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LANGUAGE AS SIGN AND USE
A STUDY OF CERTAIN ASPECTS OF SAUSSURE'S
VIEW OF LANGUAGE¹

The question of perspective

The aim of Saussure's theory of language is to provide a new and more accurate explanation of the essential nature of language. According to Saussure, traditional theories of language have been on the wrong track with regard to 'the nature question' in particular; yet this motivation is also the source of the conceptual difficulties connected with his theory. These difficulties are similar in kind to the views of language that he criticizes. The difficulties arise within the vast tradition in which the discussion of the nature of language is pivotal, and they arise as soon as the question is posed. The difficulties, one might say, are related to the posing of the question as such.

The idea that language has an essential nature implies the notion of something universal, common and uniform for language as a whole. The attempt to explain what this essence is presupposes that the true nature of language is something underlying our everyday speech. It is not our self-evident, ordinary competence in language that is fundamental, but something else. The question forces the one who poses it to form a conceptual picture of that evasive essence.

At the very outset of his investigations, Saussure declares his intention to explain the nature of language. The starting point of the *Cours de linguistique générale* is the following question: "Quel est l'objet à la fois intégral et concret de la linguistique?" (C 23)²

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- 1 Translated from the Swedish by Sharon Rider. All translations from the French are by the translator, in consultation with the author of this essay. We have chosen to translate as literally as possible to avoid what we take to be a problematic tendency in the existent translations to assume a certain interpretation of Saussure in advance, thus depriving the reader of the opportunity to form her own judgements regarding the appropriate reading of the relevant passages. For this reason, that is, due to the pervasiveness of a certain terminology in the English literature, we have been forced to render certain French terms in an intentionally unconventional manner so as to compel the reader to read the text as if he were entirely unfamiliar with the 'received Saussure'. Most striking, perhaps, is our rendition of 'la langue' as 'speech'. Here we have in mind something akin to the Greek notion of *logos*, that is, speech, or narrative, or account, or reason, in all its aspects (for example, oral, written or simply *thought*) which constitutes the essence of being human. One might bear in mind Aristotle's remark at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, where he distinguishes the human being from other animals on account of the former's possession of *logos* (and *techné*). Alternatively, one might compare to the first line of the *Book of John*: "In the beginning was *logos* [...]"
 - 2 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), Édition critique préparée par Tullio de Mauro (Paris: Éditions Payot, 1972), p 23. (Hereafter all references to *Cours* will be signified in the body of the text by (C). "What is the whole and concrete object of linguistics?"

This is hardly a neutral and presuppositionless question. The question itself, which is the starting point of Saussure's entire theory, presupposes that the object of linguistic analysis, i.e. language, is actually something whole and concrete. It also assumes that language as a whole is an object that can be circumscribed and studied, that it can be represented or depicted, however one understands that object.³

Saussure's view, which sets him apart from the tradition of his contemporaries, is that the concrete object sought ought not to be understood as an empirically localizable object given in advance of any inquiry; that is to say, it ought not to be understood as an object in the sense employed by the natural sciences, which study the same object from different perspectives. "D'autres sciences opèrent sur des objets donnés d'avance et qu'on peut considérer ensuite à différents points de vue; dans notre domaine, rien de semblable." (C23)⁴ On the contrary, claims Saussure, the method and perspective of investigation determines the object: "Bien loin que l'objet précède le point de vue, on dirait que c'est le point de vue qui crée l'objet [...]" (C 23)⁵ Naturally, such a remark is more or less unintelligible, say, within the framework of an empiricist model, in which one is inclined to take it as describing the epistemic relation between an empirical object and an empirical subject. But it is not self-evident that the concept of an object shall here be understood as 'object' in the empirical sense. Samuel Weber writes:

if scientific method depends upon the prior identification of its object, what does this identification depend upon? It is in his response to this question that Saussure begins to delineate the specific problematics of linguistics, as opposed to sciences based on observation. For if an autonomous science requires an 'integral and concrete' object, then the first thing to be recognized in dealing with language is that it does not offer such an object to mere perception. [...] The object of language is not accessible to empirical perception.⁶

If, on the other hand, one interprets Saussure's remark in a structuralist manner, this does not necessarily mean that the statement should be taken to mean that the object is constituted in a subjective consciousness, as something mental or intentional, or psychological in any respect: what is said is simply that it is the *perspective* which creates the object, and a perspective can, as the structuralists would say, be present (as a structural, social and ideological reality) before the subject, as a social collective phenomenon to which the individual subject is subordinate. (One sometimes speaks of 'structural intention'.)

That the question of *perspective* is important for Saussure becomes clear from a reading of his lecture notes. There he reminds us that, even if we should cease to speak of

3 According to de Mauro, 'object' is used by Saussure "au sens de 'finalité d'une activité', c'est-à-dire au sens scolastique pour lequel l'*obiectum* est comme le 'τέλος' aristotélicien" (C415, note 40). In other words, linguistics thus understood cannot begin with a predetermined object; rather, the object is the aim or purpose of an activity.

4 "Other sciences work with objects given in advance, which one can then consider from different points of view. There is no equivalent in our field of study."

5 "Far from the object preceding the point of view, one would say that it is the point of view that creates the object."

6 Samuel Weber, "Saussure and the Apparition of language: The Critical Perspective", *Modern Language Notes* 91 (1976), p. 915.

one object from different points of view, this would not be enough, since "**c'est le point de vue qui FAIT la chose**".⁷ It is on the basis of this initial standpoint, that is, the fundamental significance of perspective, that the semiological concepts (*langue*, *parole*, sign, etc.) must be understood, according to Saussure. Samuel Weber says that the standpoint on the role of perspective in the epistemic relation "marks out the epistemological space of Saussure's theoretical effort, and to neglect its far-reaching implications has inevitably meant to misconstrue the status of his arguments".⁸

In which perspective are we to find this object that is "à la fois intégral et concret"? And how are we then to understand this object? Saussure approaches the problem by first reviewing a few common conceptions of the object of language. He then proceeds to reject any perspective that treats language as positive facts, that is, as empirically localizable and substantial objects and phenomena.

La langue and le langage

If one observes a speaker uttering a given word, this may at first seem like a simple object, "mais un examen plus attentif y fera trouver successivement trois ou quatre choses parfaitement différentes, selon la manière dont on le considère" (C23).⁹ First, one can study the phonetic aspect. One then finds that it can be considered both in terms of production and in terms of reception. The sound itself has two sides, which can be defined as physico-articulatory and physico-auditory.

Second, if one accepts this dual phonetic definition, one finds that this articulatory/auditory sound must have a physiological connection with a presumed psychological concept, partly through phonation, partly through perception. A new duality now arises between sound and content. Suddenly, we are involved in questions of psychology, physiology and even physics.

Third, if one assumes this physical-physiological-psychological determination, the question arises as to whether language can be delimited as something psychological, physiological, etc. in the individual, or if one can or should understand language collectively. Should language be given an individual or a social definition?

7 Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Edition critique par Rudolf Engler (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1967-74), p. 26. "it is the point of view that makes the object."

8 Weber, p. 916. Weber himself, however, has misunderstood the consequences of the question of perspective when he writes: "Saussure's *Cours* describes the necessity of [...] 'shifts in perspective' [...]" (p. 937) We shall see, however, that Saussure on the contrary advocates a specific determinate perspective. Aside from Weber, others who have taken up or developed the question of perspective in the writings of Saussure are Robert M. Strozier in *Saussure, Derrida, and the Metaphysics of Subjectivity* (Berlin, New York etc.: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988), 1988, p. 138 ff. and C.G. Thosteman in *Arbitraritetsprincipen hos Saussure*, C-uppsats in General Linguistics, Department of Linguistics, Uppsala (1987), p. 9 ff., p. 17, p. 29f., p. 40.

9 "but a more careful inspection will reveal successively three or four entirely different things, depending upon the way in which one considers it."

Fourth, one may finally ask, given this heterogeneous definition, if language is to be understood systematically or historically. Should language be given a temporal or an atemporal definition? (C 23 f.)

What Saussure wishes to demonstrate in this example is that when we treat language as if it were accessible from a perspective outside of language, that is, when we study language as an empirical object, it appears to be a heterogeneous and irregular complex. Thus we find no answer to our original question, “what is the whole and concrete object of the study of linguistics”? Saussure writes:

Ainsi, de quelque côté que l'on aborde la question, nulle part l'objet intégral de la linguistique ne s'offre à nous; partout nous rencontrons ce dilemme: ou bien nous nous attachons à une seul côté de chaque problème, et nous risquons de ne pas percevoir les dualités signalées plus haut; ou bien, si nous étudions le langage par plusieurs côtés à la fois, l'objet de la linguistique nous apparaît un amas confus de choses hétéroclites sans lien entre elles. C'est quand on procède ainsi qu'on ouvre la porte à plusieurs sciences – psychologie, anthropologie, grammaire normative, philologie, etc., – que nous séparons nettement de la linguistique, mais qui, à la faveur d'une méthode incorrecte, pourraient revendiquer le langage comme un de leurs objets. (C 24 f.)¹⁰

What appears when language is studied empirically as one of several positive phenomena or objects – physical, physiological, psychological, etc. – is what Saussure terms *le langage*. To return to Saussure's starting point, this type of study *perspective* creates *le langage*. This linguistic object is extremely heterogeneous and complex, indeed it is rather a conglomerate of objects:

Pris dans son tout, le langage est multiforme et hétéroclite; à cheval sur plusieurs domaines, à la fois physique, physiologique et psychique, il appartient encore au domaine individuel et au domaine social; il ne se laisse classer dans aucune catégorie des faits humains, parce qu' on ne sait comment dégager son unité. (C 25)¹¹

One condition stands firm for Saussure: language must be a uniform object, and linguistics must define this uniform object in order to be ‘genuine linguistics’ and not something else. From which *perspective* can we then discover the concrete and whole in language? And what is this object? Saussure writes: “il faut se placer de prime abord sur le terrain de la langue et la prendre pour norme de toutes les autres manifestations du

10 “Thus from whichever side one approaches the question, nowhere does the whole object of linguistics appear to us. We encounter the same dilemma everywhere: either we stick to one side of each problem, and risk not noticing the dualities indicated above, or, if we study language from several sides at the same time, the object of linguistics appears as a muddled mass of incongruous objects with no relation between them. When one proceeds in this manner, one opens the door to several sciences – psychology, anthropology, normative grammar, philology, etc. – which we clearly separate from linguistics, but which, thanks to an incorrect method, could claim language as one of their objects.”

11 “Taken in its entirety, language [*langage*] is multifarious and irregular. Straddling several areas at the same time, those of physics, physiology, and psychology, it still belongs both to the individual and to society. It does not allow of being classified into one single category of human activity, because we do not know how to delimit its unity.”

langue.” (C 25).¹² Saussure’s solution to the problem is to construct the concept of *la langue*, a concept which is to represent the true nature of language. Saussure begins by conceptualizing his object – *la langue* – in order to answer the question of the nature of language via the definition of the concept (a quite comprehensive definition).

For Saussure, it is important that his object, *la langue*, not be confused with the traditional object of linguistics, *le langage*. *La langue* is not to be understood as an empirical object at all; rather, it is quite simply the language that we find ourselves *in*, according to Saussure. It is only from the “point de vue” we have when we are “sur le terrain de la langue” that language is “à la fois intégral et concret”. In short, language is indeed the result of a distinct perspective, namely, the perspective that the user of language has when she is using language, that is, the inner perspective. If *le langage* is the collective term for the external, definable and empirically localizable linguistic object, *la langue* is instead language conceived of as use, a linguistic reality in which we find ourselves, so to speak, and which we cannot observe from the outside.

It is in the context of this perspective that Saussure gives the concept *concrete* a particular sense. Saussure’s point is that language is concrete in insofar as it is concrete for the one who finds herself in it. Thus his use of the term *concrete* is not to be confused with the empiricist sense of the term. Language is concrete even though it cannot be observed from the outside; it is concrete in its function and use, and not as a delimited and localizable external object. He writes: “pour savoir dans quelle mesure une chose est une réalité, il faudra et il suffira de rechercher dans quelle mesure elle existe pour la conscience des sujets.” (C 128)¹³

Saussure’s *langue* is thus presented as a whole and concrete object as distinct from *le langage*. The difference between *la langue* and *le langage*, however, must not be understood as a difference between two distinct objects in the same linguistic reality. *La langue* and *le langage* must not, in Weber’s formulation, “be taken as descriptions of observable aspects of language: they are products of a point-of-view seeking”.¹⁴ *La langue* is most certainly separate from *le langage*: *la langue* is what is structurally uniform and essential in the inchoate ‘amas confus’ that is *le langage*. But the process of separating *la langue* from *le langage*, according to Saussure, requires moving from one perspective to

12 “one must from the very start place oneself in the field of speech [*la langue*], and take it as the norm for all other manifestations of language [*le langage*].”

13 “in order to find out the extent to which something is real, it will be necessary and sufficient to investigate the extent to which it exists for the consciousness of subjects.” That speech (*la langue*) is whole and concrete for “the consciousness of subjects” need not be taken as a psychological claim: speech is not concrete for the individual consciousness if consciousness is understood as something pre-linguistic, i.e. as a purely mental event. The semiological viewpoint holds that there is no (mental or conceptual or reflective) consciousness before or outside of *speech* (see, for example, C 144 and C 154). It is rather the case, as we shall see, that the speaking subject is inextricably bound up with a linguistic community, and that speech and the community, as indissoluble, constitute a social reality, which in turn determines the ‘consciousness’ of the language users, and not the reverse.

14 Weber, p. 916.



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