

Looking back
to see forward

Rediscovering Saussure

Ferdinand de Saussure's influence on cultural sciences in the 20th century is undeniable, but today it has become all too easy to overlook his importance for the future of linguistics. Saussure is still often cited as a 'father of modern linguistics', and yet his methodology is conspicuously absent from most linguistic practices today. In many linguistic textbooks, for example, some of his key notions are introduced briefly at the beginning, never to be heard of again. Sometimes he is discussed just long enough to establish that

he has been surpassed by more 'dynamic' theories of language. Despite all this, a good number of linguists today are beginning to wonder if we are only just catching up to Saussure. This is a question that deserves to be asked on the 100th anniversary of the publication of his *Course in General Linguistics*.

The critical reading of the *Course* has inspired numerous 'schools' and 'movements' and, to this day, it is considered the primary point of entry into Saussure's thinking about language. The problem is that he never wrote it! After his death in 1913, two of his colleagues at the University of

Geneva synthesized a selection of notes taken from students who attended Saussure's course (which the editors themselves never attended). Unfortunately, they also inserted passages that are not found in any student's notes or in any of Saussure's own writings. The result is a third-hand work full of contradictions that misrepresents many of Saussure's most important contributions to linguistics. While this has not prevented a century of scholars from seeing the value and achievement of his work, it is no wonder that the *Course* has been subject to so much criticism.

William J. Carrasco looks at how the discovery of Saussure's unpublished manuscripts in 1996 sheds new light on his linguistic methodology and invites us to revisit his work.



One of the most cited lines is found at the very end of the Course: “the true and unique object of linguistics is language studied in and for itself”. Even though it was inserted by the editors and never uttered by Saussure himself, this passage has been used to support the claim that he was only interested in the formal, abstract system of language and not in the

study of language in actual social contexts. According to this interpretation, it was only by excluding history, society, culture, politics, people and use that we could understand the underlying rules of language. However, in a letter written to linguist Antoine Meillet in 1894, Saussure paints a very different picture: “it is, in the final analysis, only the picturesque

side of a language, that which makes it differ from all others as belonging to a certain people having certain origins, it is only this almost ethnographic side that still holds any interest for me”. Contradictions like this one have made the search for the ‘authentic’ Saussure a subject of debate today, giving us all the more reason to revisit his work.

If one wants to understand Saussure's thinking, one would probably begin by reading his publications and then his unpublished manuscripts. Those would be the most authentic texts. After that, we might then read his student notes. The last thing we should look at is the Course, and yet, this is usually the first, if not the *only*, Saussurean text that most scholars will read! This is particularly odd given that many of his manuscripts have been publically available since 1959.

Fortunately, everything changed for the better in 1996 when a very important set of unpublished manuscripts was discovered in the orangery of Saussure's family estate in Geneva. An edited version of these papers was published in French in 2002 and translated into English in 2006 as *Writings in General Linguistics*. Over the past 20 years, this discovery has refueled a resurging international interest in Saussure. The most fascinating thing about these papers is that they clearly contradict many of the ideas put forth in the Course, especially in the manuscript titled *On the Dual Essence of Language*, in which Saussure carries out a radical, unprecedented critique of the history of linguistics and philosophy. Those who are comfortable reading in French are in luck, for François Rastier has written an excellent book titled *Saussure au futur* (Saussure into the Future) that synthesizes some of the most important findings in Saussure's manuscripts, some of which are presented here.

Working against the neogrammarian scientific dogmatism of his time (the Neogrammarians were a highly influential school of linguists

based at Leipzig University), Saussure was searching for a new and improved methodology for Historical and Comparative Linguistics. Despite the titles given to the Course and the Writings, he was not attempting to write a treatise on General Linguistics, nor was he looking for universal laws or axioms. In his view, the distinction between a general linguistics and a descriptive linguistics is pointless because the study of language in general resides in the study of actual languages. Rather, Saussure was looking for a way to study the *complexity* and *diversity* of specific *languages*, not *Language* as a universal phenomenon or a faculty of the mind.

Saussure was also unifying the theory of *signs* (like words) with a theory of *texts* (like whole stories or conversations) within the discipline of linguistics. This becomes more apparent in the 4,500 pages he dedicated to the study of literary and folklore texts using his linguistic methodology. In the 19th century, Comparative Literature and Comparative Linguistics went hand in hand. They were both applications of the same anthropological project that came out of German Enlightenment and Early Romanticism, and both were oriented toward the description of diversities. It was in this context that Saussure was developing his linguistics. He wanted to describe and compare the complexities of languages without losing sight of their unity both internally (their textual forms) and externally (their relation to society, history and each other). Saussure's linguistics was in fact an *anthropology of diversity*. This is why he considered the idea of treating linguistics as a

natural or physical science to be "profoundly illusory."

For thousands of years, we have opposed language to thought, the sensible to the intelligible, matter to mind, and so on. This traditional dualism has led us to view languages as instruments of thought or tools for communication, as though words and grammatical structures had their own identity, substance or Being independent of their 'use'. But Saussure puts an end to this with his notion of linguistic *unity*, i.e. the inseparable oneness of linguistic sound and meaning. From this perspective, there are no pre-existing, discrete units – like sounds, words, phrases, or themes – that are 'realised' in speech or 'used' as building blocks of communication. There is nothing underlying their existence other than the *differences* we establish between them as we speak, listen, read and write. The significance of this break from tradition has hardly been understood.

So, how does one begin to describe a language if it has no independent existence or separate parts? How do we make language an object of study when it is fleeting, happening everywhere simultaneously and always changing? What is our point of entry? Saussure's solution to these problems is twofold: not only must we look at language from multiple points of view, but more importantly, we need to acknowledge that *the points of view themselves create the object*. In other words, the object of linguistic study is never given in advance; it is entirely in the hands of the methodology (or point of view) that constructs it. While this idea is already presented in the Course, it becomes fundamental in the

writings. Saussure cannot repeat it enough:

“there is not the least trace of *linguistic fact*, not the slightest possibility of gaining sight of or defining a linguistic fact, without first adopting a point of view.”

“In linguistics, one wonders if the viewpoint from which the thing is approached is not in fact the whole thing. This begs the question of whether [...] it comes down to a never-ending multiplication of viewpoints.”

“No term is valid and definable outside a specific viewpoint, as a result of the total absence of innate linguistic entities.”

“it would seem to follow that there are *no* linguistic facts [...] or that there are *as many different classes of linguistic fact as there are points of view*”

For Saussure, the role of linguistic description is to vary up the points of view in order to make language an object of study. In other words, the method itself is inseparable from the object that it makes comprehensible; therefore it is important to integrate multiple points of view. This strongly favors a comparative approach because it enables a detailed description of the specific languages and texts that one wants to compare.

To develop his method, Saussure proposes his famous linguistic dualities including signifier/signified, *langue/parole*, synchrony/diachrony, individual/social, and paradigmatic/syntagmatic. These were not meant to be dichotomies, nor oppositions, nor discrete entities – they are simply *points of view* that serve as descriptive categories for appreciating



The artist Magritte's interest was in probing how words and images differ in their modes of signifying.

“A signifier is a language’s connection to the physical world; this is when we look at language as sounds of speech or written symbols. A signified is a language’s connection to the mental world; this is when we look at language as meaning something (i.e., the semantic perspective).”

languages as complex cultural objects. Let’s take a closer look at the first two dualities listed above:

Signifier/signified

A signifier is a language’s connection to the physical world; this is when we look at language as sounds of speech or written symbols. A signified is a language’s connection to the mental world; this is when we look at language as *meaning* something (i.e. the semantic perspective). The key thing to understand here is that the signifier and the signified are absolutely *inseparable*. Thus, the sound /aɪ/ (as in ‘eye’ or ‘I’) is only a *signifier* when it *means* something (like ‘eye’ or ‘I’) and its meaning is only a *signified* because it has a signifier. In other words, the association – or relation – between signifier and

signified is what really matters. Without it, we are no longer dealing with language, only sounds and ideas. This is why, in his own diagram of the sign, he used a dotted line to distinguish between the signifier and the signified, never a solid line. Because signifiers and signifieds are inseparable and mutually defined, they also ‘belong’ to a specific language. In this way, this duality helps define language as an object of study that is specific to the field of Linguistics, as opposed to Psychology or Biology.

While this duality is commonly known as the linguistic *sign*, Saussure insisted that it never be studied in isolation. For him, this was a “fundamental error”, for the relation between signifier and signified is always determined by its surrounding context and

is inseparable from it. Thus, the distinction between the /aɪ/ in *I scream* vs. *Ice cream* depends on the signifiers and signifieds that surround it. From this perspective, a ‘sign’ has no inherent identity or substance. It can only be the *result* of an interpretation, or more precisely, a *moment* of interpretation. For example, the clause *I had a house* will have a very different meaning as soon as I say the word *built* right after it, changing from one moment to the next. Try adding the words *in bed* to the end of your next fortune cookie and see how the meaning of the fortune changes. Or ask yourself how you can tell the difference between *stuffy nose* and *stuffy he knows* when they are pronounced the same way. Answer: by the surrounding text. As Rastier puts it, texts are not made out of words, but rather words are made from texts.

Langue/parole

Langue is language viewed as an abstract system (e.g. grammatical rules, vocabulary); *parole* is viewing language as a situated event or action which occurs in the form of an oral or written text (e.g. a conversation or a novel). We cannot describe one without the other: you need to have a sense of the language system (*langue*) in order to produce and understand actual speech (*parole*), but it is actual speech that creates and modifies the system. For Saussure, the point of view of *parole* had primacy over that of *langue*, because it is the “active force” and “true origin” of what we perceive to be *langue*. After all, *langue* is nothing but a momentary and revisable reconstruction of the regularities found in *parole*. He thus rejected the idea that a language’s system has any existence or identity outside of



Ferdinand de Saussure.

its occurrences. He explains this by comparing language to the activity of a music composer: “Where does a musical composition exist? [...] In reality the composition exists only when it is performed; but to see this performance as its existence is false. Its existence is in the *sameness* of its performances.”

Synchrony/diachrony, syntagmatic/paradigmatic and individual/social

From a synchronic point of view, a language is observed at one point in time; from a diachronic perspective, we look at how it has changed across time. We cannot adopt either of these points of view without considering the other.

Language occurs as a *combination* of values – like morphemes, words and sentences – that constitute a text (i.e. the syntagmatic point of view); but it is also involves the *selection* and *substitution* of the particular values that are combined (i.e. the paradigmatic point of view).

Needless to say, language is a social activity that involves individuals making unique contributions to the social environment. At the same time, each individual act of language is guided and shaped by social

norms like **genres** as well as individual **styles**.

Saussure’s method

When we combine all of these dualities, we can describe language as a complex object without losing its unity: thus, an act of *parole* is both an individual and social action that articulates two planes of language – the signifier and the signified – both paradigmatically and syntagmatically. It is precisely because it is socially, culturally and historically situated that it is also inherently systematic – integrating both *langue* and other discursive norms – and must therefore also be viewed both synchronically and diachronically.

Saussure’s method does not require that we give language physical or mental substance, nor does it depend on reference to the world. A language is thus “ever on the move, pressed forward by its imposing machinery of negative categorization, wholly free of materiality, and thus perfectly prepared to assimilate any idea that may join those that have preceded it”. For example, the meaning of the word *moon* could be defined in relation to the ‘real’ thing in outer space. But how relevant is the celestial object and its characteristics for explaining the meaning of *honeymoon*, *moonshine* (the drink), or *I got mooned*? Each particular meaning of *moon* is clearly determined by the surrounding text as well as the social norms and situations that go with it. Ultimately, the search for a constant meaning of *moon* would be in vain, for if we attempt to describe the set of traits found in every single occurrence of the word, our description would be stripped down to virtually nothing – at

best a temporary hypothesis. In other words, the stable or constant meaning of *moon* is not pre-packaged in the word itself; it only resides in its textual occurrences and re-occurrences.

In line with the comparative and historical linguistic tradition, Saussure gives us a way to describe linguistic diversity and change without making any universal or metaphysical claims. Instead, there is just a continuous diversity of interpretations, of contexts, of norms, of traditions, of cultures. A language does not 'belong' to the natural world, nor the inner world of an individual. It belongs to the community. As Saussure explains, "language is, at every moment of its existence, a *historical product*", and this "product" is only a moment about the change into the next, a temporary "compromise". The history of a language like English, for example, will show you that it never evolves in isolation, for it is constantly interacting with other languages. As Rastier summarises it: meaning is made entirely out of differences; a word is only understood through its differences with its neighbors; a text in relation to other texts; a culture in comparison to other cultures.

Saussure applies his holistic view of language to the whole range of semiotic inquiry: "Semiology = morphology, grammar, syntax, synonymy, rhetoric, stylistics, lexicology, etc., *all of which are inseparable*". From this perspective, the widely accepted tripartition of linguistics into *Syntax*, *Semantics* and *Pragmatics* – proposed by philosophers, not linguists – is a counter-productive division of labor. This is evident in the ongoing debates over the border between these 'branches' of linguistics and the frequent

demand for 'interfaces' between them. For Saussure, it was necessary to multiply our points of view in order to better understand the whole and create new *observables* without having to break languages down into separate parts or systems. A well-constructed semantics, for example, would integrate syntactic, pragmatic, morphological and phonological perspectives while maintaining its connection to society, culture and history.

Fortunately, such a Semantics does exist today in the form of the Interpretative Semantics developed by Rastier (see *The Routledge Handbook of Semantics*). Because signifiers and signifieds are inseparable and have no pre-existing identity, this textual approach describes them in terms of the interpretative paths that constitute them, thus allowing us to see language from the point of view of *parole*. But this is not the only example. If you look around, you may notice an increased interest in the application of neo-Saussurean methodology in a variety of fields such as the Digital Humanities, Anthropology, Library and Information Sciences, Corpus Linguistics, Computer Science, Construction Grammar and Literary Theory. The multiplication of multi-media texts that we are witnessing today defies substantialist approaches and makes Saussure all the more relevant.

There is no definitive interpretation of Saussure's work. That's for all of us to decide and debate together. What is evident, however, is the need for a critical re-reading of Saussure, especially in light of the orangery manuscripts. Indeed, Saussure remains difficult to read, but that is all the

more reason to reread him. As Rastier clearly explains, Saussure has not been "surpassed"; he has still yet to be understood. Either one has not yet read him beyond the Course, or one has not yet been able to comprehend the fundamental radicalness of his thought, or one has not yet been able to appropriate him in a way that would allow us to surpass him. Whatever the case may be, only a genuine return to Saussure will lead us forward. ¶

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Find out more

Books

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Ferdinand de Saussure (2006) *Writings in General Linguistics*. French text edited by Simone Bouquet and Rudolph Engler with the assistance of Antoinette Weil. Translated into English by Carol Sanders and Matthew Pires with the assistance of Peter Figueroa, Oxford University Press.

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Articles and chapters

William J. Carrasco (2015) 'From the Sign to the Passage: A Saussurean Perspective'. In *Texto! textes & cultures* Volume XX – n°1, available online at <http://bit.ly/1cByluh>.

François Rastier (2016) 'Interpretative Semantics'. In *The Routledge Handbook of Semantics* edited by Nick Reimer, Routledge.

Online

Visit *Texto! Textes & Cultures*, a website published by the Ferdinand de Saussure Institute with a large collection of articles, books and more about Saussure and various applications of neo-Saussurean linguistics: <http://www.revue-texto.net/index.php>