CHAPTER III

The Object of Study

§1. On defining a language

What is it that linguistics sets out to analyse? What is the actual object of study in its entirety? The question is a particularly difficult one. We shall see why later. First, let us simply try to grasp the nature of the difficulty.

Other sciences are provided with objects of study given in advance, which are then examined from different points of view. Nothing like that is the case in linguistics. Suppose someone pronounces the French word *nu* ('naked'). At first sight, one might think this would be an example of an independently given linguistic object. But more careful consideration reveals a series of three or four quite different things, depending on the viewpoint adopted. There is a sound, there is the expression of an idea, there is a derivative of Latin *nūdum*, and so on. The object is not given in advance of the viewpoint: far from it. Rather, one might say that it is the viewpoint adopted which creates the object. Furthermore, there is nothing to tell us in advance whether one of these ways of looking at it is prior to or superior to any of the others.

Whichever viewpoint is adopted, moreover, linguistic phenomena always present two complementary facets, each depending on the other. For example:

(1) The ear perceives articulated syllables as auditory impressions. But the sounds in question would not exist without the vocal organs.
There would be no *n*, for instance, without these two complementary aspects to it. So one cannot equate the language simply with what the ear hears. One cannot divorce what is heard from oral articulation. Nor, on the other hand, can one specify the relevant movements of the

vocal organs without reference to the corresponding auditory impression (cf. p. [63] ff.).

(2) But even if we ignored this phonetic duality, would language then be reducible to phonetic facts? No. Speech sounds are only the instrument of thought, and have no independent existence. Here another complementarity emerges, and one of great importance. A sound, itself a complex auditory-articulatory unit, in turn combines with an idea to form another complex unit, both physiologically and psychologically. Nor is this all.

(3) Language has an individual aspect and a social aspect. One is not conceivable without the other. Furthermore:

(4) Language at any given time involves an established system and an evolution. At any given time, it is an institution in the present and a product of the past. At first sight, it looks very easy to distinguish between the system and its history, between what it is and what it was. In reality, the connexion between the two is so close that it is hard to separate them. Would matters be simplified if one considered the ontogenesis of linguistic phenomena, beginning with a study of children's language, for example? No. It is quite illusory to believe that where language is concerned the problem of origins is any different from the problem of permanent conditions. There is no way out of the circle.

So however we approach the question, no one object of linguistic study emerges of its own accord. Whichever way we turn, the same dilemma confronts us. Either we tackle each problem on one front only, and risk failing to take into account the dualities mentioned above: or else we seem committed to trying to study language in several ways simultaneously, in which case the object of study becomes a muddle of disparate, unconnected things. By proceeding thus one opens the door to various sciences – psychology, anthropology, prescriptive grammar, philology, and so on – which are to be distinguish- ed from linguistics. These sciences could lay claim to language as falling in their domain; but their methods are not the ones that are needed.

One solution only, in our view, resolves all these difficulties. *The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure as his primary concern, and relate all other manifestations of language to it.* Indeed, amid so many dualities, linguistic structure seems to be the one thing that is independently definable and provides something our minds can satisfactorily grasp.

What, then, is linguistic structure? It is not, in our opinion, simply the same thing as language. Linguistic structure is only one part of language, even though it is an essential part. The structure of a language is a social product of our language faculty. At the same time,

it is also a body of necessary conventions adopted by society to enable members of society to use their language faculty. Language in its entirety has many different and disparate aspects. It lies astride the boundaries separating various domains. It is at the same time physical, physiological and psychological. It belongs both to the individual and to society. No classification of human phenomena provides any single place for it, because language as such has no discernible unity.

A language as a structured system, on the contrary, is both a self-contained whole and a principle of classification. As soon as we give linguistic structure pride of place among the facts of language, we introduce a natural order into an aggregate which lends itself to no other classification.

It might be objected to this principle of classification that our use of language depends on a faculty endowed by nature: whereas language systems are acquired and conventional, and so ought to be subordinated to – instead of being given priority over – our natural ability.

To this objection one might reply as follows.

First, it has not been established that the function of language, as manifested in speech, is entirely natural: that is to say, it is not clear that our vocal apparatus is made for speaking as our legs for walking. Linguists are by no means in agreement on this issue. Whitney, for instance, who regards languages as social institutions on exactly the same footing as all other social institutions, holds it to be a matter of chance or mere convenience that it is our vocal apparatus we use for linguistic purposes. Man, in his view, might well have chosen to use gestures, thus substituting visual images for sound patterns. Whitney's is doubtless too extreme a position. For languages are not in all respects similar to other social institutions (cf. p.[107] ff., p.[110]). Moreover, Whitney goes too far when he says that the selection of the vocal apparatus for language was accidental. For it was in some measure imposed upon us by Nature. But the American linguist is right about the essential point: the language we use is a convention, and it makes no difference what exactly the nature of the agreed sign is. The question of the vocal apparatus is thus a secondary one as far as the problem of language is concerned.

This idea gains support from the notion of *language articulation*. In Latin, the word *articulus* means 'member, part, subdivision in a sequence of things'. As regards language, articulation may refer to the division of the chain of speech into syllables, or to the division of the chain of meanings into meaningful units. It is in this sense that one speaks in German of *gegliederte Sprache*. On the basis of this second interpretation, one may say that it is not spoken language which is natural to man, but the faculty of constructing a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas.

Broca discovered that the faculty of speech is localised in the third

[26]

frontal convolution of the left hemisphere of the brain. This fact has been seized upon to justify regarding language as a natural endowment. But the same localisation is known to hold for *everything* connected with language, including writing. Thus what seems to be indicated, when we take into consideration also the evidence from various forms of aphasia due to lesions in the centres of localisation is: (1) that the various disorders which affect spoken language are interconnected in many ways with disorders affecting written language, and (2) that in all cases of aphasia or agraphia what is affected is not so much the ability to utter or inscribe this or that, but the ability to produce in any given mode signs corresponding to normal language. All this leads us to believe that, over and above the functioning of the various organs, there exists a more general faculty governing signs, which may be regarded as the linguistic faculty *par excellence*. So by a different route we are once again led to the same conclusion.

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Finally, in support of giving linguistic structure pride of place in our study of language, there is this argument: that, whether natural or not, the faculty of articulating words is put to use only by means of the linguistic instrument created and provided by society. Therefore it is no absurdity to say that it is linguistic structure which gives language what unity it has.

§2. *Linguistic structure: its place among the facts of language*

In order to identify what role linguistic structure plays within the totality of language, we must consider the individual act of speech and trace what takes place in the speech circuit. This act requires at least two individuals: without this minimum the circuit would not be complete. Suppose, then, we have two people, *A* and *B*, talking to each other:

A   B
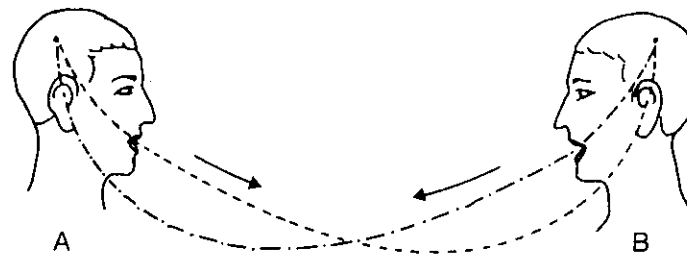
The starting point of the circuit is in the brain of one individual, for instance *A*, where facts of consciousness which we shall call concepts

[28]

are associated with representations of linguistic signs or sound patterns by means of which they may be expressed. Let us suppose that a given concept triggers in the brain a corresponding sound pattern. This is an entirely *psychological* phenomenon, followed in turn by a *physiological* process: the brain transmits to the organs of phonation an impulse corresponding to the pattern. Then sound waves are sent from A's mouth to B's ear: a purely *physical* process. Next, the circuit continues in B in the opposite order: from ear to brain, the physiological transmission of the sound pattern; in the brain, the psychological association of this pattern with the corresponding concept. If B speaks in turn, this new act will pursue – from his brain to A's – exactly the same course as the first, passing through the same successive phases, which we may represent as follows:
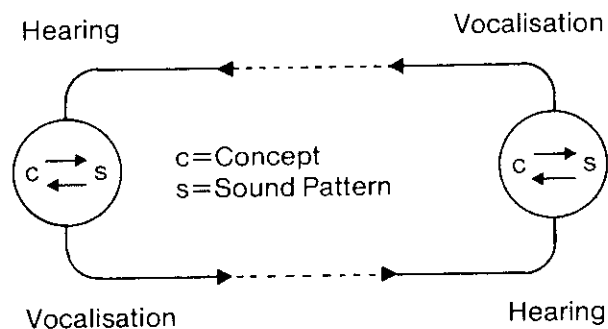
This analysis makes no claim to be complete. One could go on to distinguish the auditory sensation itself, the identification of that sensation with the latent sound pattern, the patterns of muscular movement associated with phonation, and so on. We have included only those elements considered essential; but our schematisation enables us straight away to separate the parts which are physical (sound [29] waves) from those which are physiological (phonation and hearing) and those which are psychological (the sound patterns of words and the concepts). It is particularly important to note that the sound patterns of the words are not to be confused with actual sounds. The word patterns are psychological, just as the concepts associated with them are.

The circuit as here represented may be further divided:

(a) into an external part (sound vibrations passing from mouth to ear) and an internal part (comprising all the rest);

(b) into a psychological and a non-psychological part, the latter comprising both the physiological facts localised in the organs and the

physical facts external to the individual; and

(c) into an active part and a passive part, the former comprising everything which goes from the association centre of one individual to the ear of the other, and the latter comprising everything which goes from an individual's ear to his own association centre.

Finally, in the psychological part localised in the brain, one may call everything which is active 'executive' ($c \rightarrow s$), and everything which is passive 'receptive' ($s \rightarrow c$).

In addition, one must allow for a faculty of association and co-ordination which comes into operation as soon as one goes beyond individual signs in isolation. It is this faculty which plays the major role in the organisation of the language as a system (cf. p.[170] ff.).

But in order to understand this role, one must leave the individual act, which is merely language in embryo, and proceed to consider the social phenomenon.

All the individuals linguistically linked in this manner will establish among themselves a kind of mean; all of them will reproduce – doubtless not exactly, but approximately – the same signs linked to the same concepts.

What is the origin of this social crystallisation? Which of the parts of the circuit is involved? For it is very probable that not all of them [30] are equally relevant.

The physical part of the circuit can be dismissed from consideration straight away. When we hear a language we do not know being spoken, we hear the sounds but we cannot enter into the social reality of what is happening, because of our failure to comprehend.

The psychological part of the circuit is not involved in its entirety either. The executive side of it plays no part, for execution is never carried out by the collectivity: it is always individual, and the individual is always master of it. This is what we shall designate by the term *speech*.

The individual's receptive and co-ordinating faculties build up a stock of imprints which turn out to be for all practical purposes the same as the next person's. How must we envisage this social product, so that the language itself can be seen to be clearly distinct from the rest? If we could collect the totality of word patterns stored in all those individuals, we should have the social bond which constitutes their language. It is a fund accumulated by the members of the community through the practice of speech, a grammatical system existing potentially in every brain, or more exactly in the brains of a group of individuals; for the language is never complete in any single individual, but exists perfectly only in the collectivity.

By distinguishing between the language itself and speech, we distinguish at the same time: (1) what is social from what is individual,

and (2) what is essential from what is ancillary and more or less accidental.

The language itself is not a function of the speaker. It is the product passively registered by the individual. It never requires premeditation, and reflexion enters into it only for the activity of classifying to be discussed below (p.[170] ff.).

[31] Speech, on the contrary, is an individual act of the will and the intelligence, in which one must distinguish: (1) the combinations through which the speaker uses the code provided by the language in order to express his own thought, and (2) the psycho-physical mechanism which enables him to externalise these combinations.

It should be noted that we have defined things, not words. Consequently the distinctions established are not affected by the fact that certain ambiguous terms have no exact equivalents in other languages. Thus in German the word *Sprache* covers individual languages as well as language in general, while *Rede* answers more or less to 'speech', but also has the special sense of 'discourse'. In Latin the word *sermo* covers language in general and also speech, while *lingua* is the word for 'a language'; and so on. No word corresponds precisely to any one of the notions we have tried to specify above. That is why all definitions based on words are vain. It is an error of method to proceed from words in order to give definitions of things.

To summarise, then, a language as a structured system may be characterised as follows:

1. Amid the disparate mass of facts involved in language, it stands out as a well defined entity. It can be localised in that particular section of the speech circuit where sound patterns are associated with concepts. It is the social part of language, external to the individual, who by himself is powerless either to create it or to modify it. It exists only in virtue of a kind of contract agreed between the members of a community. On the other hand, the individual needs an apprenticeship in order to acquaint himself with its workings: as a child, he assimilates it only gradually. It is quite separate from speech: a man who loses the ability to speak none the less retains his grasp of the language system, provided he understands the vocal signs he hears.

2. A language system, as distinct from speech, is an object that may be studied independently. Dead languages are no longer spoken, but we can perfectly well acquaint ourselves with their linguistic structure. A science which studies linguistic structure is not only able to dispense with other elements of language, but is possible only if those other elements are kept separate.

[32] 3. While language in general is heterogeneous, a language system is homogeneous in nature. It is a system of signs in which the one essential is the union of sense and sound pattern, both parts of the

sign being psychological.

4. Linguistic structure is no less real than speech, and no less amenable to study. Linguistic signs, although essentially psychological, are not abstractions. The associations, ratified by collective agreement, which go to make up the language are realities localised in the brain. Moreover, linguistic signs are, so to speak, tangible: writing can fix them in conventional images, whereas it would be impossible to photograph acts of speech in all their details. The utterance of a word, however small, involves an infinite number of muscular movements extremely difficult to examine and to represent. In linguistic structure, on the contrary, there is only the sound pattern, and this can be represented by one constant visual image. For if one leaves out of account that multitude of movements required to actualise it in speech, each sound pattern, as we shall see, is only the sum of a limited number of elements or speech sounds, and these can in turn be represented by a corresponding number of symbols in writing. Our ability to identify elements of linguistic structure in this way is what makes it possible for dictionaries and grammars to give us a faithful representation of a language. A language is a repository of sound patterns, and writing is their tangible form.

§3. *Languages and their place in human affairs. Semiology*

The above characteristics lead us to realise another, which is more important. A language, defined in this way from among the totality of facts of language, has a particular place in the realm of human [33] affairs, whereas language does not.

A language, as we have just seen, is a social institution. But it is in various respects distinct from political, juridical and other institutions. Its special nature emerges when we bring into consideration a different order of facts.

A language is a system of signs expressing ideas, and hence comparable to writing, the deaf-and-dumb alphabet, symbolic rites, forms of politeness, military signals, and so on. It is simply the most important of such systems.

It is therefore possible to conceive of a science *which studies the role of signs as part of social life*. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it *semiology*[1] (from the Greek *sēmeîon*, 'sign'). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready

[1] Not to be confused with *semantics*, which studies changes of meaning. Saussure gave no detailed exposition of semantics, but the basic principle to be applied is stated on p.[109]. (Editorial note)

for it in advance. Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge.

It is for the psychologist to determine the exact place of semiology.[1] The linguist's task is to define what makes languages a special type of system within the totality of semiological facts. The question will be taken up later on: here we shall make just one point, which is that if we have now for the first time succeeded in assigning linguistics its place among the sciences, that is because we have grouped it with semiology.

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Why is it that semiology is not yet recognised as an autonomous science with its own object of study, like other sciences? The fact is that here we go round in a circle. On the one hand, nothing is more appropriate than the study of languages to bring out the nature of the semiological problem. But to formulate the problem suitably, it would be necessary to study what a language is in itself: whereas hitherto a language has usually been considered as a function of something else, from other points of view.

In the first place, there is the superficial view taken by the general public, which sees a language merely as a nomenclature (cf. p. [97]). This is a view which stifles any inquiry into the true nature of linguistic structure.

Then there is the viewpoint of the psychologist, who studies the mechanism of the sign in the individual. This is the most straightforward approach, but it takes us no further than individual execution. It does not even take us as far as the linguistic sign itself, which is social by nature.

Even when due recognition is given to the fact that the sign must be studied as a social phenomenon, attention is restricted to those features of languages which they share with institutions mainly established by voluntary decision. In this way, the investigation is diverted from its goal. It neglects those characteristics which belong only to semiological systems in general, and to languages in particular. For the sign always to some extent eludes control by the will, whether of the individual or of society: that is its essential nature, even though it may be by no means obvious at first sight.

So this characteristic emerges clearly only in languages, but its manifestations appear in features to which least attention is paid. All of which contributes to a failure to appreciate either the necessity or the particular utility of a science of semiology. As far as we are concerned, on the other hand, the linguistic problem is first and foremost semiological. All our proposals derive their rationale from this

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[1] Cf. A. Naville, *Classification des sciences*, 2nd ed., p.104. (Editorial note)

basic fact. If one wishes to discover the true nature of language systems, one must first consider what they have in common with all other systems of the same kind. Linguistic factors which at first seem central (for example, the workings of the vocal apparatus) must be relegated to a place of secondary importance if it is found that they merely differentiate languages from other such systems. In this way, light will be thrown not only upon the linguistic problem. By considering rites, customs, etc., as signs, it will be possible, we believe, to see them in a new perspective. The need will be felt to consider them as semiological phenomena and to explain them in terms of the laws of semiology.

CHAPTER IV

Linguistics of Language Structure and Linguistics of Speech

In allocating to a science of linguistic structure its essential role within the study of language in general, we have at the same time mapped out linguistics in its entirety. The other elements of language, which go to make up speech, are automatically subordinated to this first science. In this way all the parts of linguistics fall into their proper place.

Take, for example, the production of sounds necessary to speech. The vocal organs are as external to the language system as the electrical apparatus which is used to tap out the Morse code is external to that code. Phonation, that is to say the execution of sound patterns, in no way affects the system itself. In this respect one may compare a language to a symphony. The symphony has a reality of its own, which is independent of the way in which it is performed. The mistakes which musicians may make in performance in no way compromise that reality.

One may perhaps object to regarding phonation as separate from the language system. What about the evidence provided by phonetic changes, coming from alterations in sounds as produced in speech? Do not these have a profound influence upon the destiny of the language itself? Have we really the right to claim that a language exists inde-

pendently of such phenomena? Yes, for they affect only the material substance of words. The language itself as a system of signs is affected only indirectly, through the change of interpretation which results. But that has nothing to do with phonetic change as such (cf. p. [121]). It may be of interest to investigate the causes of such changes, and the study of sounds may be of assistance. But it is not essential. For a science which deals with linguistic structure, it will always suffice to take note of sound changes and to examine what effects they have on the system.

What applies to phonation will apply also to all other elements of speech. The activity of the speaker must be studied in a variety of disciplines, which are of concern to linguistics only through their connexions with linguistic structure.

The study of language thus comprises two parts. The essential part takes for its object the language itself, which is social in its essence and independent of the individual. This is a purely psychological study. The subsidiary part takes as its object of study the individual part of language, which means speech, including phonation. This is a psycho-physical study.

These two objects of study are doubtless closely linked and each presupposes the other. A language is necessary in order that speech should be intelligible and produce all its effects. But speech also is necessary in order that a language may be established. Historically, speech always takes precedence. How would we ever come to associate an idea with a verbal sound pattern, if we did not first of all grasp this association in an act of speech? Furthermore, it is by listening to others that we learn our native language. A language accumulates in our brain only as the result of countless experiences. Finally, it is speech which causes a language to evolve. The impressions received from listening to others modify our own linguistic habits. Thus there is an interdependence between the language itself and speech. The former is at the same time the instrument and the product of the latter. But none of this compromises the absolute nature of the dis-   tinction between the two.

A language, as a collective phenomenon, takes the form of a totality of imprints in everyone's brain, rather like a dictionary of which each individual has an identical copy (cf. p. [30]). Thus it is something which is in each individual, but is none the less common to all. At the same time it is out of the reach of any deliberate interference by individuals. This mode of existence of a language may be represented by the following formula:

$$1 + 1 + 1 + 1 \ldots = \text{I (collective model)}.$$

In what way is speech present in this same collectivity? Speech is the sum total of what people say, and it comprises (*a*) individual combinations of words, depending on the will of the speakers, and (*b*) acts of phonation, which are also voluntary and are necessary for the execution of the speakers' combinations of words.

Thus there is nothing collective about speech. Its manifestations are individual and ephemeral. It is no more than an aggregate of particular cases, which may be represented by the following formula:

$$(1 + 1' + 1'' + 1''' \ldots).$$

For all these reasons, it would be impossible to consider language

systems and speech from one and the same point of view. Language
in its totality is unknowable, for it lacks homogeneity. But the dis-
tinction drawn above and the priority it implies make it possible to
clarify everything.

That is the first parting of the ways that we come to when endeav-
ouring to construct a theory of language. It is necessary to choose
between two routes which cannot both be taken simultaneously. Each
must be followed separately.

It would be possible to keep the name *linguistics* for each of these
two disciplines. We would then have a linguistics of speech. But it
would be essential not to confuse the linguistics of speech with lin-
[39]   guistics properly so called. The latter has linguistic structure as its
sole object of study.

We shall here concern ourselves strictly with linguistics proper, and
although in the course of our discussion we may draw upon what the
study of speech can tell us, we shall endeavour never to blur the
boundaries which separate the two domains.

PART ONE

General Principles

CHAPTER I

Nature of the Linguistic Sign

§1. Sign, signification, signal

For some people a language, reduced to its essentials, is a nomenclature: a list of terms corresponding to a list of things. For example, Latin would be represented as:

 : ARBOR
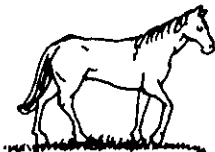
 : EQUOS

etc.   etc.

This conception is open to a number of objections. It assumes that ideas already exist independently of words (see below, p. [155]). It does not clarify whether the name is a vocal or a psychological entity, for

ARBOR might stand for either. Furthermore, it leads one to assume that the link between a name and a thing is something quite unproblematic, which is far from being the case. None the less, this naive [98] view contains one element of truth, which is that linguistic units are dual in nature, comprising two elements.

As has already been noted (p. [28]) in connexion with the speech circuit, the two elements involved in the linguistic sign are both psychological and are connected in the brain by an associative link.[1] This is a point of major importance.

A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern.[2] The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses. This sound pattern may be called a 'material' element only in that it is the representation of our sensory impressions. The sound pattern may thus be distinguished from the other element associated with it in a linguistic sign. This other element is generally of a more abstract kind: the concept.

The psychological nature of our sound patterns becomes clear when we consider our own linguistic activity. Without moving either lips or tongue, we can talk to ourselves or recite silently a piece of verse. We grasp the words of a language as sound patterns. That is why it is best to avoid referring to them as composed of 'speech sounds'. Such a term, implying the activity of the vocal apparatus, is appropriate to the spoken word, to the actualisation of the sound pattern in discourse. Speaking of the *sounds* and *syllables* of a word need not give rise to any misunderstanding,[3] provided one always bears in mind that this refers to the sound pattern.

[99]   The linguistic sign is, then, a two-sided psychological entity, which may be represented by the following diagram (top of p. 67).

These two elements are intimately linked and each triggers the other. Whether we are seeking the meaning of the Latin word *arbor* or the word by which Latin designates the concept 'tree', it is clear

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[1] This associative link is to be distinguished from the associative relations which link one sign with another: cf. p. [170] ff. (Translator's note)

[2] Saussure's term 'sound pattern' may appear too narrow. For in addition to the representation of what a word sounds like, the speaker must also have a representation of how it is articulated, the muscular pattern of the act of phonation. But for Saussure a language is essentially something acquired by the individual from the outside world (cf. p. [30]). Saussure's 'sound pattern' is above all the natural representation of the word form as an abstract linguistic item, independently of any actualisation in speech. Hence the articulatory aspect of the word may be taken for granted, or relegated to a position of secondary importance in relation to its sound pattern. (Editorial note)

[3] None the less, as various passages in the *Cours* bear witness, it would have been in the interests of clarity to introduce a terminological distinction and keep to it. (Translator's note)
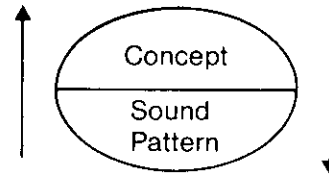
that only the connexions institutionalised in the language appear to us as relevant. Any other connexions there may be we set on one side.
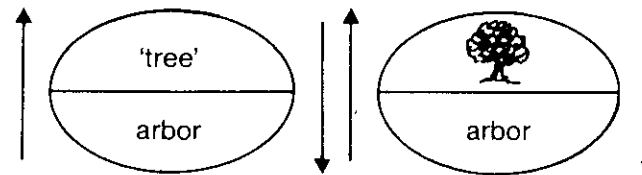
This definition raises an important question of terminology. In our terminology a *sign* is the combination of a concept and a sound pattern. But in current usage the term *sign* generally refers to the sound pattern alone, e.g. the word form *arbor*. It is forgotten that if *arbor* is called a sign, it is only because it carries with it the concept 'tree', so that the sensory part of the term implies reference to the whole.

The ambiguity would be removed if the three notions in question were designated by terms which are related but contrast. We propose to keep the term *sign* to designate the whole, but to replace *concept* and *sound pattern* respectively by *signification* and *signal*. The latter terms have the advantage of indicating the distinction which separates each from the other and both from the whole of which they are part. We retain the term *sign*, because current usage suggests no alterna [100] tive by which it might be replaced.

The linguistic sign thus defined has two fundamental characteristics. In specifying them, we shall lay down the principles governing all studies in this domain.

§2. *First principle: the sign is arbitrary*

The link between signal and signification is arbitrary. Since we are treating a sign as the combination in which a signal is associated with a signification, we can express this more simply as: *the linguistic sign is arbitrary.*

There is no internal connexion, for example, between the idea 'sister' and the French sequence of sounds *s-ö-r* which acts as its signal. The same idea might as well be represented by any other sequence of

sounds. This is demonstrated by differences between languages, and even by the existence of different languages. The signification 'ox' has as its signal *b-ö-f* on one side of the frontier,[1] but *o-k-s (Ochs)* on the other side.

No one disputes the fact that linguistic signs are arbitrary. But it is often easier to discover a truth than to assign it to its correct place. The principle stated above is the organising principle for the whole of linguistics, considered as a science of language structure. The consequences which flow from this principle are innumerable. It is true that they do not all appear at first sight equally evident. One discovers them after many circuitous deviations, and so realises the fundamental importance of the principle.

It may be noted in passing that when semiology is established one of the questions that must be asked is whether modes of expression which rely upon signs that are entirely natural (mime, for example) fall within the province of semiology. If they do, the main object of study in semiology will none the less be the class of systems based upon the arbitrary nature of the sign. For any means of expression accepted in a society rests in principle upon a collective habit, or on [101] convention, which comes to the same thing. Signs of politeness, for instance, although often endowed with a certain natural expressiveness (prostrating oneself nine times on the ground is the way to greet an emperor in China) are none the less fixed by rule. It is this rule which renders them obligatory, not their intrinsic value. We may therefore say that signs which are entirely arbitrary convey better than others the ideal semiological process. That is why the most complex and the most widespread of all systems of expression, which is the one we find in human languages, is also the most characteristic of all. In this sense, linguistics serves as a model for the whole of semiology, even though languages represent only one type of semiological system.

The word *symbol* is sometimes used to designate the linguistic sign, or more exactly that part of the linguistic sign which we are calling the signal. This use of the word *symbol* is awkward, for reasons connected with our first principle. For it is characteristic of symbols that they are never entirely arbitrary. They are not empty configurations. They show at least a vestige of natural connexion between the signal and its signification. For instance, our symbol of justice, the scales, could hardly be replaced by a chariot.

The word *arbitrary* also calls for comment. It must not be taken to imply that a signal depends on the free choice of the speaker. (We shall see later than the individual has no power to alter a sign in any respect once it has become established in a linguistic community.) The

[1] The frontier between France and Germany. (Translator's note)

term implies simply that the signal is *unmotivated*: that is to say arbitrary in relation to its signification, with which it has no natural connexion in reality.

In conclusion, two objections may be mentioned which might be brought against the principle that linguistic signs are arbitrary.

1. *Onomatopoeic* words might be held to show that a choice of signal is not always arbitrary. But such words are never organic elements of a linguistic system. Moreover, they are far fewer than is generally [102] believed. French words like *fouet* ('whip') or *glas* ('knell') may strike the ear as having a certain suggestive sonority. But to see that this is in no way intrinsic to the words themselves, it suffices to look at their Latin origins. *Fouet* comes from Latin *fāgus* ('beech tree') and *glas* from Latin *classicum* ('trumpet call'). The suggestive quality of the modern pronunciation of these words is a fortuitous result of phonetic evolution.

As for genuine onomatopoeia (e.g. French *glou-glou* ('gurgle'), *tic-tac* 'ticking (of a clock)'), not only is it rare but its use is already to a certain extent arbitrary. For onomatopoeia is only the approximate imitation, already partly conventionalised, of certain sounds. This is evident if we compare a French dog's *ouaoua* and a German dog's *wauwau*. In any case, once introduced into the language, onomatopoeic words are subjected to the same phonetic and morphological evolution as other words. The French word *pigeon* ('pigeon') comes from Vulgar Latin *pīpiō*, itself of onomatopoeic origin, which clearly proves that onomatopoeic words themselves may lose their original character and take on that of the linguistic sign in general, which is unmotivated.

2. Similar considerations apply to *exclamations*. These are not unlike onomatopoeic words, and they do not undermine the validity of our thesis. People are tempted to regard exclamations as spontaneous expressions called forth, as it were, by nature. But in most cases it is difficult to accept that there is a necessary link between the exclamatory signal and its signification. Again, it suffices to compare two languages in this respect to see how much exclamations vary. For example, the French exclamation *aie!* corresponds to the German *au!* Moreover, it is known that many exclamations were originally meaningful words (e.g. *diable!* 'devil', *mordieu!* 'God's death').

In short, onomatopoeic and exclamatory words are rather marginal phenomena, and their symbolic origin is to some extent disputable.

§3. Second principle: linear character of the signal   [103]

The linguistic signal, being auditory in nature, has a temporal aspect, and hence certain temporal characteristics: (a) *it occupies a certain*

temporal space, and (b) *this space is measured in just one dimension:* it is a line.

This principle is obvious, but it seems never to be stated, doubtless because it is considered too elementary. However, it is a fundamental principle and its consequences are incalculable. Its importance equals that of the first law. The whole mechanism of linguistic structure depends upon it (cf. p. [170]). Unlike visual signals (e.g. ships' flags) which can exploit more than one dimension simultaneously, auditory signals have available to them only the linearity of time. The elements of such signals are presented one after another: they form a chain. This feature appears immediately when they are represented in writing, and a spatial line of graphic signs is substituted for a succession of sounds in time.

In certain cases, this may not be easy to appreciate. For example, if I stress a certain syllable, it may seem that I am presenting a number of significant features simultaneously. But that is an illusion. The syllable and its accentuation constitute a single act of phonation. There is no duality within this act, although there are various contrasts with what precedes and follows (cf. p. [180]).

CHAPTER II   [104]

Invariability and Variability of the Sign

§1. Invariability

The signal, in relation to the idea it represents, may seem to be freely chosen. However, from the point of view of the linguistic community, the signal is imposed rather than freely chosen. Speakers are not consulted about its choice. Once the language has selected a signal, it cannot be freely replaced by any other. There appears to be something rather contradictory about this. It is a kind of linguistic Hobson's choice. What can be chosen is already determined in advance. No individual is able, even if he wished, to modify in any way a choice already established in the language. Nor can the linguistic community exercise its authority to change even a single word.[1] The community, as much as the individual, is bound to its language.

A language cannot therefore be treated simply as a form of contract, and the linguistic sign is a particularly interesting phenomenon to study for this reason. For if we wish to demonstrate that the rules a community accepts are imposed upon it, and not freely agreed to, it is a language which offers the most striking proof.

Let us now examine how the linguistic sign eludes the control of our will. We shall then be able to see the important consequences which follow from this fact.

At any given period, however far back in time we go, a language is   [105] always an inheritance from the past. The initial assignment of names

[1] This is not a denial of the possibility of linguistic legislation, nor even of its potential effectiveness. What Saussure denies is that the collective ratification required is a matter for collective decision. It may be illegal for trade purposes to call Spanish sparkling wine 'champagne'; but that will be merely one external factor bearing on speech (*parole*), which may or may not ultimately affect the word *champagne* as a linguistic sign. (Translator's note)

to things, establishing a contract between concepts and sound patterns, is an act we can conceive in the imagination, but no one has ever observed it taking place. The idea that it might have happened is suggested to us by our keen awareness of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign.

In fact, no society has ever known its language to be anything other than something inherited from previous generations, which it has no choice but to accept. That is why the question of the origins of language does not have the importance generally attributed to it. It is not even a relevant question as far as linguistics is concerned. The sole object of study in linguistics is the normal, regular existence of a language already established. Any given linguistic state is always the product of historical factors, and these are the factors which explain why the linguistic sign is invariable, that is to say why it is immune from arbitrary alteration.[1]

But to say that a language is an inheritance from the past explains nothing unless we take the question further. Is it not possible from time to time to change established laws which have been handed down from the past?

This question leads us to consider a language in its social context and to pursue our enquiry in the same terms as for any other social institution. How are social institutions handed down from generation to generation? This is the more general question which subsumes the question of invariability. It is first necessary to realise the different degrees of freedom enjoyed by other institutions. Each of them, it will be seen, achieves a different balance between the tradition handed down and society's freedom of action. The next question will be to discover why, in any given case, factors of one kind are more powerful or less powerful than factors of the other kind. Finally, reverting to linguistic matters in particular, it may then be asked why historical [106] transmission is the overriding factor, to the point of excluding the possibility of any general or sudden linguistic change.

The answer to this question must take many considerations into account. It is relevant to point out, for example, that linguistic changes do not correspond to generations of speakers. There is no vertical structure of layers one above the other like drawers in a piece of furniture; people of all ages intermingle and communicate with one another. The continuous efforts required in order to learn one's native language point to the impossibility of any radical change. In addition, people use their language without conscious reflexion, being largely

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[1] For Saussure's generation, questions of language planning had not acquired the importance they have today. Although criticism of commonly accepted linguistic forms of expression has a long history in the Western tradition, only small minorities of thinkers, teachers and writers had ever concerned themselves with such matters. (Translator's note)

unaware of the laws which govern it. If they are not aware of these laws, how can they act to change them? In any case, linguistic facts are rarely the object of criticism, every society being usually content with the language it has inherited.

These considerations are important, but they are not directly to the point. Priority must be given to the following, which are more essential, more immediately relevant, and underlie all the rest.

1. *The arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign*. The arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign was adduced above as a reason for conceding the theoretical possibility of linguistic change. But more detailed consideration reveals that this very same factor tends to protect a language against any attempt to change it. It means that there is no issue for the community of language users to discuss, even were they sufficiently aware to do so. For in order to discuss an issue, there must be some reasonable basis for discussion. One can, for example, argue about whether monogamy is better than polygamy, and adduce reasons for and against. One could likewise discuss the pros and cons of a system of symbols, because a symbol has a rational connexion with what it symbolizes (cf. p. [101]). But for a language, as a system of arbitrary signs, any such basis is lacking, and consequently there is no firm ground for discussion. No reason can be given for preferring   [107] *sœur* to *sister*, *Ochs* to *bœuf*, etc.[1]

2. *The great number of signs necessary to constitute a language*. The implications of this fact are considerable. A system of writing, comprising between 20 and 40 letters, might conceivably be replaced in its entirety by an alternative system. The same would be true of a language if it comprised only a limited number of elements. But the inventory of signs in any language is countless.

3. *The complex character of the system*. A language constitutes a system. In this respect, it is not entirely arbitrary, for the system has a certain rationality. But precisely for this reason, the community is unable to change it at will. For the linguistic system is a complex mechanism. Its workings cannot be grasped without reflexion. Even speakers who use it daily may be quite ignorant in this regard. Any such change would require the intervention of specialists, grammarians, logicians, and others. But history shows that interference by experts is of no avail in linguistic matters.

4. *Collective inertia resists all linguistic innovations*. We come now to a consideration which takes precedence over all others. At any

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[1] Saussure's general point here is confirmed by the fact that current debates about, for instance, whether 'sexist' terms (such as *chairman*) should be replaced by unbiassed terms (e.g. *chairperson*) arise only when a reason *can* be given for preferring one to the other. But in such cases the reason given is usually social or political, rather than linguistic. (Translator's note)

time a language belongs to all its users. It is a facility unrestrictedly available throughout a whole community. It is something all make use of every day. In this respect it is quite unlike other social institutions. Legal procedures, religious rites, ships' flags, etc. are systems used only by a certain number of individuals acting together and for a limited time. A language, on the contrary, is something in which everyone participates all the time, and that is why it is constantly open to the influence of all. This key fact is by itself sufficient to explain why a linguistic revolution is impossible. Of all social insti-
[108]   tutions, a language affords the least scope for such enterprise. It is part and parcel of the life of the whole community, and the community's natural inertia exercises a conservative influence upon it.

None the less, to say that a language is a product of social forces does not automatically explain why it comes to be constrained in the way it is. Bearing in mind that a language is always an inheritance from the past, one must add that the social forces in question act over a period of time. If stability is a characteristic of languages, it is not only because languages are anchored in the community. They are also anchored in time. The two facts are inseparable. Continuity with the past constantly restricts freedom of choice. If the Frenchman of today uses words like *homme* ('man') and *chien* ('dog'), it is because these words were used by his forefathers. Ultimately there is a connexion between these two opposing factors: the arbitrary convention which allows free choice, and the passage of time, which fixes that choice. It is because the linguistic sign is arbitrary that it knows no other law than that of tradition, and because it is founded upon tradition that it can be arbitrary.[1]

§2. Variability

The passage of time, which ensures the continuity of a language, also has another effect, which appears to work in the opposite direction. It allows linguistic signs to be changed with some rapidity. Hence variability and invariability are both, in a certain sense, characteristic of the linguistic sign.[2]

[1] The epigrammatic concision of this summary of the connexion between the nature of the linguistic sign and its socio-historical role epitomises Saussure's brilliance as a linguistic theorist. It was not until half a century after his death that detailed socio-linguistic investigations began to provide in abundance the kind of evidence which would corroborate the connexion Saussure here postulates. What is ironical is that the evidence in question was often interpreted as throwing doubt upon the validity or adequacy of a Saussurean approach to the study of language. What is perhaps even more ironical is that the Saussurean implications of a reciprocal limitation between choice and tradition remained largely unexplored as a result. (Translator's note)

[2] It would be a mistake to criticise Saussure for being illogical or paradoxical in assigning two contradictory characteristics to the linguistic sign. The striking contrast

In the final analysis, these two characteristics are intimately connected. The sign is subject to change because it continues through   [109] time. But what predominates in any change is the survival of earlier material. Infidelity to the past is only relative. That is how it comes about that the principle of change is based upon the principle of continuity.

Change through time takes various forms, each of which would supply the subject matter for an important chapter of linguistics. Without going into detail here, it is important to bring out the following points.

First of all, let there be no misunderstanding about the sense in which we are speaking of change. It must not be thought that we are referring particularly to phonetic changes affecting the signal, or to changes of meaning affecting the concept signified. Either view would be inadequate. Whatever the factors involved in change, whether they act in isolation or in combination, they always result in *a shift in the relationship between signal and signification*.

As examples, one might cite the following. The Latin word *necāre* meaning 'to kill' became in French *noyer* meaning 'to drown'. Here the sound pattern and the concept have both changed. It is pointless to separate one aspect of the change from the other. It suffices to note as a single fact that the connexion between sound and idea has changed. The original relationship no longer holds. If instead of comparing Latin *necāre* with French *noyer*, one contrasts it with Vulgar Latin *necare* of the fourth or fifth century, meaning 'to drown', the case is somewhat different. But even here, although the signal has undergone no appreciable change, there is a shift in the relationship between the idea and the sign.[1]

The Old German word *dritteil* meaning 'a third' became in modern German *Drittel*. In this case, although the concept has remained the same, the relationship has changed in two ways. The signal has altered not only phonetically but also grammatically. We no longer recognise it as a combination including the unit *Teil* meaning 'part': instead, it has become a single unanalysable word. That counts too as a change   [110] in relationship.

In Anglo-Saxon, the preliterary form *fōt* meaning 'foot' remained as *fōt* (modern English *foot*), while its plural **fōti*, meaning 'feet', became *fēt* (modern English *feet*). Whatever changes may have been involved here, one thing is certain: a shift in the relationship occurred. New correlations between phonic substance and idea emerged.

between these terms is intended simply to emphasise the fact that a language changes even though its speakers are incapable of changing it. One might also say that it is impervious to interference although open to development. (Editorial note)

[1] In the interests of terminological consistency, the term *sign* should here be replaced by *signal*. (Translator's note)

A language is a system which is intrinsically defenceless against the factors which constantly tend to shift relationships between signal and signification. This is one of the consequences of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign.

Other human institutions — customs, laws, etc. — are all based in varying degrees on natural connexions between things. They exhibit a necessary conformity between ends and means. Even the fashion which determines the way we dress is not entirely arbitrary. It cannot depart beyond a certain point from requirements dictated by the human body. A language, on the contrary, is in no way limited in its choice of means. For there is nothing at all to prevent the association of any idea whatsoever with any sequence of sounds whatsoever.

In order to emphasise that a language is nothing other than a social institution, Whitney quite rightly insisted upon the arbitrary character of linguistic signs. In so doing, he pointed linguistics in the right direction. But he did not go far enough. For he failed to see that this arbitrary character fundamentally distinguishes languages from all other institutions. This can be seen in the way in which a language evolves. The process is highly complex. A language is situated socially and chronologically by reference to a certain community and a certain period of time. No one can alter it in any particular. On the other hand, the fact that its signs are arbitrary implies theoretically a freedom to establish any connexion whatsoever between sounds and ideas. The result is that each of the two elements joined together in the linguistic sign retains its own independence to an unparalleled [111] extent. Consequently a language alters, or rather evolves, under the influence of all factors which may affect either sounds or meanings. Evolution is inevitable: there is no known example of a language immune from it. After a certain time, changes can always be seen to have taken place.

This principle must even apply to artificial languages. Anyone who invents an artificial language retains control of it only as long as it is not in use. But as soon as it fulfils its purpose and becomes the property of the community, it is no longer under control. Esperanto is a case in point. If it succeeds as a language, can it possibly escape the same fate? Once launched, the language will in all probability begin to lead a semiological life of its own. Its transmission will follow laws which have nothing in common with those of deliberate creation, and it will then be impossible to turn the clock back. Anyone who thinks he can construct a language not subject to change, which posterity must accept as it is, would be like a hen hatching a duck's egg. The language he created would be subject to the same forces of change as any other language, regardless of its creator's wishes.

The continuity of signs through time, involving as it does their alteration in time, is a principle of general semiology. This principle

is confirmed by systems of writing, by deaf-and-dumb languages, and so on.

But on what is the necessity for change based? We may perhaps be criticised for not being as explicit upon this point as upon the principle of invariability. The reason is that we have not gone into the different factors involved in change. A great variety of such factors must be taken into account in order to determine to what extent change is a necessity.

The causes of linguistic continuity are in principle available to observation. The same is not true of the causes of change through time. That is why in the first instance it would be misleading to attempt to identify them precisely. It is more prudent to speak in general terms of shifts in relations. For time changes everything. [112] There is no reason why languages should be exempt from this universal law.

The argument advanced so far, based on the principles established in the introduction, may be summarised as follows.

1. Avoiding the sterility of merely verbal definitions, we began by distinguishing, within the global phenomenon of *language*, between *linguistic structure* and *speech*. Linguistic structure we take to be language minus speech. It is the whole set of linguistic habits which enables the speaker to understand and to make himself understood.

2. But this definition fails to relate linguistic structure to social reality. It is a definition which misrepresents what a language is, because it takes into account only how the individual is affected. But in order to have a language, there must be a *community of speakers*. Contrary to what might appear to be the case, a language never exists even for a moment except as a social fact, for it is a semiological phenomenon. Its social nature is one of its internal characteristics. A full definition must recognise two inseparable things, as shown in the following diagram:
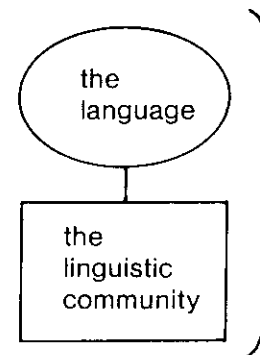
But even then there is something missing. The language thus represented is a viable system, but not a living one. It is a social reality, but not a historical fact.

3. Since the linguistic sign is arbitrary, a language as so far defined would appear to be an adaptable system, which can be organised in any way one likes, and is based solely upon a principle of rationality. Its social nature, as such, is not incompatible with this view. Social psychology, doubtless, must operate on more than a purely logical basis: account must be taken of everything which might affect the operation of reason in practical relations between one individual and another. But that is not the objection to regarding a language as a mere convention, which can be modified to suit the interests of those involved. There is something else. We must consider what is brought about by the passage of time, as well as what is brought about by the forces of social integration. Without taking into account the contribution of time, our grasp of linguistic reality remains incomplete.

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If a language were considered in a chronological perspective, but ignoring the social dimension (as in the case of a hypothetical individual living in isolation for hundreds of years), there might perhaps be no change to observe. Time would leave no mark upon the language. On the other hand, if one looked at the community of speakers without taking the passage of time into account, one would not see the effect of social forces acting upon the language. In order to come to terms with reality, therefore, one must supplement our first diagram by some indication of the passage of time:
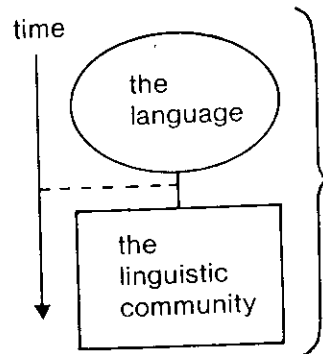
When this is taken into account, the language is no longer free from constraints, because the passage of time allows social forces to be brought to bear upon it. One is left with a principle of continuity which precludes freedom of choice. At the same time, continuity necessarily implies change. Relations will alter in some respect or other.

CHAPTER III   [114]

Static Linguistics and Evolutionary Linguistics

§1. *Internal duality of all sciences concerned with values*

Very few linguists realise that the need to take account of the passage of time gives rise to special problems in linguistics and forces us to choose between two radically different approaches.

Most other sciences are not faced with this crucial choice. For them, what happens with the passage of time is of no particular significance. In astronomy, it is observed that in the course of time heavenly bodies undergo considerable changes. But astronomy has not on that account been obliged to split into two separate disciplines. Geology is constantly concerned with the reconstruction of chronological sequences. But when it concentrates on examining fixed states of the earth's crust, that is not considered to be a quite separate object of study. There is a descriptive science of law and a history of law: but no one contrasts the one with the other. The political history of nations is intrinsically concerned with successions of events in time. None the less, when a historian describes the society of a particular period, one does not feel that this ceases to be history. The science of political institutions, on the other hand, is essentially descriptive: but occasionally it may deal with historical questions, and that in no way compromises its unity as a science.

Economics, by contrast, is a science which is forced to recognise this duality. Unlike the preceding cases, the study of political economy and of economic history constitute two clearly distinguishable disciplines belonging to one and the same science. Recent work in this field emphasises this distinction. Although it may not be fully realised, the distinction is required by an inner necessity of the subject. It is a necessity entirely analogous to that which obliges us to divide linguistics into two parts, each based upon a principle of its own. The

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reason is that, as in the study of political economy, one is dealing with the notion of *value*. In both cases, we have a *system of equivalence between things belonging to different orders*. In one case, work and wages; in the other case, signification and signal.

It is certain that all sciences would benefit from identifying more carefully the axes along which the things they are concerned with may be situated. In all cases, distinctions should be drawn on the following basis..

1. *Axis of simultaneity* (AB). This axis concerns relations between things which coexist, relations from which the passage of time is entirely excluded.

2. *Axis of succession* (CD). Along this axis one may consider only one thing at a time. But here we find all the things situated along the first axis, together with the changes they undergo.
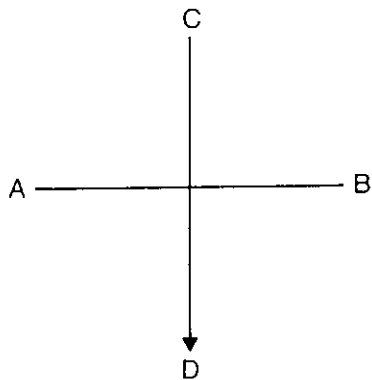
For sciences which involve the study of values, this distinction becomes a practical necessity, and in certain cases is an absolute necessity. In this domain, it is impossible for scholars to organise their [116] research in any rigorous fashion without taking account of these two axes. They are obliged to distinguish between the system of values considered in itself, and these same values considered over a period of time.

It is in linguistics that this distinction is least dispensable. For a language is a system of pure values, determined by nothing else apart from the temporary state of its constituent elements. Insofar as a value, in one of its aspects, is founded upon natural connexions between things (as, for example, in economics the value of a piece of land depends on the income derivable from it), it is possible up to a point to trace this value through time, bearing in mind that it depends

at any one time upon the relevant system of contemporary values. However, its connexion with things inevitably supplies it with a natural basis, and hence any assessment of it is never entirely arbitrary. There are limits upon the range of variability. But, as we have already seen, in linguistics these natural connexions have no place.

It should be added that the more complex and rigorously organised a system of values is, the more essential it becomes, on account of this very complexity, to study it separately in terms of the two axes. Of no system is this as true as it is of a language. Nowhere else do we find comparable precision of values, or such a large number and diversity of terms involved, or such a strict mutual dependence between them. The multiplicity of signs, which we have already invoked to explain linguistic continuity, precludes absolutely any attempt to study simultaneously relations in time and relations within the system.

That is why we must distinguish two branches of linguistics. What should they be called? The terms available are not all equally appropriate to indicate the distinction in question. 'History' and 'historical linguistics' cannot be used, for the ideas associated with them are too vague. Just as political history includes the description of periods as well as the narration of events, it might be supposed by describing a [117] sequence of states of a language one was studying the language along the temporal axis. But in order to do that, it would be necessary to consider separately the factors of transition involved in passing from one linguistic state to the next. The terms *evolution* and *evolutionary linguistics* are more exact, and we shall make frequent use of these terms. By contrast, one may speak of the science of linguistic *states*, or *static linguistics*.

But in order to mark this contrast more effectively, and the intersection of two orders of phenomena relating to the same object of study, we shall speak for preference of *synchronic* linguistics and *diachronic* linguistics. Everything is synchronic which relates to the static aspect of our science, and diachronic everything which concerns evolution. Likewise *synchrony* and *diachrony* will designate respectively a linguistic state and a phase of evolution.

§2. *Internal duality and the history of linguistics*

The first thing which strikes one on studying linguistic facts is that the language user is unaware of their succession in time: he is dealing with a state. Hence the linguist who wishes to understand this state must rule out of consideration everything which brought that state about, and pay no attention to diachrony. Only by suppressing the past can he enter into the state of mind of the language user. The intervention of history can only distort his judgment. It would be

absurd to try to draw a panorama of the Alps as seen from a number of peaks in the Jura simultaneously. A panorama must be taken from just one point. The same is true of a language. One cannot describe it or establish its norms of usage except by taking up a position in relation to a given state. When the linguist follows the evolution of the language, he is like the observer moving from one end of the Jura to the other in order to record changes in perspective.

[118]   Since its beginnings, it would be true to say that modern linguistics has been entirely taken up with diachronic study. The comparative grammar of the Indo-European languages uses the facts it has available in order to reconstruct hypothetically an earlier type of language. Comparison is only a means for resurrecting the past. The method is the same in the study of particular linguistic sub-groups (the Romance languages, Germanic languages, etc.). Linguistic states are considered only in fragments and very imperfectly. This was the approach inaugurated by Bopp, and the conception of a language it offers is hybrid and uncertain.

But what was the method followed by those who studied languages before the foundation of linguistics? How did the traditional 'grammarians' proceed? It is a curious fact that on this particular point their approach was quite flawless. Their writings show us clearly that they were concerned with the description of linguistic states. Their programme was a strictly synchronic one. The grammar of Port Royal, for instance, attempts to describe the state of the French language under Louis XIV and to set out the relevant system of values. For this purpose, it has no need to make reference to the French of the Middle Ages; it keeps strictly to the horizontal axis (cf. p. [115]) and never departs from it. Its method is thus perfectly correct. That is not to say, however, that the application of the method is perfect. Traditional grammar pays no attention to whole areas of linguistic structure, such as word formation. It is normative grammar, concerned with laying down rules instead of observing facts. It makes no attempt at syntheses. Often, it even fails to distinguish between the written word and the spoken word. And so on.

Traditional grammar has been criticised for not being scientific. None the less, its basis is less objectionable and its object of study better defined than is the case for the kind of linguistics inaugurated by Bopp. The latter attempts to cover an inadequately defined area,
[119]   never knowing exactly where it is going. It has a foot in each camp, having failed to distinguish clearly between states and sequences.

Having paid too much attention to history, linguistics will go back now to the static viewpoint of traditional grammar, but in a new spirit and with different methods. The historical approach will have contributed to this rejuvenation. It will have been instrumental in facilitating a better grasp of linguistic states. The old grammar saw no

further than synchronic facts. Linguistics has made us aware of a different order of phenomena. But that is not enough. The opposition between these two orders must be grasped in order to draw out all the consequences which it implies.

§3. Examples of internal duality

The contrast between the two points of view – synchronic and diachronic – is absolute and admits no compromise. A few examples will illustrate what this difference consists in, and why it is irreducible.

The Latin word *crispus* ('wavy, curly') supplied French with a stem *crép-*, on which are based the verbs *crépir* ('to rough-render') and *décrépir* ('to strip the plaster from'). Then French at a certain stage borrowed from Latin the word *dēcrepitus* ('worn by age'). This became in French *décrépit*, and its etymology was forgotten. Nowadays, it is certain that most speakers connect *un mur décrépi* ('a dilapidated wall') and *un homme décrépit* ('a decrepit man'), although historically the two words have nothing to do with each other. People often speak of the *façade décrépite* ('dilapidated façade') of a house. That is a static fact, because it involves a relationship between two terms coexisting in the language. But in order to bring it about, certain evolutionary changes had to coincide. The original *crisp-* had to come to be pronounced *crép-*, and at the right moment a new word had to be borrowed from Latin. These diachronic facts, it is clear, have no con-   [120]
nexion with the static fact which they brought about. They are of quite a different order.

Another example with quite general implications is the following. In Old High German, the plural of *gast* ('guest') was originally *gasti*, the plural of *hant* ('hand') was *hanti*, and so on. Subsequently, this *-i* produced an umlaut; that is to say, it had an effect upon the vowel of the preceding syllable, changing *a* into *e*. So *gasti* became *gesti*, and *hanti* became *henti*. Then this *-i* weakened, giving *geste*, etc. Today as a result we have *Gast* with a plural *Gäste*, *Hand* with a plural *Hände*, and so on for a whole class of words. Something similar happened in Anglo-Saxon, where originally *fōt* ('foot') had a plural **fōti*, *toþ* ('tooth') had a plural **toþi*, *gōs* ('goose') had a plural *gōsi*, etc. A first phonetic change gave rise to an umlaut, so that **fōti* became **fēti*; and then as the result of a second phonetic change, the fall of the final *i*, **fēti* became *fēt*. Thus *fōt* then had a plural *fēt*, *tōþ* a plural *tēþ*, *gōs* a plural *gēs* (Modern English *foot : feet*, *tooth : teeth*, *goose : geese*).

Previously, at the stage *gast : gasti*, *fōt : fōti*, the plural had been marked simply by adding an *-i*. But *Gast : Gäste* and *fōt : fēt* show a new way of marking the plural. The mechanism is not the same in

the two cases, since in Old English there is simply a contrast of vowels, whereas in German there is in addition the presence or absence of a final -e. But this difference does not affect the example.

The relation between singular and plural at any given time, irrespective of the actual forms, can be represented along a horizontal axis:

• ⟷ • Period A

• ⟷ • Period B

[121]   The developments, whatever they may have been, which gave rise to changes in the forms, can be represented along a vertical axis. So we have a complete figure as follows:

• ⟷ • Period A
↓   ↓
• ⟷ • Period B

This type of case suggests a number of observations which are very relevant to the present discussion.

1. The diachronic developments are in no way directed towards providing a new sign to mark a given value. The fact that *gasti* changed to *gesti* and then to *geste (Gäste)* has nothing to do with the plurals of nouns. In *tragit→trägt* we see the same umlaut affecting the flexion of a verb. So the reason for a diachronic development lies in the development itself. The particular synchronic consequences which may ensue have nothing to do with it.

2. These diachronic events do not even tend to change the system. There was no intention to replace one system of relations by another. The change affected not the organisation as such, but merely the particular items involved.

This illustrates a principle already stated earlier: the language system as such is never directly altered. It is in itself unchangeable. Only certain elements change, but without regard to the connexions which integrate them as part of the whole. It is as if one of the planets circling the sun underwent a change of dimensions and weight: this isolated event would have general consequences for the whole solar system, and disturb its equilibrium. In order to mark pluralisation, a contrast between two terms is required: *fōt* vs. **fōti* or *fōt* vs. *fēt* are equally viable for this purpose. Substituting one for the other leaves the distinction itself untouched. It is not the system as a whole which has been changed, nor one system which has engendered a second. All that happened was the one element in the original system changed,

and that sufficed to bring a new system into being.

3. Once we see this, we can better appreciate the fact that a linguistic state always has a *fortuitous* character. Languages are not   [122] mechanisms created and organised with a view to the concepts to be expressed, although people are mistakenly inclined to think so. On the contrary, our example shows that the state which resulted from the change was in no way destined to express the meanings it took on. A fortuitous state is given *(fōt : fēt)*, and this is pressed into service to mark the distinction between singular and plural: but *fōt* vs. *fēt* is no better designed for that purpose than *fōt* vs. **fōti*. At each stage, spirit is breathed into the matter given, and brings it to life. This view, inspired by historical linguistics, is unknown to traditional grammar, which would never have come to it by the traditional methods. It is a view equally foreign to most philosophers of language: and yet it is of the greatest philosophical significance.

4. Are the facts belonging to the diachronic series at least of the same order as those of the synchronic series? In no way. For the changes brought about, as we have already observed, are entirely unintentional. Whereas a synchronic fact is always significant, being based always upon two coexisting terms. It is not *Gäste* which expresses the plural, but the opposition *Gast* vs. *Gäste*. With a diachronic fact, just the opposite is true. It involves one term only. If a new term *(Gäste)* is to appear, the old term *(gasti)* must make way for it.

Any notion of bringing together under the same discipline facts of such disparate nature would be mere fantasy. In the diachronic perspective one is dealing with phenomena which have no connexion with linguistic systems, even though the systems are affected by them.

Other examples which may be adduced to corroborate and amplify the conclusions drawn from those already cited include the following.

In French, the stress falls always on the final syllable, unless it contains a mute *e (ə)*. This is a synchronic fact, a relationship between the whole French vocabulary and stress. Where does it come from?   [123] From an antecedent linguistic state. Latin had a different and more complex system of stress, in which stress fell upon the penultimate syllable if that syllable were long, but otherwise upon the antipenultimate (e.g. *amīcus, ánima*). This rule involves factors which have no parallel at all in the case of French. None the less, it is the same stress we are dealing with, in the sense that it still falls in the same place. In a French word, the stress falls always on the same syllable which bore the stress in Latin. Thus *amīcum* becomes French *ami*, and *ánimam* becomes *áme*. However, the Latin and French stress patterns are different because the forms of the words have changed. In French words, vowels following the stressed syllable have either disappeared or been reduced to a mute *e*. As a consequence of these

changes, the position of stress in the word was no longer the same. From that point on French speakers, aware of the new situation, instinctively placed stress on the final syllable, even in the case of foreign words originally borrowed in written form (*facile, consul, ticket, burgrave*, etc.). It is evident that there was no intention to change the system or apply a new rule, since in a case like *amícum→amí* the stress remains throughout on the same syllable. But a diachronic fact intervened. The place of the stress changed without anyone moving it. A stress law, like everything else in a linguistic system, is an arrangement of elements, the fortuitous and involuntary outcome of evolution.

An even more striking example is this. In early Slavonic, *slovo* ('word') had an instrumental case *slovemъ* in the singular, a nominative plural *slova*, and a genitive plural *slovъ*. It was a declension in which each case had its own ending. But today the 'weak' vowels ь and ъ, which were the Slavic representatives of Proto-Indo-European *ĭ* and *ŭ*, have disappeared. So in Czech, for example, we have *slovo, slovem, slova, slov*. Likewise *žena* ('woman') has an accusative singular *ženu*, a nominative plural *ženy*, and a genitive plural *žen*. Here we see that the genitive ending (*slov, žen*) is zero. So it is not

[124] even necessary to have any material sign in order to give expression to an idea: the language may be content simply to contrast something with nothing. In this particular example, we can recognize the genitive plural *žen* simply by the fact that it is neither *žena*, nor *ženu*, nor any of the other forms of the declension. At first sight it seems strange that such a specific notion as that of genitive plural should have acquired the sign zero. But that is precisely what demonstrates that it is purely a matter of chance. Languages are mechanisms which go on functioning, in spite of the damage caused to them.

All this confirms the principles already formulated above, which may be summed up as follows.

A language is a system of which all the parts can and must be considered as synchronically interdependent.

Since changes are never made to the system as a whole, but only to its individual elements, they must be studied independently of the system. It is true that every change has a repercussion on the system. But initially only one point is affected. The change is unrelated to the internal consequences which may follow for the system as a whole. This difference in nature between chronological succession and simultaneous coexistence, between facts affecting parts and facts affecting the whole, makes it impossible to include both as subject matter of one and the same science.

§4. *Difference between the two orders illustrated by comparisons*

In order to clarify at the same time the autonomy and interdependence of the synchronic and diachronic approaches, it is useful to compare synchrony to the projection of a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional plan. Any projection depends directly upon the object projected, but none the less differs from it. The projection is something apart. Otherwise there would be no need for a whole science of projection: it would be enough to consider the objects themselves. In linguistics, we find the same relation between historical reality and a [125] linguistic state. The latter is a projection of the former at one given moment. Studying objects, that is to say diachronic events, will give us no insight into synchronic states, any more than we can hope to understand geometrical projections simply by studying, however thoroughly, different kinds of object.

If we cut crosswise through the stem of a plant, we can observe a rather complex pattern on the surface revealed by the cut. What we are looking at is a section of the plant's longitudinal fibres. These fibres will be revealed if we now make a second cut perpendicular to the first. Again in this example, one perspective depends on the other. The longitudinal section shows us the fibres themselves which make up the plant, while the transversal section shows us their arrangement on one particular level. But the transversal section is distinct from the longitudinal section, for it shows us certain relations between the fibres which are not apparent at all from any longitudinal section.
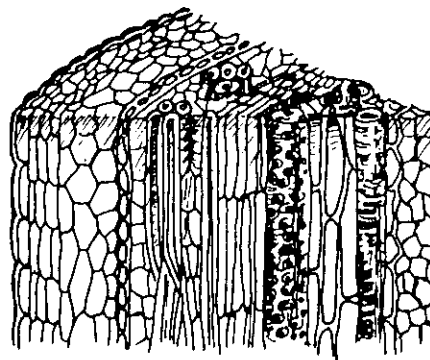
But of all the comparisons one might think of, the most revealing is the likeness between what happens in a language and what happens in a game of chess. In both cases, we are dealing with a system of values and with modifications of the system. A game of chess is like an artificial form of what languages present in a natural form.

Let us examine the case more closely.

In the first place, a state of the board in chess corresponds exactly to a state of the language. The value of the chess pieces depends on their position upon the chess board, just as in the language each term has its value through its contrast with all the other terms.

Secondly, the system is only ever a temporary one. It varies from one position to the next. It is true that the values also depend ultimately upon one invariable set of conventions, the rules of the game, which exist before the beginning of the game and remain in force after each move. These rules, fixed once and for all, also exist in the linguistic case: they are the unchanging principles of semiology.

Finally, in order to pass from one stable position to another or, in our terminology, from one synchronic state to another, moving one piece is all that is needed. There is no general upheaval. That is the counterpart of the diachronic fact and all its characteristic features. For in the case of chess:

(*a*) One piece only is moved at a time. Similarly, linguistic changes affect isolated elements only.

(*b*) In spite of that, the move has a repercussion upon the whole system. It is impossible for the player to foresee exactly where its consequences will end. The changes in values which result may be, in any particular circumstance, negligible, or very serious, or of moderate importance. One move may be a turning point in the whole game, and have consequences even for the pieces which are not for the moment involved. As we have just seen, it is exactly the same where a language is concerned.

(*c*) Moving a piece is something entirely different from the preceding state of the board and also from the state of the board which results. The change which has taken place belongs to neither. The states alone are important.

In a game of chess, any given state of the board is totally independent of any previous state of the board. It does not matter at all whether the state in question has been reached by one sequence of moves or another sequence. Anyone who has followed the whole game has not the least advantage over a passer-by who happens to look at the game at that particular moment. In order to describe the position on the board, it is quite useless to refer to what happened ten seconds ago. All this applies equally to a language, and confirms the radical distinction between diachronic and synchronic. Speech operates only upon a given linguistic state, and the changes which supervene between one state and another have no place in either.

There is only one respect in which the comparison is defective. In chess, the player *intends* to make his moves and to have some effect upon the system. In a language, on the contrary, there is no premeditation. Its pieces are moved, or rather modified, spontaneously and

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[127]

fortuitously. The umlaut of *Hände* for *hanti*, of *Gäste* for *gasti* (cf. p. [120]) produced a new plural formation, but also produced at the same time a verb form like *trägt* for *tragit*, etc. If the game of chess were to be like the operations of a language in every respect, we would have to imagine a player who was either unaware of what he was doing or unintelligent. This sole difference, moreover, makes the comparison even more instructive, by showing the absolute necessity for distinguishing in linguistics between the two orders of phenomena. For if diachronic facts cannot be reduced to the synchronic system they affect, even when a change of this kind is made deliberately, this will be the case even less when blind forces of change disturb the organisation of a system of signs.

§5. Synchronic and diachronic linguistics: their methods and principles contrasted

Diachronic and synchronic studies contrast in every way.

For example, to begin with the most obvious fact, they are not of equal importance. It is clear that the synchronic point of view takes precedence over the diachronic, since for the community of language users that is the one and only reality (cf. p. [117]). The same is true for the linguist. If he takes a diachronic point of view, he is no longer examining the language, but a series of events which modify it. It is often claimed that there is nothing more important than knowing how a given state originated. In a certain sense, that is true. The conditions which gave rise to the state throw light upon its true nature and prevent us from entertaining certain misconceptions (cf. p. [121] ff.). But what that proves is that diachrony has no end in itself. One might say, as has been said of journalism as a career, that it leads nowhere until you leave it behind.

Their methods are also different in two respects:

(*a*) Synchrony has only one perspective, that of the language users; and its whole method consists of collecting evidence from them. In order to determine to what extent something is a reality, it is necessary and also sufficient to find out to what extent it exists as far as the language users are concerned. Diachronic linguistics, however, needs to distinguish two perspectives. One will be *prospective*, following the course of time, and the other *retrospective*, going in the opposite direction. It follows that two diachronic methods are required, and these will be discussed later in Part V.

(*b*) A second difference derives from the different areas covered by the two disciplines. The object of synchronic study does not comprise everything which is simultaneous, but only the set of facts correspond-

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ing to any particular language. In this, it will take into account where necessary a division into dialects and sub-dialects. The term *synchronic*, in fact, is not sufficiently precise. *Idiosynchronic* would be a better term, even though it is somewhat cumbersome. Diachronic linguistics, on the contrary, needs no such particularisation, and indeed rejects it. The items diachronic linguistics deals with do not necessarily belong to a single language. (Compare Proto-Indo-European *esti, Greek ésti, German ist, French est.) It is precisely the succession of diachronic facts and their proliferation in space which gives rise to the diversity of languages. In order to justify comparing two forms, it is sufficient that there should be some historical connexion between them, however indirect.

These are not the most striking contrasts, nor the most profound. The consequences of the radical difference between facts of evolution and static facts is that all notions pertinent to the former and all notions pertinent to the latter are mutually irreducible. Any of the notions in question may be used to demonstrate this truth. No synchronic phenomenon has anything in common with any diachronic phenomenon (cf. p. [122]). One is a relationship between simultaneous elements, and the other a substitution of one element for another in time, that is to say an event. We shall also see (p. [150]) that diachronic identities and synchronic identities are two very different things. Historically, the French negative particle *pas* is the same as the noun *pas* ('pace'), whereas in modern French these two units are entirely separate. Realising these facts should be sufficient to bring home the necessity of not confusing the two points of view. But nowhere is this necessity more evident than in the distinction we are about to draw.

§6. *Synchronic laws and diachronic laws*

There is a great deal of talk nowadays about laws in linguistics. But are linguistic facts really governed by laws? And if so, of what kind can these laws be? A language being a social institution, one might *a*
[130] *priori* think it is governed by prescriptions of the kind which regulate communities. Now any social law has two fundamental characteristics: it is *imperative* and it is *general*. It demands compliance, and it covers all cases, within certain limits of time and place, of course.

Do the laws which govern a language answer to this definition? Once again, to find out we must first distinguish between synchrony and diachrony. For the two cases are not to be conflated. To speak of a 'linguistic law' in general is like trying to lay hands on a ghost.

The following are examples from Greek, in which 'laws' of a synchronic and diachronic nature have been deliberately intermingled.

1. Proto-Indo-European voiced aspirates became voiceless aspirates, e.g. *dhūmos → thūmós* ('breath of life'), *bherō → phérō* ('I carry')

2. Stress never falls on a syllable preceding the antipenultimate syllable of a word.

3. All words end either in a vowel or in *-s, -n, -r*; but no other consonant.

4. Initial *s* before a vowel became *h* (denoted by the 'rough breathing' mark), e.g. *septm* (Latin *septem*) → *heptá*.

5. Final *-m* became *-n*, e.g. *jugom → zugón* (cf. Latin *jugum*).[1]

6. Final stops fall, e.g. *gunaik → gúnai, *epheret → éphere, *epheront → épheron*.

In the above examples, Law 1 is diachronic: it states that what had been *dh* becomes *th*, etc. Law 2 states a relationship between word-unit and stress: it is a kind of contract between two coexisting terms: [131] it is thus a synchronic law. Law 3 is the same, since it concerns the word-unit and its final sound. Laws 4, 5 and 6 are diachronic: they state, respectively, that what had been *s* became *h*, that *-n* replaced *-m*, and that *-t, -k*, etc. disappeared without trace.

It should also be noted that Law 3 is the result of Laws 5 and 6. Two diachronic facts created a synchronic fact.

Once the two categories of laws are distinguished, one sees that Laws 2 and 3 are not of the same nature as Laws 1, 4, 5 and 6.

Synchronic laws are general, but not imperative. It is true that a synchronic law is imposed upon speakers by the constraints of communal usage (cf. p. [107]). But we are not envisaging here an obligation relative to the language users. What we mean is that *in the language* there is nothing which guarantees the maintenance of regularity on any given point. A synchronic law simply expresses an existing order. It registers a state of affairs. What it states is of the same order as a statement to the effect that in a certain orchard the trees are planted in the form of a quincunx. The order a synchronic law defines is precarious, precisely because it is not imperative. Nothing could be more regular than the synchronic law governing stress in Latin (a law exactly comparable to Law 2 above). This system of stress, none the less, offered no resistance to factors of change, and eventually gave place to a new law, which we find in French (cf. p. [122] ff.). In short, when one speaks of a synchronic law, one is speaking of an arrangement, or a principle of regularity.

Diachrony, on the other hand, presupposes a dynamic factor through

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[1] According to Meillet (*Mem. de la Société de Linguistique, IX*, p. 365 ff.) and Gauthiot (*La fin de mot en indo-européen*, p. 158 ff.) Proto-Indo-European had only final *-n* and not *-m*. If this is accepted, law 5 becomes: 'Final *-n* is maintained'. Its value as an example is unchanged, since the phonetic conservation of an earlier state of affairs is not different in nature from the phonetic alteration of an earlier state of affairs. Cf. p. [200]. (Editorial note)

which an effect is produced, a development carried out. But this imperative character does not justify applying the notion of law to facts of evolution. One speaks of a law only when a set of facts is governed by the same rule. In spite of appearances to the contrary, diachronic events are always accidental and particular in nature.

[132]   This is quite obvious in the case of semantic facts. For example, the French word *poutre*, meaning 'mare', took on the meaning of 'beam, rafter'. The change can be explained by reference to particular circumstances, and has no connexion with other changes that may have occurred at the same time. It is merely one accident among many recorded in the history of a language.

As regards syntactic and morphological changes, at first sight this is not so clear. At a certain period, for instance, nearly all the forms of the Old French nominative case disappeared. Is this not an example of a whole set of facts governed by the same law? No. For all these are merely multiple examples of a single isolated fact. It was the notion of a nominative case itself which was affected, and the disappearance of that case naturally involved the disappearance of a whole set of forms.[1] For anyone who looks only at the language from the outside, the single phenomenon is obscured by the multiplicity of its manifestations. But the phenomenon itself is one in its underlying nature, and it constitutes a historical event as isolated of its kind as the semantic change of the word *poutre*. It only appears to be a law because it is actualised in a system. It is the rigorous organisation of the system which creates the illusion that the diachronic fact is subject to the same conditions as the synchronic.

Exactly the same applies to phonetic changes, even though people nowadays speak of 'phonetic laws'. It is indeed observable that at a given time in a given region, all the words which have a certain phonetic feature are subject to the same change. For example, Law 1 on p. [130] (**dhūmos → Greek thūmós*) applies to all Greek words with a voiced aspirate (cf. **nebhos → néphos, *medhu → méthu, *anghō → ánkhō*, etc.). Law 4 (**septm → heptá*) applies to **serpō → hérpo, *sūs → hûs*, and all words beginning with *s*. This regularity, which has sometimes been disputed, is in our view very well estab-
[133]   lished: the apparent exceptions do not diminish the ineluctability of changes of this kind, for they are to be explained either by more specialised phonetic laws (e.g. *tríkhes : thriksí*, cf. p. [138]), or else by the intervention of facts of a different order (analogy, etc.). So it would appear that nothing could better fit the definition of the term *law* given above. And yet, however many cases confirm a phonetic

[1] It is not altogether clear how this explanation is to be reconciled with the claims that a language system itself is never changed as such (p. [124]) and that case distinctions belong among the abstract entities of grammar (p. [189] ff.). (Translator's note)

law, all the facts it covers are simply manifestations of a single particular fact.

The real question is whether phonetic changes affect words or only sounds. The answer is not in doubt. In *néphos, méthu, ánkhō*, etc. it is a particular sound; a Proto-Indo-European voiced aspirate which becomes a voiceless aspirate, the initial *s* of early Greek which changes to *h*, and so on. Each of these facts is an isolated fact. It is independent of other events of the same order, and also independent of the words in which it occurs.[1] All the words in question, naturally, are modified phonetically; but that must not mislead us as to the real nature of what is taking place.

On what do we base the claim that words themselves are not directly subject to phonetic change? On the simple observation that sound changes do not affect words as such, and cannot alter them essentially. The word as a unit is not made up simply of a set of sounds:[2] it depends
[134]   on other characteristics than its material nature. Imagine that one   [134]
note on a piano is out of tune. Every time this note is played in the performance of a piece, there will be a false note. But where? In the melody? Surely not. Nothing has happened to the melody, only to the piano. It is exactly the same in the case of sound change. The sound system is the instrument we play in order to articulate the words of the language. If one element in the sound system changes, this may have various results; but in itself, the fact does not affect the words, for they are, so to speak, the melodies in our repertoire.

Thus diachronic facts are individual facts. The alteration of a system takes place through events which not only lie outside it (cf. p. [121]), but are isolated events and form no system among themselves.[3]

To summarise, synchronic facts of whatever kind present a certain regularity, but they have no imperative character. Diachronic facts, on the contrary, are forced upon the language, but there is nothing general about them.

[1] It need hardly be said that the examples cited are merely an indication. Currently, linguistics attempts – rightly – to relate as many series of changes as possible to the operation of the same initial principle. Meillet, for example, explains all changes in Greek stops as due to a gradual weakening of articulation (*Mem. de la Société de Linguistique, IX*, p. 163 ff.). Where such general facts are to be found it is to them, in the final analysis, that the conclusions concerning the nature of phonetic change apply. (Editorial note)

[2] But elsewhere (p. [98]) it is denied that a word consists of sounds at all. If that is the case, there is no need to justify the claim that words are not subject to sound change, since it is true by definition. If, on the other hand, the signal is treated as a fixed set of sound units, corresponding to the sequence of letters in a written form (p. [32]), it is less obvious that sound change does not affect the sound pattern of a word directly. There is some inconsistency here, which Saussure's editors cannot be said to have resolved satisfactorily. (Translator's note)

[3] The thesis that a system as such does not evolve, but is merely affected by unrelated external developments, subsequently became one of the major subjects of controversy among structuralists. (Translator's note)

In short, we conclude that neither synchronic nor diachronic facts are governed by laws in the sense defined above. If, none the less, one insists on speaking of linguistic laws, the term will mean something entirely different as applied to synchronic facts and to diachronic facts.

§7. *Is there a panchronic point of view?*

Hitherto, we have taken the term *law* in its legal sense. But might there perhaps be in languages laws as understood in the physical and natural sciences? In other words, relations which hold in all cases and for ever? In short, is it not possible to study languages from a panchronic point of view?

[135] It is possible, no doubt. Since phonetic changes occur, and will always occur, one may consider that general phenomenon in itself as one of the constant features of language: hence it is a linguistic law. In linguistics as in chess (cf. p. [125] ff.) there are rules which outlast all events. But they are general principles existing independently of concrete facts. As soon as one comes down to particular, tangible facts, there is no panchronic point of view. Every phonetic change, whatever its extension may be, is limited to a certain period and a certain geographical area. There is no such change which occurs all the time and everywhere. Its existence is merely diachronic. That very fact is a criterion for judging what belongs to linguistic structure and what does not. Any concrete fact amenable to panchronic explanation could not be part of linguistic structure. Take the French word *chose* ('thing'). From a diachronic point of view, it is to be distinguished from Latin *causa*, from which it is derived. From a synchronic point of view, it is to be distinguished from all the words it might be associated with in modern French. Only the sounds of the word considered in themselves (*šǫz*) may be considered panchronically: but they are devoid of linguistic value. Even from a panchronic point of view, *šǫz* as part of a sequence like *ün šǫz admirablǝ* (*une chose admirable* 'an admirable thing') is not a unit. It is just a formless mass, which lacks definition. Why pick out *šǫz*, rather than *ǫza* or *nšǫ*? There is no value, because there is no meaning. The panchronic point of view never gets to grips with specific facts of language structure.

§8. *Consequences of the confusion of synchrony with diachrony*

There are two cases to consider.

(a) The synchronic facts appear to conflict with the diachronic facts. Looking at the case superficially, it appears that we have to choose

between the two. In fact, this is not necessary. One does not exclude the other. For instance, the word *dépit* in French used to mean 'scorn'; [136] but that does not prevent it nowadays having a quite different meaning. Etymology and synchronic value are two separate things. Similarly, in modern French, according to traditional grammar, the present participle is sometimes variable and behaves like an adjective, agreeing with its noun (*une eau courante*, 'running water') but is in other cases invariable (*une personne courant dans la rue*, 'a person running in the street'). But historical grammar shows us that we are not dealing with one and the same form. In one case there is the continuation of the Latin participle (*currentem*), which is variable; but in the other case we are dealing with a survival of the Latin ablative gerund (*currendō*), which is invariable.[1] Do the synchronic facts contradict the diachronic facts in this case? Is traditional grammar to be condemned in the name of historical grammar? No. That would be to see only one side of the reality. One must not suppose that historical facts are the only important ones, or that they suffice to constitute a language. It is undoubtedly true that, as far as its origins are concerned, the modern French participle *courant* subsumes two originally separate forms. But as language users we no longer distinguish two forms: we recognise only one.[2] Both facts are equally absolute and incontestable.

(b) The synchronic facts agree so closely with the diachronic facts that they are confused, or it is considered superfluous to distinguish them. For instance, the present meaning of the French word *père* ('father') is explained by appeal to the fact that its Latin etymon *pater* meant 'father'. To take another example, Latin short *a* in a non-initial open syllable became *i*: so beside *faciō* one has *conficiō*, beside *amīcus* one has *inimīcus*, etc. The law is often stated as being that the *a* of *faciō* ('I make') changes to *i* in *conficiō* ('I make ready, complete') because it is no longer in the initial syllable. This is incorrect. The *a* of *faciō* never 'became' the *i* of *conficiō*. In order to establish the truth of the matter, one must distinguish between two periods and four different forms. Originally, the forms were *faciō* and *confaciō*. Then [137] *confaciō* became *conficiō*, while *faciō* stayed as it was: so the forms in use were *faciō – conficiō*.

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[1] This theory, although generally accepted, has recently been challenged by E. Lerch (*Das invariable Participium praesentis*, Erlangen, 1913), but unsuccessfully in our view. The example has therefore been allowed to stand. In any case, its didactic value would be unimpaired. (Editorial note)

[2] The example is not entirely convincing. For semantically, and on the basis of both syntagmatic and associative relations, there seem to be adequate grounds for distinguishing the variable *courant* from its invariable counterpart in modern French, without any appeal to diachronic considerations. (Translator's note)

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{faciō} \longleftrightarrow \text{confaciō} & \text{Period A} \\ \downarrow \qquad \downarrow \\ \text{faciō} \longleftrightarrow \text{conficiō} & \text{Period B} \end{array}$$

If a 'change' occurred, it was that *confaciō* changed to *conficiō*. But the rule, badly formulated as it is, does not even mention *confaciō*. Furthermore, in addition to this change, which is a diachronic fact, there is a second fact which is quite different. It concerns the purely synchronic contrast between *faciō* and *conficiō*. One may be tempted to regard this not as a separate fact, but as a consequence of the first. . None the less, it is a fact in its own right; and indeed all synchronic facts are of this kind. What prevents our recognising the proper value of the contrast *faciō – conficiō* is that its role is not particularly important. But when we consider pairs like German *Gast – Gäste*, *gebe – gibt*, we realise that these contrasts too are fortuitous results of phonetic evolution: they none the less embody, synchronically, quite essential grammatical distinctions. Since synchronic and diachronic facts are closely connected in other respects, each presupposing the other, in the end distinguishing between them is felt to be pointless. For years, linguistics has muddled them up without even noticing the muddle.

This mistake becomes very apparent, however, in certain cases. In order to explain Greek *phuktós*, it might be supposed that it is sufficient to point out that in Greek *g* and *kh* become *k* before a voiceless consonant, and to state this fact ·in terms of synchronic correspondences such as *phugeín : phuktós, lékhos : léktron*, etc. But then we come up against cases like *tríkhes : thriksí*, where a complication [138] appears in the form of a 'change' from *t* to *th*. The forms of this word can be explained only in historical terms, by appeal to relative chronology. The primitive stem **thrikh*, followed by the ending *-si*, gave *thriksí*. This was a very early development, like that which produced *léktron* from the root *lekh-*. At a later stage, any aspirate followed by another in the same word lost its aspiration, and so **thríkhes* became *tríkhes*, while *thriksí* naturally remained unaffected by this development.

§9. *Conclusions*

Linguistics is thus faced with a second parting of the ways. In the first place, we found it necessary to choose between studying languages and studying speech (cf. p. [36]). Now we find ourselves at the junction where one road leads to diachrony and the other to synchrony.
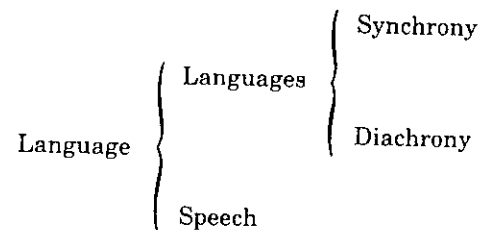
Once this dual principle of classification is grasped, one may add that *everything which is diachronic in languages is only so through*

speech. Speech contains the seeds of every change, each one being pioneered in the first instance by a certain number of individuals before entering into general usage. Modern German has *ich war, wir waren*, whereas at an earlier period, up to the sixteenth century, the conjugation was *ich was, wir waren* (English still has *I was, we were*). How did this substitution of *war* for *was* come about? A few people, on the basis of *waren*, created the analogical form *war*. This form, constantly repeated and accepted by the community, became part of the language. But not all innovations in speech meet with the same success. As long as they are confined to certain individuals, there is no need to take them into account, since our concern is solely with the language. They enter our field of observation only when they have become accepted by the community.

An evolutionary development is always preceded by a similar development, or rather many similar developments, in the sphere of speech. That in no way invalidates the distinction established previously: rather, it offers a confirmation. For in the history of any innovation one always finds two distinct phases: (1) its appearance in individual cases, and (2) its incorporation into the language in exactly the same form, but now adopted by the community. [139]

The following table indicates a rational structure for the pursuit of linguistic studies:

$$\text{Language} \begin{cases} \text{Languages} \begin{cases} \text{Synchrony} \\ \\ \text{Diachrony} \end{cases} \\ \\ \text{Speech} \end{cases}$$

It must be conceded that the theoretically ideal form a science should take is not always the form imposed upon it by practical necessities. In linguistics, practical necessities are more demanding than in any other subject. To some extent, the confusion which at present reigns in linguistic research is due to them. Even if the distinctions drawn here were accepted once and for all, it might not be possible in practice to translate this ideal schema into a systematic programme of studies.

In the synchronic study of Old French, the linguist uses facts and principles which have nothing in common with those which would be revealed by the history of the same language from the thirteenth to the twentieth century, but are comparable to those which would emerge from the description of a modern Bantu language, or Attic

Greek in 400 B.C., or French at the present day. These different synchronic investigations are concerned with similar relations: for although each language constitutes a closed system, all presuppose certain constant principles. These do not vary from one case to the next, because the facts studied belong to the same order of phenomena. In the case of historical studies, it is no different. Whether one is [140] studying the development of French over a certain period (from the thirteenth to the twentieth century, for example), or a period in the history of Javanese, or of any other language, one is dealing with similar facts. Comparing these facts is sufficient to enable one to establish valid diachronic generalisations. The ideal programme would be for each scholar to concentrate either on synchronic or on diachronic research, and include as much as possible of the material falling within his chosen field. But it is difficult to achieve a scientific understanding of widely differing languages. Furthermore, each language in practice constitutes a single unit for purposes of study, and one is led inevitably to study it from both a static and a historical viewpoint in turn. Such units, we must none the less remember, are merely superficial in theoretical terms. On the contrary, the disparity between different languages conceals an underlying unity. In studying a language from either point of view, it is of the utmost importance to assign each fact to its appropriate sphere, and not to confuse the two methods.

The two branches of linguistics thus defined will now be considered in turn.

Synchronic linguistics will be concerned with logical and psychological connexions between coexisting items constituting a system, as perceived by the same collective consciousness.

Diachronic linguistics on the other hand will be concerned with connexions between sequences of items not perceived by the same collective consciousness, which replace one another without themselves constituting a system.

CHAPTER III

Identities, Realities, Values

The foregoing considerations raise a crucial problem. It is all the more important in that the fundamental concepts of static linguistics are directly based upon, or even merge with, the concept of a linguistic unit. This we now propose to show, by examining the notions of synchronic identity, synchronic reality, and synchronic value.

A. What is a synchronic *identity*? What is at issue here is not the kind of identity which links the French negative particle *pas* ('not') to the Latin noun *passum* ('pace'): that is a diachronic identity (cf. p. [249]). It is the no less interesting kind of identity which permits us to say that two sentences like *je ne sais pas* ('I don't know') and *ne dites pas cela* ('Don't say that') include the same element (*pas*, 'not'). An idle question, it may be thought. For clearly the identity resides in the fact that these two sentences include the same sequence of sound (*pas*) bearing the same meaning in both cases. But this explanation will not do. Although correlations of phonic segments and concepts establish identities (as in the example previously given: *la force du vent* and *à bout de force*, p. [147]), the converse does not hold. It is possible to have an identity without any such correlation. For example, we may hear in the course of a lecture several repetitions of the word *Messieurs!* ('Gentlemen!'). We feel that in each case it is the same expression: and yet there are variations of delivery and intonation

which give rise in the several instances to very noticeable phonic differences – differences as marked as those which in other cases serve to differentiate one word from another (e.g. *pomme* from *paume*, *goutte* from *goûte*, *fuir* from *fouir*, etc.).[1] Furthermore, this feeling of identity persists in spite of the fact that from a semantic point of view too

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[1] Comparable English pairs would be *come – comb*, *look – luck*, *fear – fir*. (Translator's note)

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there is no absolute reduplication from one *Messieurs!* to the next. A word can express quite different ideas without seriously compromising its own identity (cf. *adopter une mode*, 'to adopt a fashion', *adopter un enfant*, 'to adopt a child'; *la fleur du pommier* 'the flower of the apple-tree', *la fleur de la noblesse*, 'the flower of the nobility').

The mechanism of a language turns entirely on identities and differences. The latter are merely counterparts of the former. The problem of identities crops up everywhere. It merges in part with the problem of entities and units, to which it adds complications. But the complications are valuable complications. Let us examine the problem of identity in linguistics in the light of some non-linguistic examples. We assign identity, for instance, to two trains ('the 8.45 from Geneva to Paris'), one of which leaves twenty-four hours after the other. We treat it as the 'same' train, even though probably the locomotive, the carriages, the staff etc. are not the same. Or if a street is demolished and then rebuilt, we say it is the same street, although there may be physically little or nothing left of the old one. How is it that a street can be reconstructed entirely and still be the same? Because it is not a purely material structure. It has other characteristics which are independent of its bricks and mortar; for example, its situation in relation to other streets. Similarly, the train is identified by its departure time, its route, and any other features which distinguish it from other trains. Whenever the same conditions are fulfilled, the same entities reappear. But they are not abstractions. The street and the train are real enough. Their physical existence is essential to our understanding of what they are.

A quite different kind of case would be, say, a suit of mine which is stolen, but which I find subsequently on a second-hand stall. That suit is indeed a material object, made up simply of various inert substances – cloth, lining, facings, etc. Any other suit, however similar, would not be my suit. Now linguistic identity is not the kind of identity the suit has, but the kind of identity the train and the street have. Every time I utter the word *Messieurs* ('Gentlemen'), I renew its material being: it is a new act of phonation and a new psychological act. The link between two uses of the same word is not based upon material identity, nor upon exact similarity of meaning, but upon factors the linguist must discover, if he is to come anywhere near to revealing the true nature of linguistic units.

B. What is a synchronic *reality*? What concrete or abstract elements of linguistic structure can be thus designated?

Take the distinctions between the various parts of speech. On what is the classification of words into nouns, adjectives, etc. based? Is it on some purely logical principle of an extra-linguistic nature, applied to grammar from outside like lines of longitude and latitude on the

earth's globe? Or does it correspond to something which belongs within, and is determined by the language system? In other words, is it a synchronic reality? The second answer seems likely to be correct, but there may be something to be said in favour of the first. In the French sentence *ces gants sont bon marché* ('these gloves are good value'), is *bon marché* ('good value') an adjective? Logically, it has the right meaning. But grammatically it is less clear. For *bon marché* does not behave like a normal French adjective: it is invariable, never precedes its noun, and so on. Furthermore, it consists of two words. What the parts of speech provide is a classification of individual words:
[153] so how can a group of two words belong to one or other of the parts of speech? Yet if we split it up into two words, and say *bon* ('good') is an adjective, whereas *marché* ('value') is a noun, we have not accounted for the single expression *bon marché* ('good value'). The conclusion is that our 'parts of speech' classification must be defective or incomplete: its division of words into nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. does not correspond to any undeniable linguistic reality.

Linguistics is always working with concepts originally introduced by the grammarians. It is unclear whether or not these concepts really reflect constituent features of linguistic structure. But how can we find out? And if they are illusory, what realities can we put in their place?

To avoid being misled, it is first of all important to realise that concrete linguistic entities do not just present themselves for inspection of their own accord. It is in seeking them out that one makes contact with linguistic reality. Taking this as our point of departure, we have to proceed to work out all the classifications linguistics needs to accommodate the facts it has to deal with. But to base these classifications on anything other than concrete entities – to say, for instance, that the parts of speech do reflect linguistic structure, simply because they are logically viable categories – is to forget that linguistic facts do not exist independently of sound-sequences divided into meaningful segments.

C. Finally, the notions discussed above do not differ in essentials from what we have elsewhere referred to as *values*. The point can be brought out once again by comparison with chess (cf. p. [125] ff.). Consider a knight in chess. Is the piece by itself an element of the game? Certainly not. For as a material object, separated from its square on the board and the other conditions of play, it is of no significance for the player. It becomes a real, concrete element only when it takes on or becomes identified with its value in the game. Suppose that during a game this piece gets destroyed or lost. Can it
[154] be replaced? Of course it can. Not only by some other knight, but even by an object of quite a different shape, which can be counted as a

knight, provided it is assigned the same value as the missing piece. Thus it can be seen that in semiological systems, such as languages, where the elements keep one another in a state of equilibrium in accordance with fixed rules, the notions of identity and value merge.

That is why in the final analysis the notion of value covers units, concrete entities and realities. There is no fundamental difference between these notions, but they allow the same problem to be formulated in a variety of different ways. Whether we are trying to determine units, realities, concrete entities, or values, it will always come down to the same central question, which runs throughout the whole of static linguistics.

From a practical point of view, it would be of interest to begin with units; to determine units, and recognize the various kinds of units by providing a classification. It would be necessary to examine what the basis is for division into words. For the word, in spite of being so difficult to define, is a unit which compels recognition by the mind. It has a central role in the linguistic mechanism. (But a discussion of that topic alone would fill a book.) Then one would proceed to classify smaller units, larger units, and so on. By determining in this way the elements to be dealt with, a science of linguistics would fully achieve its goals, having related all relevant phenomena in its domain to one first principle. It cannot be said that this central problem has ever been tackled, or that the scope and difficulty of it have been realised. Where languages are concerned, people have always been satisfied to work with poorly defined units.

However, in spite of the capital importance of units, it is preferable to approach the problem by considering values. For that, in our view, is the heart of the matter.

CHAPTER IV

Linguistic Value

§1. *The language as thought organised in sound*

In order to realise that the language itself can be nothing other than a system of pure values, one need only consider the two elements which are involved in the way it functions: ideas and sounds.

Psychologically, setting aside its expression in words, our thought is simply a vague, shapeless mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed that were it not for signs, we should be incapable of differentiating any two ideas in a clear and constant way. In itself, thought is like a swirling cloud, where no shape is intrinsically determinate. No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct, before the introduction of linguistic structure.

But do sounds, which lie outside this nebulous world of thought, in themselves constitute entities established in advance? No more than ideas do. The substance of sound is no more fixed or rigid than that of thought. It does not offer a ready-made mould, with shapes that thought must inevitably conform to. It is a malleable material which can be fashioned into separate parts in order to supply the signals which thought has need of. So we can envisage the linguistic phenomenon in its entirety – the language, that is – as a series of adjoining
subdivisions simultaneously imprinted both on the plane of vague, amorphous thought (*A*), and on the equally featureless plane of sound (*B*). This can be represented very approximately as in the following sketch (top of p. 111).

The characteristic role of a language in relation to thought is not to supply the material phonetic means by which ideas may be expressed. It is to act as intermediary between thought and sound, in such a way that the combination of both necessarily produces a mutually complementary delimitation of units. Thought, chaotic by nature, is made precise by this process of segmentation. But what happens is neither
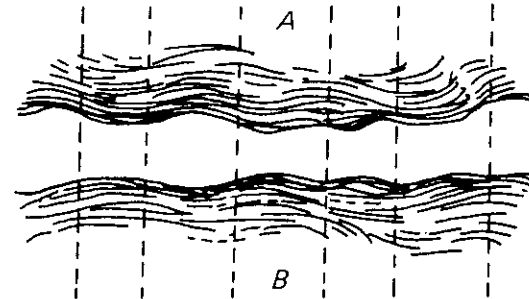
a transformation of thoughts into matter, nor a transformation of sounds into ideas. What takes place, is a somewhat mysterious process by which 'thought-sound' evolves divisions, and a language takes shape with its linguistic units in between those two amorphous masses. One might think of it as being like air in contact with water: changes in atmospheric pressure break up the surface of the water into series of divisions, i.e. waves. The correlation between thought and sound, and the union of the two, is like that.

Linguistic structure might be described as the domain of articulations, taking this term in the sense defined earlier (p. [26]). Every linguistic sign is a part or member, an *articulus*, where an idea is fixed in a sound, and a sound becomes the sign of an idea.

A language might also be compared to a sheet of paper. Thought is   one side of the sheet and sound the reverse side. Just as it is impossible to take a pair of scissors and cut one side of paper without at the same time cutting the other, so it is impossible in a language to isolate sound from thought, or thought from sound. To separate the two for theoretical purposes takes us into either pure psychology or pure phonetics, not linguistics.

Linguistics, then, operates along this margin, where sound and thought meet. *The contact between them gives rise to a form, not a substance.*

These observations clarify our earlier remarks about the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign (p. [100]). Not only are the two areas which are linguistically linked vague and amorphous in themselves, but the process which selects one particular sound-sequence to correspond to one particular idea is entirely arbitrary. If this were not so, the notion of value would lose something. For it would involve a certain element of imposition from the outside world. But in fact values remain entirely a matter of internal relations, and that is why the link between idea and sound is intrinsically arbitrary.

In turn, the arbitrary nature of the sign enables us to understand more easily why it needs social activity to create a linguistic system.

A community is necessary in order to establish values. Values have no other rationale than usage and general agreement. An individual, acting alone, is incapable of establishing a value.

Furthermore, the notion of value, thus defined, shows us that it is a great mistake to consider a sign as nothing more than the combination of a certain sound and a certain concept. To think of a sign as nothing more would be to isolate it from the system to which it belongs. It would be to suppose that a start could be made with individual signs, and a system constructed by putting them together. On the contrary, the system as a united whole is the starting point, from which it becomes possible, by a process of analysis, to identify its constituent elements.

[158]   To develop this idea, we shall look at it first from the point of view of the signification or concept (§2), then from that of the signal (§3), and finally from that of the sign as a whole (§4).

Since we cannot have direct access to concrete entities and linguistic units, we shall take words as examples. Although, as previously noted (p. [147]), words do not answer exactly to our definition of linguistic units, they will be adequate to give a rough idea, and will obviate the necessity for talking in abstract terms. So we will treat them for present purposes as specimens supposedly equivalent to the actual signs of a synchronic system. The principles which will emerge may be taken as valid for linguistic entities in general.

§2. *Linguistic value: conceptual aspects*

The value of a word is mainly or primarily thought of in terms of its capacity for representing a certain idea. That is indeed an aspect of linguistic value. But in that case, does its linguistic value differ from what is called its *meaning*? Are *value* and *meaning* synonymous terms? Not in our view, although it is easy to confuse them. For the subtlety of the distinction, rather than any analogy between the two terms, invites confusion.

Value, in its conceptual aspect, is doubtless part of meaning. It is by no means easy, indeed, to draw the distinction in view of this interconnexion. Yet it must be drawn, if a language is not to be reduced to a mere nomenclature (cf. p. [97]).

Let us first consider meaning, as usually understood, in the light of our previous analysis (p. [99]). As the arrows in the diagram indicate, a meaning is simply the counterpart of a sound pattern. The relevant [159]   relation is one between a sound pattern and a concept, within the limits of the word, which is for this purpose treated as a self-contained unit, existing independently.
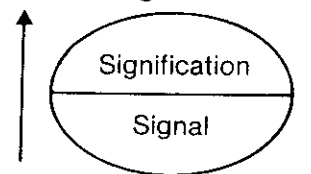
The paradoxical part of it is this. On the one hand, the concept appears to be just the counterpart of a sound pattern, as one constituent part of a linguistic sign. On the other hand, this linguistic sign itself, as the link uniting the two constituent elements, likewise has counterparts. These are the other signs in the language.

A language is a system in which all the elements fit together, and in which the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all the others. It may be represented as follows.
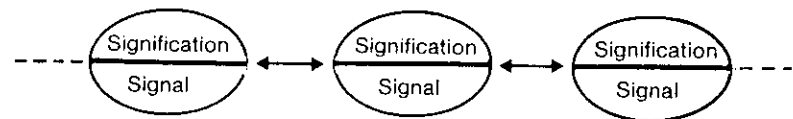
So how does it come about that value, as defined, can be equated with meaning, i.e. with the counterpart of the sound pattern? For it looks impossible to assimilate the relations represented here by horizontal arrows to those other relations represented in the previous diagram by vertical arrows. In other words, to go back to our comparison with the sheet of paper (p. [157]), it is difficult to see how the relation between different shapes cut out (call them A, B, C, D, etc.) can fail to be different from the relation between one side of any given shape and its reverse side (A/A', B/B', etc.).

In answering this question, it is relevant to point out that even in non-linguistic cases values of any kind seem to be governed by a paradoxical principle. Values always involve:

(1) something *dissimilar* which can be exchanged for the item whose value is under consideration, and
(2) *similar* things which can be *compared* with the item whose value is under consideration.

These two features are necessary for the existence of any value. To determine the value of a five-franc coin, for instance, what must be   [160] known is: (1) that the coin can be exchanged for a certain quantity of something different, e.g. bread, and (2) that its value can be compared with another value in the same system, e.g. that of a one-franc coin, or of a coin belonging to another system (e.g. a dollar). Similarly, a

word can be substituted for something dissimilar: an idea. At the same time, it can be compared to something of like nature: another word. Its value is therefore not determined merely by that concept or meaning for which it is a token. It must also be assessed against comparable values, by contrast with other words. The content of a word is determined in the final analysis not by what it contains but by what exists outside it. As an element in a system, the word has not only a meaning but also – above all – a value. And that is something quite different.

A few examples will show that this is indeed the case. The French word *mouton* may have the same meaning as the English word *sheep*; but it does not have the same value. There are various reasons for this, but in particular the fact that the English word for the meat of this animal, as prepared and served for a meal, is not *sheep* but *mutton*. The difference in value between *sheep* and *mouton* hinges on the fact that in English there is also another word *mutton* for the meat, whereas *mouton* in French covers both.

In a given language, all the words which express neighbouring ideas help define one another's meaning. Each of a set of synonyms like *redouter* ('to dread'), *craindre* ('to fear'), *avoir peur* ('to be afraid') has its particular value only because they stand in contrast with one another. If *redouter* ('to dread') did not exist, its content would be shared out among its competitors. On the other hand, words are also enriched by contact with other words. For instance, the new element introduced into *décrépit* (as in *un vieillard décrépit*, cf. p. [119]) is a result of the coexistence of *décrépi* (as in *un mur décrépi*). So the value of any given word is determined by what other words there are in that particular area of the vocabulary. That is true even of a word [161] like *soleil* ('sun'). No word has a value that can be identified independently of what else there is in its vicinity. There are languages, for example, in which it is impossible to say the equivalent of *s'asseoir au soleil* ('to sit in the sun').

The above remarks apply not only to words but to all linguistic elements, including grammatical entities. The value of a French plural, for instance, does not match that of a Sanskrit plural, even though they often mean the same. This is because in Sanskrit, in addition to singular and plural, there is a third category of grammatical number. In Sanskrit the equivalents of expressions like *mes yeux* ('my eyes'), *mes oreilles* ('my ears'), *mes bras* ('my arms'), *mes jambes* ('my legs') would be neither in the singular nor in the plural but in the dual. It would thus be inaccurate to attribute the same value to the Sanskrit plural as to the French plural, because Sanskrit cannot use the plural in all the cases where it has to be used in French. Its value thus does indeed depend on what else there is in its vicinity.

If words had the job of representing concepts fixed in advance, one would be able to find exact equivalents for them as between one

language and another. But this is not the case. French uses the same verb *louer* ('hire, rent') both for granting and for taking a lease, whereas German has two separate verbs, *mieten* and *vermieten*: so there is no exact correspondence between the values in question. The German verbs *schätzen* ('to value') and *urteilen* ('to judge') have meanings which answer roughly to those of the French verbs *estimer* and *juger*: but in various respects there is no one-to-one correspondence.

Flexion offers some particularly striking examples. The distinctions of tense which are so familiar to us are unknown in certain languages. The Hebrew verb does not even mark the fundamental difference between past, present and future. Proto-Germanic has no separate verb form for the future: it is sometimes said that it uses the present tense for this purpose, but that is misleading because the value of a present tense is not the same in Germanic as in those languages which have future tense forms in addition to present tense forms. The Slavic languages regularly distinguish two verbal aspects: the perfective [162] aspect represents an action as a whole, as a single point, taking no development into account, whereas the imperfective aspect represents the same action in the process of development, taking place in time. These categories are difficult for a Frenchman, because his language does not recognise them. If they were predetermined categories, there would be no such difficulty. In all these cases what we find, instead of *ideas* given in advance, are *values* emanating from a linguistic system. If we say that these values correspond to certain concepts, it must be understood that the concepts in question are purely differential. That is to say they are concepts defined not positively, in terms of their content, but negatively by contrast with other items in the same system. What characterises each most exactly is being whatever the others are not.

The full significance of our diagram representing the linguistic sign should now be apparent.
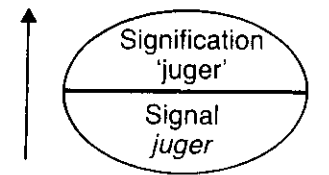
This means that in French, the concept 'juger' ('to judge') is linked to the sound pattern *juger*. So the diagram represents what the word means. But it must not be supposed that the concept in question has any kind of priority. On the contrary, that particular concept is simply a value which emerges from relations with other values of a similar

kind. If those other values disappeared, this meaning too would vanish. If I say, simply, that a certain word means this or that – going no further than identifying the concept associated with that particular sound pattern – then what I am saying may in some respects be accurate, and succeed in giving a correct picture. But I fail inevitably to capture the real linguistic fact, either in its basic essentials or in its full scope.

[163]
§3. Linguistic value: material aspects

Just as the conceptual part of linguistic value is determined solely by relations and differences with other signs in the language, so the same is true of its material part. The sound of a word is not in itself important, but the phonetic contrasts which allow us to distinguish that word from any other. That is what carries the meaning.

This may seem surprising. But how could it possibly be otherwise? No particular configuration of sound is more aptly suited to express a given message than any other such configuration. So it is clearly the case – indeed, it must be the case – that no linguistic item can ever be based, ultimately, upon anything other than its non-coincidence with the rest. Here the terms *arbitrary* and *differential* designate two correlative properties.

The processes of linguistic change amply demonstrate this correlation. It is precisely because two signs *a* and *b* are never grasped as such by our linguistic consciousness, but only the difference between *a* and *b*, that each sign remains free to change in accordance with laws quite unconnected with their signifying function. The Czech genitive plural *žen* (cf. p. [123]) has no positive case maker. Yet the contrast *žena* vs. *žen* works just as well as *žena* vs. *zenъ*, which preceded it. The reason is that all that matters is the difference between the signs: *žena* functions effectively simply because it is different.

Another example which brings out even more clearly the systematic nature of such contrasts is the following. In Greek *éphēn* is an imperfect and *éstēn* an aorist, even though their morphological format-
[164] ion is identical. The former belongs to the present indicative system of *phēmi* ('I say'), whereas there is no present form **stēmi*. It is the relation between *phēmi* and *éphēn* which corresponds to the relation between present and imperfect (cf. *deíknūmi – edeíknūn*). These signs thus function not according to their intrinsic value but in virtue of their relative position.

In any case, it is impossible that sound, as a material element, should in itself be part of the language. Sound is merely something ancillary, a material the language uses. All conventional values have the characteristic of being distinct from the tangible element which

serves as their vehicle. It is not the metal in a coin which determines its value. A crown piece nominally worth five francs contains only half that sum in silver. Its value varies somewhat according to the effigy it bears. It is worth rather more or rather less on different sides of a political frontier. Considerations of the same order are even more pertinent to linguistic signals. Linguistic signals are not in essence phonetic. They are not physical in any way. They are constituted solely by differences which distinguish one such sound pattern from another.

This fundamental principle applies to every material element used by a language, even the basic speech sounds. Each language constructs its words out of some fixed number of phonetic units, each one clearly distinct from the others. What characterises those units is not, as might be thought, the specific positive properties of each; but simply the fact that they cannot be mistaken for one another. Speech sounds are first and foremost entities which are contrastive, relative and negative.[1]

What proves this is the latitude speakers are allowed in pronunciation, provided they distinguish one sound from another. In French, for instance, the fact that *r* is usually pronounced as a uvular consonant does not prevent many speakers from pronouncing it as an apical trill. It makes no difference to the French language, which requires   [165] only that *r* should be distinct from other consonants. There is no necessity that it be pronounced always in exactly the same way. I can even pronounce a French *r* like the German *ch* in *Bach*, *doch*, etc.; whereas I could not in German substitute *r* for *ch* because German, unlike French, distinguishes between *r* and *ch*. Likewise in Russian, there is no latitude of pronunciation for *t* in the direction of *t'* (i.e. palatalised *t*), because the result would be to confuse two sounds distinguished by the language (cf. *govorit'*, 'to speak' vs. *govorit* 'he speaks'). But a Russian is more at liberty to aspirate a *t*, because *th* is not a separate sound in the Russian system.

An identical state of affairs is to be found in that other system of signs, writing. Writing offers a useful comparison, which throws light upon the whole question. We find that:

1. The signs used in writing are arbitrary. The letter *t*, for instance, has no connexion with the sound it denotes.

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[1] When this passage is compared with the detailed account of speech sounds given earlier (p. [63] ff.), it is evident that the published text of the *Cours* lacks any careful and consistently drawn distinction between phonetic and phonological units. The speech sounds discussed on p. [63] ff. are clearly language-neutral elements, characterised in physiological terms; whereas the speech sounds discussed here are defined contrastively in the context of particular languages. Cf. p. [180] fn. (Translator's note.)

2. The values of the letters are purely negative and differential. So the same individual may write *t* in such variant forms as:

The one essential thing is that his *t* should be distinct from his *l*, his *d*, etc.

3. Values in writing are solely based on contrasts within a fixed system, having a determinate number of letters. This feature, although not the same as 2 above, is closely connected with it; for both 2 and 3 follow from 1. Since the written sign is arbitrary, its form is of little importance; or rather, is of importance only within certain limits imposed by the system.

[166]   4. The actual mode of inscription is irrelevant, because it does not affect the system. (This also follows from 1.) Whether I write in black or white, in incised characters or in relief, with a pen or a chisel — none of that is of any importance for the meaning.

§4. *The sign as a whole*

Everything we have said so far comes down to this. *In the language itself, there are only differences.* Even more important than that is the fact that, although in general a difference presupposes positive terms between which the difference holds, in a language there are only differences, *and no positive terms.* Whether we take the signification or the signal, the language includes neither ideas nor sounds existing prior to the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonetic differences arising out of that system. In a sign, what matters more than any idea or sound associated with it is what other signs surround it. The proof of this lies in the fact that the value of a sign may change without affecting either meaning or sound, simply because some neighbouring sign has undergone a change (cf. p. [160]).

But to say that in a language everything is negative holds only for signification and signal considered separately. The moment we consider the sign as a whole, we encounter something which is positive in its own domain. A linguistic system is a series of phonetic differences matched with a series of conceptual differences. But this matching of a certain number of auditory signals and a similar number of items carved out from the mass of thought gives rise to a system of values. It is this system which provides the operative bond between phonic and mental elements within each sign. Although signification and signal are each, in isolation, purely differential and negative,

their combination is a fact of a positive nature. It is, indeed, the only order of facts linguistic structure comprises. For the essential function   [167] of a language as an institution is precisely to maintain these series of differences in parallel.

Certain diachronic developments are most revealing in this respect. We find countless cases where a change in the signal brings with it a change in the idea expressed. Time and again we observe that in principle the number of ideas distinguished matches the number of distinct signals available. When two words merge through phonetic change (e.g. *décrépit* from Latin *decrepitus*, and *décrépi* from Latin *crispus*, cf. p. [119]), the ideas tend to merge as well, however dissimilar they may be. What happens when one word gives birth to two alternative pronunciations (e.g. French *chaise* and *chaire*, both from Latin *cathedra*)? Inevitably the phonetic difference which has emerged will tend to acquire significance, although perhaps not always immediately or always successfully. Conversely, any difference in ideas distinguished by the mind will seek expression in different linguistic signals; whereas two ideas the mind no longer differentiates will tend to find expression in the same signal.

The moment we compare one sign with another as positive combinations, the term *difference* should be dropped. It is no longer appropriate. It is a term which is suitable only for comparisons between sound patterns (e.g. *père* vs. *mère*), or between ideas (e.g. 'father' vs. 'mother'). Two signs, each comprising a signification and a signal, are not different from each other, but only distinct. They are simply in *opposition* to each other. The entire mechanism of language[1], which we shall consider below, is based on oppositions of this kind and upon the phonetic and conceptual differences they involve.

What is true of values is also true of units (cf. p. [154]). A unit is a segment of a spoken sequence which corresponds to a certain concept. Both are purely differential in nature.

Applied to units, the principle of differentiation may be formulated   [168] as follows. *The characteristics of the unit merge with the unit itself.* In a language, as in every other semiological system, what distinguishes a sign is what constitutes it, nothing more. Difference is what makes characteristics, just as it makes values and units.

Another consequence, and a rather surprising one, of the same principle is this. What is usually called a 'grammatical fact' corresponds in the final analysis to our definition of a unit. For there is always an opposition of terms involved. What is special is that the opposition happens to be particularly important, e.g. German plural formations of the type *Nacht* vs. *Nächte* (cf. p. [120] ff.). Each of the

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[1] The term used in the text here is *langage*, but the chapter referred to is entitled 'Mécanisme de la langue'. (Translator's note)

items which contrast grammatically (the singular form without the umlaut and without the final *-e*, contrasting with a plural form having both) is itself the product of the operation of oppositions within the system. In isolation, *Nacht* and *Nächte* are nothing: the opposition between them is everything. In other words, one might express the relation *Nacht* vs. *Nächte* by an algebraic formula *a/b*, where *a* and *b* are not simple terms, but each represents a complex of relations. The language is, so to speak, an algebra which has only complex terms. Some of the oppositions it includes are more important than others. But 'units' and 'grammatical facts' are only different names for different aspects of the same general fact: the operation of linguistic oppositions. So much so that it would be perfectly possible to tackle the problem of units by beginning with grammatical facts. Starting from an opposition like *Nacht* vs. *Nächte*, one would inquire what are the units involved. Are they just two words? Or are they whole series of similar words? Or are they just *a* and *ä*? Or are they all singulars and all plurals?

Units and grammatical facts would not merge in this way if a linguistic sign was constituted by anything apart from differences. Linguistic structure being what it is, however one approaches it, [169] But linguistic structure being what it is, however one approaches it, nothing is simple. Always and everywhere one finds this same complex equilibrium of terms holding one another in mutual juxtaposition. In other words, *the language itself is a form, not a substance* (cf. p. [157]). The importance of this truth cannot be overemphasised. For all our mistakes of terminology, all our incorrect ways of designating things belonging to the language originate in our unwittingly supposing that we are dealing with a substance when we deal with linguistic phenomena.

Syntagmatic Relations and Associative Relations

§1. *Definitions*

In a linguistic state, then, everything depends on relations. How do they work?

The relations and differences between linguistic items fall into two quite distinct kinds, each giving rise to a separate order of values. The opposition between these two orders brings out the specific character of each. They correspond to two different forms of mental activity, both indispensable to the workings of a language.

Words as used in discourse, strung together one after another, enter into relations based on the linear character of languages (cf. p. [103]). Linearity precludes the possibility of uttering two words simultaneously. They must be arranged consecutively in spoken sequence. Combinations based on sequentiality may be called *syntagmas*.[1] The syntagma invariably comprises two or more consecutive units: for example, *re-lire* ('re-read'), *contre tous* ('against all'), *la vie humaine* ('the life of man'), *Dieu est bon* ('God is good'), *s'il fait beau temps, nous sortirons* ('if it's fine, we'll go out'). In its place in a syntagma, any [171] unit acquires its value simply in opposition to what precedes, or to what follows, or to both.

Outside the context of discourse, words having something in common are associated together in the memory. In this way they form groups, the members of which may be related in various ways. For instance, the word *enseignement* ('teaching') will automatically evoke a host of other words: *enseigner* ('to teach'), *renseigner* ('to inform'), etc., or *armement* ('armament'), *changement* ('change'), etc., or *édu-*

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[1] Needless to say, the study of *syntagmas* is not to be equated with *syntax*. The latter is only part of the former, as will be seen (cf. p. [185] ff.). (Editorial note)

cation ('education'), *apprentissage* ('apprenticeship'). All these words have something or other linking them.

This kind of connexion between words is of quite a different order. It is not based on linear sequence. It is a connexion in the brain. Such connexions are part of that accumulated store which is the form the language takes in an individual's brain. We shall call these *associative relations*.

Syntagmatic relations hold *in praesentia*. They hold between two or more terms co-present in a sequence. Associative relations, on the contrary, hold *in absentia*. They hold between terms constituting a mnemonic group.

Considered from these two points of view, a linguistic unit may be compared to a single part of a building, e.g. a column. A column is related in a certain way to the architrave it supports. This disposition, involving two units co-present in space, is comparable to a syntagmatic relation. On the other hand, if the column is Doric, it will evoke mental comparison with the other architectural orders (Ionic, Corinthian, etc.), which are not in this instance spatially co-present. This relation is associative.

Each of these two orders of relationship calls for certain special comments.

2. §Syntagmatic relations

The examples given above (p. [170]) already make it clear that the notion of a syntagma applies not only to words, but to groups of words, and to complex units of every size and kind (compound words, derivative forms, phrases, sentences).

It is not sufficient to consider merely the relation between the parts of a syntagma, e.g. between *contre* ('against') and *tous* ('all') in *contre tous* ('against all'), or between *contre* ('over') and *maître* ('master') in *contremaître* ('overseer'). Account must also be taken of the relation between the whole and the parts, e.g. between *contre tous* and *contre, contre tous* and *tous, contremaître* and *contre, contremaître* and *maître*.

An objection might be raised at this point. The most typical kind of syntagma is the sentence. But the sentence belongs to speech, not to the language (cf. p. [30]). So does it not follow that the syntagma is a phenomenon of speech too? Not in our view. The characteristic of speech is freedom of combination: so the first question to ask is whether all syntagmas are equally free.

There are, in the first place, a large number of expressions belonging to the language: these are ready-made phrases, absolutely invariable in usage, in which it may even require reflection to distinguish the

constituent parts: e.g. *à quoi bon?* ('what's the use?'), *allons donc!* ('come along!'). The same is true, although not to the same extent, for expressions like *prendre la mouche* ('to take offence'), *forcer la main à quelqu'un* ('to force someone's hand'), *rompre une lance* ('to break a lance'), *avoir mal à la tête* ('to have a headache'), *à force de* ('by dint of'), *que vous en semble?* ('what do you think of it?') *pas n'est besoin de* ... ('no need to ...'), etc. These are idiomatic expressions involving oddities of meaning or syntax. These oddities are not improvised, but handed down by tradition. In this connexion one might also cite morphological oddities which, although perfectly analysable, represent irregularities maintained solely by prevalence of usage: e.g. *difficulté* ('difficulty') as compared with *facilité* ('ease') and *facile* ('easy'); *mourrai* ('I will die'), *mourir* ('to die'), as compared with *dormirai* ('I will sleep'), *dormir* ('to sleep'), and *finirai* ('I will finish'), *finir* ('to finish').[1]

But that is not all. To the language, and not to speech, must be attributed all types of syntagmas constructed on regular patterns. Since there is nothing abstract in linguistic structure, such types will not exist unless sufficiently numerous examples do indeed occur. When a new word such as *indécorable* ('undecoratable') crops up in speech (cf. p. [228] ff.), it presupposes an already existing type, and the type in question would not exist were it not for our recollection of a sufficient number of similar words already in the language, e.g. *impardonnable* ('unpardonable'), *intolérable* ('intolerable'), *infatigable* ('indefatigable'), etc. Exactly the same holds for sentences and groups of words based upon regular models. Combinations like *la terre tourne* ('the earth rotates'), *que vous dit-il?* ('what does he say to you?'), etc. correspond to general combinatory types, which in turn are based in the language on specific examples heard and remembered.

Where syntagmas are concerned, however, one must recognise the fact that there is no clear boundary separating the language, as confirmed by communal usage, from speech, marked by freedom of the individual. In many cases it is difficult to assign a combination of units to one or the other. Many combinations are the product of both, in proportions which cannot be accurately measured.

§3. Associative relations

Groups formed by mental association do not include only items sharing something in common. For the mind also grasps the nature of the relations involved in each case, and thus creates as many associative

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[1] The 'regular' forms ought presumably to be **difficilité* and **mourirai*. (Translator's note)

series as there are different relations. In *enseignement* ('teaching'),
enseigner ('to teach'), *enseignons* ('(we) teach'), etc., there is a common
[174]   element in all the terms, i.e. the stem *enseign-* ('teach-'). But the word
enseignement also belongs to another series based upon a different
common element, the suffix *-ment*: e.g. *enseignement* ('teaching'), *arme-
ment,* ('armament'), *changement* ('change'), etc. The association may
also be based just on similarity of significations, as in *enseignement*
('teaching'), *instruction* ('instruction'), *apprentissage* ('apprenticeship'),
éducation ('education'), etc. Similarly, it may be based just on simi-
larity of sound patterns, e.g. the final syllables of *enseignement* ('teach-
ing') and *justement* ('precisely').[1] So sometimes there is a double
associative link based on form and meaning, but in other cases just
one associative link based on form or meaning alone. Any word can
evoke in the mind whatever is capable of being associated with it in
some way or other.

While a syntagma brings in straight away the idea of a fixed se-
quence, with a specific number of elements, an associative group has
no particular number of items in it; nor do they occur in any particular
order. In a series like *désir-eux* ('desirous'), *chaleur-eux* ('warm'),
peur-eux ('fearful'), etc. it is impossible to say in advance how many
words the memory will suggest, or in what order. Any given term acts
as the centre of a constellation, from which connected terms radiate
ad infinitum.

Of these two characteristics found in associative series – indeter-
minate order and indefinite number – only the former is constant. The
[175]   latter may not be found in certain cases. This is so with a very common
type of associative group, flexional paradigms. In a Latin series like
dominus, dominī, dominō, etc. we have an associative group based
on a common element: the noun stem *domin-.* But the series is not
open-ended, like *enseignement, changement,* etc., since the number of
case forms is limited. Their sequence, however, is not fixed. It is purely
arbitrary that grammarians list them in one order rather than an-
other. As far as language-users are concerned, the nominative is not

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[1] This case is rare and may be treated as abnormal. For the mind naturally discards
all associations likely to impede understanding and discourse. Nonetheless, the exist-
ence of such associative groups is proved by the category of feeble puns based upon the
ridiculous confusions which may result from homonymy pure and simple. E.g. *Les
musiciens produisent les sons et les grainetiers les vendent* ('Musicians produce [sounds/
bran], which seedsmen sell' – *son* meaning both 'sound' and also 'bran'). Such cases
must be distinguished from those in which word assoication, although fortuitous, is
backed by a certain connexion of ideas: e.g. French *ergot* ('spur, spike') and *ergoter* ('to
quibble'), or German *blau* ('blue') and *durchbläuen* ('to beat, thrash'). What is involved
here is a new interpretation of one or other of the terms. These are cases of popular
etymology (cf. p. [238]). Although of interest in the study of semantic change, from a
synchronic viewpoint they merely fall into the category of *enseigner, enseignement,* etc.
mentioned above. (Editorial note)
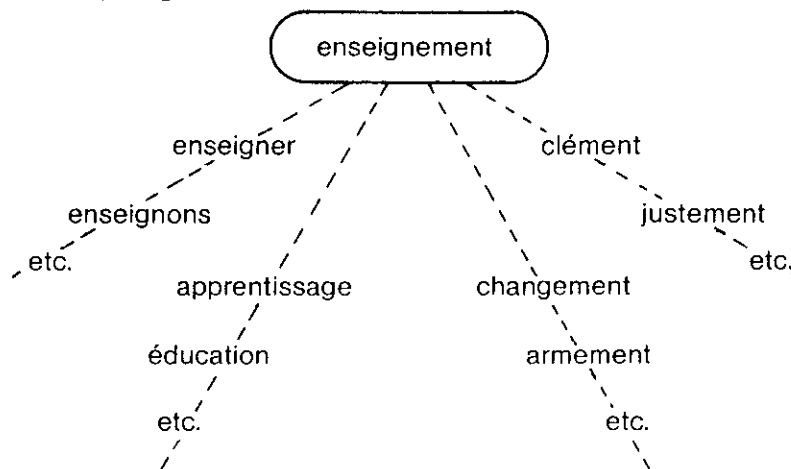
in any sense the 'first' case in the declension: the forms may be thought
of in any variety of orders, depending on circumstances.

CHAPTER VI

The Language Mechanism

§1. Syntagmatic interdependences

The whole set of phonetic and conceptual differences which constitute a language are thus the product of two kinds of comparison, associative and syntagmatic. Groups of both kinds are in large measure established by the language. This set of habitual relations is what constitutes linguistic structure and determines how the language functions.

The first thing that strikes us in this organisation are the *syntagmatic interdependences*. Almost all linguistic units depend either on what precedes or follows in the spoken sequence, or else on the successive parts of which they are themselves composed.

This is amply demonstrated by word formation. A unit like *désireux* ('desirous') divides into two smaller units: *désir-eux* ('desir-ous'). But these two are not independent units merely added together: *désir+eux*. They form a product, a combination of interdependent elements, their value deriving solely from their mutual contributions within a higher unit, which we may represent as: *désir×eux*. For the suffix *-eux*, in isolation, never occurs. Its place in the language depends on the existence of a series of terms in use, such as *chaleur-eux*, *chanc-eux*, etc. Nor is the stem *désir-* autonomous. It exists only when combined with a suffix. In *roulis* ('rolling') the element *roul-* ('roll-') is nothing without the suffix added to it. The whole depends on the parts, and the parts depend on the whole. That is why the syntagmatic relation between part and whole is just as important as the syntagmatic relation between one part and another.

This is a general principle, which can be seen to operate in all the types of syntagma previously listed (p. [172]). There are always larger units, composed of smaller units, with a relation of interdependence holding between both.

It is true that there are independent linguistic units. These have no

syntagmatic relations, either between their parts or with other units. Words like *oui* ('yes'), *non* ('no'), *merci* ('thank you'), which are equivalent to whole sentences, provide good examples. But this phenomenon, which is in any case rare, does not undermine the general principle. Normally we do not express ourselves by using single linguistic signs, but groups of signs, organised in complexes which themselves are signs. In linguistic structure everything in the end comes down to differences, and also to groups. This mechanism, which involves interrelations of successive terms, is like the functioning of a machine in which the components all act upon one other, even though they are arranged in one dimension only.

§2. Simultaneous functioning of both types of group

Syntagmatic groups formed in this way are linked by interdependence, each contributing to all. Linear ordering in space helps to create associative connexions, and these in turn play an essential part in syntagmatic analysis.

Take the compound *dé-faire* ('un-do'). We can represent it along a horizontal strip corresponding to the spoken sequence:
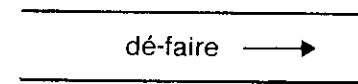
But at the same time, along another axis, there are subconsciously present one or more associative series, each based on a common element. For example:
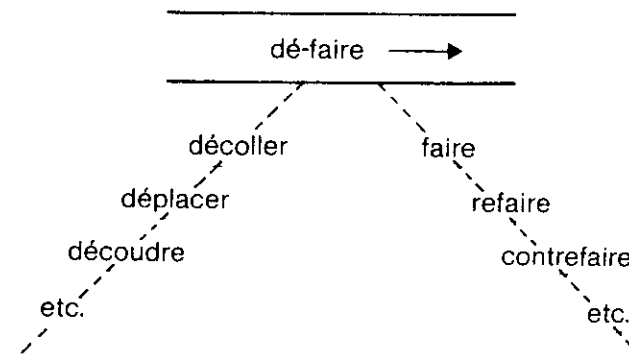
Similarly, as a syntagma the Latin word *quadruplex* ('four-fold') is supported by two associative series:

quadru-plex ⟶

quadrupes   simplex

quadrifons   triplex

quadraginta   centuplex

etc.   etc.
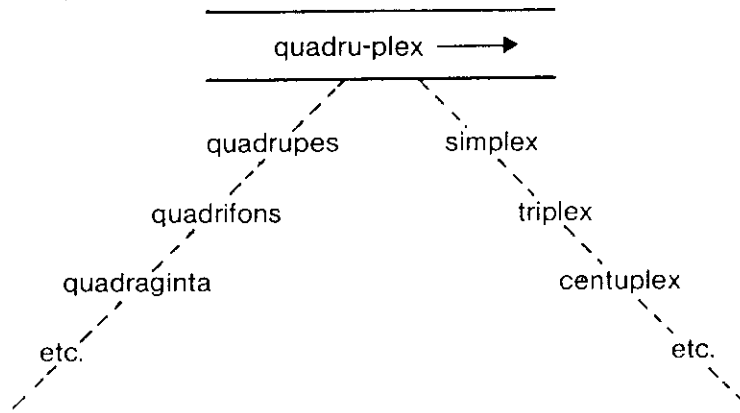
It is insofar as *défaire* and *quadruplex* are surrounded by these other forms that they are themselves analysable into smaller units – that they are syntagmas, in other words. *Défaire* would become unanalysable if the other words containing *dé-* or *faire* disappeared from the language. *Défaire* would then be one simple unit, with no parts to contrast internally.

We can now see how this dual system works in discourse.

Our memory holds in store all the various complex types of syntagma, of every kind and length. When a syntagma is brought into use, we call upon associative groups in order to make our choice. So when someone says *marchons!* ('let's march!'), he thinks unconsciously of various associative groups, at whose common intersection appears the syntagma *marchons!* This syntagma belongs to one series which includes the singular imperative *marche!* ('march!') and the 2nd person plural imperative *marchez!* ('march!'), and *marchons!* stands in opposition to both as a form selected from this group. At the same time, it belongs to another series which includes *montons!* ('let's go up!'), *mangeons!* ('let's eat!') etc., and represents a selection from this group as well. In each series, it is known which factor to vary in order to obtain the differentiation appropriate to the unit sought. If the idea to be expressed is a different one, other oppositions will be brought into play to produce a different value, thus yielding some other form, such as *marchez!* or *montons!*

It is thus an oversimplification to say, looking at the matter positively, that *marchons!* is selected because it means what the speaker intends to express. In reality, the idea evokes not just one form but a whole latent system, through which the oppositions involved in the constitution of that sign are made available. The sign by itself would have no meaning of its own. If the forms *marche!* and *marchez!* were

[179]

to disappear from the language, leaving *marchons!* in isolation, certain oppositions would automatically collapse and *ipso facto* the value of *marchons!* would be different.

This principle applies to syntagmas and sentences of all types, even the most complex. In uttering the words *que vous dit-il?* ('what does he say to you?'), we vary one element in a latent syntagmatic type of which other examples would be *que te dit-il?*, *que nous dit-il?* etc. ('what does he say to you/us/them ...?' etc.). This is the process involved in our selection of the pronoun *vous* in *que vous dit-il?* In this process, which involves eliminating mentally everything which does not lead to the desired differentiation at the point required, associative groupings and syntagmatic types are both involved.

[180]

On the other hand, this process of determination and choice governs even the smallest units, right down to phonetic elements, when they have a value. We are thinking here not only of cases like the feminine adjective *pǝtit* (*petite* 'little') contrasting with the masculine *pǝti* (written *petit*), or the Latin genitive singular *dominī* ('of a master') contrasting with the dative singular *dominō* ('to a master'), where it happens to be the case that the difference depends on just one sound, but also of the more typical and subtle way in which speech sounds themselves play their part in the system comprising a given linguistic state. If, for example, in Greek *m,p,t*, etc. never occur at the end of a word, that means that their presence or absence in a certain position counts as a factor in word structure and sentence structure. In all cases of this kind, the individual sound in question, as with all other units, will be selected on the basis of a dual contrast in the mind. If we take a hypothetical sequence like *anma*, the sound *m* is in syntagmatic opposition with the preceding and following sounds, and also in associative opposition with all the sounds that the mind can suggest[1], as shown:

$$a \quad n \quad m \quad a$$
$$v$$
$$d$$

[1] Cf. p. [164] fn. This formulation fails to make it clear exactly what status is to be assigned to the 'sounds' discussed here. The phrase 'all the sounds the mind can suggest' seems to allow, for example, the possibility of imagining an English word *srim*, even though the initial group *sr-* never in fact occurs in English. On the other hand, if the possibilities of contrast are limited to combinations actually occurring in the language, the conclusion would seem to be that the *s* in English *slip* cannot be the same 'sound' as the *s* in *lisp*, since the syntagmatic and associative relations in the two cases are different. (Translator's note)

§3. Absolute arbitrariness and relative arbitrariness

The mechanism of a language can be looked at in another way which is of particular significance.

The fundamental principle of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign does not prevent us from distinguishing in any language between what is intrinsically arbitrary – that is, unmotivated – and what is only relatively arbitrary. Not all signs are absolutely arbitrary. In some cases, there are factors which allow us to recognise different degrees of arbitrariness, although never to discard the notion entirely. *The sign may be motivated to a certain extent.*

[181]

The French word *vingt* ('twenty') is unmotivated, whereas *dix-neuf* ('nineteen') is not unmotivated to the same extent. For *dix-neuf* evokes the words of which it is composed, *dix* ('ten') and *neuf* ('nine'), and those of the same numerical series: *dix* ('ten'), *neuf* ('nine'), *vingt-neuf* ('twenty-nine'), *dix-huit* ('eighteen'), *soixante-dix* ('seventy'), etc. Taken individually, *dix* and *neuf* are on the same footing as *vingt*, but *dix-neuf* is an example of relative motivation. The same is true of *poirier* ('pear-tree'), which evokes the simple form *poire* ('pear'), and has a suffix *-ier* which recalls that of *cerisier* ('cherry-tree'), *pommier* ('apple-tree'), etc. (But words like *frêne* ('ash-tree') and *chêne* ('oak') offer no parallel.) Again, a word like *berger* ('shepherd') is completely unmotivated, whereas *vacher* ('cowman') is relatively motivated.[1] Similar pairs are: *geôle* ('jail') and *cachot* ('lock-up'), *hache* ('axe') and *couperet* ('chopper'), *concierge* ('porter') and *portier* ('doorman'), *jadis* ('of yore'), and *autrefois* ('formerly'), *souvent* ('often') and *fréquemment* ('frequently'), *aveugle* ('blind') and *boiteux* ('limping'), *sourd* ('deaf') and *bossu* ('hunch-backed'), *second* ('second') and *deuxième* ('2nd'), German *Laub* ('foliage') and French *feuillage* ('leafage'), French *métier* ('trade') and German *Handwerk* ('handicraft'). The English plural *ships* adds an *-s*, recalling a whole series like *flags*, *birds*, *books*, etc.; whereas the plurals *men* and *sheep* recall no parallel cases. In Greek *dósō* ('I will give') expresses the idea of futurity by a sign which links it associatively with other future tense forms like *lúsō*, *stésō*, *túpsō*, etc.; whereas the future form *eîmi* ('I will go') is completely isolated.

The factors involved in the motivation of these various cases cannot be examined here. But motivation is always more marked if the syntagmatic analysis is more straightforward and the meaning of the constituent units more obvious. Although some formative elements are transparent enough – e.g. the suffix *-ier* in *poirier* ('pear-tree'), *cerisier* ('cherry-tree'), *pommier* ('apple-tree'), etc. – others are of uncertain meaning, or altogether obscure. What, for instance, is the

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[1] Because of *vache* ('cow'). In English, however, the connexions between the forms *shepherd – sheep* and *cowman – cow* make both *shepherd* and *cowman* motivated words. (Translator's note)

meaning, if any, of the suffix *-ot* in *cachot* ('lock-up, nick')? Is there in a series of words like *coutelas* ('cutlas'), *fatras* ('jumble'), *plâtras* ('debris'), *canevas* ('canvas'), an ending *-as* that one can vaguely discern, but without being able to say what it means? Not only are the elements of a motivated sign themselves arbitrary (as are *dix* 'ten', and *neuf* 'nine', in *dix-neuf* 'nineteen'), but the value of the term as a whole is never equal to the sum of the values of its parts. *Poir* × *ier* is not just *poir* + *ier* (cf. p. [176]). [182]

The phenomenon we are considering here finds its explanation in the principles mentioned in the previous section (§2). Relative motivation implies (i) the analysis of the term in question, and hence a syntagmatic relation, and (ii) appeal to one or more other terms, and hence an associative relation. The mechanism is none other than that by which any term whatsoever lends itself to the expression of an idea. So far we have looked upon units as values, as elements of a system, and considered principally the oppositions between them. But now we are taking stock of their interdependences, both associative and syntagmatic, which combine to set a limit to arbitrariness. *Dix-neuf* ('nineteen') is interdependent associatively with *dix-huit* ('eighteen'), *soixante-dix* ('seventy'), etc., and syntagmatically with its constituent elements *dix* ('ten') and *neuf* ('nine') (cf. p. [177]). This dual relationship accounts for part of the value of the sign *dix-neuf*.

Everything having to do with languages as systems needs to be approached, we are convinced, with a view to examining the limitations of arbitrariness. It is an approach which linguists have neglected. But it offers the best possible basis for linguistic studies. For the entire linguistic system is founded upon the irrational principle that the sign is arbitrary. Applied without restriction, this principle would lead to utter chaos. But the mind succeeds in introducing a principle of order and regularity into certain areas of the mass of signs. That is the role of relative motivation. If languages had a mechanism which were entirely rational, that mechanism could be studied in its own right. But it provides only a partial correction to a [183] system which is chaotic by nature. Hence we must adopt the point of view demanded by the nature of linguistic structure itself, and study this mechanism as a way of imposing a limitation upon what is arbitrary.

There exists no language in which nothing at all is motivated. Even to conceive of such a language is an impossibility by definition. Between the two extremes – minimum of organisation and minimum of arbitrariness – all possible varieties are found. Languages always exhibit features of both kinds – intrinsically arbitrary and relatively motivated – but in very varying proportions. This is an important characteristic, which may have to be taken into account in classifying languages.

In one sense – this must not be pressed too far, but it brings out one aspect of the contrast – a distinction could be drawn between *lexico-logical* languages, in which absence of motivation reaches a maximum, and *grammatical* languages, in which it falls to a minimum. This is not to imply that 'lexical' and 'arbitary' are always synonymous, or 'grammar' and 'relative motivation' either. But they go together in principle. There are, one might say, two opposite poles towards which the whole system is drawn, or two contrary currents sweeping through it. On the one hand there is a tendency to use lexicological means, which favours the unmotivated sign. On the other hand there is a tendency to use grammatical means, which favours regular construction.

English, for example, can be seen to favour lack of motivation more markedly than German. The ultra-lexicological extreme is represented by Chinese, whereas Proto-Indo-European and Sanskrit are examples of the ultra-grammatical. Within the same language, a whole evolu-tionary trend may be marked by constant movement from motivation to arbitrariness, and vice versa. The result of this to-and-fro is often [184] a noticeable shift in the proportions of the two categories of sign. French, as compared with Latin, is marked among other things by a huge increase in arbitrariness. Whereas Latin *inimicus* ('enemy') is motivated by its relations with *in-* ('un-') and *amīcus* ('friend'), the French word *ennemi* ('enemy') lacks motivation entirely. *Ennemi* has relapsed into absolute arbitrariness, and this is the basic condition of the linguistic sign. This shift can be seen in hundreds of French examples: Latin *constāre* 'to cost' (*stāre* 'to stand') vs. French *coûter* ('to cost'), Latin *fabrica* 'workshop' (*faber* 'workman') vs. French *forge* ('forge'), Latin *magister* 'master' (*magis* 'more') vs. French *maître* ('master'), Latin *berbīcārius* 'shepherd' (*berbīx* 'sheep') vs. French *berger* ('shepherd'), etc. These changes have given French a very dis-tinctive character.