

## ***Saussure's Course in General Linguistics (CGL):***

### **Liebman's Guide to the Terminology**

Note: My reading of Saussure departs at points from the that of Dr. Cohen. The Linguistics faculty members have developed a specific consensus about how to reconcile their understanding of the levels of linguistic analysis (phonology, morphology, and syntax) with Saussure's basic categories and distinctions. In class, Dr. Cohen seemed to claim both that this structuralist approach is indebted to and (depending on how we understand Saussure) might differ critically from Saussure (whose emphasis on semantics and neglect of syntax and parts of speech we ought to reject). Since my sympathies and opinions fall outside the local consensus be careful about how you make use of *my* definitions of Saussure's terms.

## **I. Langue and Parole**

Simply translated, "**langue**" and "**parole**" are "**language**" and "**speech**". However, such a translation is misleading because those terms are almost synonyms. Jonathon Culler, an American Deconstructionist who has written extensively on Saussure, defined *langue* and *parole* in the introduction to Wade Baskin's translation of the *Course* as follows:

"...Saussure's most fundamental contribution, on which all of modern linguistics rests, was the step by which he postulated a suitable object for linguistic study. If linguistics tries to concern itself with every fact relating to language, it will become a confused morass. The only way to avoid this is to isolate a coherent object which will provide both a goal for analysis and a principle of relevance. And that is precisely what he did, distinguishing with a bold stroke between language as a system (*la langue*) and the actual manifestations of language in speech or writing (*la parole*)..."

"...This distinction between langue and parole has been important not only for linguistics but for other disciplines as well, where it can be rendered as a distinction between institution and event, or between the underlying system which makes possible various types of behavior and actual instances of such behavior. Study of the system leads to the construction of a model which represents the various possibilities and their derivation within the system, whereas study of actual behavior leads to the construction of statistical models which represent the probabilities of particular actions under specified conditions."

Roy Harris in his version of the CGL translates *la langue* using the terms *linguistic structure* (a bold and excellent translation). Three points are crucial to *la langue*: 1) its theoretical character (it is invented to explain the occurrence and distribution of forms in *parole*), 2) its systematic or relational character (its terms mutually define and compete with each other), and 3) it is an "institution" or social construct and by definition the inheritance of the many.

***La langue then is shared linguistic structure.*** In the third chapter of the *Course*, Saussure explained *la langue* as follows:

"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..." (CGL, Harris translation, pg. 13).

Note that this definition avoids aligning *la langue* with any particular definition of a language or a dialect: the "collectivity" remains undefined.

## II. Sign, Signifier and Signified:

Jonathon Culler again provides a good definition and starting point:

"...The Linguistic Sign. If speakers of different ages, sexes, and regions utter the sentence The cat is on the mat, the actual physical sounds produced will vary considerably, and insofar as they are referring to different cats and different mats, their intended meanings will not be identical, yet from the point of view of the English Language, they are all uttering the same sequence of signs. The sign, therefore, is an abstract unit, not to be confused with an actual sequence of physical sounds nor with a referent. It is the combination of a signifier, which is a phonological sequence or "sound image", and a signified or concept, which in parole are manifested as sounds and as meanings and references..."

I disagree with **Dr. Cohen**, and to an extent with Culler, about the definitions of the *signifier* and the *signified*. Culler's description of the signified as a *concept* is fine. However, on my view, any of the terms "*meaning*," "*function*," "*content or substance*" and "*value*" would be more or less acceptable ways to describe Saussure's *signified*. Culler claims here that meaning is part of *parole* and does not distinguish it from reference (implications of the communication in the "real world"). I think *meaning* is the *signified*. (Reference is irrelevant to the discussion except in so far as some people think, as Culler might, that it is impossible to separate meaning from reference.) The *sign* itself is part of *langue* and both the *signifier* and the *signified* (no matter how intuitively satisfying) are theoretical units, unknown in advance of empirical study—from my point of view, meaning must be discovered through extensive and rigorous analysis.

**Dr. Cohen** wants the signified to equal the grammatical function of the signifier as that changes in its various syntactic contexts (contexts defined not by *the sentence*, which is usually taken as the largest unit of syntax, but by the genre of some larger environment, a *texteme*). This Saussure was certainly not saying. **Dr. Cohen** and other members of the faculty are, of course, free to develop their own understandings of the Saussurian sign.

The *sign* is Saussure's fundamental unit of *langue* and of *language inheritance*. There is one more important point to remember about the sign: it is doubly arbitrary. Here is Culler on that topic:

"...Moreover, the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary. That is to say there is no intrinsic and "natural" reason why a particular concept should be linked with one "sound image" rather than another, and therefore the linguist cannot attempt to explain individual signs in piecemeal fashion. He must, rather, show how arbitrary signs fit together in an internally coherent system. There is not intrinsic and inevitable connection between the phonological sequence *relate* and the concept associated with it, but within the morphological system of English—the rules governing the internal structure of words—*relate* is to relation as dictate to dictation, narrate to narration, etc... Precisely because the individual signs are arbitrary, the linguist must, by way of explanation, attempt to reconstruct the total system."

**Dr. Cohen** sees in this fact about the sign, its arbitrary character, a support for regarding the relations among signifiers and signifieds as subject to a kind of radical instability. He sees in it a support for the notion that the same signifier will appear with different (and many, many) functions as its communicative environment changes. (I think an opposite tendency, one that leads to the conservation and limitation of forms and functions, is at work in languages through a process roughly parallel to genetic inheritance and natural selection.)

Left unstated in the previous quote from Culler (though understood by him) is that the concepts, the signifieds, themselves are arbitrary: language is not a nomenclature that assigns labels to concepts given somehow in advance or necessitated in an irresistible way by the nature of

human beings or reality. Every language is in Saussure's terminology, "its own principle of classification." It categorizes according to the interests, needs, and peculiarities of the population in and for which it develops. The identification of cross-linguistic grammatical categories or functions, categories that do not seem to result from inheritance (i.e. for which we can trace no history), such as "predication," "subordination," "attribution," "modality," or "tense/aspect" does not fit with the assumption that every language is categorizing reality on and in its own terms. (That these categories do not reflect a single or simple "grammatical nature" but instead seem to derive variously from "logical", "philosophical", or "semantic" domains is itself deeply problematic.) In the *Course*, Saussure never mentions or attempts to identify such cross-linguistic (or worse, universal) functions. Saussure is right and contemporary linguistics, to the extent that it insists on chasing such phantoms, is wrong.

### III. Synchrony and Diachrony:

A **synchronic** perspective studies the functioning of a designed system (in whole or part) at a given point of time. A **diachronic** perspective describes how elements of a system are constituted at successive points in time and may allow us to recognize instances of either inheritance (sameness) or change within the system.

Saussure tries to illustrate the interactions of accident, time, and language change in his brief discussion of the Latin word, "crispus" and the French term *décrapir*. In this example, a change in pronunciation from "crisp-" to "crép-" and the "forgetting" that occurred as new generations of speakers learned the word but not its etymology resulted in a kind of merger between the meaning of *décrapir* and that of another Latin term that by coincidence resembled its sound pattern (*dēcrepitus*).

Saussure's examples are meant to highlight the partial evolutionary independence of the two parts of the sign: the signal and the signified. Sometimes, as with *décrapir*, the meaning changes while the signal remains the same. Other times, (as in *fōt/fēt*) the sound patterns change without altering the meanings of the terms.

For linguistic science, Saussure insists that separating between the static and evolutionary points of view of critical importance. He illustrates this claim with a consideration of Chess (compared at several points in the *Course* to language).

Chess (not a system for communication) has elements that vary, as one might put it, in terms of their "relative power of movement" on the chess board. Chess shares with language an arbitrary or conventional definition of elements (pieces of whatever substance can be assigned "movement power") and an interesting temporal aspect (each turn in the chess game is a synchronic state and the relative values of the pieces needs to be reassessed after every move). Whatever definitions of movement power are assigned to chess pieces *ab initio*, their strengths (or values) will vary throughout the course of the game as a function of their position on the field and the positions of other pieces. In a brilliant formulation Saussure writes, "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".

### I will digress and speculate now:

The *sign* is Saussure's fundamental unit of *langue* and of *language inheritance*. It is worth noting that *the kind of natural selection* constantly at work on the forms of language tends to preserve a one to one correspondence between form and function, typically between a sound sequence, "sound image" and a meaning within a specific semantic domain (i.e. a single morpheme never indicates two meanings within the semantic domains PERSON or NUMBER). Where few differences in sound pattern and meaning distinguish forms intense competition results (consider English, *lay* and *lay*).

In language, it is the shuffling and combination of the articulated sound patterns in ordinary usage that is roughly analogous to "sex" in biological evolution: both kinds of production establish material for subsequent inheritance and might introduce mutations. Of course, in neither case is it assured that the forms produced will ever be inherited. This constant shuffling and recombination of the forms in ordinary language use is, from the perspective of the sound sequencing (though not from the perspective of the intentionally selected meanings), random and gives rise to multitudinous and sometimes destructive accidents. In such a competitive ecology, fine distinctions among a half-dozen or more variant senses for a sign are unlikely to flourish.

#### IV. Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Relations:

Although Saussure does not mention syntax he does offer two descriptive terms for relations among signs in combination as specified in a given communication: 1) **syntagmatic**, or relations of **co-occurrence** and 2) **paradigmatic** or relations of **alternation**. These terms are neutral (and meant to be so) to the question of whether we need to postulate some kind of separate level of language reality called **syntax**.

#### Personal comments:

For **Dr. Cohen**, these relations of co-occurrence and alternation are often built into the identity of the **signifier** itself and result in its being related to different **signifieds**. This results in divorcing the **morpheme** from the **sign** in a radical fashion and accepting as natural the occurrence of the same **morpheme** in many different **signs**: in each case, the morpheme will be only part of the **signifier** and its **signified** function will have changed. If true, this kind of syntax would indeed be an essential part of the reality of language and constitute observations in need of explanation by linguists: in other words, this claim is crucial to how one defines the problem of language.

The linguistics faculty at Hebrew University often seem to be saying both that such grammatical paradigms can and should be identified by morphological-relational criteria alone (discovering the fixed co-occurrence or alternation of forms being the approved method of identifying members in a grammatical paradigm) and that a functional component to the identification is sometimes (often?) necessary. This for one of at least two reasons. First, the morphology of a language may not unambiguously express the grammatical category (e.g. English with regard to almost any of the standard parts of speech classifications; or, a neuter noun in Latin whose identity as an *accusative* or *nominative* form does not alter its morphology). Secondly, the set of forms with which that member alternates may depend on keeping a particular function (indeed a certain definition of a particular function) in mind while ruling some forms into or out of the paradigm. This later requirement made following **Dr. Cohen's** lectures about identifying paradigms so difficult. Only looking for *modality* in advance can we find it in the functions of both *intonation* and in *mood* morphology. Only if we recognize a particular *a priori* definition of what an *indirect object* is can we exclude Modern English *for* from a *dative* paradigm involving *to*.

V. **Substance and Value:** (This section represents me at my most speculative—be careful.)

In a famous example, Saussure noted:

"...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."

For Saussure, "**value**" is a category of synchronic—a single slice of time— identity. **Value** is defined relationally in opposition to other units within a system (an ecology or an economy). In the case of a **communication system** such as language the **value** of a **sign** is determined in opposition to other **signs** available to the language user at a particular moment in time. (In theory, all the signs simultaneously available in the vocabulary of a particular language user exist in relation and opposition to one another: all want to be used, so to speak, and the use of any one represents declining the option of using any of the others.)

Saussure sometimes described the relationship between substance and value in a way that seems to give all the importance to value: "*language is a form not a substance*" or "*the mechanism of language turns entirely on identities and differences*". Martinet and others have thought that this emphasis was misplaced or received in an exaggerated way by Saussure's students and others. Viewing a system only in terms of value results in errors in two related dimensions: 1) functionally similar but non-identical elements are identified and conflated under unstable and shiftily "value" rubrics, 2) the arbitrary nature of the system as a whole is exaggerated because the mechanisms, appear under so many different "value" headings that they come to be seen as having no consistent and reliably identifiable functions.

It is this later confused understanding of **value**, a value alienated from **substance**, that **Dr. Cohen** (and he is not alone) operates with. **Dr. Cohen** maintains that **value** is the grammatical function of a paradigm. In other words, whenever a communicative environment changes to the point that a slightly different set of forms competes to satisfy the then local communicative need a distinct function must be identified and a new category of grammar created. In practice, Dr. Cohen and others like him tend to favor "discovering" functions already approved of in the grammatical tradition—they express their modernity mainly in adding new forms to the list of ways of accomplishing one of the standard, canonical functions.

Re-visiting Saussure's chess analogy, we might say the following: the potential **movement capacity** associated with a **queen** in the abstract and out of play is its function. The substance of that function is MOVEMENT of which the queen may travel in a line for an infinite number of "paces" and in any direction. Other chess pieces are also defined in terms of the substance MOVEMENT but they have less innate capacity than the queen does. Nonetheless when they compete with the queen for positions on the board their capacities relative to hers may change dramatically: a pawn might trap her. While the substance MOVEMENT will remain common to all the pieces throughout the course of the chess game, the different values of the pieces will change each turn. Each new position in the game, will redefine the then current **value** of the queen.

If the function of the queen is analyzed only in terms of those temporary **values**, we should define it with categories such as forwards, backwards, straight, diagonal (no differently than we define the activities of pawns, bishops, and rooks) without ever understanding that some theory of the queen's movements distinguishes her movement capacity from the other pieces clearly and absolutely—wouldn't that be a disaster?