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SAUSSURE'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE¹

0. This paper is based on a number of earlier suggestions regarding the implications of Saussure's teachings (Wittmann, 1964a, b). The five points brought out here, though to some extent representative, are not meant to be exhaustive. They cover the areas where the criticisms of Saussure's theory by the transformationalists and Roman Jakobson concentrate.

1. **Double articulation of the sign.** "Le signe linguistique est double", the linguistic sign is twofold, said Saussure; it is a "entité psychique à deux faces" which associates, as a fact of internal structure, a signatum with a signans. Both signata and signantia are "empreintes psychiques" (engrams), i.e. they represent only a mental reality, not a material one. In other words, linguistic sign is not a substance but a sensory mediating process acting as a link between a deep structure engram and a surface structure engram. Chomsky claims that Saussure did not discuss the deep structure aspect of the linguistic sign (cf. Wittmann, 1964a). Katz and Postal (1964, 2, 161) speak of a "dictum" by Saussure saying that "the connection between form and meaning is arbitrary". Jakobson (1965) equates Humboldt's "connection between sound and meaning" with Saussure's synthesis of signifiants with signifiés. All these claims are misrepresentations of Saussure's theory. Both signans and signatum are properly speaking "valeurs" (meanings), whereas "forme" characterizes already a product, "le signe considéré dans sa totalité" (155-69). On the other hand, "sound" is not a "empreinte psychique" but is properly speaking an aspect of parole (36-9). The faculté de constituer une langue" (the ability to synthesize) is based on the bipolarity of articulation².

2. **Relativity principle.** This is probably the most controversial of all of Saussure's postulates. Major criticisms have been leveled by Wittmann (1935), Benveniste (1939), Bolinger (1949), Jakobson (1965), and

¹ This work was supported by the Humanities Research Council of Canada.

² Saussure, 26, 156. Cf. Martinet (1960), Mikuš (1947).

others. In Einstein's relativity, a major source of confusion in discussing the twin paradox is that the situation can be described in so many different verbal ways. It is also a matter of words whether we call a particular phenomenon "inertia" or "gravity"; they are really the same thing. Mathematically, the situation is described by one set of space-time field equations; but it can be talked about informally in either of two sets of Newtonian phrases. Similarly to Einstein's famous "thought experiments" dealing with the motion of two spaceships relative to each other, Saussure determined that in the structure of psychological space-time a signifiant is signifiant only relative to a signifié, the sign itself constituting the frame of reference. He compares the linguistic sign to a sheet of paper of which "on ne peut découper le recto sans découper en même temps le verso; ... on n'y arriverait que par une abstraction ...". (157). He continues "... le choix qui appelle [tel signifiant] pour [tel signifié] est parfaitement arbitraire. Si ce n'était pas le cas, la notion de valeur perdrait quelque chose de son caractère, puisqu'elle contiendrait un élément imposé du dehors. *Mais en fait les valeurs restent entièrement relatives*, et voilà pourquoi le lien [du signifié] et [du signifiant] est radicalement arbitraire". (157, italics are mine). "[Les signes de la langue] agissent donc, non par leur valeur intrinsèque, mais par leur position relative, comme dans un jeu d'échecs". (ap. Gödel, 1957. 281). "Bien que le signifié et le signifiant soient, chacun pris à part, purement différentiels et négatifs, leur combinaison est un fait positif; c'est même la seule espèce de faits que comporte la langue, puisque le propre de l'institution linguistique est justement de maintenir le parallélisme entre ces deux ordres de différences". (166-7). Thus, "signification" undergoes a constant comparing and matching, and, in our scientific appreciation of "langue", some things become relative that were previously thought absolute, but thereby new absolutes are introduced.

Saussure did not introduce the concept of "motivation" in order to attenuate his "fundamental principle of arbitrariness", as is claimed by Jakobson (1950. 30). He simply showed that motivation is an emotional reaction of the human mind, a defense mechanism against the implications of relativity, a refusal to accept relativity in one's life; and this same observation has been made by Einstein³.

3. Linguistic taxonomy. Whatever the polemic merits of the argument, there should be no doubt that a good taxonomy is the necessary prerequisite to any "generative" account⁴. The "terme" is Saussure's minimal sign with both a signatum and a signans corresponding to the contemporary "morpheme". To every "linear" combination of "termes" the name "syntagme" or "assemblage in praesentia" is given as opposed

³ For a fuller discussion of Saussure's theory of relativity and Jakobson's interpretation of same, see Wittmann (forthcoming).

⁴ For a brief development of this argument, see Wittmann (1964b, forthcoming).

to "association [par analogie]" or "assemblage in absentia". A morpheme (terme) comprises a deep structure (signatum) made up of at least one "moment conceptuel" and a surface structure (signans) made up of at least one "moment acoustique". The "moment acoustique" has the peculiarity of having an "aspect auditif" as well as an "aspect moteur" of which the second is deemed to occupy only a subordinate place compared to the first. "Moments" are both homogeneous and irreducible and correspond to today's "isolates"⁵. Whereas "moments acoustiques" (phonemes) are simply distinct from each other, its constituent elements (cues) are differential. The "éléments différentiels" of a phoneme may be "facteur positif" or "négatif"; only a facteur négatif can have a "valeur différenciatrice". Saussure anticipates here the theory of perceptual isolates as bundles of distinctive features, as in visual perception by Gibson (1950), in auditory perception by Trubetzkoy (1939) and Jakobson et al. (1952).

4. Réseau de rapports (Network). The relativity of meaning shows us, says Saussure, that it would be a great mistake to consider a morpheme (terme) simply as a union of a particular signans with a particular signatum. To define it this way would mean to isolate it from the system of which it is part; it would mean starting from the morpheme (terme) and building up the system by making the grand total, when to the contrary the search has to start with the interdependent whole if we want to obtain by analysis whatever it contains. (157). In a language state (état de langue), everything is based on a network of interdependences. The identities and differences (i.e. similarities and dissimilarities) between morphemes (termes linguistiques) take place in two distinct spheres each generating a particular set of meanings (valeurs) and corresponding to a form of mental activity indispensable to the life of our language. On one hand, by virtue of concatenation, the morphemes contract into a kind of interdependence based on the linear (i. e. temporal) character of linguistic coherence. The resulting string with its constituents in consecutive co-occurrence may be called a *syntagm*. (170). Placed in a syntagm, a constituent morpheme (terme) acquires its meaning (valeur) only from the contrast with what precedes or what follows or both. On the other hand, if discontinuous syntagms and morphemes share comparable identical elements in common, they constitute spatially distributed psychological interrelations which we call *associations*. A syntagmatic context is in praesentia, i.e. contiguous (linear)⁶; it is based on two or more morphe-

⁵ A phonological isolate corresponds to a phoneme. I adopted the term "isolate" from E. T. Hall (1959) who in turn adopted it from G. L. Trager, the latter probably getting it from H. L. Smith.

⁶ "Linéaire" and "syntagmatique" are synonymous in Saussure's theory. Cf. Godel (1957, 265, 279): Ordre intuitif (= associatif) des unités, qui est celui des associations qui ne sont pas dans le système linéaire (= groupement syntagmatique), mais que l'esprit embrasse d'un seul coup.

mes co-occurring (également présents) in an actual series (série effective). An associative (paradigmatic) comparison, to the contrary, is in absentia, i.e. related and intuitive; it links morphemes [or syntagms] into a virtually mnemonic series. (171). Simultaneous functioning of the two networks constitutes a tight bond of interdependencies conditioning each other reciprocally. Indeed, co-ordination in [psychological] space contributes to create associative co-ordinations, and these in turn are necessary for recognizing the structure underlying the syntagm. (177; end of condensed translation). In an important article on aphasia, R. Jakobson (1955) has substantiated Saussure's theory by showing that normal verbal behavior is bipolar. He observed that there are two fundamental types of aphasic disturbances, representing respective impairment of the two basic linguistic processes involved in speech: selection (metaphorical device), and combination (metonymical device). Impairment of the selection process is reflected in so-called "similarity disorders", while impairment of the combinatory process produces "contiguity disorders" ⁷.

5. Rule changing behavior. Saussure's "langage", like any phenomenon of coherence, is subject to perpetual change, because coherence is not permanent; and so le langage may be analyzed into an institutional, inherited element: la langue, and an element of improvisation: la parole. La langue is a social product which is stored passively in the individual's mind, la parole constitutes an individual act of will and intelligence. By definition, the two exhaust together le langage. Saussure further shows that la parole as an individual act of will and intelligence is "comportement innovateur spontané" to a larger extent than rule-governed behavior; such "improvisations du sujet parlant" constitute idiosyncratic "créations de la parole" which presumably have not yet entered (and possibly may never enter) the "langue" of a collectivity of at least two individuals. (138 f., 197, 231 ff.). In other words, there is a minimum amount of originality in any given utterance ⁸. Any syntagmatic recoding which

⁷ It is therefore surprising to read Jakobson's frequent claims that his own dissociation of phonemes into distinctive features invalidates Saussure's principle of linearity of the signans, unless he wishes to invalidate his own conclusions on contiguity disorders. "Linear", "contiguous", and "syntagmatic" are synonymous in Saussure's theory (cf. fn. 6, above). The arrangement in which units occur in syntagms is linear, i.e. one after another with no simultaneity or overlapping. Whereas Jakobson dissociates the phoneme completely into ultimate atoms of linguistic structure, for Saussure, the features never had any such autonomy in the "conscience des sujets parlants". To Saussure's mind, the ordinary hearer-speaker does not have a choice between grammatical and ungrammatical patterns on the feature level. Experience in second language teaching seems to bear out that the subject does not manipulate the feature level liberally integrated in the game with oppositions and identities, though poets, polyglots, and linguists possible constitute an exception to this rule.

⁸ Chomsky tells us that models of perception and acquisition have failed totally to come to grips with the creative aspects of language use, i.e. the ability to form and understand previously unheard sentences. He feels Saussure to be the source for this preoccupation with inventory and taxonomic procedures. Chomsky indicates as reference CLG 154, where Saussure says exactly the opposite of what Chomsky claims Saussure to have said. Cf. Wittmann (1964a).

occurs in a given utterance may therefore be either a reflex of langue or a creation of parole⁹; Saussure's ambiguous passages 148, 172, 173 delimiting faits de langue from faits de parole have to be read keeping this in mind. The exact differentiation between faits de langue and faits de parole varies thus from individual to individual; e.g. faits de parole are proportionally more substantial than faits de langue in the small child, whereas the amount of originality in parole has ordinarily become negligible in the aged.

6. As often pointed out, Saussure had little interest in the practical aspects of particular language descriptions, but more in positing an adequate theory of language. In doing so, his concern was not with data gathering and classification, a claim existing only in the minds of his critics, but with constructing precise axiomatic theories.

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⁹ Under recoding, we understand any kind of psychological "transformation", no matter how small or large the segment involved. We distinguish two types of recoding: (a) blending (cf. Bolinger, 1961), and (b) reorientation (cf. Martinet, 1960. 126f.). On the rôle of blending in the child's acquisition of language, cf. Hockett (forthcoming).