

# Language as the Core of the Human Condition: In Honour of Gustave Guillaume (1889–1960)

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Man's faculty of *thought* has appeared to be so distinct from nature that some have attributed it to a gift from God, leading to a Cartesian-type dualism – against which Spinoza would have reacted – while other philosophers, from Fichte to Léon Brunschvicg, have subordinated perceptible reality to it, passing from spiritualism to absolute idealism. Since the last World War – and the intensification of the tragic dimension of history – whether or not one is speaking of a materialism refined by the progress of science in all its diversity, the cards have been modified by the importance now attributed to *language*. Language has provided the necessary means of resisting the antinomy between a dogmatic metaphysics – that sets thinking or the mind apart from the world – and a neurological determinism which anticipates everything will be accounted for through research on the brain. Before the perceptible world, an irreducible symbolic and semiotic dimension began to be put in place, arising out of the numerous analyses of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1904) and passing on to the revolutions of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1923).

In reality one should go back further, to the later research of Wilhelm von Humboldt (d. 1835), to mark the beginning of a second wave of modernity in contrast to Cartesianism and its technicist promises. In the period between Humboldt and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), on the fringe of manifold advances in psychoanalysis, the rehabilitation by Nietzsche of the *body* would have very fruitfully stirred up the preconceived ideas about the nature of the *thinking* being. The commonplace that 'language is the unique characteristic of man', which was minutely analysed in many articles by Émile Benveniste (1902–1975) and collected together in the two volumes of his *Problèmes de linguistique générale* published in 1966 and 1974, could then come under examination from an anthropological perspective (transcending the swings between psychology and sociology), and to which the contribution of the linguistic theory of Gustave Guillaume was by no means the slightest. The occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his death on 3 February 1960 serves as a call to try to clarify and make better known what was fundamentally at issue in his penetrating hypotheses. To keep to the essentials of that astonishing project, we will, within the limits of our modest discussion, try to bring out successively:

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- I. The *kinetic* implications of any quest for *meaning* by a thinking process that is striving to express itself: being the dependence not only of ‘to think’ on linguistic *systems*, but also of these latter on a signifying *mechanics*;
- II. The operative and temporal character of these kinetic processes that are constitutive of language: an operative time that is not measurable but ordinal, corresponding itself to an *Instant* which paradoxically is constant.

Whence the capacity of language, which does not lodge anywhere else – whatever its association with cerebral activity might be – to enter upon discourse *at any* instant and *in an* instant; and its homology with the *Cogito*, coextensive in a thinking-speaking Subject, the core of the human condition.

### From systems to a ‘mechanics’

If, in order to speak, it is not essential to be aware of the history (diachrony) of one’s language – as Guillaume delighted in emphasising – on the other hand it is important that its synchrony (an ‘at the same time’ by which it is *systematised*), along with completing a *language act* as given recognition by Saussure, is not limited to describing a *state* of language (a linguistics that is primarily structural, because static) but encompasses what Saussure very correctly calls the ‘mechanism of the language’. Alone among the latter’s successors, Guillaume sought to pin his theoretical research to a ‘psycho-mechanics of language’, radicalising on a kinetic basis what he had previously called a ‘psycho-systematics of language’. From the very fact that language appeared to him as being an ‘(integrative) system of systems’ – nominal or verbal – (*La langue est-elle ou n’est-elle pas un système?* 1952), the shifts implied by the construction of these systems – operations, assumed by the language users, justified the use of the term ‘mechanics’: the effective condition for ‘illumination’ (language as ‘lucidity’, rising above ‘animal turbulence’) and in no way blind, as often thought. On the other hand, in the term ‘psycho-mechanics’, the radical ‘psycho-’, which is ambiguous, particularly in French (as in English), would be better replaced by ‘signifying’ (thus: *signifying mechanics*), since mentalism is no way involved.

The two major language registers which may illustrate the hypothesis, subsequently developed into a theory, concern on the one hand the systems involving the French definite and indefinite article, elaborated in 1919 though not altogether thoroughly, despite the stages previously traversed by Louis Havet, and on the other the Indo-European verbo-temporal systems, were elucidated in *Temps et Verbe* [Tense and Verb] in 1929. In the case of the former, the shifts from broad to narrow focus and vice versa, from which one cannot effectively stand aside if one is to understand and be seized of the real, as demanded by language activity, call for the recognition in the French indefinite article ‘*un*’ (Eng. ‘a’) of a shift from the Universal (swiftly registered by the mind in ‘*un homme est mortel*’ – ‘a man is mortal’) to the singular, approached in ‘*un homme entra*’ – ‘a man went in’, before this movement reaches its inversion threshold. At that point of rebound there emerges the definite article ‘*le*’ (Eng. ‘the’) – with its origin in the Latin pronoun *ille* – as in ‘*l’homme entra*’ – ‘the man went in’ – preceding the generality of ‘*l’homme est mortel*’ – ‘the human being is mortal’. This interpretation is kinetic in nature, going beyond the standard designations of the articles as *indefinite* and *definite* where the articles register an unequal relevance at their moment of perception. Verbal systems, on the other hand, are governed by a process of ‘chronogenesis’, where the (tri-phase) construction of a time-image, which is characteristic of the indicative (*in esse* time) follows upon modes of subjunctive type (*in fieri* time) and quasi-nominal type – infinitives and participles (*in posse* time). Within the set of conjugations may be noted the

plurality of ‘sense effects’ of the French imperfect tense – where the expression ‘un moment après, le train déraillait’ (‘a moment later, the train derailed/was derailing’) reveals the fine balance with which language subtends our thought.<sup>1</sup>

If meaning derives out of direction and movement, with linguistic operations supposing a process of reconstruction (an instantaneous and unconscious reiteration of the constitutive kinetic processes of the language), such a constructivist explanation no doubt goes beyond the habitual explanatory approaches to language structures and systems.

Given this conclusion that, functioning at a more micro level than psychology, the science of behaviour, linguistics as kinetically based presents as a mechanics of meaning, Guillaume, by melding the linguistic *genetics* of Wilhelm von Humboldt with the (differential) *diacritics* of Saussure, could well appear as the ‘Newton of the moral world’, a status David Hume aspired to shortly after the death of the great theoretician of celestial mechanics. This all the more since linguistics, which, like psychology, had no distinct existence at that period, cannot be ignored by today’s psychologists when they address the domain of cognitive activity. It is there that operativity provokes a revolutionary instantaneity in man – one much prior to those deplored by Paul Virilio in the technological domain – in favour of kinetic processes of which we are unconscious but which very propitiously underpin our thinking capabilities.

### From the *Cogito* to the Instant of the *Loquor*

The priority of the kinetic over the static, in occasioning a process of instantiation weighty in its consequences, aligns quite closely with the intuitive character of thinking to assist in showing up a removal from time or a dependence on an eternity: there where there is engenderment and condensation, that is, in the domain of operativity. Such an instant is both *separative* of a past and a future, and *actualisation* of a language in utterances. An instant of initiation which ‘downstream’ provokes *renewal* but which ‘upstream’ paradoxically affirms *constancy*: these to the extent where it is the same linguistic virtualities which authorise, at any instant and in an instant, spoken – or written – concatenations of greater or lesser length. The setting-off of in-common thought against the fleeting instant calls for the latter to be attributed a *capitalisation* (something neglected by theoreticians): as is done with the speaking Subject, both depository of the language and composer of its expression. Thus denoted, the generativity of utterance is distinguished from the subordination of the speaking subjects to forms of domination within their particular socio-political domain. The *instance*, at the centre of a tension between the conservation of the system and the innovation of its utterances stands in sharp distinction to the non-linguistic *institutions*.

Thus, not only can human temporality not be separated in any way from this organisation – whence the reference in George Steiner’s *After Babel* (1998: 139) and in Paul Ricœur’s *Temps et récit* (III, 1982: 10) to our *Temps et langage, essai sur les structures du sujet parlant* (1967) which was inspired by the teaching of Guillaume – but the constancy of this brings to mind the Cartesian *Cogito*, coextensive with our lives. With this reservation, that the *Cogito* has been genetically transformed by its incarnation in particular expression, as was decisively set in train by Wilhelm von Humboldt’s project of a *Comparative Anthropology of Human Languages*. That is why, if the issue of thinkability – of means of thinking – is of capital importance in the destiny of the speaking Subject, the I of the *Cogito* lodges there, to the benefit of a *Loquor* (*Temps et langage*: 284) whose deponence suitably limits the element of the acquired or the transmitted, while discursive activity arises out of it.

Hence, alongside Benveniste’s ‘instances of discourse’, this linguistic Instant infers that language is not an institution like others, whatever might be the influence of the social milieu in its

regard – something often underlined by Pierre Bourdieu. For it occurs ‘distributively’ in *each* of us, at a distance from the exteriority of the State, the Church, the factory or the hospital. It allows utterances to be exteriorised, in widely different contexts. It introduces an *instantial* dimension that is original to humans, a condition of existentiality and temporalisation, in the face of spaces that are becoming more and more urbanised and where the density of voices and noises never ceases to grow. Whatever the impact of languages on the human condition, their synchronic operativity, anteceding all consciousness, subtends the apparent miracle of thinking, by substituting for any dogmatic or loose affirmation the rigour of an organisation that systematically and kinetically conditions its sense.

## Conclusions

The importance given to Guillaume’s work by a whole school of linguists, whose members, working on the majority of languages on the five continents, have increased tenfold since the master’s passing, has not failed to strike many philosophers, through the issue that we have tried to bring out. In their turn, Father Gaston Fessard, Paul Ricœur, Gilles-Gaston Granger, Henri Maldiney, Jean-Marc Ferry or Giorgio Agamben concluded that they were discovering a genius whose work they needed to turn to profit in order to throw new light on the origins of *thought* and *time*, key elements of the human condition. Should not the idea of a mechanics of signification, sufficiently innovative to underpin the operative Instant of thinking-speaking Subjects whom their language renders available for initiating utterances (whatever their degree of culture), call for some particular attention?

By bringing back language (the Idea-Universe) into a ‘great face-off’ with the universe itself (the representative vertical dimension of the relation Man-Universe), Guillaume brought forward determinations that are no doubt irreplaceable for realising what Humboldt, Hegel or Cassirer were striving to achieve. Reflexivity and analysis of the perceptible world assist in transcending, genetically and structurally, a substantialism that is constantly reasserting itself. The anthropological specificity of the transcendental, which had roused Michel Foucault’s interest from the time of his translation of Kant’s *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* in 1961, arises all the more out of the power of language in that it corresponds to an unexpected and pluralised opposition to the mechanics of rationality, which governs empirical reality. Less than ever could it be that there are two worlds, each of different nature, but rather that there exist complex and varied processes which enable the universe – within its ultimate but lowly inhabitants that we are – to be cultivated (to become the culture of nature) through self-reflection.

The *Subject*, co-extensive with the Instant (*in-stans*), results out of a ‘Subject-becoming’ of the individual, that is, of a body which, standing erect (*stans*) in space, does not depart from a quasi-animal present. By structuring himself through language in order to voice his experience – to other Subjects – he unites the singularity of his *expressivity* to the latent universality of his *communication*. Language is truly a dense and radiant core for the human condition: melding together the tension of virtualities in each of us with extension to groups of more or less vast dimensions. Its operativity assigns to its sense-intentions – and a thought-*actualisation* specified *linguistically* – a temporal constructivity able to dissipate the metaphysical illusions of the intemporal. From universal gravitation to the singular generative capacity of each speaker, *movement* could not fail to unfold, however contrastively, from the *sensible* to the *sense*.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

## Notes

1. A cogent equivalent example of English tense usage might be found in the plurality of senses of the English aorist, as in ‘A moment later, the train derailed. Unfortunately, that train derailed often.’ – *Trans*.

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