

IV. ÉVÉNEMENTS

LINGUISTIC TERMINOLOGY – WITH SAUSSURE AND AFTER SAUSSURE

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Abstract:

This year, Classiques Garnier Publisher has printed the book *Ferdinand de Saussure. Une science du langage pour une science de l’humain*, written by Jean-Paul Bronckart and Ecaterina Bulea Bronckart. The two authors bring back into discussion the topicality of the Genevan scholar’s linguistics, starting from the same challenging question: “*Why, again, Saussure?*”. The answer extending over more than five hundred pages aims at the complexity of an approach which revolutionised not only the bases of language sciences, but also the terminological innovations introduced, with Saussure, in all disciplines whose subject of study is language.

This article relies on the reading of the Bronckarts’ book and focuses on that innovative part of the Saussurean terminology without which the process of scientific establishment of language studies would not have been possible.

Key words:

Saussure, language, system, sign, synchrony, diachrony, associative, syntagmatic.

Originally, this was supposed to be a review of Jean-Paul Bronckart and Ecaterina Bulea Bronckart’s book *Ferdinand de Saussure. Une science du langage pour une science de l’humain*. However, we later considered that the exhaustive analysis would not be the most appropriate in terms of concisely addressing Saussure’s linguistic terminology, but only in relation to the chapters which strictly concern the mentioned topic. In order not to detract from the complexity of such an extensive work, we shall try, while constructing the overall picture of the book, to refer to those aspects that have

a direct impact on the terminological innovations which revolutionised language sciences with Saussure and after him.

In *Introduction*, the authors justify their option for a subject that, over time, has entailed the appearance of so many works, studies and thematic volumes about the components of the Saussurean theory as well as about the status and topicality of the Genevan scholar's general linguistics, placed at the crossroads along other past or present linguistic currents, all this in one vision which starts from the question «*Pourquoi Saussure, encore?*» (“*Why, again, Saussure?*”). (2022: 13)

The first chapter, *On the scientific path of F. de Saussure*, is a mini-biography which marks the great linguist's scientific evolution. As the authors themselves state, it is about the “*the elements likely to clarify the circumstances of a relatively complex path*” (2022: 21), a mini-biography focusing on “*Saussure's scientificity rather than his personality or character traits*” (2022: 21), which are unnecessary in a linguistic approach as that undertaken in the work we are referring to.

The next two chapters are centred upon the dimensions which defined the Saussurean approach on the epistemological and methodological level. Entitled *A theoretical and methodological positioning* and *The general qualities of languages*, these two chapters re-analyse the situation of language sciences in the late-19th century, from which the foundation of the new linguistic science was to emerge upon the Saussurean project: from then on, language facts would be considered from a semiotic and systemic perspective and defined, without a doubt, by means of a specific terminological apparatus. Furthermore, the general qualities of languages were to be projected depending on the aspect of language change in time and space.

The authors start from the more complex view of the generally change-causing movement in order to get to the types of linguistic changes Saussure had in mind: the phonetic, analogical changes and those which are not linguistic per se, the latter being related to the intrinsically social dimension of languages.

Saussure attributed the phonetic changes to the arbitrary nature¹ of linguistic signs: the signifier, having no justified connection with the signified, is not to be hindered from changing.

Analogical changes² occur when “*one traditional form is substituted for another one, created by association*”. “*An analogical form is a form created in the image of another.*”³

The third type of changes – those due to the social – have the following explanation: if space is the locus of social motives and goals, and by this the social implicitly “moves” the language, then the language will also act upon the social as a fundamental factor in achieving cohesion in the life of a linguistic community. (2022: 139) Sociality is, therefore, the essential quality of languages, viewed from two different perspectives: from an outer perspective, because social processes and language activities are inevitably interdependent; from an inner perspective, because verbal signs, through their very structure and functionality, belong to strictly social agreements and conventions. The social thus becomes the vital point of any linguistic unit.

The following four chapters deal with the theoretical fields that Saussure addressed numerous times and for which he proposed theoretical analyses and argumentations harmonised with innovative terminological suggestions. Saussure’s attempt to qualify, define and differentiate the level of speech from that of language, speaking and discourse is certainly well-known.

¹ “*The first principle or primary truth: the linguistic sign is arbitrary. The tie that binds a given acoustic image to a determined concept and which gives it the sign value is a radically arbitrary tie*” (Cours III – C, p. 221), in Bronckart J.-P., Bronckart Bulea E., 2022, *Ferdinand de Saussure. Une science du langage pour une science de l’humain*, Paris: Classiques Garnier, p. 294, (translated from the original work). As is well-known, Saussure named the acoustic image ‘signifier’ and the concept ‘signified’.

² In general, the first form falls into desuetude after its equivalent has been created; as there is no need for two forms to mean the same thing, the ‘rival’ form will disappear. However, it sometimes happens that the old form does not disappear and in this case the competition between the two forms will unavoidably lead to each of them being used in certain occurrences. “*One must see in the analogical phenomenon only creations, innovations (things that are created anew), creations, not from nothingness, but whose elements are given as in any literary, artistic creation*”. («CLG – E, p. 385» in *op. cit.*, p. 159)

³ «Cours I – R, p. 56», in *op. cit.*, p. 121.

Taken as a whole, speech is multiform and heteroclitic, it intersects, at the same time, with the physical, physiological and psychic domains and it belongs both to the individual and the social realm. Speech cannot be classified in any category of human facts because – Saussure states – the exact criterion according to which its unity should be defined is not known. Language, on the other hand, can be taken as norm for the other manifestations of speech.⁴ It is the only one to which an autonomous definition can be assigned, as it is “*a whole in itself and a principle of classification*”⁵, which is why it is given the first place among language facts. As a “*social part of speech*”⁶, language is external to the speaking individual who can neither create nor modify it. Language is also defined as an abstract system of signs in which the association between the signifier and the signified is essential⁷, both of which are inseparable facets whose value derives only by relating one to the other. But, although linguistic signs are essentially psychic, they are not mere abstractions: the associations between the signifier and the signified are ratified by the consent of each linguistic community that gives them their social character. Saussure’s definition in this respect is unequivocal:

*“Language exists in the form of a sum of impressions deposited in the brain of each member of a community, almost like a dictionary of which identical copies have been distributed to each individual.”*⁸ Language is, therefore, something which “*exists in each individual, yet is common to all. Nor is it affected by the will of the depositaries*”⁹.

⁴ «CLG – C, p. 25» in *op. cit.*, p. 142.

⁵ «Cours I – R, pp. 65-66», in *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁶ «ELG, p. 178», in *op. cit.*, p. 306.

⁷ “*The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses [...]*”. («CLG, p. 98» in *op. cit.*, p. 235; English translation by Wade Baskin, *Course in General Linguistics*, Eds. Charles Bally & Albert Sechehaye, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

⁸ «Cours III – C, p. 236» (Trans. Wade Baskin), in *op. cit.*, p. 156

⁹ «Cours III – C, p. 237» (Trans. Wade Baskin), in *op. cit.*, p. 166.

Their will is manifested only in speech, which is absolutely necessary “for language to be established.”¹⁰

Historically, speaking always precedes language. Although it is considered as a secondary part of language study, speaking is no less important, primarily because it is only through speaking that language is renewed.

Speaking, as “*a wilful and intellectual act*”¹¹, facilitates the understanding and exteriorisation of those combinations by which the speaking subject uses language in order to express his/her own ideational projections, which is why one also has to consider the psychophysical mechanism by which acts of speech are carried out.

In the Saussurean corpus, the terms *discourse* and *discursive* refer to four orders of phenomena. In some occurrences, they may designate either the vocal dimension devoid of meaning or the overall meaningful activity of verbal production. In other instances, often inserted in the phrases “*discourse chain*” and “*part of the discourse*”, these terms denote the organised verbal production of speaking (“texts” in the contemporary sense of the term) or infra-ordered structures involved in the organisation of the spoken chain (2022: 148). However, of all the elements of speech, language is obviously the central concept in the Saussurean linguistics insofar as it is “*a unity that satisfies the mind*”, holding a “*preeminent place within the speech facts*”¹² on which all the others will depend. In fact, Saussure revisits the concept of *language* several times, highlighting its various aspects, which the Bronckarts classify as follows: the language of humanity, an object of linguistics; language understood in ontological terms; language as an object of the discipline of linguistics; language as a state; language as an organising system of semiotic life; language as an act of consciousness; language as virtuality and a discursive act.

¹⁰ “*In separating language from speaking we are at the same time separating: 1° what is social from what is individual; 2° what is essential from what is accessory and more or less accidental [...]*” («CLG – E, pp. 30-31», translated by W. Baskin, in *op. cit.*, p. 142).

¹¹ «CLG – E, p. 30» in *op. cit.*, p. 142.

¹² «Cours III – C, p. 214» in *op. cit.*, p. 164.

The next chapter, about the *opposition between synchrony and diachrony*, discusses the ways of describing the language facts that involve two types of approaches, synchronic and diachronic.

The synchronic approach has to do with simultaneous static entities, with balanced forces, which should be understood in terms of the speaking subject. The diachronic approach (Gk. *dia* → *throughout, through time*) is related to successive, dynamic entities, with forces in motion, resorting to the retrospective perspective of the linguist. But – the authors of this book about Saussure state – “*it is impossible and dangerous (it is a permanent source of error) to conduct the same types of studies at the same time*”. (2022: 190)

In his observations on language facts, Saussure shows from the very beginning that they are confined to two kinds of phenomena: events (*motus*) and states (*status*). Following the line of this argument, he states that in any object which presupposes some evolution, some historical continuation, a succession of things in time, attention is turned to events-changes and tends to disregard states. It is a tendency that manifests itself in all sciences, acceptable in some of them, but absolutely unacceptable in linguistics, given that

“*it is only at the level of language-states that the meanings which are that particular something through which a language really lives or exists manifest themselves*”. (2022: 173)

Language-states involving meanings are the only reality to which speakers have access and as a result – Saussure opines – the only reality on which linguists should, above all things, focus their attention.

The speakers are always in control of the static side of language, the knowledge of which is sufficient for them to speak that particular language. They do not need to know, in advance, the changes which in time have affected the words they use. And Saussure explicitly states: “*Not only in practice, but also in theory, the only means of accounting for what exists in a language at a given moment is to turn the past into tabula rasa.*”¹³ That is why “*it is necessary that one should disregard the past given the irreducible*

¹³ «Cours II – Intro, p. 65» in *op. cit.*, p. 178.

nature of the two phenomena.”¹⁴ Hence the conclusion: “*One does not explain one through the other.*”¹⁵

The synchronic approach, the primacy of which Saussure advocates, considers the terms that coexist within a system and have a distinct, differential value from one another. Furthermore, besides the systemic value, any term has a negative value: the value becomes positive due to the opposition by contrast: it is everything that the other terms to which it relates are not. (2022: 297)

Diachronically, language facts are not directly accessible to the average speaker. Only the linguist determines them in the pursuit of knowledge, either retrospectively (analysing past changes) or prospectively (anticipating upcoming changes). However, an observation, which relies not on a particular scientific explanation but on common sense (the average speaker’s common sense), is required here: a language is not the exclusive apapanage of language theorists; it is spoken by all social categories, with or without in-depth specialised knowledge and represents the common good shared among all members of a human community.

The chapter *In search of the essence of signs* begins with the Bronckarts’ reflection on the omnipresence of the issue of the linguistic sign in Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*. In his entire methodological approach, Saussure first proceeds to delimit some fields, more precisely, to identify sums of phenomena with common and regular characteristics. He then analyses the empirical properties of the same phenomena, comparing mainly the forms in several languages and researching them alternatively from a synchronic and diachronic perspective. Based on this, he tries to formulate those concepts that are likely to codify the transversal and recurrent aspects of the forms of manifestation of the analysed phenomena. From the very beginning, the Genevan linguist delimits an entire domain of facts: LANGUAGE as a sum of functional and structural constants that can be attested in any natural language. (2022: 205) After that, he thoroughly analyses these constants from a comparative perspective and proposes

¹⁴ «Cours II – Intro, pp. 65-66» in *op. cit.*, p. 178.

¹⁵ «Cours II – Intro, p. 66» in *op. cit.*, p. 178.

appropriate definitions and theoretical conceptualisations. Starting from the assumption that language is not the only system of signs, Saussure first defines the status of any sign and then clarifies the particular status of verbal signs and of the language system within the semiotic system. He speaks about the status of a new science, *semiology*, whose laws

“will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts.”¹⁶

In addition to natural language, semiology deals, according to Saussure, with a whole set of signs: writings, nautical signals, military signals, symbols, gestures or polite formulas, rites, customs etc. All these systems of signs are related through a common aspect which consists in the fact that it has some forms of manifestation whose specific property is to evoke ideas and to be structurally double. The dual approach is Saussure’s fulcrum when he establishes the dichotomy *spoken language* vs. *written language*, a distinction which has become, along with the Saussurean linguistics, part of the methodological study of any didactic approach to languages. Extending the comparison between the spoken and written language, Saussure highlights four properties common to the set of linguistic signs: the arbitrary nature (the unmotivated relation between a sign and what it designates); the negative-differential nature; the oppositional-systemic nature; the independence of the sign from the type of material of which it is made. (2022: 209)

Saussure insists on the importance of the arbitrary relation which he first presents in the conventionalist sense according to which the properties of the acoustic image of a word are absolutely independent of the material or mental properties of the entity to which the word refers. He also adds that, beyond the issue of the relationship with the referent, the true value of a sign is oppositional; the sign has no value in itself (it is a neutral or “negative” entity), but it is invested with a positive value through the opposition relationships manifesting themselves within the language system. To these internal characteristics Saussure adds two more properties which he considers

¹⁶ «CLG, p. 33» (Trans. Wade Baskin) in *op. cit.*, p. 211.

“extrinsic”: signs *presuppose* and *require* a *convention* which imposes itself on individuals and on the community with each passing on from one generation to another.¹⁷

The chapter *The language system* brings to the fore the notion of *system*¹⁸, which holds a special place in the Saussurean theoretical architecture, primarily referring to the relation of interdependence between linguistic signs. Saussure intuitively very early that the systemic view is the only one capable of establishing the pertinent methodological perspective in the study of linguistic and, more broadly, semiological facts. The chapter includes the approaches and conceptualisations progressively developed by Saussure in this field, grouped into three major themes.

The first theme is related to the status of linguistic units and of the relationships between them, leading to a systemic view of the language.

The second theme refers to the properties of the language system, which is studied in its entirety as an instance of handling differences.

The third theme concerns the methods of internal organisation of the system, directly involving the two relationships establishing between signs (associative and syntagmatic). The interdependence or solidarity of linguistic units is their defining feature, by virtue of which language functions only as a system. Saussure often brings up the phenomenon of coexistence and co-dependency of signs in the system, but the term *system* and the phrase *system of signs* are not his creations. They were used long before by numerous

¹⁷ What ensures the transmission of a natural language from one generation to another is the *sine qua non* condition of its existence: “*Language is a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty.*” («Cours III, CLG – E, p. 32» in *op. cit.*, p. 164.

¹⁸ In Saussure’s systemic view, linguistic units are *terms*: “*As soon as we say term <instead of word> it is because we consider its relations to others.*” («Cours III – C, p. 281» in *op. cit.*, p. 282). Resorting to the concept of *term*, the linguist actually considers the system of relations in which any word of a language enters: “*Let us first consider the words as terms of a system, it is really necessary to project them as terms of a system. Any word of the language has to do with other words or rather it only exists in relation to the other words and by virtue of what surrounds it.*” («Cours III – C, p. 277» in *op. cit.*, p. 282) Saussure thus formulated the general principle according to which in a given language-state, the units or groups of units do not have a stable and absolute value but are *terms* the value of which is determined by the differences and oppositions establishing within the analysed state.

authors of comparative grammar, such as Franz Bopp¹⁹ and Wilhelm von Humboldt²⁰, who supported the idea of language as an organised whole, referring to it as a “*self-producing being*”, endowed with a force that unites the elements into a structured ensemble, a force involved in each concrete manifestation of the whole. Saussure adopts the same perspective and considers that language units do not exist and are not formed as units only insofar as they form a system whose universal dimension is sociality, constituted by anchoring the language in the social agreements and conventions of that particular linguistic community.²¹

Reflecting upon the status and manner of organising the language system as compared to other semiotic systems, Saussure also mentions the term *syntagm*. He says that the concept of syntagm may designate entities of various lengths or entities that are “indeterminate in size”: from syllables forming words to groups of words and even entire sentences. Some of the examples illustrating the concept of syntagm are “*chien, il parle; par ici, s’il vous plaît; ce soir la lune rêve avec plus de paresse etc*”²².

Saussure defines the issue of the syntagm and particularly of the syntagmatic sphere relatively late, by drawing a comparison with the associative groups, pointing out the relations of similarity and difference between these two major coordinates of language.

“*We speak uniquely by syntagms – he state – and the probable mechanism is that we have these types of syntagms in our head and that at the moment we use them we introduce the associational group.*”²³

¹⁹ Bopp, F., 1816, *Über das der Konjugationssystem Sanskritsprache a Vergleichung mit der jenem griechischen, lateinischen, persischen Germanische und Sprache*, Frankfurt: Windischmann.

²⁰ Humboldt, W. (von), 1822/1974a, « La recherche linguistique comparative dans son rapport aux différentes phases du développement du langage », in *Introduction à l’œuvre sur le kavi et autres essais*, Paris: Seuil.

²¹ “*Language is a social fact. The individual, designed for speaking, will be able to use the faculty of speech only through the community surrounding him and, furthermore, he does not feel the need to use it except in relation to that particular community. He is completely dependent on the community [...] In other words man is only complete by way of what he borrows from his milieu*”. («ELG, p. 178» in *op. cit.*, p. 306)

²² De Mauro, «1975a, p. VIII-IX », in: *op.cit.*, p.218

²³ «Cours II – Intro, p. 82» in: *op. cit.*, p. 320.

The theory about syntagms and associations relies on the two orders of relations between words: on the one hand, the discursive order, of combining words in syntagmatic groups, on the other hand, the intuitive order of associative groups which is that of the *families* (lexico-semantic fields) within which the speaker chooses those words considered to be the best for what he has to convey. The syntagmatic relations are formed by virtue of the linear nature of language which excludes the possibility of pronouncing two units at the same time. On the contrary, associative relations create groups formed by mental associations between words whose number is indefinite and whose order is also indeterminate. These two types of relations, *in praesentia* and *in absaentia*, underlie the *syntagmatic coordination* (of combinations of words meant to transmit a certain message)²⁴ and the *associative coordination* (of the mental association of a term with other terms of the language).

Saussure's reflections and analyses reveal, in addition to the constant demand for clarity and epistemological coherence, a tireless labour of theoretical reconceptualization of language sciences. And this reconceptualization is related to a terminology established in all disciplines whose object of study is language. The references we have made to the notions of *language, speech, speaking, discourse, sign, signifier, signified, arbitrary, language-state, synchrony, diachrony, semiology, associative, syntagmatic* do not make up an exhaustive list of key words in Saussurean linguistics.²⁵ They are nevertheless the significant part of the list that might confirm the Genevan scholar's contribution to the scientific establishment of language studies. That is why we believe that Tullio de Mauro is absolutely right when he states

²⁴ "Language is par excellence a means, a tool, bound to constantly and immediately fulfil its goal, finality and effect: to make oneself understood". («ELG, p. 178-179» in *op. cit.*, p. 133)

²⁵ Terminologically, there are other key words that are not consistently used by Saussure. *Entity* has a generic connotation; *term* refers to an element insofar as it is the object of a delimitation; *unit* designates, on the one hand, methodologically, elements which may be the subject of a classification (phonemes, syllables, signs etc.) and, on the other hand, qualitatively, a term belonging to a certain order. (2022: 258)

“There are few keywords that, being common to several lines of research, are not rooted in Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*.”²⁶

We shall conclude by pointing out that the scientific study of language facts reveals, beyond its scientificity, the interest in investigating that sphere in which man exists in and through words. We should also like to add that it is no coincidence that the Bronckarts’ book is subtitled *A science of language for a science of the human*. The quote they take from Ferdinand de Saussure also captures something essential about the man-language relationship:

“What is clear, as has been said a thousand times, is that man without language would perhaps be ‘man’, but not someone who would compare, even if approximately, to the man that we know and that we are, because language, on the one hand, was the most formidable tool of collective action, and on the other hand of individual education, the instrument without which the individual or the species would never be able to aspire developing, in any sense, their native faculties.”²⁷

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²⁶ Saussure, Ferdinand (de), 1998, p. 10.

²⁷ «Confér – 1, p. 155» in *op. cit.*, p. 526.

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ABBREVIATIONS (from the Saussurean corpus)

- Cours III – C *Linguistique générale. Cours de M. le professeur F. de Saussure. Cahiers d'Émile Constantin. Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, 58, 2005, pp. 71-289.
- Cours I – R *Premier cours de linguistique générale (1907) d'après les cahiers d'Albert Riedlinger*. Édité par E. Komatsu & G. Wolf, Oxford/Tokyo : Pergamon, 1996.
- CLG – E *Cours de linguistique générale*. Édition critique par R. Engler, tome I, Wiesbaden : Harrassowitz, 1968.
- ELG *Écrits de linguistique générale*. Édité par S. Bouquet & R. Engler, Paris : Gallimard, 2002.
- Cours II – Intro *Cours de linguistique générale (1908 – 1909). Introduction*. Édité par R. Godel, *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, 15, 1957, pp. 3-103.
- CLG/E2 *Cours de linguistique générale*. Édition critique par R. Engler tome II, Wiesbaden : Harrassowitz, 1974.
- Confér – 1 *Première conférence à l'Université de Genève (novembre 1891)* in : *Écrits de linguistique générale*, 2002, pp. 143-156.