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Saussure, Ferdinand de

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SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Ferdinand Mongin de Saussure (1857–1913) was a Swiss linguist and semiotician, a specialist in the study of Indo-European languages, and the author of the prominent book *Cours de linguistique générale* (1995/1916; see also 1996/1907, 1997/1908–1909, 1993/1910–1911), published in English under the title *Course in General Linguistics* (1978/1916). He is widely regarded as one of the founding figures of modern linguistics, notably of structural linguistics, which became increasingly influential in the second part of the twentieth century in various other academic disciplines – above all, in anthropology, sociology, and psychology. In addition, his work had a major impact upon the field of study known as semiology or semiotics, which he – along with Charles Sanders Peirce – shaped in a groundbreaking fashion.

Saussure was born in Geneva in 1857; he died in the same city in 1913. The Saussure family had French origins; in order to escape the persecution of Protestants in France, they moved to Geneva in the seventeenth century. After spending a year studying Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit, as well as taking several courses – in Latin, Greek, chemistry, theology, and law – at the University of Geneva, in 1876 he embarked upon postgraduate work at the University of Leipzig, where he was awarded a doctorate in 1880 (see Saussure 1881). Focusing on the research field commonly referred to as “historical linguistics,” he also studied in Berlin and Paris. In 1879, he published the

monograph *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* [Dissertation on the Primitive Vowel System in Indo-European Languages].

He began his teaching career at the University of Paris in 1880, before taking up a professorship at the University of Geneva in 1891. There, he taught a course on the ancient Sanskrit language for 21 years. Toward the end of his career, he was invited to give a course on general linguistics; he taught this course three times between 1907 and 1911.

Saussure published several monographs and articles on Indo-European linguistics. His *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), arguably his most influential book, is based on notes taken by students who attended his Geneva lectures between 1907 and 1911. It was not until after his death, however, that these notes were collected, compiled, and edited by two of his colleagues, which is why the book was published posthumously.

KEY CONCEPTS

General Linguistics

Saussure’s general linguistics can be described as a *structuralist approach* concerned with the nature, functioning, and development of language. Unlike historical linguistics, which aims to shed light on the genealogy of language and symbolic forms, general linguistics is interested – first and foremost – in the study of living languages, that is, in the inquiry into languages that are used in the present.

Language System

According to Saussure, language can be understood as a system. To be precise, every language system constitutes a *system of signs*.

Language derives its systematic constitution from the structural nature of objectivity, normativity, and subjectivity: “the” objective world is composed of physical structures, “our” normative world is built upon social structures, and “my” subjective world is embedded in psychological structures. The systematic nature of language reflects the structural composition of the human universe, because the latter is the primary reference point of the former. The principal purpose of semiology is the scientific study of linguistic signs. Within language systems, the conjunction between sounds (or acoustic images) and concepts (or abstract representations) is relatively arbitrary.

Semiology/Semiotics

To conceive of language in terms of a system of signs is to place the emphasis on the interpretive functions of linguistic forms. One may draw an analogy between linguistic and nonlinguistic types of signs, in the sense that all of them serve the communicative purpose of conveying information about something or somebody. Saussure sought to overcome the pitfalls of what he labeled *nomenclaturism*, which – in his view – was the common reduction of language to “a collection of words” or to “an inventory of names for things.” For Saussure, languages are, above all, constellations of *sounds*, rather than of written *letters*; the latter are mere manifestations – that is, sign-based epiphenomena – of the former. The socio-ontological centrality of sounds is illustrated in the fact that healthy humans have an innate capacity to learn to “speak” a language, whereas mastery of its typographical and orthographic dimensions is a competence they acquire through educational training, usually at school.

“The Sign”: “Signifier” and “Signified”

In principle, anything that conveys information about something other than itself is a sign. Implicitly or explicitly, every sign transmits something about itself (for example, about its linguistic identity, its origin, and its history). The main function of a sign, however, is to carry and to communicate meaning about a reality outside itself (for instance, about a thing, a person, or a state of affairs). A distinctive characteristic of the linguistic sign is that it serves to link not simply a name and a particular aspect of reality (something or someone) but, rather, a concept and an acoustic image. Put differently, the sign is a link between “a form that signifies” (*signifiant*) and “a concept that is signified” (*signifié*). From a Saussurean perspective, both “the signifier” and “the signified” are mental constructs.

Arbitrariness

According to Saussure, the linguistic sign is arbitrary, that is, it is randomly allocated, rather than defined by a fixed underlying logic determining the nexus between “the signifier” and “the signified.” The proof of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign is relatively straightforward: as different languages emerge and evolve, they develop and transmit different signs, that is, different links between “signifiers” and “signifieds.” When grappling with the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, however, we are confronted with a paradox:

- On the one hand, the linguistic sign *is* arbitrary from an *outsider’s* point of view: as linguists explain, different languages provide, define, and assign different signs.
- On the other hand, the linguistic sign is *not* arbitrary from an *insider’s* point of view: as users of a particular language know (reflexively or intuitively), within

their own linguistic universe, signs have a denotatively ascribed meaning.

As an *externalist* analysis demonstrates, there would be just one language in the world if the linguistic sign were not arbitrary. As an *internalist* perspective makes clear, by contrast, communication between actors would break down if every member of a speech community could choose to use whatever signs he or she wanted. In principle, any language is permitted to establish a nexus between any sound (or sound sequences) and any idea; once this nexus is ascertained, however, *neither* an individual subject capable of engaging in symbolically mediated interaction *nor* the whole speech community can simply ignore, undo, or redefine it, since communication within the semiotic parameters of their language would fail to be successful. The arbitrariness of the linguistic sign proves another, more fundamental, point: linguistic elements are defined not in terms of their seemingly inherent qualities, but, rather, in terms of their functions – that is, in terms of their capacity to enable human subjects to engage in constative, normative, expressive, and communicative forms of action.

Relationality

In Saussure's view, all languages are relationally constituted. Languages generate not only their own concepts and sound images, but also their own words with corresponding meanings. Yet, meaning is not an intrinsic property of a word; rather, the meaning of every word is established in relation to the meanings of other words. The meaning of every word can be compared and contrasted to the meanings of other words. In short, meaning is relationally constructed. The relational constitution of linguistically generated meaning is particularly obvious in the creation of oppositions, which may

be regarded as *binary conceptual units*. Each component of a binary makes sense only in relation to its opposite. Every language system is brought into existence through the construction of differences between signs; in fact, given its relational constitution, meaning is carried by differences alone. Language can be described as a system of interconnected components whose value is contingent upon the concurrent presence of multiple signs, which acquire meaning in relation to – rather than in isolation from – one another.

Changeability

Saussure is eager to point out that, inevitably, languages change over time and space. Situated in spatiotemporally contingent horizons, languages adapt to constantly altering circumstances, and so do the actors who use them. The mutability of language is symptomatic of the arbitrariness of the sign: the meaning of a linguistic sign is at no point ultimately or eternally fixed; rather, it is always open to revision and transformation. A meaning that can be constructed can be deconstructed and reconstructed. The meaning of a linguistic sign is never forever; if anything, it is forever changeable. In fact, all constitutive ingredients of a living language change throughout time and in different settings, precisely because, by definition, a living language is alive.

KEY DUALITIES

Structural/Processual

For Saussure, one of the most problematic aspects of traditional linguistics is that it has a tendency to focus on the historical study of language – notably, in terms of its origins, development, and changes. In so doing, it gives priority to written texts, rather than to the spoken word, which – in his eyes – forms the starting point for grasping the uniqueness

of every linguistically mediated expressive act. In this respect, his distinction between *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech) is crucial: the former – at the level of legislative and compositional potentiality – refers to what we *can* do with language (language as a *structure*); the latter – at the level of executive and performative actuality – designates what we *do* with language (language as a *process*). Every language is possible only in terms of the combination of the structural constitution of *langue* and the processual constitution of *parole*.

Synchronic/Diachronic

According to Saussure, there are two fundamental ways of analyzing language. Synchronic (or “same-time”) analysis examines language as a *system*, that is, as a *whole* of interacting constituents. Diachronic (or “through-time”) analysis scrutinizes language in terms of its *evolution*, that is, by considering only *fragments* of states that make up its – constantly shifting – entirety and, hence, its history. The comprehensive study of language requires considering both the way its key components *are* organized and the way they have *become* to be organized.

Relational/Substantial

In Saussure’s view, language constitutes a combination of relationally, rather than substantially, determined elements. The intimate nexus between sound and concept, which lies at the heart of every linguistic sign, produces symbolic forms, in the sense that they are mental constructs, which, by definition, lack any essence or inherent properties. Given that their value is relationally determined, the meanings of linguistic signs – far from being quasi-naturally built into particular codes or symbols – are established in comparison and contrast to each other.

Auditory/Conceptual

According to Saussure, the auditory nature of “the signifier,” as opposed to the conceptual nature of “the signified,” is the source of the linguistic sign’s temporally constituted linearity. On this account, it is the auditory richness of language, rather than its conceptual complexity, which drives the development of human thought. It is not the consciousness of human beings that determines their speaking, but, on the contrary, their speaking that determines their consciousness. Owing to the preponderance of “the auditory” over “the conceptual” in the evolution of human cognition, it is – from a Saussurean point of view – imperative to accord paradigmatic priority to linguistics, rather than to psychology.

Abstract/Concrete

Another cardinal opposition in Saussurean thought can be found in the distinction between “the abstract” and “the concrete” – that is, between *the abstractness of signifier and signified*, on the one hand, and *the concreteness of the sign*, on the other. In Saussure’s eyes, “the signifier” and “the signified,” if considered in isolation from each other, stand for mere abstractions. By contrast, “the sign” constitutes a real and concrete object, rather than a mental projection. It is only through the intimate association of “the signifier” and “the signified,” however, that the linguistic entity comes into existence. If these two essential linguistic components are artificially separated from one another, then the linguistic sign that they bring about as an ensemble disappears as if it were a pure abstraction.

Arbitrary/Motivated

The notion that the connection between “words” and “meanings” is utterly arbitrary – since, as a codified nexus, it is determined

by social conventions – can be traced back to the pre-Socratics and the Sophists, thus predating Saussure’s sign theory. Yet, for Saussure, despite the ineluctable arbitrariness permeating the semantic tools of human language, the sign can be “relatively motivated,” implying that it is permeated by a degree of determinacy that is contingent upon its user’s intentionality. According to Saussure, languages that are highly *grammatical* lean toward the side of *motivation* (for example, Sanskrit), whereas languages that are highly *lexicological* lean toward the side of *arbitrariness* (for instance, Chinese). Paradoxically, arbitrariness and motivation represent two integral and irreducible components of human language. While the arbitrariness of the sign lies at the core of every linguistic system, relative motivation is projected upon reality by the mind creating a sense of order and, hence, permitting humans to structure the ways in which they interpret, engage with, and act upon the multiple aspects of their existence.

Natural/Formal

From a Saussurean perspective, we can distinguish between two fundamental forms of language: *natural or first-order language*, on the one hand, and *formal or second-order language*, on the other. An academic discipline that seeks to obtain scientific status needs to establish a formal distance between its object of study (the *researched* side) and itself (the *researching* side). In this sense, the whole point of rigorous scientific activity is to carry out an epistemological rupture between *the ways in which objects are constructed and scrutinized in “formal” and theoretical terms* and *the ways in which objects are constructed and experienced in “natural” and practical terms*. Language, then, can be employed methodically and technically as a “*formal*” and *theoretical tool* for studying reality, including itself

as a symbolically constituted part of human existence; at the same time, language can be used spontaneously and intuitively as a “*natural*” and *practical tool* for coping with, and attaching meaning to, the quotidian dimensions of reality, of which, in the human universe, it constitutes a core component.

LEGACY

It is difficult to overstate the far-reaching impact of Saussure’s work on the development of modern social science, particularly with regard to linguistics and semiology/semiotics. The numerous analogies he drew between language and other aspects of human civilization (such as chess, music, chemistry, physics, and algebra) are indicative not only of the imaginative spirit permeating his thinking, but also of the far-reaching scope of applicability of his structuralist theory in relation to multiple facets of social reality. His ideas were adapted and further elaborated by several influential (notably French) intellectuals, such as the following: Gustave Guillaume (European linguistics and philology; 1883–1960); Roman O. Jakobson (European linguistics and literary theory; 1896–1982); Jacques Lacan (psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and literary criticism; 1901–1981); Claude Lévi-Strauss (anthropology; 1908–2009); Roland Barthes (linguistics, semiotics, philosophy, and literary theory; 1915–1980); and Jacques Derrida (philosophy; 1930–2004). Undoubtedly, Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* will continue to serve as one of the most insightful sources of inspiration for those who aim to shed light on the structural forces shaping both the constitution and the development of human existence.

SEE ALSO: Barthes, Roland; Communication Theory; Critical Theory; Cultural

Industries; Culture; Derrida, Jacques; Discourse Analysis; Lacan, Jacques; Language; Lévi-Strauss, Claude; Popular Culture; Rationality; Realism; Semiology; Structuralism; Wittgenstein, Ludwig

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