

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE COURSE IN GENERAL LINGUISTICS (1916)

This seminal work, reconstructed posthumously from his lecture notes by Saussure's students, represented nothing less than a revolution in the philosophy of language, undermining many of the most cherished assumptions concerning the nature of signification dominant to that point in philology (from Greek roots meaning love [philos] of words [logos]). Indeed, in keeping with the rise to dominance of positivism in the second half of the nineteenth century, Saussure would become one of the founders of linguistics, the attempt in the twentieth century to place the study of language on a scientific basis. Though largely ignored in the Anglo-American Analytic philosophical tradition which has held on to many of these assumptions, Saussure's model of signification has had an enormous impact on several contemporary schools of Continental European philosophy, linguistics, social sciences such as anthropology in particular, and literary criticism, among others, giving rise to the movement which would come to be called Structuralism. Although Saussure termed his philosophy of language 'semiology,' the name which has come to stick is 'semiotics,' a term coined by Charles Sanders Peirce, the American Pragmatist, to characterise his own similar views on signification.

Saussure rejected the main tenets of nineteenth century philology, epitomised by the pioneering work of Germans like Johann Gottfried von Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt. Saussure criticised, firstly, its historical (what he termed *diachronic*) and social focus, the view that the functioning of language was best explained with reference to its development over time and in distinct cultural contexts. It is a commonplace, R. H. Robbins reminds us in *A Short History of Linguistics*, that the "nineteenth century was the era of the comparative and historical study of languages" (189). From this point of view, for example, the meaning of a word in the present was thought to be derived from its etymology, that is, the history of the uses to which it was put in various contexts. Secondly, Saussure criticised the related *expressivist* view of language with which Humboldt in particular and the Romantics in general were synonymous, to be precise, the view that the meaning of a word is that which is imparted to it by an individual user whose idea about something it expresses. From this point of view, a word means what an idiosyncratic speaker / writer wants it to mean. This is sometimes called the *ideational* theory of meaning. This view of language had replaced, at least on the European Continent, earlier *referential* or *correspondence* or *mimetic* theories of signification, the view that a word means what it does by virtue of what it stands for, reflects, names, corresponds to or re-presents. From this point of view, a word means what it stands for.

In response to the first emphasis, Saussure stressed the importance of understanding how any language works at all given moments of its historical development and in any specific location, that is, regardless of historical provenance or cultural context (he terms this emphasis the *synchronic*). Striving to address the issue of how language functions in general, Saussure sought to answer the question: how is meaning produced *irrespective of the culturally- and historically-specific circumstance of language-use?* (Many critics of Saussure have argued that this focus has led to what they describe as an *ahistorical* tendency in Saussurean and post-Saussurean thought.) In response to the second emphasis, Saussure sought to debunk both the *expressivist* and *referential* theories of meaning, arguing that both views are predicated on a false understanding of the nature of the sign.

Saussure rejects the view that "ready-made ideas exist before words" (646) and for which words are merely a vehicle or instrument of expression. The reason for this, he argues, is that "our thought -- apart from its expression in words -- is only a shapeless and indistinct mass" (649). Language is the necessary matrix without which meaningful

thought cannot occur. Thought is not possible without the words by which it is rendered. Moreover, if language is indispensable for thinking to occur, sound when not allied to thought is in and of itself merely meaningless noise. Thus, meaningful thought occurs only through the cooperation of pre-given systems of language with the physiological capacity of the brain to allow thought to occur. Meaningful thought is, in his celebrated though slightly confusing mathematical formula, a "series of contiguous subdivisions marked off on both the indefinite plane of jumbled ideas . . . and the equally vague plane of sounds" (649).

Mimeticism: Saussure also argues that language does not consist in a "list of words each corresponding to the thing that it names" (646). Firstly, linguists argue that it is better not to speak of words when one is discussing the nature of the production of meaning. The correct technical term for the basic element involved in the production of meaning is *sign*. That is, words are verbal signs but signs also take other forms--anything can function as a sign once humans are involved in trying to interpret it: for example, clothes (hence, the phrase, 'fashion statement'). For Saussure, signs (e.g. c-a-t) do not simply label or refer to a prior reality or *referent* (that furry little animal out there that most of us have seen).

If signs do not mean by referring to real objects, how, then, do they mean? According to Saussure, the nature of the sign is more complex than the traditional formula
Sign ----> Referent

would seem to suggest. Each sign consists of a *signifier* (Sr), which he defines as the 'sound-image,' that is, the phonic component of the sign (i.e. the sound made by c-a-t), which is attached in an *arbitrary* way to a *signified* (Sd) which is itself, importantly, a concept of or idea about reality rather than reality itself. He compares signifier and signified to two sides of the same coin, pointing out that it is impossible to say or even write a signifier such as c-a-t without also simultaneously considering what it signifies (cat). By arbitrary, Saussure means that particular signifiers are attached to specific signifieds by convention, rather than necessity. The proof of this is the existence of different languages which attach different signifiers to the same objects. If there were some natural, immutable bond linking a particular signifier to a particular signified, then there would not be different languages. Hence, Saussure's new formula for the sign:

Sr
--- ----> Referent
Sd

The important point that Saussure is trying to make is that language does not provide us with unmediated access to or a transparent window upon 'reality.' Rather, language shapes how we apprehend reality. We can never 'know' the 'real' as it really is--which is not to say that reality does not exist. In a linguistic variant of the social constructionist argument, Saussure's point is that different language systems proffer different conceptualisations of reality (to put this another way, different languages *signify* the Real differently). A good example of this is the fact that Eskimos, surprisingly, do not understand what we mean when we speak of snow. For them, there is no one 'thing' called snow. What we call snow they differentiate into several different 'objects.' For us, it is all snow.

The crucial question that arises from the foregoing is the following: if signs do not simply refer to reality and if there is no necessary or immutable bond between a particular signifier and a specific signified, then how do particular signifiers come to be attached to particular signifieds? Why does c-a-t designate our conception of that furry little animal out there who undoubtedly exists apart from our apprehension of it? For Saussure, the answer is quite simple. Each sign (i.e the attachment of a particular signifier to a particular

signified) is part of a *sign-system* which in the course of its historical development has dictated which signifiers be attached to which signifieds. To put it simply, c-a-t came to be attached to cat because other combinations of sound (e.g. d-o-g or b-o-o-k) came to be attached to our conceptualisations of other furry animals or reading objects, etc. In other words, a particular sign means what it does because it is part of a sign-system based on *differences* (or, to be accurate, distinctions). The signifier c-a-t means cat because d-o-g means dog and so on. A given sign means what it does only because it is differentiated from all other signs within the same sign-system. (If it were otherwise, clarity of thought would be impossible, we would be unable to differentiate the concept 'cat' from 'dog' and so on.) Difference is, therefore, the cornerstone of the functioning of any sign-system. In other words, *both phonically and conceptually*, 'cat' is 'cat' because it is not 'cap' nor 'bat.' Of course, it is precisely because the language system operates differentially that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary rather than necessary. What one understands by the signifier 'cat' could have been denoted by any combination of letters. This particular combination came into existence precisely because other combinations were utilised to other ends.

Thus, consideration of the individual sign is inseparable from that of the sign system as a whole of which it is a part. (This contrasts, of course, with the traditional scheme of things in which an individual sign labels a particular referent.) Saussure's indispensable contention in this regard is that language operates *systemically* or, which is to say the same thing, *differentially* rather than *referentially*. Language, which is a verbal sign-system (remember that sign-systems can take other forms--e.g. fashion is a sign-system), is a "system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous *presence* of others" (my emphasis; 650). Just as phonemes are not "characterised by their own positive quality but simply by the fact that they are distinct" (652), so concepts are "purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not" (651). The most important consequence of this is that in "language there are only differences without positive terms" (653), language having neither "ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system" (653).

Saussure's major interest is in the general rules (described above) by which any sign-system (of which the verbal language which humans speak and write is one such system) function. His focus is on what he terms *langue*, that is, the abstract system within or the basic rules by virtue of which all signs mean. He is less interested in *parole*, his term for concrete applications or instances of these rules. In other words, it is one thing to study how all signs mean (through the systemic functioning of language), it is another thing to study how people actually put signs to use. *Langue* and *parole* constitute a flexible pair of terms that can be applied in an infinite number of ways. As we have seen, *langue* can refer to the rules by which all languages work and *parole* to particular languages. A given language (e.g. English) may in turn be viewed as *langue* and concrete uses thereof (e.g. a book of poetry written in English) as *parole*. A particularly influential book or books of poetry (e.g. Petrarch's sonnets) may in turn, for example, metamorphosise into a *langue* that shapes the work of other poets who appropriate certain elements of Petrarchan discourse to similar or different ends. In short, each *parole* or discourse is an actualisation of *langue* that may become in turn a *langue* of its own that then spawns other *paroles* or discourses. Most other linguists use the term *discourse* as a synonym for *parole* to denote actual instances of language use (these are sometimes termed *utterances*). Because signs are not solely verbal, *discourse* is a term that covers a wide range of applications: oral communications, written communications, fashion, etc.

For Saussure, any instance of parole (or any utterance), such as 'the cat sat on the mat,' proceeds simultaneously along two axes. The first axis is what he calls the *paradigmatic* axis: each sign (e.g. cat) chosen to be present in a given sequence of signs gestures implicitly towards all the other signs comprising a given sign-system which were not chosen to be present and from which the word in question is thus differentiated (e.g. the speaker/writer could have chosen to speak/write about a dog). If this axis were absent in a given utterance, no conceptualisation would be possible. The second axis is what he terms the *syntagmatic* axis: to wit, the exact sequence of signs which comprise the utterance in question: the-cat-sat-on-the-mat. (One of Saussure's most important heirs Roman Jakobson calls these axes the *metaphoric* and *metonymic* axes respectively.) At stake here are the grammatical rules or *syntax* which govern how signs are strung together. If this axis were absent in a given utterance, humans would only be able to communicate through single words. We would all go about our business saying individual words which would do little justice to the complexity of human thought. In a nutshell, meaningful thought occurs at the intersection of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes. If an utterance is deficient in either or both of these respects, the communication of meaning is severely hampered.

There are a number of important consequences of Saussure's theory of signification which subsequent thinkers have sought to elicit. Firstly, from a philosophical point of view, if language is not merely a vehicle for expressing ideas which pre-exist language in the mind, then our consciousness does not pre-exist and is, thus, not autonomous of language. Language, like any other social factor (such as class, gender or race), moulds our consciousness. Language is like the other factors listed above one more important force involved in what philosophers call the *decentering of the Cartesian subject*. (Language plays no role in Descartes's celebrated formula 'I think therefore I am.')

Language is, thus, not a vehicle which people merely use in order to express a pre-given self. As we shall see when we come to the work of linguists like Emile Benveniste, if there is no psychological essence which precedes language, then language paradoxically is that which fashions subjectivity, assigning us subject-positions in the process. Secondly, language *signifies*, rather than re-presents, reflects or labels, what we understand by reality. The Real does not determine the meaning of words, rather, language-systems *articulate* (in the French sense of the word *articuler*--i.e. divide up) according to binary oppositions the Real which is, of course, in and of itself a continuum that, as such, has no boundaries, borders or divisions prior to the conceptualisations which humans impose upon it. It is from this perspective that, as one thinker influenced by Saussure suggests, bizarre as it may seem, it is the "world of words that creates the world of things". Thirdly, due to the nature of the differential functioning of the sign system (c-a-t signifies 'cat' because it is distinct from d-o-g which signifies 'dog' and so on), human beings have a predisposition towards conceptualising reality in terms of binary oppositions (White versus black; Good versus evil; etc.).

There are two main legacies bequeathed by Saussure to literary and cultural criticism. Some critics such as Umberto Eco who might be said to be involved in the pursuit of *Semiotics* (Saussure's original term for this was *Semiology*) study any object in society, verbal or otherwise by thinking of it as a sign which forms part of a wider sign-system based upon differences. A possible object of study in this regard might be the minibuses which crowd the road in Barbados. This is a social phenomenon which many sociologists might be tempted to study from a historical point of view by applying Marx's Base/superstructure model and understanding the history of its development to the point where it is at today. A semiotician would adopt a synchronic approach, viewing each minibus as if it were one sign within a sign-system consisting of all the minibuses in

Barbados. Such an approach might have explained why each bus (before the Barbadian government, in an effort to curb disorder on the roads, sought to regulate via legislation the appearance of minibuses), was painted in garish colours and labelled with provocative names (often of a sexual nature): a semiotician would undoubtedly contend that this was done in an effort to distinguish their 'vehicular parole' from that of rivals.

Other theorists influenced by Saussurean linguistics such as Roland Barthes use Saussure's insights into the paradigmatic axis of any utterance to study the nature of the literary text's relationship to the Real. If signs do not label or refer to but, rather, signify reality, then the way in which texts signify reality becomes of crucial concern. Others similarly influenced focus on the nature of the relationship which obtains between an author and his/her work, given that language should no longer be viewed as a vehicle used for self-expression. Still others such as Barthes or Tzvetan Todorov or Gérard Genette, who call themselves or are called *Structuralists* (*narratologists* probably a more accurate name), use Saussure's insights into the syntagmatic axis of any utterance to study the nature of the development of narratives. To cut a long story short, they basically compare literary texts to extended sentences. Texts are accordingly subject to rules that are analogical to the grammatical rules that inform the construction of any sentence.

QUESTIONS

1. Philosophy is often divided into several branches or areas of focus. What is the focus of the branch of philosophy called 'philosophy of language'?
2. Philosophers of language have traditionally argued that meaning is produced in two ways. One of these is often termed the 'referential' (or 'reflectionist' or 'mimetic' or 'correspondence') model of language. What do you understand by this theory?
3. The other way in which meaning is produced is often termed the 'instrumental' or 'expressivist' model of language. What do you understand by this theory?
4. How exactly, according to Saussure, is meaning produced? How is Saussure's model of signification a critique of the referential and expressive models discussed above?
5. Define the following key Saussurean terms:
 - sign,
 - referent,
 - signifier,
 - signified,
 - signification,
 - sign system,
 - structure,
 - différence,
 - binary oppositions,
 - diachrony,
 - synchrony,
 - langue,
 - parole,
 - discourse,
 - the paradigmatic axis,
 - the syntagmatic axis.
6. Explain, in the light of Saussure's essay, the following statement: "The meaning of any utterance occurs at the intersection of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes."
7. What is the focus of those branches of philosophy called 'philosophy of mind,'

- 'philosophy of culture' and 'epistemology'?
8. Does Saussure's model shed light on the characteristic manner in which humans think and try to grasp reality? If so, how?
 9. What do you understand by what philosophers term the 'Cartesian subject' or the 'Cogito'? In what ways may Saussure's model contribute to the 'decentering' of the Cartesian subject?
 10. Discuss the implications of Saussure's model of the sign for realist and expressive models of literature and, by extension, the arts.