Chapter 3

Ferdinand de Saussure

Introduction

1. Introduction

If Saussure is responsible for the establishment of a linguistic paradigm, it is his description of the linguistic sign that is the basis for such a claim. If there is any single unifying concept among the varying schools and theories of the twentieth century, it is the tacit assumption (no one finds it necessary anymore to cite Saussure as the original source) of the dual, Janus-like nature of language, facing in one direction towards phonetics/sound and in the other direction toward meaning/semantics/content, etc. It is his derivation of the sign and the attendant attributes that has provided unity to linguistic theorizing over the past eighty-plus years.¹

¹ I know of only one widely accepted view of language which escapes this generalization. J. R. Firth and the London School of linguistics elaborated a concept of language from which
2. **Orientation**

Saussure develops his ideas from examination of a speech act — what happens when (minimally) two people talk — and ironically perhaps arrives at a characterization that is **completely other**. Saussure’s schematicization is presented in Figure 1. It is **symmetrical** in that both A and B act as speaker or listener indifferently, but **asymmetrical** in that at a given time the two roles are complementary. Assuming that A is speaking, several components of this event can be identified. **First**, there is a point in A where a ‘concept’ is associated with a ‘sound image’; that point is delimited from the remainder as **psychological**. **Second**, that portion within A wherein the sound image is converted into muscular activity (articulation) is **physiological**; the remainder is not. **Third**, that portion of the speech act that consists of the sound itself, independent of both A and B, is **physical**. **Fourth**, that portion within B wherein the sound is converted back into a sound image is **physiological**, lying between the ear and the point described next. **Fifth**, that point where the sound image is associated with a concept is finally **psychological**. Figure 2 adds this partitioning to Figure 1. That portion described as physical is opposed to the remainder in both A and B as **outer** (physical) to **inner** (physiological and psychological). Those portions described for both A and B where the ‘association’ is accomplished is contrasted to the remainder as **psychological** to **non-psychological**. Those portions where A associates a concept with a sound image, then converts the image into articulation, and finally the Saussurean sign is absent. The Prague School, Hjelmslevian glossematics, the work of Bloomfield and the American Structuralists (or Post-Bloomfieldians), Pikean tagmemics, and Transformational Generative Grammar in its various forms are **all** the direct intellectual inheritors of Saussure.

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2 A similar inspection by Bloomfield — in his anecdote of Jack and Jill — begins analogously, but ends for Bloomfield with very different results (Bloomfield 1933:22-27). And recall Harris’ (1992) lament for the “ordinary” or “lay language user”.
resulting physical sound are collected to comprise the **active** portion of the chain. The remainder — lying entirely within B — is **passive**. The psychologically active is finally opposed to the psychologically passive as **executive** to **receptive**.

As it turns out, Saussure finds language (*langue*) to be completely other/different from these distinctions and elucidates his concept of language by opposing its attributes to those he finds in this schematized speech act. Language is above all a **social** phenomenon while the speech act of Figure 1 is not, and it is from the social property that several additional characteristics arise.³ Although the speech act would appear to be ‘social’, it is not, given Saussure’s particular use of the term social, by which he intends the **collectivity** of individuals. And language is social to the degree that it is common to that collectivity. It is the **average**. It is, as Saussure says, **not complete in an individual**, but is identified as the ‘overlap’ that unites individuals into that collective whole. The speech act, then, is not social because it is unique and **particular**. It is individual and thereby opposed to the collectivity wherein language is found. There is no collective speaking; “execution is never carried out by the collectivity” (Saussure 1959:13).

The introduction of social allows Saussure then to distinguish **language** (*langue*) from speech or **speaking** (*parole*), and it is just the latter which is represented in Figure 1. It is from this conception of a social language that additional differentiating properties arise. They are that:

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³ Recall Hockett’s (1983) associating with Schleicher the idea that pattern may arise from the social nature of a phenomenon.
Both langue and parole may show their respective properties in several ways.

2.1 On the opposition of Active to Passive

Language having been separated from the speech act is passive, while the latter is active. Parole is the use, the drawing upon the passive — the collective sum or average. Language is passive ontogenetically, as well, in its acquisition. It is a “storehouse” which is “filled” in the process of acquisition, and seeing language as “a storehouse filled [emph. mine, PWD] by members of a given community” (Saussure 1959:13) gives language yet another source for its nonwillfulness, i.e., its ontogeny.4

2.2 On the opposition of Willful to Nonwillful

Because speaking involves choice — selection — it is willful, not just in the sense of choosing what to say, but also how and when (or whether) anything is said. Equivalently, speaking is a conscious activity, whereas language is unconscious/nonwillful. Language never requires “premeditation” (Saussure 1959:14) while speaking does.

... reflection enters [language] only for the purpose of classification (Saussure 1959:14).

The introspective examination of language is carried out by a linguist for the purpose of description. Language is nonwillful, as well, because it cannot be altered at will. This property is tied to the notion that language is social and beyond the reach of the invididual, each speaker having only a portion of it (Saussure 1959:71 & 72):

The masses have no voice in the matter ... speakers are largely unconscious of the

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4 Recall Hockett’s (1948) desire to reduce language to terms of a stimulus-response mechanism and a central nervous system. This will produce a ‘storehouse’ filled in a ‘non-willful’ way just as in Saussure’s vision. Does Chomsky’s idea of a LAD have the same qualities as Saussure’s and Hockett’s views of acquisition ... or does it differ?
laws of language; and if they are unaware of them, how could they modify them?5

Recall from Hockett (1983:17):

Schleicher’s reasoning [concerning the absence of role of free will in determining language change, PWD], never fully elaborated, was Hegelian in the same way as was that of Karl Marx (1818-1883) at about the same time. Marx did not deny, for example, that an individual entrepreneur can try to be a generous fellow if he so chooses. He argued only that the capitalist system — the interlocking relationships among people within which their decisions lead to one or another result — involves internal stresses forcing it as a whole to develop in a certain way, resulting ultimately in a relatively sudden system-changing outcome ... Whitney, true to the spirit of the American frontier, would have been much more concerned with the free-will nature of the individual decisions that lead (?) [This is Hockett’s “?”, PWD] to the collective consequence; Schleicher would have been more intrigued by what he thought was the inevitability of the consequences.

Hence, language is passive in a further way. Diachronically, while language may not be willfully changed by individuals, their behavior is nevertheless the unwilled source of language change. Language responds to changes in speaking and may itself change.

2.3 On the opposition of Heterogeneity to Homogeneity

This opposition follows from several others. First, because language is a social average, complete within a collectivity that excludes individual variation, it projects ‘ideal’ speaker-listeners that are by definition homogeneous. But notice that in Saussurean terms such ‘ideal’ speakers cannot (?) in fact exist since each speaker will be partial, incomplete, and not ‘ideal’ in that she will not represent the entirety of language. Second, because language is opposed to willful speaking, speaking is heterogeneous, as a function of individuals, and individual occasions. Third, because language is not an activity, a use, its localization must lie somewhere other than in the chain of

5 Cp. Whorf’s (1940:221) reference to “automatic, involuntary patterns of language”. It may be noted here that Hockett himself (and others) attribute an absence of willfulness to sound change because it occurs outside of awareness (Hockett 1965:202):

[sound change] is not reducible to borrowing because the density distribution is largely altered by innumerable tiny imprecisions of pronunciation and by constant channel noise ... that take place totally out of awareness.

Hockett (1965:191) sees the regularity of change in sound change itself and it is the social context which produces any contradiction to the regularity. This view is the inverse of the one described in the quotation just below from Hockett (1983).
activity that is speaking (Saussure 1959:14):

It can be localized in the limited segment of the speaking-circuit where an auditory image becomes associated with a concept.

I.e., it is psychological, existing in what Saussure terms the associative center. Its nature is homogeneously psychological while speaking remains composed of various kinds of phenomena — psychological, physiological, physical.

2.4 The implications of these properties

Ultimately, language is patterned and regular whereas speaking is irregular and unpattered. We may see this projection of language upon the collective society as a continuation of the perception of sound change in the nineteenth century as outlined by Hockett (1983). The regularity there escaped from the indeterminateness of Geisteswissenschaft by conceiving change as a mass (social) phenomenon, which is beyond the reach of any individual to initiate or to alter. The notion of social is primary for Saussure and the other properties of language appear to follow from it. Yet from our point of view it leads to some odd conclusions.

Assuming that language derives its homogeneity from its social nature, we are directed to search for a homogeneous speech community where that homogeneity will reside. Yet that search (e.g. linguistic geography) has not found such a community. In the same search for homogeneity, American structuralism begins with language and then fractures that concept into dialects, and then further into idiolects, and finally into styles. The curious result of that progression is that when homogeneity is ultimately found (?), the social property is lost. For Transformational Generative Grammar, any person who knows the language can be an ideal speaker-listener; the language is complete in that individual. Homogeneity and social are not concomitant properties in the American style of linguistics. The ‘language’ studied now is the behavior of one speaker behaving in one style. Language is no longer a collective, and it is complete in the individual. Language is contextually bound to usage, i.e., a specific style in a specific speech act, and is no longer the usage-free thing it was for Saussure. It is circumscribed by the terms of that usage.

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7 Cf. Bloch (1947) and the description of the variants of English have: htdocs, hæv, and v.
3. The sign
The implementation of Saussure’s socially homogeneous language depends upon his use of the sign, which is a composite of a concept and a sound-image held together by a bond of mutual implication. This relation establishes the concept as a signified and the sound-image as a signifier (cf. Figure 3 from Saussure 1959:114). Neither exists independently of the other as there is no up without the opposed down ... no left without the contrary right. Both derive their existence relationally, rather than by their own content.

![Figure 3: A depiction of the sign relation.](image)

The sign exists as a psychological reality independent of its manifestation, e.g. “phonemes ... which suggest[...] verbal activity ... is applicable to the spoken word only” (Saussure 1959:66). And (Saussure 1959:94):

The word-unit is not constituted solely by the totality of its phonemes but by characteristics other than its material quality [emp. mine, PWD].

Signs acquire their existence and their character not from their content, but from their place in a system, by their opposition to one another. The matter/material that realizes them or the opposition is irrelevant.

The separation of the signs of language/langue from material expression implies a second property of signs, the famed arbitrariness of the bond between the signifier and signified. Given that language/langue exists independently from its manifestation and that a signifier and signified take their status from that mutual relation, it matters not what signifier bonds with

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8 But notice that the ‘bond’ may experience degrees of necessity (Saussure 1959:75):

Latin necère ‘kill’ became noyer ‘drown’ in French. Both the sound-image and the concept changed; but it is useless to separate the two parts of the phenomenon; it is sufficient to state with respect to the whole that the bond between the idea [i.e., concept/signified] and the sign [i.e., sound-image/signifier] was loosened [emph. mine, PWD].
what signified. This systemic arbitrariness is supported by the empirical observation that one cannot reason from sound-to-meaning nor from meaning-to-sound.⁹

4. *Language/langue and the theory*

Language/langue is a *system* of arbitrarily constituted signs, defined by their opposition to other signs. Language is *abstract*, but it is not an *abstraction*.⁹⁰ Saussure takes care to emphasize the *reality*, the existence of the system of signs (Saussure 1959:107):

> Language then has the strange, striking characteristic of not having entities that are perceptible at the outset [i.e., abstract] and yet not permitting us to doubt that they exist [i.e., not abstractions] and that their functioning constitutes it.

Saussure adopts a realist’s position towards his object of study; he advocates a God’s-truth belief in the actuality of langue and not a hocus-pocus attitude.

In denying the possibility of arriving at the system by means of a series of analyses, Saussure *rejects* an *operational* kind of theory and *proposes* a theory which is *explanatory*. There are several motivations for his position. **First**, because language/langue has an abstract (though real) existence and only an arbitrary association with its realization, it is not possible to reason from sound-image (or from concepts) to the sign.¹¹ It is the (system of) sign(s) which order(s) and shape(s) sound-images and concepts; and without prior knowledge of the sign, one cannot know what portions to operate upon. The segmentation is not a given. Any structuring of sound or thought results from projecting the form of language/langue upon an otherwise formless purport. Cf. Figure 4 (Saussure 1959:112). Given A and B in Figure 4, it is not possible to see their organizations unless they have been given before; but

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⁹ This arbitrariness is found in American structuralism in the *patternless* association between levels, e.g. in the connection between syntax/morphology and phonology. Cf. footnote 12. Grammar cannot be reduced to phonology (except arbitrarily) in the same way that language cannot be reduced to physics/chemistry (except arbitrarily).

¹⁰ Recall my earlier use of ‘covert’.

¹¹ This recurs in Chomsky’s (1960) advocating an explanatory theory in the face of an impenetrable blackbox, the LAD.
that organization is just what an operational approach is trying to determine.\footnote{This recalls Hammarström’s (1978) distinction between internal and external and the direct seizure of language through introspection (Hammarström 1978:20 & 22):}

**Second**, an operational discovery of the elements of language/langue would lead to an abstraction. Consideration of the French alternation between *mwa* and *mwaz* ‘month’, and attempting to establish a signifier would yield an abstraction which is the ‘link’ between the two, but is neither, and which has no status in parole, nor in langue (Saussure 1959:105):

In *mwa* (mois, as in le mois de Septembre ‘the month of September’) and *mwaz* (mois, in un mois après ‘a month later’) there are also two forms of the same word, and there is no question of a concrete unit. The meaning is the same, but the slices of sound are different. As soon as we try to liken the concrete units to words, we face a dilemma: we must either ignore the relation — which is nonetheless evident — that binds *cheval* and *chevaux*, the two sounds of *mwa* and *mwaz*, etc. and say that they are different words, or instead of concrete units be satisfied with the abstraction that links [emph. mine, PWD] the different forms of the same word.\footnote{This dilemma looks forward to Hockett’s later trilemma (1961:30):}

(1) *Knife-* and *knive-* are the same morpheme.
(2) *Knife-* and *knive-* are phonemically different.
(3) A morpheme is composed of phonemes.

One of the propositions must be false.

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12 This recalls Hammarström’s (1978) distinction between internal and external and the direct seizure of language through introspection (Hammarström 1978:20 & 22):

A linguist can study language externally. He may have to do so, or he may choose to do so, but in both cases his description will be at least somewhat wrong and incomplete ... I have previously suggested ... that this kind of scrutinizing [of an internal object] involves intuition or introspection. Intuition would imply a more direct procedure: one can immediately tell that in English the definite article always precedes ... the noun.

13 This dilemma looks forward to Hockett’s later trilemma (1961:30):
Third, the discovery techniques would yield a list and not a system, thus missing the structural essence of language/la langue. And fourth, signs match no entities of a fixed size in speaking. They are not uniquely equivalent to ‘words’ (e.g. porte-plume), nor to ‘locutions’ (e.g. s’il vous plait), nor to ‘sentences’. Beginning with one or the other, then, will not produce consistent identification of the signs of the language system.

The theory is therefore 

**explanatory.** Saussure underscores — implicitly — that the explanation is a deductive one, not historical, and seeks to establish a **synchronic linguistics.** The explanation is not one of cause-and-effect, that Hammarström (1978:26) attributes to the natural sciences but the ‘weaker’ deductive one. The system which Saussure suggests exists independent of time ... it is unchanging ... thus cause-and-effect explanations can have no home in language/la langue. Given a sign relation as in Figure 3, the replacement of the content of the signifier, or the replacement of the signified will have no effect upon the system as long as the system, i.e., the structural relations remain unaltered (Saussure 1959:94):

... these transformations are basically alien to words and cannot touch their essence.

One can see additional properties in language change which set the history of language off from atemporal language and which **void** historical explanations. **First,** change affects only one term of the sign. It is phonetic or semantic, as when the pronunciation of Germanic *gast/gasti* –> *Gast/Gäste* without changing the semantics. The history of language does not deal with signs, and “to try to unite such dissimilar facts in the same discipline would be certainly a fanciful undertaking” (Saussure 1959:85). The patterns of language are not those of change (Saussure 1959:93 & 104):

... if one speaks of law [i.e., pattern] in synchrony it is in the sense of arrangement [i.e., static], a principle of regularity ... [whereas] ...Diachrony supposes a dynamic force through which a thing is produced, a thing executed.

**Second,** change like speaking is **active:** both are events. There will be no ‘events’ in language/la langue, only “the momentary arrangement of terms” (Saussure 1959:80 & 81):

The first thing that strikes us when we study the facts of language is that their succession in time does not exist insofar as the speaker is concerned. He is confronted with a state. That is why the linguist who wishes to understand a state must discard all knowledge of everything that produced it and ignore diachrony.
Implicit in this is that whatever pattern Saussure adduces for language/langue, it will be static and **taxonomic**.