

SRB Insight:

Does Saussure still matter?

By Paul Bouissac

The discovery, in 1996, of some manuscripts penned by Ferdinand de Saussure, which had been stored in the “orangerie” of the family estate in Geneva, brought again to the fore the linguistic and semiotic legacy of the Swiss philologist who had been obsessed all his life by the true nature of languages and, more generally, signs. The publication of these manuscripts in 2002, under the editorship of Simon Bouquet and Rudolph Engler, was preceded, in June 2001, by an international conference in Archamp and Geneva, whose aim was both to take stock of Saussurean scholarship and to assess the history and current state of Saussurism in the world. The newly discovered manuscripts are due to appear in English, translated by Carol Sanders, who is also the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure* (2004). This renewal of interest should not make one forget that, since his death in 1913, there has been a continuous stream of inquiries, both philological and interpretative, bearing on Saussure’s texts and thought. The highlights of this research included, during the last few decades, the monumental critical edition of the sources of the *Course in General Linguistics* by Rudolph Engler (1968-1990), the separate editing of the notes taken by the students who followed Saussure’s courses on general linguistics between 1907 and 1911 (Komatsu and Harris 1993; Komatsu

and Wolf 1996, 1997), and the publication of the Harvard manuscripts by Herman Parret (1993). In addition, numerous historiographic and exegetic exercises have been devoted to reinterpreting, year after year, Saussure's contribution to linguistics and semiology (e.g. Koerner 1973; Harris 1987, 2001; Thibault 1997; Choi 2002). The *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, published by the University of Geneva, remain the main outlet for Saussurean scholarship and keep track of all other relevant publications.

In view of such an abundance of editorial and hermeneutic activities close to a century after Saussure's premature death, it seems difficult not to raise the following question: is all this scholarship of strictly historical interest or does Saussure's thought still matter to the advancement of linguistics and semiotics? But, before answering this question, a brief recapitulation of Saussure's emergence as a fountainhead of semiology is in order.

It is indeed important to recall that, during his lifetime, Saussure was known mainly as a specialist of Indo-European comparative and historical linguistics. His fame among other linguists was due to a 1879 publication on the early system of Indo-European vowels, in addition to his teaching in this philological domain at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris, until he was appointed to the University of Geneva in 1891, where he taught Sanskrit and Indo-European Comparative Linguistics. It is only toward the end of his life that, between 1907 and 1911, he was entrusted the

task of teaching a course in general linguistics. The three courses he gave on this subject matter attracted only a handful of students, and the way in which the lectures were delivered has been interestingly characterized thirty years later by Albert Sechehaye in the following manner: "Having been asked to teach courses in general linguistics, which, incidentally, had been allotted a very short time, the master, whose thought on this topic was still in progress, hardly could do more than convey to his students the problems with which he was struggling and the few certainties he had reached so far concerning some essential points. Three times, each time from a different angle, he expounded his views, thus making his listeners reflect upon these issues anew. He was thinking aloud to stimulate their own thinking" (quoted in French in Godel 1969: 139 - my translation).

It is all too often forgotten that the book to which Saussure's name became indissolubly attached, the *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), is a posthumous publication that was neither composed nor even approved by him. Even when the conditions of its production are perfunctorily acknowledged, it is assumed that its contents faithfully reflect Saussure's ideas. Hence the abundant quotations found in the literature that are introduced by: "For Saussure..." or "Saussure says that" To make things still worse, most references found in today's critical discourse are second-hand paraphrases by scholars who are hardly aware of the scholarship mentioned above. Using Saussure as a straw man is a popular topos in post-structuralist cultural theory and beyond. In fact, as more manuscripts and

correspondence come to light, it is increasingly obvious that the *Course* is largely a fabrication (Harris 2003). Using students' notes, personal recollections and fragmentary manuscripts to reconstruct a systematic treatise on the nature of language was all the more dubious an enterprise as Saussure himself had always refused to give such a form to his speculations. He refused on the ground that the only thing he was sure of was that none of the ideas that formed the linguistics of his time had any value, and that he had not come yet to any conclusions that would allow him to formulate a consistent theory of language within a comprehensive semiology. At his death, Saussure was still struggling with the conundrum of language and was confronted with a set of contradictory evidence that could not be reconciled in a coherent theory.

Nevertheless, Saussure's name has been endlessly invoked through most of the previous century in the structuralist and post-structuralist literature. It must be emphasized, however, that it is essentially on the basis of two short paragraphs from the *Course* that he was posthumously elevated first to the status of founder of semiology, then co-founder of semiotics when C.S. Peirce's contrastingly prolix speculations entered the fray. Whoever has perused the sources of the *Course*, can only be struck by the gap that exists between the dogma that was derived from this formally written text, following a conventional, rational plan, and the often erratic and emotional autographic notes, full of bold assertions as well as self-doubting reflexions, that the book purports to selectively systematize and normalize in a

didactic manner. From the beginning until today, whatever manuscripts have been found have been assessed and organized by their editors through the filter of the *Course* which remains the reference with respect to which their contents are classified and interpreted. Precious little effort is made to restore them to their chronological order within the context of the linguistic and philosophical debates of their time. The curse of the *Course* keeps casting its shadow on one of the most daring minds of the century. The fact that his original thoughts are accessible only in the form of fragments, tentative notes, contradictory statements, should not detract us from granting them our utmost attention. A century after they were jotted down on paper, their counterintuitive insights retain their provocative force and challenge the established doxa that now reigns in linguistics and semiotics. It may be the case, however, that Saussure's epistemological vision is at last coming of age.

It was after re-reading the *Course* that the Russian linguist Nikolaj Trubetzkoy wrote to Roman Jakobson in 1932: "For inspiration I have reread de Saussure, but on a second reading he impresses me much less. There is comparatively little in the book that is of value; most of it is old rubbish. And what is valuable is awfully abstract, without details" (Trubetskoy 2001:255). In view of some of the remarks found in his notes there is no doubt that Saussure himself would have agreed, had he been given an opportunity to look at the work of his well-intending editors. The intellectual picture that emerges from his manuscripts is indeed strikingly different from the posthumous text that fed the epistemological myth of Saussurism.

A recurring theme in the *Course* and in Saussure's own notes is the notion of *langue*. This notion has challenged all translators of the text into English, and probably into other languages as well. Exegetes and commentators have also inconclusively debated on the status of this term, whether it refers to some mental entity, perhaps a sort of Platonic idea, or merely designates a methodological concept, an abstraction that is a part of a heuristic strategy. The issue has been, and remains, the articulation of the twin notions of *langue* and *parole*, the latter being no less difficult to translate into English than the former. Some have opted for an ontological distinction on the model of the philosophical tradition that opposes essence and existence or "accidents"; others have reduced the difference to the pragmatic necessity of evaluating instances of "linguaging" with respect to the opposite poles of a continuum going from the normative, idealized representation of a language to the open-ended actual utterances that are usually observed in verbal interactions. That Saussure himself was not entirely satisfied with these correlate notions of *langue* and *parole* seems obvious from his numerous attempts to specify the distinction. In fact, in spite of almost a century of controversies, neither Hjelmslev's conceptual sleight of hand that consisted of rewriting the terminological pair as "system" and "process," nor the Derridean debunking of its alleged metaphysical assumptions, have totally defused the issue. As various linguistic paradigms are still jockeying for the final word regarding the nature and origin of

language (e.g. Trabant and Ward 2001, Christiansen and Kirby 2003), Saussure's uneasy, often ambiguous circumlocutions and occasional images continue to engage the researchers who get to the manuscript sources rather than accept one of the standardized versions of the Saussurean doxa (e.g. Gandon 2001).

Saussure struggled inconclusively with the issue of what kind of object is language, that is, the object of general linguistics which he was supposed to teach, and the notion of *langue* was for him a sort of notion by default, in the sense that there appeared to be no other way to account, albeit imperfectly, for a range of observable language phenomena. Examining his successive attempts at clarifying his own thought leads one to the evidence that the various characters and aspects of language he could identify seemed to him contradictory. The manuscripts discovered in 1996 do not appear to sensibly modify this outlook. Excerpts from a draft entitled "De l'essence double du langage" [On the dual essence of language] rehash, if not compound, the ambiguities and uncertainties which Saussure confronted: "Il est profondément faux de s'imaginer qu'on puisse faire une synthèse radieuse de la langue, en partant d'un principe déterminé qui se développe et s'incorpore avec []" [it is definitely a mistake to fancy that it is possible to derive an unproblematic synthesis of *langue* from a determinate principle which would develop and become embodied in [it]; or: "Quand un système de signes devient le bien d'une collectivité [...] Nous ne savons plus quelles forces et quelles lois vont être mêlées à la vie de ce système de signes". [Once a sign system has taken root in a social group [...] we do

not understand which forces and which laws become involved in the life of this system.] (Bouquet & Engler 2001: 15-16).

Langue was the label Saussure attached to the elusive object of general linguistics and which could not be captured by the detailed study of the innumerable languages that could be experienced in the contemporary world and through history. But since, for him, languages constituted merely a subset, albeit an important one, of a more encompassing class of sign systems, the notion of *langue* needed to be given a semiological rather than purely linguistic definition. His agenda was to capture this elusive object and his efforts towards this goal remain relevant today since nobody has yet proposed a convincing answer to Saussure's pertinent question. As long as it is believed that Saussure had reached a conclusion regarding this problem, it is possible to try and give an explanation of his "theory," but if, as it is contended here, Saussure merely attempted again and again to get a grip on the intractable difficulty of conceptualizing language as an object of scientific knowledge that would transcend the indefinite variety of observable languages and nevertheless account for each one of them, understanding the problem is what we should try to achieve without limiting our inquiry to the historical circumstances within which Saussure was immersed during the last decade of the nineteenth century.

The great debate of the time was whether languages were kinds of organisms which changed along the same patterns as other organisms' life cycles or whether

they were social institutions based on conventions supported by human mental abilities. In one of his rare references to other linguists reported in the *Course*, Saussure designates W.D. Whitney as a valuable exponent of the latter approach. At the same time, he directs derogatory remarks to some insane theorists, without naming them, who support the organicist view. This allusion obviously echoes Whitney's harsh criticisms of August Schleicher's crude Darwinism (1863). However, the reference to Whitney is accompanied by some reservations, and, further, his endorsement of the movement which then defined itself by opposition to the organic hypothesis is not expressed in a wholehearted manner. Again and again Saussure returns to the stubborn evidence that led him to grapple with a paradox: *langue* as a set of differential terms is founded on arbitrary conventions that totally escape the conscious intentions of the individuals who use its resources for expressing their thoughts and communicating among themselves. Paradoxically, it is a contract without contractants. Because none of the empirical investigations of the multifarious aspects of language communication appear to be sufficient to found a scientific knowledge of this phenomenon, something he calls *langue* must be assumed to exist by default. But, actually, *langue* is the unknown in the equation.

A common misreading has construed *langue* as a static, achronic or synchronic system, depending on the temporal order to which it is opposed. But, for Saussure, time is of the essence for understanding the notion of *langue*. For instance, following the sequence of Saussure's own notes in the column in which Engler lists them in his

critical edition of the *Course*, one cannot avoid coming to the conclusion that this notion, which has often been foregrounded by commentators as an achronic mentalist or cognitive “reality,” is far from being the whole picture. It is a set of constraints that can be expressed as an algorithm or a coherent body of algorithms at a given moment but that is conceived by Saussure as an object for which time is of the essence. Repeatedly, his notes allude to this undeniable characteristic which must be accepted in spite of the equally undeniable evidence of its contrary: “On peut parler à la fois de l’immutabilité et de la mutabilité du signe” (Engler 1989:165) [the sign can be said to be both immutable and mutable]. This remark appears in the context of attempts at circumscribing the elusive object of general linguistics, and more generally semiology: “Tout ce qui comprend des formes doit entrer dans la sémiologie” (154) [whatever involves forms must come under the purview of semiology]; but contrary to the contemplative rationality of geometry, *langue* is an irrational force which imposes itself on humans (“La langue est quelque chose que l’on subit” (159) [langue is something which imposes itself upon us]; its very foundations are irrational and it is driven by blind forces (“fondée sur l’irraison même”[162], “des forces aveugles”[171])).

Indeed, alterations occur in the system itself and these alterations are not functional in the sense that they would be the effects of conscious changes consensually made to a social contract in order to improve its efficiency. Instead, they are neither free nor rational. “Quand intervient le Temps combiné avec le fait de

la psychologie sociale, c'est alors que nous sentons que la langue n'est pas libre [...] parce que principe de continuité ou de solidarité indéfinie avec les âges précédents. La continuité enferme le fait d'altération qui est un déplacement de valeurs" (173-174). [When Time combines with the reality of social psychology, we come to realize that langue is not free [...] because of the principle of continuity and solidarity with previous states. Continuity includes alterations in the form of shifting values.]

This way of thinking is remarkably Darwinian and more specifically adumbrates contemporary speculations on evolutionary semiotics and memetics which construe semiotic systems, including language(s), as semi-autonomous algorithms endowed with an evolutionary dynamic of their own akin to parasitic modes of adaptation, survival and reproduction (e.g., Deacon 1997, Worden 2000, van Driem 2000). Saussure's puzzling image of *langue* as somewhat like "a duck hatched by a hen," whose essential character is to "always escape to some extent individual or social will" and which "exists perfectly only in the mass of brains" (Engler 1989: 40-41, 51, 57), evokes some kind of yet unclassified organism (see also Engler 1989: 169). He specifies his approach to which he seems to be led almost reluctantly through compounding the range of evidence he has reached as a compelling, albeit counter-intuitive conclusion: "Notre définition de la langue suppose que nous en écartons tout ce qui est étranger à son organisme, à son système", "l'organisme intérieur de la langue", "On s'est fait scrupule d'employer le terme d'organisme, parce que la langue dépend des êtres vivants. On peut employer le mot, en se rappelant qu'il ne

s'agit pas d'un être indépendant" (Engler 1989:59) [Our definition of langue implies that we discard whatever is foreign to its organism, its system, the inner organism of langue. The word organism is used here reluctantly because langue depends on living organisms. Let us use it any way, keeping in mind that this organism is not independent]. It is interesting to note that this characterisation meets the definition of parasitic organism, a recurrent theme in contemporary memetic theories of language. Furthermore, Saussure's paradoxical insights do not apply only to the object of linguistics but to semiology as a whole: "La continuité du signe dans le temps, liée à l'altération dans le temps, est un principe de la sémiologie générale" (171) [the continuity of the sign in time, linked to its alteration, is a principle of general semiology]. But this continuity depends on transmission "selon des lois qui n'ont rien à faire avec les lois de création" (170) [according to laws which are totally different from the laws of creation]. Saussure repeatedly emphasizes that the social nature of semiological systems is "internal" rather than "external" to these systems (173). Continuity and change belong to their very essence and unambiguously, albeit not explicitly, locating them within an evolutionary process whose description fits, *avant la lettre*, the neo-Darwinian models. This vision is emphatically underlined in the first Geneva lectures of 1891 in which even pauses in the evolution of "langue" - what some contemporary evolutionist controversially term "punctuations" - are denied (Engler 1990: 3-14).

Such remarks, and many other of the same vein, have not been foregrounded by the epigones and commentators, or they have been interpreted as mere

metaphors. Similarly, Saussure's assertions regarding the place he envisioned for semiology as a part of general psychology has been glossed over. However, the latter is not less striking and many written remarks by Saussure anticipate the tenets of modern cognitive neurosciences. His occasional criticisms of Broca's approach bears upon the restrictive localisations of linguistic functions. "Il y a une faculté plus générale, celle qui commande aux signes" (Engler 1989: 36) [there exists a more general faculty, one which governs signs]. This faculty is conceived as a brain function which makes language possible without being its origin since the law of continuity shows that any *langue* must be transmitted. A definite vision, well ahead of Saussure's time, emerges from his concise, at times cryptic, assertions: "L'essentiel de la langue est étranger au caractère phonique du signe linguistique" (22) [the essence of langue is alien to the phonic character of linguistic signs]; "La langue n'est pas moins que la parole un objet de nature concrète" (44) [langue is as much as parole a concrete object] and "Tout est psychologique dans la langue" (21) [the whole of langue is psychological]. But shifting the problem to psychology is also a way to project its solution into an unknown future because Saussure's conception of psychology is a critical one. It is, like semiology, or signology as he preferred at times to call the science of signs, something to come which is bound to be different from the discipline known by this name at the turn of the century. The condition for the emergence of a psychology that would encompass semiology is that psychology take the temporal dimension into account and overcome its tendency to speculate on intemporal signs and ideas ["[...] sortir absolument de ses spéculations sur le signe

momentané et l'idée momentanée" (Engler 1990:47)]. This approach, perhaps, echoes more closely than it is suspected James Mark Baldwin's (1861- 1934) evolutionary psychology and epistemology. The American psychologist, contemporary of Saussure, whose impact on Piaget and Vygotsky is generally acknowledged, was widely read and discussed in Europe and in France in particular where he lived from 1908 until his death (Wozniak 1998). Baldwin's use of Darwinism in the rethinking of the traditional disciplines of his time may have been indeed much less objectionable than Schleicher's literal and narrow Spencerian applications of evolutionism to the history of languages that Whitney and Saussure considered to be "laughable."

Saussure, who was inconclusively engaged in an uneasy rethinking of linguistics, claiming for instance that there was not a single linguistic notion he did not find problematic, was projecting toward an ill-defined future the emergence of new epistemological horizons. Are his tentative ideas now coming of age? Can they provide a useful reference point for today's researchers, a sort of reflexive temporal depth, a heuristic framework beyond the earlier fossilisation of some restrictive interpretations? Bringing all the problems he raised and all the insights he jotted down in a single, not exclusive purview remains one of the most stimulating and challenging tasks of today. After all, the emergence of the epistemological resource which Saussure called semiology is not necessarily to be found under the official label of semiotics and its cohorts of scholastic debaters. For instance, George Spencer Brown's logic of distinctions expounded in *Law of Forms* (1969) and the use of his calculus of indications by Francisco Varela in *Principles of Biological Autonomy* (1979)

pursue one of the tenets of Saussure's conviction that "tout signe repose purement sur un co-status négatif" [any sign is purely based upon a negative co-status] or that "l'expression simple sera algébrique ou ne sera pas" [the simple expression will be algebraic or will not be at all] (Engler 1990: 28-29). Such is the goal of today's algorithmic and computational semiotics.

One may wonder whether, once the complete manuscripts left by Saussure will have been published in their chronological order irrespective of the prism of the *Course in General Linguistics* through which previously available autographs were perceived until recently, a novel, perhaps surprising conceptual landscape will emerge. This new contextualisation, both internal and external, may indeed show that Saussure had anticipated theoretical directions which he could not fully explore in his own time, given the state of scientific knowledge at the turn of the twentieth century, and the linguistic doxa which then prevailed. This will put to the test the various versions of Saussurism that have been constructed, and criticized, so far on the basis of limited information, and stimulate anew the semiotic, or semiological, project which Saussure envisioned as an open-ended process when he wrote "Où s'arrêtera la sémiologie? C'est difficile à dire." (Engler 1989: 46) [How far will semiology go? It is difficult to predict]. Saussure's questions remain valid and his elusive agenda still provides a challenge for today's spirit of scientific inquiry.

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