

Initially we can attribute three characteristics to language-as-a-potential: it is organized, operational and mental. Since Saussure it has been commonplace to consider language as somehow systematic, if only because we use our mother tongue so readily and with such unerring ease even in novel situations. Attributing the system to the potential part of language relieves the linguist of the impossible task of trying to prove at all costs that actual usage is systematic (just as Saussure attributed the coherent set of relationships to the vowels in his Proto-Indo-European reconstruction, not to the set of actual results in the various attested languages). Since an ability is for producing results, this systematic potential must also be operational by nature. A system providing the potential for carrying out certain operations must be organized in such a way as to make these operations possible. And since these operations are in large part mental, involving processes of thought, the ability permitting them must be in the mind. All this leads us to conceive of language-as-a-potential as a system in the mind involving a mechanism, i.e. as a coherent mental construct permitting the repeated carrying out of certain operations.

Compared with the Saussurian and Chomskyian approaches, this involves a very different way of regarding our ability to speak since it implies that each of us has a set of operative systems enabling us to realize the mental and physical processes necessary to construct the words and sentences we need in order to talk about whatever we have in mind and to understand the discourse of others. Viewing a

person's language potential as a set of mental systems in this way involves both an operational conception far removed from Saussure's idea of *la langue* as a set of static oppositions, and a real-speaker oriented conception poles apart from the competence of an ideal speaker. Essentially, this amounts to viewing our ability to speak as the set of linguistic conditions in the mind necessary to produce whatever we say. This is, in fact, the view developed by Guillaume from 1919 on. For him, an organized set of mental systems—and each word is a system for representing what we want to say—constitutes the language potential of any speaker, what he calls "tongue" (*la langue*) to indicate that it is just as real as "discourse", the actual speech and texts a speaker produces. Thus for Guillaume our mother tongue is an "obvious ability", an acquired capacity, the really existing potential for all the discourse we produce during our lives.

This brings us to the main point, namely obtaining as complete and realistic a view of language as possible: what are the successive phases involved in a person undertaking an act of language and producing a certain discourse? If we accept that people's ability to speak a given language is part of this reality—the contrary would be inconceivable—then we must view this capacity as a set of linguistic systems, a system of systems as Guillaume put it. Since the *raison d'être* of an ability is to make possible the carrying out of certain processes or actions, our language potential is, as we have just seen, operational by nature, i.e. constructed in such a way as to produce discourse corresponding to whatever the speaker has in mind. The upshot of all this is that in order to have the reality of language in view we must never lose from sight its two modes of existence, the potential and the actual, ability and speech/text. But this is not all: to grasp its whole reality we must also keep in mind the language processes whereby the potential is actualized to produce a particular unit of discourse. After all, when we speak we do not put all our mother tongue into a sentence but rather call on certain of its resources to say what we have in mind. It is this calling on certain morphemes and words to represent and express what we want to say that constitutes the actualizing processes involved in any act of language. Thus, granted our system of systems in the preconscious mind, certain of the processes it makes possible must be actuated to produce the discourse appropriate to the particular situation the speaker has in mind at that moment.

As a consequence, it is essential to get out of the naïve habit of thinking about language merely as text or speech to be described. It is more realistic to consider it as a dichotomy opposing ability and sentences actually said, but even this is insufficient. To grasp the

whole reality of language it is necessary to view it as a triad, a threefold entity wherein the operational component, language-as-operations, has its place between language-as-a-potential and language-as-actualized. This can be summarized as follows:

language ability + actualizing operations + sentences produced

But even this formula, which suggests that one component is simply added to another to make up the whole, is inadequate because the third component is the outcome of the second, which is itself permitted by the first. We can bring out these condition/consequence relationships more clearly by depicting the whole of language as essentially dynamic in the following way:

systemic potential → representing and expressing → actual output

The effect of introducing the operative element into our consideration of language is to bring out the condition/consequence relationship between potential and actual by introducing the temporal dimension involved in any operation. This gives a view of language in synchrony radically different from that proposed by Saussure. As a result of eliminating the temporal dimension, he came to consider language as something immobile, static, reduced to a thing, an object. In reality language is anything but static: it is dynamic from beginning to end. This operativity includes not just the actual pronouncing of the sounds, but also the preconscious mental operations of relating one meaning component to another to give rise to the syntax, as well as the prior representational operations of actualizing the meaning potential of each morpheme and word to provide the particular meaning components required to meet the needs of the sentence. Both language-as-a-potential and language-as-actual are realities, but neither should be considered as an object in itself: for the linguist, the former is a system of potential operations and the latter the result of a series of operations. Thus although the time involved in representing and expressing one's experience may be extremely short, keeping this temporal dimension in mind enables linguists to focus on the reality of language.²

The reason this view keeps one in touch with the reality of language is that a sentence, discourse, is always the outcome of a speaker putting a momentary complex of experiential impressions into language. A speaker always languages some content of consciousness, and, in fact, we cannot talk about anything else. This languaging, this translating of some extra-linguistic experience into the meaning-units provided by the words of one's language, is part of

the causal chain—the part that concerns linguists—giving rise to any sentence. Hence, insofar as it is an outcome of the real language processes actuated by a speaker, the resulting sentence should never be confused with linguists' abstractions consisting of strings of words which have no correlate in the experiential awareness of someone speaking.

It will perhaps bring out this fundamental point more adequately if we consider for a moment what is, for many linguists, the most remarkable characteristic of language: the capacity it gives us to represent and express whatever comes into our minds. This extraordinary ability to translate any passing experience into word meanings and to say it is far more than a mere object or thing. My tongue is constantly meeting different requirements, adapting to new experiences, permitting me to represent and express novel messages—and, of course, to understand novel messages (as when I saw *Hairsations* on a shopfront in downtown Toronto recently). No system of *post-factum* rules, no commonly accepted norm for speaking, no set of sentences however numerous—none of these static ways of viewing language could possibly account for the give and take of actual usage. And this is the reality which a description of language in synchrony must deal with. What is called for, as Guillaume so often insisted, is to abandon the idealized, non-temporal view of synchrony left us by Saussure and reintroduce the parameter of time as the measure of real operations (cf. Guillaume 1984: 79-99).

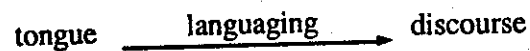
If this way of envisaging language does bring us closer to reality, one may well wonder why it is not more widespread. As O'Kelly (1996: 57-61) makes abundantly clear, it goes against the current of a certain type of empiricism which would reduce linguistics to what can be induced from measurable data. Another point is, as can be seen from the experience of other sciences, that the very fact of introducing the dimension of time into an area of reality hitherto seen as static is accepted with difficulty. But I think the reasons go even deeper. For one thing, we acquire our mother tongue so naturally that we simply take it for granted, being quite unaware of the language potential we possess. Moreover, because almost all of the languaging processes are preconscious and so escape any direct observation we see only their results, the sentences making up discourse, especially as written. Thus it is not surprising that, in the naïve view of the ordinary speaker, language is something static, like an object. And so when we learn the word *language* as youngsters its concept is formed with this limited scope. For anyone whose notion of language does not go beyond their experience of ordinary usage, the meaning of *language* need not be extended beyond this static sense. For scholars who focus on the study of language as such,

however, adopting this common term as part of their learned vocabulary should lead to an examination of its popular sense so that they can be fully aware of the concept of language they are adopting in using it. Linguists can and should extend its meaning to cover all the reality of the object of their study, and this requires a conscious effort. This is what Saussure attempted to do, with only partial success, as we have seen, because he failed to bring in the operative component. But apparently many linguists have not attempted to do so, if one can judge by those who characterize language as "a set of sentences". Unless we are prepared to do violence to our ordinary-speaker, uncritical assumption as to the nature of language by introducing both a language-as-a-potential and a language-as-operations component in this way, we cannot hope to grasp the reality of language as a whole.

Experience shows that even after accepting the point of view that language is inherently operational, one is constantly confronted with the danger of lapsing back into static ways of thinking and speaking about it, because the ordinary-speaker "static" sense of the word *language* is constantly with us.³ This is why the terminology one adopts to designate the three components, or better, phases of language is so important. The term *discourse*, quite widely used for both speech and text, is appropriate to designate language-as-actualized. There is no term in common usage to designate the operational phase of representing one's experience of the moment and expressing the representation of it through speaking or writing. There is the term *wordage* in the sense of "the use of words" but it is far too rare. Less recondite, the term *languaging* in the sense of "putting one's experience into language" is the best found so far to designate language-as-operations. Most important and most difficult in this "struggle for words", as Einstein in a similar situation put it, is to find a term for language-as-a-potential. It is hardly satisfactory to use the French term *langue*, which at best evokes the static view of Saussure. To use the term *language* itself, as in Gardiner (1963), is misleading because besides using the name of the whole for one of the components, it is of no help in calling to mind the new view proposed by Guillaume. Even expressions like *language as system* or *potential language*, which point to the hidden part of language, would simply tend to make one think of resultative language, discourse, from another point of view. The advantage of *tongue*, the term adopted here, is that it designates language-as-a-potential as existing in its own right distinct from language-as-actualized, and so obliges us to enlarge our concept of "language" beyond the common-usage, "static" sense. Although some people have trouble accepting *tongue* in the sense of "the power of communication or expression

through speech" (*Webster's Third*) as in expressions like *the mother tongue* and *tongues of men and of angels*, it is the most appropriate substantive available in English. Any initial hesitation in using it in this sense is perhaps a reflection of the fact that the reality it denotes is something hitherto unfamiliar and so easily overlooked.

The three-phase view of language proposed here can be summarized thus:



It offers a panorama of language as it unrolls in synchrony every time someone speaks. In coming to grips with the reality of the language phenomenon in this way, we see the successive phases of the act of language as parts of a chain of causality. This provides synchronic linguistics with an explanatory basis shared by the other sciences based on observation because, so it seems, our very way of understanding leads us to infer that anything we observe, be it act or entity, must arise from some prior potentiality. In any case, since this approach works well in other sciences, it should certainly be tried in the science of language as a means of reconciling the legitimate claims of both structuralism and psychologism in linguistics,⁴ without sacrificing either the reality of the individual act of language or the reality of the hidden system. This appears to be the best way of reaching "an understanding of language that is grounded in reality".

Notes

1. See Valin (1996: 37-40) for a convenient example of this method.
2. It also provides linguists with the parameter for analyzing the operations involved. See Valin (1996: 40-45) for a brief illustration of the type of analysis this leads to, and Hirtle (1988) for a more detailed one.
3. The most striking example of this influence of the ordinary-speaker meaning of a word is provided by Saussure himself, who redefines the term "signe" in the *Cours de linguistique générale* (1955: 99) yet uses it in the common usage sense more than fifty times in same volume.
4. See Geeraerts (1988: 663-674) for an interesting comparison of these two types of approach from the point of view of lexical semantics.

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