BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE:
THE POTENTIAL SIGNIFICATE OF *AVOIR*

Lori Morris
Concordia University

THE PROBLEM

One of the central tenets of Guillaumean linguistics holds that every word has a potential significate (meaning) in tongue[1] which conditions its various realizations in discourse. Because they are not directly observable, potential significates are notoriously difficult to describe and discuss, and their very existence is a cause of skepticism in some linguistic circles.[2] The difficulty is particularly acute when the word in question has a wide range of lexical and grammatical uses in discourse, some of which are very hard to relate to others. Such is the case of the French verb *avoir*, the focal point of this study. *Avoir* presents an interesting problem for those in search of its potential significate in that at least two of its uses—the expression of obligation and the formation of the future tense—would not seem to fit in with the others. While the fully lexicalized, partially dematerialized (bleached), and auxiliary uses of *avoir* share a common resultative and retrospective orientation, the *avoir à + infinitive* and future structures would seem prospective in orientation, situating the subject notionally before an event rather than in its result phase.

This study looks at *avoir* both synchronically and diachronically in an attempt to understand how it has come to produce both retrospective and prospective expressive effects. It also seeks to determine whether the search for a potential significate is still a viable linguistic undertaking when dematerialization has rendered a particular word—in this case the verb *avoir* reduced to the status of a grammatical morpheme in the future tense—unrecognizable to native speakers.

AVOIR IN DISCOURSE

Avoir operates as a fully lexicalized verb to express possession or ownership:

(1) Ils ont une maison, deux voitures et trois enfants.
     They have a house, two cars and three children.

Avoir also has a series of lexical uses in which it shows a certain amount of dematerialization:

(2)   Elle a douze ans.
            She is twelve.
(3)   Il a du mal à comprendre.
            He has trouble understanding.
(4)   Ils ont faim.
            They are hungry.
(5)   Nous avons tort.
            We are wrong.

In these cases, the idea of possession or ownership is attenuated and only the idea of having come into a state of being remains, but there is nonetheless a clear connection with more highly lexicalized uses of the verb. The subject of (2) has acquired the experience of twelve years of living, while in (3), (4) and (5) the subjects have come into or acquired the states of trouble in understanding, hunger and wrongness.

When *avoir* combines with *à + infinitive* to express an obligation, the idea of ownership or possession is attenuated in much the same way as in (2) to (5). The subject does not own anything, but instead is perceived to have a single course of action to take in the future.

(6)   Ils ont à faire leurs devoirs.
            They have to do their homework.

Although this use of *avoir* has much in common with the examples given above in terms of its degree of lexical dematerialization, it has one particularly striking feature that sets it apart: the *avoir à + infinitive* is what could be termed a forward-looking or prospective structure in that it orients the subject towards a future action. Most other uses of *avoir* tend to be inherently resultative and retrospective. More will be said about this below.

In yet another use, *avoir* combines with *il* and *y* to form *il y a*.

(7)   Il y a/avait trois livres sur la table.
            There are / were three books on the table.
(8)   Elle est partie il y a longtemps.
            She left a long time ago.

The purpose of this phrase is to evoke the existence of a location in either space or time. At this location can be found whatever is mentioned in the following noun phrase, be it singular or plural (ex. *Il y a une maison. Il y a trois mois*). The status of the verb in the *il y a* sequence is difficult to determine. *Avoir* is not analysed lexically by native speakers in such uses,

but there is a certain degree of grammatical analysis of the verb since it shows tense agreement.

When *avoir* is used as an auxiliary verb in the formation of the *passé composé* and in a variety of similar compound verbs, its lexical meaning is reduced to a bare minimum.

(9)   Nous avons dansé.
           We danced / We have danced.

All that is left of the original idea of possession is an impression of something having been acquired or added to the experience of the subject, in this case the result of the event evoked by the past participle. Grammatically, interesting things have happened. *Avoir* has formed a very close relationship with the past participle, which has become incident to it, and it can now be perceived as a means of situating the subject beyond final limit of the lexical event, as opposed to a means of expressing possession.

The final stage in grammaticalization is reached when *avoir* acquires morphemic status and is appended to the infinitive to form the future tense (Moignet 1988: 188).

(10)   je chanterai; tu chanteras; il chantera, etc.
           I will sing; you will sing; he will sing, etc.

At this point the verb becomes unrecognizable as such to French speakers, few of whom ever realize that the conjugated element of the future is in fact a highly dematerialized form of *avoir*.

This is also the point at which the paradox of *avoir* emerges with particular clarity. The lexical properties of *avoir*, which include the idea of possession and ownership, make it a verb that lends itself marvellously to the expression of a result or of a retrospective view of another event. After all, the possession of something is necessarily the result of a process of acquisition. This explains why *avoir* and its equivalents in a number of other languages (*have, haben, haber*) have come to be used as auxiliaries which situate the subject in the aftermath of the event expressed by a lexical verb in compound verb phrases (Moignet 1980: 272-273). However, this analysis of *avoir* seems to make little sense when the verb is used as a grammatical morpheme in the formation of the future tense in French and almost all of the Romance languages. Why use an inherently resultative, retrospective verb in the expression of future time? The Germanic languages would seem to have a much more coherent solution to the problem in their use of forward-looking modals such as *will* and *werden*.

THE EVOLUTION OF *AVOIR*

The key to understanding how *avoir* came to reach morphemic status and be appended to the infinitive to form the future tense can be found when one follows the pattern of its historic dematerialization and studies how this pattern has been determined by the lexical content of the verb.

Habeo did not attain true auxiliary status in Latin. It did, however, begin the move towards auxiliarization. In Early Latin it was used as a lexical verb to express possession or ownership. In late Latin, it began to co-occur with past participles, falling both before and after the participle to express accomplishment of the action evoked by the nonfinite form. By the time French emerged as a distinct language, the relationship between *avoir* and the past participle had tightened and stabilized, giving rise to a new verb form: the *passé composé*. (Meillet & Vendryes 1979: 298-300).

The evolution of the auxiliary use of *avoir* in the formation of the *passé composé* is relatively easy to understand and to relate to the lexical meaning of the verb. In its earliest uses *avoir* combines with a direct object complement and a past participle:

(11)   J'ai la lettre lue.
         I have the letter read.
(12)   Il a le travail fini.
         He has the work done

The subject has come into possession of the result of an accomplished action: a read letter in (11) and a finished piece of work in (12). The past participle functions adjectivally, modifying the direct object complement. Over time, *avoir* comes to represent not just the possession of a result but the retrospective position of the subject with respect to the event of the lexical verb. As this happens *avoir* auxiliarizes and becomes a grammatical means of situating the subject beyond the bounds of the lexical event. By the time of St. Augustine (5th century), this form had evolved into a true perfect with the past participle incident to the auxiliary verb rather than to the direct object complement (Brunot & Bruneau 1956).

(13)   J'ai lu la lettre.
         I have read the letter.
(14)   Il a fini le travail.
         He has finished the work.

In Old French this form was used much as the present perfect is used in Modern English, expressing only the present result of a completed event (Moignet 1988). By the Middle French period the *passé composé* had ex-

tended its the limits and was coming to be used to express results in past time as well as in present time. In spoken French today, the *passé composé* has completely supplanted the preterite or *passé simple*. In written French, it has largely taken over from the *passé simple*, particularly in informal writing.

At the same time that *avoir* was being grammaticalized as an auxiliary, it was also heading towards morphemic status in a new future tense which was beginning to supplant the Latin future. The parallels between the auxiliarization of *avoir* in the *passé composé* and the grammaticalization of *avoir* in the future tense are striking: in both cases *avoir* loses all but a minimal amount of its original lexical meaning and comes to combine with a nonfinite form. In the case of the future tense, however, the combination is far more incongruous than in the case of the *passé composé*. While auxiliary *avoir* is part of a resultative, retrospective construction in which it has a certain syntactic autonomy, morphemic *avoir* is tightly bound to its infinitive in a forward-looking verb tense. This raises a number of questions. Is a single potential significate still involved when *avoir* reaches morphemic status? If so, what might that significate be? Is it in any way useful to continue to look for a potential significate when links between different uses have been blurred to the point of opacity?

Some answers to these questions can be provided by an analysis of the other prospective use of *avoir*: the expression of obligation in *avoir à + infinitive*. Starting in the classical period, *habeo* is found coupled with the infinitive to express first capability and then obligation. Since the lexical content of *avoir* would not in itself seem to include any notion of obligation, one might well wonder how a sense of obligation is generated by the *avoir à + infinitive* structure.

An answer can be found if one begins to consider what conditions must be present for an obligation to exist. Someone who is subject to an obligation is offered a single course of action and is perceived to be capable of doing the action. You cannot oblige someone to do something that is beyond the realm of what is possible for them. The lexical meaning of the infinitive in the *avoir à + infinitive* construction indicates the course of action to be followed, the grammatical meaning of the infinitive potentializes this event and the preposition *à* provides a specific orientation towards it. To create a sense of obligation, the role of *avoir* must be to situate the subject in a position that commits it to the course of action evoked by *à + infinitive*. *Avoir* is used to this end because of its original lexical meaning of possession. The subject is perceived to possess something and that something is the single possible course of action represented by *à + infinitive*. The

prospective element of an obligation as something to accomplish in the future comes from *à* + *infinitive* rather than from *avoir*.

In the case of the future, the infinitive once again evokes an event as a potential and *avoir* indicates the nature of the relationship binding the subject to this event. But this time there is no sense of obligation. There are two factors which could account for this: the preposition *à* is no longer present to orient the subject towards realization of the event evoked by the infinitive and *avoir* itself is postposed with respect to the lexical event. In the absence of *à*, the nature of the association between the subject and the lexical event changes markedly. The subject is not seen to be oriented specifically into the lexical event, but simply to occupy a position notionally prior to it. This means that the subject could either realize or not realize the event; both options are left completely open. The presence of *avoir* once again suggests that something has been acquired, just as every use of *avoir* seen thus far can be related directly or indirectly to an underlying idea of the subject having come into possession of something. In this instance, the subject has acquired the only thing necessary for the existence of the future tense: the mere possibility of realizing an event.

If the future is looked at in this manner, it becomes possible to understand how a resultative and retrospective verb can be used in the formation of a prospective tense. Morphemic *avoir* is not an exception to the rule; it still carries traces of the full lexical meaning of the verb. For the future tense to exist, a real potential must exist. *Avoir* in its most highly grammaticalized form shows that this potential has come into existence. To do so, it provides the infinitive with a subject and a link to present time. Any prospective overtones in the verb phrase are provided by the infinitive to which *avoir* is joined. Thus, in the case of both the *avoir à* + *infinitive* structure and the future tense, the subject is perceived to have acquired a potential, the possibility of realizing the lexical event of the infinitive. In the first instance it is the only course of action available to the subject, whence the idea of obligation, and in the second instance it is a purely potential course of action which does not beg realization. These two cases contrast strongly with the *passé composé*, in which there is no prospective element at all. *Avoir* in its auxiliary use and the past participle reinforce each other's resultativeness to give the verb phrase a strongly retrospective orientation.

À LA RECHERCHE DU SIGNIFIÉ PERDU

On the strength of the evidence presented above, it could be argued that the various uses of *avoir* in discourse are all amenable to a common potential significate in tongue. *Avoir* consistently retains a trace of its original lexical content. In the more highly lexicalized uses of the the verb, it is the idea of possession that comes strongly to the fore. When *avoir* reaches auxiliary status, only the position afforded by the inherent retrospectivity of possession is retained. When used as a grammatical morpheme in the future tense, *avoir* evokes the mere existence of an acquired possibility, the only condition that need be met for a future form to exist.

The question remaining to be answered concerns whether a search for connecting threads in discourse is a viable linguistic enterprise. For many linguists this type of research is seen as only marginally useful since it requires a considerable investment in time for returns that some consider impossible to verify. For a few the practice is perceived to be downright dangerous since the possibility always exists that a determined researcher could see tenuous connections where connections have never existed. This has led many linguists to abandon the search for a potential significate when links between uses in discourse become blurred for native speakers.

The evidence presented here would lead one to question the wisdom of this policy. It has been shown that significant links between the various uses of *avoir* in discourse continue to exist even when the verb has become unrecognizable for native speakers. *Avoir*, whatever its form, can only be used in a manner consistent with the meaning of the fully lexicalized verb. This is because all of the uses of *avoir* in discourse are conditioned by the limits of the realm of possibility of the form in tongue, or, if you will, by its potential significate. Even if the limits of what is possible are constantly changing over time—and the case of *avoir* shows very clearly that they are, the way in which they change can never be completely arbitrary. They must be governed by a constant potential which can be rooted only in the original lexical content of the word.

This idea of consistency in a changing potentiality is important for linguists and language teachers alike since it impacts on research into language and into language pedagogy. Linguists must be aware that the paraphrases they rely on to talk about meaning are never exact equivalents of what is being paraphrased and must therefore be used with great circumspection in explanations and analyses. Language teachers need the same knowledge to be able to make their students aware of the tremendous systematicity and economy of language and to drive home the point

that no form, however dematerialized and grammaticalized, is without meaning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BRUNOT, FERDINAND & BRUNEAU, CHARLES. 1956. *Précis de grammaire historique de la langue française.* Paris: Masson.

DAMOURETTE, JACQUES., & PICHON, ÉDOUARD. 1911-1971. *Des mots à la pensée. Essai de grammaire de la langue française.* Paris: D'Artrey.

GUILLAUME, GUSTAVE. 1973. *Langage et science du langage.* 3e édition. Paris & Québec: Librairie A.-G. Nizet & Presses de l'Université Laval.

    1984. *Temps et verbe: théorie des aspects, des modes et des temps.* Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion.

HEWSON, JOHN. 1980. The reconstruction of underlying meaning. In André Joly & Walter H. Hirtle (eds.), *Langage et psychoméchanique du langage.* Lille & Québec: Presses Universitaires de Lille & Presses de l'Université Laval, 366-386.

JOLY, ANDRÉ. 1977. Les auxiliaires AVOIR et ÊTRE: approche psychosystématique. *Le Français dans le monde* 129: 22-28.

MEILLET, ANTOINE & VENDRYES, JOSEPH. 1979. *Traité de grammaire comparée des langues classiques.* 5e édition. Paris: Honoré Champion.

MOIGNET, GÉRARD. 1980. La diathèse verbale. Les verbes fondementaux en français. In André Joly & Walter H. Hirtle (eds.), *Langage et psychoméchanique du langage.* Lille & Québec: Presses Universitaires de Lille & Presses de l'Université Laval, 267-283.

    1988. *Grammaire de l'ancien français.* Paris: Édition Klincksieck.