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A Critical Review of Ferdinand de Saussure's Linguistic Theory

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Abstract

Needless to say that the issues and problems by previous linguistic studies and theories have not been completely resolved yet and still remain in dispute. Therefore the authors of this paper feel the need for the re-examination of those problems and principles studied and discussed many years ago. And because the authors believe that many of these problems in linguistics were recognized by Ferdinand de Saussure, the attempt has been made to support this by presenting his linguistic considerations and discussions. The authors' selection of de Saussure can be justified by the tremendous influence of his work in general development of linguistic theories.

The study has revealed that Saussure's vision of complexities and dilemmas in the description of language still persists in linguistics. For example, uncertainty and disputes still exist over the relation of language to the very great number of speech events in the experience of linguists, in addition to the status of rules or laws applying to all languages and in addition to the nature of linguistic units, especially in semantics. Thus, the study reveals that Saussure's deliberations provide an inspiring impetus for reconsidering the still disputed aspects and areas in linguistics.

Key words: Symbolism; Arbitrary; Language change; Phonetic change; Syntagm; Sign system

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INTRODUCTION

If one considers the criticism rose against methods and theories which revolutionized linguistics, one comes to acknowledge the fact that almost none of them remain undisputed. And each method or approach distances itself from others before it; for example, the mentalist descriptive linguistics of structuralism in Europe led by de Saussure was against philology, and the physicality descriptive linguistics of American structuralism founded by L. Bloomfield refused to accept or acknowledge mentalist. Chomsky, in turn, reproved Bloomfieldian descriptive structuralism as inadequate and praised mentalist and traditional grammar as well.

As for Bloomfield, mentalism for firth was rejected and severely criticized. But Halliday's functional approach seems an alternative to both American Bloomfieldian structuralism and Chomskyan generativism. Continuity of supplanting approaches by each other obtained. Halliday comments on the continuity and history of linguistics as saying that twentieth-century linguistics "has tended to wrap old descriptions inside new theories instead of seeking genuinely new descriptions" (Beaugrande, 1933, p.346).

De Saussure's thinking on language has exercised an important influence on the whole of twentieth-century linguistics (cf. Harris 1983, 1984, 2001; Tagai, 2009). For example, in studying the detailed and individual features of dialectal variation, one is often studying the sort of synchronic situation in which the phenomena of linguistic change have their origin (cf. Robins, 1993). Also Sapir and Bloomfield share many of de Saussure's views on the description of language. For example, like de Saussure, Sapir describes language as "a Pure human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols" (Sapir, 1921, p.8); i.e., language is a "conventional, arbitrary system of symbolisms" (1921, p.4). And as for de Saussure, the real language for Sapir is

not made up by the phonetic framework of speech, and the individual speech-sound cannot be taken as a linguistic element: "The mere sounds of speech are not the essential fact of language ... and the single sound of articulated speech is not a linguistic element at all" (1921, p.22, p.42).

Again like de Saussure, Sapir declares that the psychological existence of the word is not based on its phonetic characteristics, such as 'accent'. Once again like de Saussure, Sapir views language change as a major concern of linguistics, and introduces it into language as a leading and determining feature of diversity (Sapir, 1921, pp.24, p.33, p.173).

Despite these shared views with de Saussure, Sapir unlike him believes that "phonetic change is frequently followed by morphological rearrangements" (Sapir, p.183).

On Bloomfield's side, we can recognize that he follows de Saussure in that the connection between linguistic forms and their meanings is wholly arbitrary; each "combination of signaling units is arbitrarily assigned to some feature of the practical world" (Bloomfield, 1933, p.152). Again like de Saussure, Bloomfield does not consider writing as language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks, and he believes that the linguist does not "need to know something about writing in order to study language" (Beaugrande, 1933, p.12). Bloomfield also shares with de Saussure his reluctance to see phonetic change following laws (Bloomfield, p.365).

Like de Beaugrande (1993) and Robins (1993), the authors of this paper are convinced that surveying the major issues and problems of linguistics through their treatment in Saussure's 'Course in General Linguistics' can help in planning for future research that calls for a comprehensive and systematic study of the languages of linguistics, and that de Saussure in many ways marks the beginning of linguistics as an independent academic subject in its present form, and many of the distinctions and topics now almost universally recognized as essential to it were first made explicit by him.

1. LINGUISTICS IN DE SAUSSURE'S TIME

At his time, Saussure was dissatisfied with the state of linguistic research, because of the confusion that characterized it. He also criticized the study of grammar which was based on logic and far from being concerned with the language itself; consequently, according to de Saussure, the study of grammar did not approach the description of language scientifically.

De Saussure rejected such study, because it treated grammar as a normative discipline, detached from actual observation. He also expressed dissatisfaction with the study of the comparison of texts of different periods and

the exploration of the relatedness of many languages, because they failed to form the true science of linguistics, and to draw a distinction between states and successions (De Saussure, p.81f).

De Saussure argued against the neogrammarians, who tried to show how a set of facts apparently obeys the same law. He pointed out that such facts are isolated and accidental, and that "regardless of the number of instances where a phonetic law holds, all the facts embraced by it are but multiple manifestations of a single particular fact" (p.93f). De Saussure's principle in the study of language is that it would be a mistake to suppose that the facts embraced by a law exist once and for all. There are no unchangeable characteristics.

2. DE SAUSSURE'S LINGUISTIC THEORY

According to de Saussure, Linguistics is differentiated from sciences such as zoology, psychology, and anthropology because these sciences can be helpful to "everything that is outside the system of language" (1966, p.20). For de Saussure, linguistics is only a part of a science (semiology) that is engaged in the study of the life of signs within society (cf. Thibault, 1997). In other words, linguistics is expected to clarify "what makes language a special system within the mass of semiological data" (De Saussure, 1966, p.17). This, in turn, means that "if we are to discover the true nature of language, we must learn what it has in common with all other semiological systems" (De Saussure, 1966, p.17). The unique object of linguistics is then language studied in and for itself. For de Saussure, this unique object is the social product deposited in the brain of each individual i.e., speech cannot be studied, because it is not homogeneous. De Saussure then limits the object of study in drawing a dichotomy between 'langue' (language) and 'langage' (human speech), making language only a definite part of human speech and arguing that language can be classified among human phenomena, whereas human speech cannot, "for we cannot discover its unity; only language gives unity to speech" (De Saussure, 1966, p.19). De Saussure also distinguishes between 'parole' (speaking) and 'langue' (language); he declares that "the two objects are closely connected and interdependent ... Speaking is necessary for the establishment of language, and historically its actuality always comes first ... Language is passive, receptive, collective, and homogeneous ... Unlike language, speaking is not collective ... its manifestations are individual and momentary and depend on the will of speakers"(De Saussure, 1966, p.18f).

De Saussure emphasizes that speaking, as the activity of speakers, should be studied in a number of disciplines other than linguistics. De Saussure's restricted notion of language can be confined "in the limited segment of

the speaking-circuit where an auditory image becomes associated with a concept ... Language is organized thought coupled with sound. The combination of sound and thought produces a form, not a substance; all the mistakes in our terminology, all our incorrect ways of naming things that belong to language, stem from the involuntary supposition that the linguistic phenomenon must have substance. Language, for de Saussure, exists independently of the material substance of words. A word, as a linguistic form, in which an idea is fixed in a sound and a sound becomes the sign of an idea, exists only through its meaning and function (De Saussure, 1966, p.111ff). Such deliberation by de Saussure led him to state his thesis that sees the sign as the result of associating a signified with a signifier, and a linguistic unit can exist only through this association. This means, whenever only one element is retained, the unit or the entity vanishes (De Saussure, 1966, p.101f; Cobley and Jansz, 1997). According to these view-points, the statement that everything in language is negative is true only if the signified and the signifier are considered separately. Their combination is a positive fact; it is even sole type of facts that language has. The idea and the sound, whose function proves that language is only a system of pure values, control each other but not the extent that "the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary" (De Saussure, 1966, p.67; Holdcroft, 1991).

The terms 'signified' and signifier, which are involved in the linguistic sign, are psychological and are united in the brain by an associative bond. The sound-image is not the material sound, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses. The concreteness of language, for Saussure, lies "between the indefinite plane of jumbled ideas and the equally vague plane of sounds ... Without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut distinction between two ideas" (De Saussure, 1966, p.133). For de Saussure, the speakers' analysis is only what matters, because it is based on the facts of language. If language is not complete in any speaker and exists only within a collectivity, we might assign the knowledge to "the collective mind of speakers, wherein logical and psychological relations form a system" (De Saussure, 1966, 99f).

De Saussure's search for the place of language led him to distinguish between diachrony and synchrony, and so he calls for two sciences of language, static or synchronic and evolutionary or diachronic; synchronic linguistics was his favourite: "language is a system whose parts can and must be considered in their synchronic solidarity" (De Saussure, 1966, p.81). According to de Saussure, only synchronic facts affect the whole system of language. Therefore, definitions of terms and a method for the analysis of language can only be set up after adopting a synchronic viewpoint, which is true and reality to the community of speakers. De Saussure declares that the opposition between synchronic and diachronic linguistics

is absolute and allows no compromise, and "the more rigidly they are kept apart, the better it will be ... The synchronic law is general but not imperative" ... It only "reports a state of affairs" (De Saussure, 1966, p.92). In opposite to synchronic linguistics, diachronic linguistics is imperative and does not guarantee the application of the concept of law to evolutionary facts which are always accidental and particular (De Saussure, De Saussure, 1966, p.92f). Even though de Saussure did not reject the fact that the language system and its history are so inseparable that we can barely keep them apart, he insisted on the impossibility of studying "simultaneously relations in time and relations within the system. We must put each fact in its own class and not confuse the two methods" ... It is obvious for de Saussure that "the diachronic facts are not related to the static facts they produced. A diachronic fact is an independent event; the synchronic consequences that stem from it are wholly unrelated to it" ... As a result, "the linguist who wishes to understand a state must discard all knowledge of everything that produced it ... The linguist can enter the mind of speakers only by completely suppressing the past; the intervention of history can only falsify his judgment. Diachronic facts are not directed toward changing the system; only certain elements are altered without regard to the solidarity that binds them to the whole" ... De Saussure carries on to say that even when "a shift in a system is brought about, the events" in charge of this are "outside the system and form no system among themselves. In the science of language all we need do is to observe the transformations of sounds and to calculate their effects; determining the causes is not essential. The causes of continuity are a priori within the scope of the observer, but the causes of change in time are not" (De Saussure, 1966, 77ff).

De Saussure acknowledges that it is not easy to see how language can change at all if

The signifier is fixed with respect to the linguistic community ..., and the signifier chosen by language could be replaced with the other. No individual, even if he willed it, could modify in any way at all the choice; the community itself cannot control so much as a single word. We can conceive of a change only through the intervention of specialists, grammarians, logicians, etc.; but experience shows us that all such meddlings have failed (1966, p.71f).

De Saussure seems to contradict himself when he acknowledges that "time changes all things", and "the sign is exposed to alteration because it perpetuates itself" (De Saussure, 1966, 74). For him there is no reason why language should escape this universal law. But de Saussure's search for order makes him consider language change as a matter of deterioration, damage, and disturbance, in spite of which language continues to function (De Saussure, 1966, p.152).

De Saussure warned that the linguistic mechanism is obscured, complicated, and phonetic evolution first obscures analysis, and then makes it completely

impossible. These warnings break the continuity of the descriptive, non-evaluative methodology by which de Saussure wants to overcome the illusion of the linguist for whom everything that deviated from the original state was a distortion of an ideal form (cf. de Beaugrande, 1993).

For de Saussure everything in language is reduced not only to differences, but also to groupings whose study requires the gathering together “all that makes up a language state and (fitting) this into a theory of syntagms and a theory of associations”—syntagms are combinations supported by linearity and always composed of two or more consecutive units. According to de Saussure, “only the distinction between syntagmatic and associative relations can provide a classification that is not imposed from the outside. The groupings in both classes are for the most part fixed by language; this set of common relations constitutes language and governs its functioning”. De Saussure (1966) adds that “syntagmatic and associative solidarities are what limits arbitrariness and supplies motivation”(p.132f).

These suggested theories of syntagms and associations are put forward in mentalistic terms; de Saussure emphasizes the fact that “our memory holds in reserve all the more or less complex types of syntagms ..., and we bring in the associate groups to fix our choice when the time for using them arrives”. Every “unit is chosen after a dual mental opposition.” For example:

The isolated sound stands in syntagmatic opposition to its environing sounds and in associative opposition to all other sounds that may come to the mind ... parts of syntagms, such as the subunits of words, can be analyzed because they can be placed in opposition ... From the synchronic viewpoint, each word can (also) stand in opposition to every word that might be associated with it (p.129f).

Such statements make clear that the unit of language for de Saussure is “a slice of sound which to the exclusion of everything that precedes and follows it in the spoken chain is the signifier of a certain concept” (De Saussure 1966, p.104). De Saussure is saying that “in the syntagm a term has value because it stands in opposition to everything that precedes or follows it or to both” (De Saussure, 1966, p.123). These statements support de Saussure's consideration of the sounds of language as its most basic elements. And since sounds are studied by phonetics, then phonetics, for de Saussure, constitutes a basic part of the science of language. This assessment of phonetics differs from the one he favored later when he uses phonetics for the study of the evolution of sounds, and phonology for the physiology of sounds: “We must draw up for each language studied a phonological system (with) a fixed number of well-differentiated phonemes ... This system (is) the only set of facts that interests the linguist” (De Saussure, 1966, p.32). De Saussure defines a phoneme as the sum of the auditory impressions (the unit heard) and articulatory movements (the unit spoken), each conditioning the other. He declares that auditory

impressions exist unconsciously before phonological units are studied and enable the observer to single out subdivisions in the series of articulatory movement. Auditory impressions are then the basis for any theory and come to us just as directly as the image of the moving organs. The signifier, being auditory, is unfolded solely in time and represents a span measurable in a single dimension. In any grouping, a given sound stands in syntagmatic opposition to all other sounds that may come to mind (Beaugrande, 1993).

De Saussure is convinced that the science of sounds becomes invaluable only when two or more elements are involved in a relationship based their inner dependence. At this point, combinatory phonology can define the constant relations of interdependent phonemes. Freedom in linking phonological species is checked by the possibility of linking articulatory movements. Whereas phonology is outside time, because the articulatory mechanism never changes, phonetics is a historical science, and so the prime object of diachronic linguistics (De Saussure, 1966, p.31ff).

De Saussure acknowledges that absolute phonetic changes are extremely rare, and they may seem unlimited and incalculable, but some limits are postulated. For example, phonetic evolution cannot create two forms to replace one. So phonetic doublets do not exist; the evolution of sounds only emphasizes previous differences. The same unit cannot be subjected at the same time and in the same place to two different transformations. Here, the diachronic character of phonetics fits in very well with the principle that anything which is phonetic is neither significant nor grammatical (De Saussure, 1966, p.141ff).

The science of sounds outlined by de Saussure has remained a fundamental part of linguistics. He wanted a theory that would not depend on material aspects, and he did not believe that the movements of the vocal apparatus illuminate the problem of language. To demonstrate the abstractness of language, de Saussure draws comparisons between the functioning of language and a game of chess:

The respective value of the pieces depends on their position on the chessboard just as each linguistic term derives its value from its opposition to all the other terms. Though the system varies from one position to the next, the set of rules persists and outlives all events. The material make-up of the pieces has no effect on the grammar of the game (De Beaugrande, 1993, p.28).

The abstractness of language can also be illustrated by competing linguistics to other sciences, like geology, zoology, and chemistry. But de Saussure favored the model of mathematics, which does not have a concrete object domain as the other sciences do. Accordingly, language can be conceived as a type of algebra consisting solely of complex terms. Relations should be expressed by algebraic formulas, proportions, and equations. Moreover, studying a language-state means in practice disregarding changes of little importance, just as mathematicians disregard infinitesimal quantities in certain calculations (De Saussure, 1966, p.102).

So far, de Saussure's deliberations and discussions of language can be summed up in "(a) setting up the system of sounds revealed by direct observation, and (b) observing the system of signs used to represent these sounds" (De Saussure, 1966, p.37).

De Saussure advocates a science that would treat articulatory moves like algebraic equations, but he could not always maintain his firmly asserted dichotomies: synchronic versus diachronic, or collective versus individual. Moreover, he emphasized that language is social and psychological, but he wanted linguistics clearly separated from sociology and psychology. He situated language in the minds of speakers, but could not decide how far the speaker's knowledge of a language is comparable to the categorical framework of linguistics.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that language—as a conventional, arbitrary system of symbolisms, i.e., as a non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols—is so intricate that its description entails inconsistencies, which have on all sides the views that linguistics should involve a study of speech, pay attention to writing, and accept the word as a basic unit and language as essentially arbitrary. But more importantly, as de Beaugrande (1993, p.30) puts it:

language seems to have been resisting Saussure's determined campaign to make hold still, to be as static, orderly and precisely circumscribed as he wanted. Some of the abstractions and dichotomies he deployed in this campaign tended to disperse the very factors that might have assisted him. His dismissal of 'speaking' and thus of actual discourse led him to inflate 'the arbitrary nature of the sign', to fall back on 'association' and 'opposition', and to neglect methods of data-gathering. His turn against 'diachrony' left him deeply perplexed about 'time' and 'history'. Arguing from the neat oppositions of phonemic systems clashed sharply with the elusive, often metaphoric handling of semantics in terms of 'concepts', 'ideas', and 'thoughts'. And so Saussure's intent to raise issues and problems rather than to resolve them has not merely misrepresented, but has impeded comprehensive solutions.

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