

## TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES: WHAT TO TEACH AND HOW TO TEACH IT?

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This article, based on the teaching of the French linguist Gustave Guillaume, is an application of his theory to foreign language teaching in general. It presents the linguist's conception on language and the attitude to adopt when faced with grammar problems – in French, used here as an example.

*Keywords: languaging, tongue, human experience, psychomechanics, discourse.*

### The Didactic Approach

The challenge here is to enable a speaker to express his experience as a human being by using a linguistic programme – or software – different from the one that has been built up in him, without his awareness, in the first two or three years after birth<sup>1</sup>.

This programme, called *tongue*, can be identified as a mental mechanism. It is permanently installed in our mind, and called upon any time we need it in order to respond to our needs as thinking and speaking subjects. Without it, no *languaging*<sup>2</sup> is possible.

The latter – it is important to take it into account – is a process which comes to our consciousness – as a result – in the form of inaudible inner speech – when we are only thinking, that is to say, speaking to ourselves – or of audible outer speech, when we wish to manifest to others – by communicating it to them – our own experience.

The conversion of human experience into linguistic representations, in the form of words, syntagms and sentences, is, as Gustave Guillaume used to emphasize, the essential function of language – “a human, uniquely human function” – which goes beyond the social and communicative function.

The didactic approach is therefore bound to respect this starting point, which is the basis of all linguistic activity: *experience*.

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<sup>1</sup> We are indebted here to Roch Valin, the linguist's faithful student, who passed on his teaching to us during the long years we spent at Laval University in Quebec City under his direction. Without him as a patient and extremely generous guide, this monumental work – the largest ever produced in general linguistics – could not have been the heuristic reference point that it has become for us.

<sup>2</sup> The terminology *tongue* and *languaging* correspond to *langue* and *acte de langage* in the French original. They are used by the English-speaking tenants of Gustave Guillaume's theory of language.

### Human Experience<sup>3</sup>

Human experience corresponds to an infinite universe of changing, turbulent impressions. The characteristic role of *tongue* is to reduce this *impression turbulence* by freezing it in the mental molds represented by the *signifiés* of a given language. In the mental mechanics of *tongue*, the *signifiés* are to be conceived as operators or, if one prefers, micro-processors. Indeed, nothing belonging to *tongue* is static. Everything is kinetic, as Gustave Guillaume liked to say. Only the realities of *discourse* are static. They are the finished products of the operativity of language.

The meaning of a lexeme, a word or a grammatical morpheme, as it appears in *discourse*<sup>4</sup> in a given sentence, is therefore to be considered as one of the multiple meaning-effects contained in the language operator which is at the origin of its emergence. The *signifié* – just like the *sign*<sup>5</sup> for that matter – is in fact, in *tongue*, an entity designed to

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<sup>3</sup> Understand: what the speaking subject, from moment to moment, experiences.

<sup>4</sup> To *tongue*, installed in our mind, Gustave Guillaume opposed what he called *discourse* – a term he preferred, for reasons too long to mention here, to that of *speech* chosen by Ferdinand de Saussure. For him, *discourse* was the signifying matter conveyed by signs, used by the speaking subject to represent his experience in language.

<sup>5</sup> The linguist preferred the term *sign* to Ferdinand de Saussure's *signifiant*, retained by him in its current meaning. This leads him to pose the following formula for language:

$$\text{Signifiant} = \frac{\text{Sign}}{\text{Signifié}}$$

Which should be interpreted as follows: A *sign* – whatever it is – to which a *signifié* is attached, constitutes a signifying unit: i. e. a *signifiant*. Note that in this formula, the *sign* (equivalent to the *signifiant* in F. de Saussure's work) is placed at the top, the *signifié* at the bottom. This is to underline the fact that what belongs to the *sign*, in language, belongs to a more superficial order of reality, which is easier to acquire than what belongs to the *signifié*.

perform operations: in this case, to generate a greater or lesser range of meaning-effects.

The goal of language teaching therefore consists in discovering, for each linguistic occurrence, not one basic meaning, which would be unique, but a plurality of possible meaning-effects. Each *signifié* is installed in *tongue* to apprehend a more or less extensive palette of human experience.

One must note that the impressions of the *ocean of impressions* in which the human being is immersed are of two orders :

- physical: these are the things captured by our senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch,
- psychic: those belonging to memory, reflection, imagination.

Saying something always consists therefore in obtaining, for oneself first, and for others if need be, a representation of a complex of impressions pertaining to the experiential universe to which we belong – and to the universe that we ourselves are inside this universe.

### Language and Reality

As announced above, in these two universes – the one we are and the one in which we evolve – nothing is permanent; everything is constantly changing. To be convinced of this, it is enough to observe a tree under a light breeze, the course of the sun in the sky, a bird in flight, a sleeping cat: they all present themselves to our eyes from moment to moment – to take into consideration only the sense of sight – in an infinite succession of different features.

One might object that the argument is biased, as the examples are borrowed from the reign of living beings – where things tend to be in motion more often, even when the latter is imperceptible.

The same is true, however, when the object is a still life – a vase placed on a table, for example. Certainly, in this case immobility and spatial stability are physically there, but one only has to look at the object a little longer to realize that our relationship with it changes from moment to moment; that we no longer see it after a moment as we perceived it at the beginning: details that we had never noticed appear to us. In our experiential universe, it therefore gradually becomes something else. The painter is accustomed to this feeling, whereas the common sense view is satisfied, usually at least, with the illusion of stability that the concept mentally sends back to him.

Language, as we can see, can be a trap for our lucidity if we are not careful. Language does not show us reality as it is, but only in a schematized representation, if one may say so. This way of operating is however necessary for its normal functioning. Otherwise, *tongue* would have to have an infinity of different concepts to show each of the moments that constitute the continuous flow of impressions that characterizes the human experiential universe. Yet, *tongue* has been designed, as Roch Valin stressed in his teaching as “light baggage, not cumbersome for the mind”.

### Languaging

When I say: *There is a bird there holding a twig in its beak*, I have thus isolated from the ocean of impressions in which as a thinking and speaking subject I am immersed, a slice of complex and turbulent impressions – mainly visual – of which I felt the need to become conscious, and of which I eventually felt the need to make others aware.

This is made possible by the mental mechanics of *tongue* within us – which, by the way, is also, in this physical and psychic universe that we are, a mysterious universe of infinite complexity.

This characteristic – which compels wonder – must constantly be present in our mind in order to avoid the danger of presenting the facts of grammar in an overly simplistic way, verifiable within a restricted field of application. Consider what is said about the use in French of the imperfect, the simple past tense, the present subjunctive, to name but a few forms – and the many counter-examples and exceptions that can be objected to.

The result of the appeal to the operativity of *tongue* – which is the very definition of *languaging* – *l'acte de langage* – is a discourse, inaudible or audible, whose outcome is a sentence<sup>6</sup>.

The dynamics of the *languaging* to be respected – when it is a question of having it practised by means of a *tongue* other than the mother tongue of the students who have chosen this exercise – consists therefore in moving from something to be said to something said. What is to be said is human experience; what is actually said is the representation, in linguistic form, of the experience momentarily subjected to the analytical action of the operating system that *tongue* represents in us. Schematically:

LANGUAGING		
SOMETHING TO SAY	TONGUE	SOMETHING SAID
Experience	Mental mechanics or <b>Psychomechanics</b>	Representation of experience

### The Didactic Approach

Teaching a foreign language must therefore be based not on words, phrases and constructed sentences – language as a process has come to completion at this point – but on impressions that words, phrases and sentences are meant to capture. In other words, it is a question of going back to the source of the phenomenon: *to the conditions that trigger it*.

This is what we do spontaneously, as an instructor<sup>7</sup>, when we begin to give the student, in the

<sup>6</sup> Taking into account the inner inaudible speech allows us to become aware of the fact that language – except when we sleep – is never at rest. Inner chattering, even when we are silent, operates constantly within us. This seems indeed to be the primary function of language and, therefore, its most frequent use.

<sup>7</sup> We will come back to this term later.

very first moments of his exposure to a foreign language, the means – of a lexical nature – to grasp a few of the innumerable *packages of impressions* present in his experiential universe.

The expression “*packages of impressions*”, which we have just used, is reminiscent of what we pointed out above, namely that language does not speak of the *real*, in the sense that it is understood in natural sciences, but of impressions or “*impression complexes*” that reach the senses of the thinking and speaking subject.

Later on, in the learning process, so-called “language register” issues – for example, the difference in French between the words *bagnole* and *voiture*, to take just this opposition – can be dealt with by using impressions such as, at first sight, in these two examples, appearance criteria. However, those are not enough; it will also be necessary to show in which of the more complex situations involving the speakers present, one or the other term is appropriate. Indeed, *tongue* captures impressions that are not only external to the speaking subject, but also impressions belonging to the allocutive relationship in which the latter is involved. This is verified, among other things, with terms – pronouns in particular – that serve as an address to the person. Here again, we are faced with the external universe vs internal universe dialogue already mentioned.

In any case, it is always about questions of impressing contrasts that *tongue* – which is, within ourselves, a higher intelligence than what is usually called *intelligence* – is constructed. This higher intelligence, common to all human beings, gives everyone the means of becoming conscious of his condition as a human being in the universe.

### The Superior Intelligence of *Tongue*

Thus the most complex things in language, those that the instructor fails to explain, are largely acquired not by “professing”, but by finding the contrasting experiential situations that require their use – and by letting the higher intelligence that the student holds within him act and set things in motion in his mind. In other words, the *raison d'être* of this or that linguistic form is to be sought not on the side of the *discourse* obtained within a sentence, but on the side of the impressions, or more precisely the impressive contrasts that *tongue* initially had *before its eyes* at the starting point of the languaging process.

This is indeed how things happen in the situation of total language immersion – when the teacher is absent from the game. Linguistic programming operates not through reflection, but through that unconscious and superior intelligence – that of *tongue* – which is within us and governs us<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Gustave Guillaume pointed out in this connection that *we do not possess our language; rather, it possesses us*. We are in fact indebted to what it allows us to say, and we are also prisoners, let us not forget it – this is the other side of the coin – of the limits within which it holds our perceivability and above all

What we call grammar, which is in fact the acquisition – again largely unconscious – of the linguistic systems installed in us, is therefore based on the student's perception of the impression contrasts that *tongue* has the power to grasp; and on the discovery of new conceptual operators – the *signifies* – capable of grasping them.

Obviously, when learning is being supervised, the instructor needs to have a minimum awareness of what the unconscious systematics of his mother tongue, or of the language he is teaching, is within him. This is generally obtained thanks to a master – Gustave Guillaume in this case – who has succeeded, through an effort of theorization, in revealing more or less extensive parts of its reality.

But where this insight remains incomplete – which is the case for most of what *tongue* is in us – the instructor will have to resort to a grammar that is more experiential than intellectual. This can be done by seeking to spot, in the experience, the impressive complexes that trigger the use of one form or another.

Thus, for example, in French, the conditions of recourse to the imperfect and the so-called *passé composé* form can easily be discovered if the student's attention is drawn to the contrast in duration that the same event can report in two distinct experiential situations.

If we consider, for example, the following two statements as scripts to be played:

*Elle souriait quand il est entré*  
*Elle a souri quand il est entré*

the student will be able to observe concretely what happens on the faces of the actor involved in the smiling action. In the first case, the smile is already in progress when the protagonist enters the stage; in the other case, it starts at that precise moment and is held until its completion. The semantic value of these two grammatical uses has thus been shown – and can obviously be underlined later by a diagram or a so-called “grammatical” explanation.

In any case, in many situations, the identification of impressive changes in the experiential universe is worth more than long speeches – be they of linguists or of grammarians. Moreover, this starting point in didactic practice makes it possible to anchor things in the experience<sup>9</sup> that the languaging process, thanks to *tongue*, constantly holds under its analytical focus. Above all, it is a matter of nourishing grammar with more flexible considerations which are in contact with the living reality of language – the latter being made up more of impressions captured by the superior intelligence of *tongue* within us than of intellectual reflections based on the observation of the facts of *discourse*.

our conceivability of things. *La langue est l'avant science de toute science*, he also liked to repeat.

<sup>9</sup> The words *experience* and *packages of impressions*, that we used in this paper, correspond to the terms *vécu expérimentiel* and *complexe impressif* that Roch Valin introduced into his teaching.

**Language Teacher or Trainer**

Of course, one single situation is never enough; the student should be exposed to other situations where similar contrast occur. He has then to be trained to react to them linguistically.

The language teacher occupies therefore a special place on the teaching scene. He does not teach knowledge, but practice. His job is thus more akin to that of an instructor or sports coach.

Just as one does not learn to play tennis or skiing by following a theoretical presentation, but by confronting and reacting to external situations – the ball in one case, the snow on the ground in the other – one learns a language progressively by setting up reflexes that are part of a mental mechanism that is beyond our control for the most part.

What is true for tennis or skiing, for getting one's balance on a bicycle, for deciphering music, is also true, as we can see, for the acquisition of a foreign language.

In other words, memory – that of the concepts and of their phonic vector, i.e. of both *signifiés* and *signs* – is only the most superficial and easiest part of learning. The essential, even when guided by the instructor or trainer,

calls upon faculties and resources that go beyond the speaking subject's conscious ability. These capacities take over within him and lead him, without his consciousness, to the mastery of linguistic gestures.

The “teacher” of foreign languages must therefore facilitate the setting up in the mental world of his students of new mental circuits. Like a sports coach, by ensuring a step-by-step progression which consists in building performance, increasing progressively the level of complexity – always starting from solid foundations capable of receiving it. He can just to be a guide – a good guide.

When it comes to language acquisition, one should indeed always bow down before the wonderful process represented by the emergence in the mind of a new software – mainly empowered by a creativity that lies beyond our control and intelligence.

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## ОБУЧЕНИЕ ИНОСТРАННЫМ ЯЗЫКАМ: ЧТО ПРЕПОДАВАТЬ И КАК ЭТО ПРЕПОДАВАТЬ?

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Данная статья, основанная на учении французского лингвиста Гюстава Гийома, представляет собой приложение его теории к преподаванию иностранного языка в целом. В ней представлена концепция лингвиста о языке и отношении к нему, когда он сталкивается с грамматическими проблемами; в качестве примера в статье использован французский язык.

Ключевые слова: речевой акт, язык, человеческий опыт, психомеханика, дискурс.

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