

Course in General Linguistics

F. de Saussure

July 20–22, 2007

The only true object of study in linguistics is the language, considered in itself ad for its own sake. Those are the concluding words by de Saussure, or rather those by the editors, as the book itself is a posthumous editorial construction based on notes delivered by the author during a series of lectures. Saussure is supposed to be a revolutionary linguist, but of the revolutionary characteristics of his thoughts little remains to be sampled by the modern reader. Maybe because his revolution was so successful, as to have been fully assimilated in the uncontroversial core of the subject?

In many ways the rather short book reads like the conventional linguistic textbook. There is a full section on the phonetics of language and how the different sounds are in principle generated by the vocal tracts, along with a suitable phonetic alphabet to as faithfully as possible present the phonetic content of a spoken language, without getting into any technicalities. Furthermore a large part of the book is devoted to comparative linguistics, out of which the subject grew, as exemplified by Jones startling discovery of similarities between Sanskrit and Modern European languages. Comparative linguistics means in principle tracing the history of words diverging through several languages. Such studies are always amusing and presuppose a wide learning from the putative linguists in order to supply him with a sufficiently rich empirical basis. It goes without saying that the pleasure derived by such reflections is proportional with the a priori familiarity of the languages and their lexicographies on which such reflections are applied. Invariably changes documented among languages of which the reader knows nothing become rather abstract, not to say pointless.

But what are the deeper aspects of linguistics? Clearly how thought relate to language, and how language appear and is maintained. First of all is it possible to think without language? Or more precisely does language generate thought not only encoding it? On this Saussure does not have too much to say. He does point out that language as spoken, and this is the natural state of language, does not present sequences of discrete meaningful sounds, on the contrary, the subdivision of the stream of sounds into isolated components can only be made by a competent speaker who senses the meaning of what is being said, and of course in order to sense the meaning, you need to be able to make the necessary subdivisions in the first place. Clearly we are talking about a complex process involving feedbacks and acting at great speed. In fact the ability of the human mind to differentiate rapidly spoken speech is limited, and gaps of informations are necessarily created, which have to be interpolated by maintaining a firm sense of meaning. Sometimes of course this reconstruction makes slips, often comical, occasionally catastrophic.

The acquisition of a native language, on which the author does not comment at all, is a mystery, and probably very different from the way we would naively believe, misled as we may be by the way we acquire foreign languages. In particular one should not believe that language proceeds by naming objects, of systematically establishing arbitrary

relations between signs and what they signify. How indeed can you point at a tree and suggest that you thereby consider it as a general species of the concept of tree, and not just a particular sub-species, say as that of an oak, or maybe even just giving a proper name to a unique thing? The discipline of semiotics, is in fact more general than language based on speech, as speech is just one of the many different ways a language can manifest itself. That it has done so is clearly an evolutionary accident, which nevertheless has some profound consequences as to the actual human practice of language. All Saussure has to say on the topic is that the point of vocal sounds is to set up distinctions, and that the mind operates on those distinctions, as to be able to set up some kind of correspondence between those and those that correspond to distinct concepts. But what kind of correspondence is set up, and how it is being done, clearly in a multi-tiered process, Saussure prefers not to speak in his lectures, and maybe wisely so. One thing is clear, that language is made up of discrete words with fixed meaning, is misleading. As Collingwood remarks in his 'Principles of Art' words do not have fixed meanings, and as meaningful units, they should also be complemented by collections of words making up so called idiomatic expressions¹. Saussure does touch on the latter in his introduction of the concept of syntagmas, being as far as I can tell, some kind of tight syntactic relation between several words, eventually developing into irreducible units. What the author does is to make a strong point that words derive their meaning from other words in opposition. The plural in French is not quite the same as in Sanskrit, because the latter has preserved the notion of the dual, making the former a somewhat more restrictive entity. To a Swedish speaker, to give an example not in the book, the common word 'grandfather' is somewhat disturbingly vague, as such speakers are used to the distinction between maternal and paternal, and do in fact never employ a word that covers both. On the other hand, Swedish does not distinguish, like most other known languages, between cousins on the paternal and the maternal side (in fact as English not even by sex), and thus its speakers never feel the automatic desire to know the distinction, unless the situation explicitly calls for it.

Language is a human construction, but it is a collective such, and imperious to individual legislation. Language use is a convention, and a convention is an unwritten contract between individual speakers, which somehow, like fashion appears spontaneously. Of course there are academies and compilers of dictionaries, and even grammarians, who prescribe correct usage, and in fact a literary tradition with a large and sophisticated textual output, does impose itself on the spoken language, often rigidifying it as well as preserving many archaic features, yet such proscription ultimately derive from descriptions, and make laws and regulations retroactively. Thus language can be studied as something outside man himself, and thus give to linguistics the status of a science, as something objective and falsifiable.

All languages change, and the study of the evolution of language belongs to what Saussure would like to call its diachronic character to which he would like to oppose its synchronic, as language is to be thought of as an actual thing, a slice in time. Linguistics up to the end of the 19th century had mostly been obsessed with the diachronic aspects, making it into a historical science. What Saussure would like to stress is the need to study

¹ And indeed in the study of a foreign language, idiomatic expressions are learned along side more conventional lexicographic material

the very structure of language on a level deeper than that of the traditional grammarian. This is of course in the nature of a program, and thus in the book, comparatively little is done on the synchronic as opposed to the more traditional diachronic.

How do languages change? One should here make a distinction between external factors and internal, and of the two the latter is of course the most intriguing. It is easy enough to understand how a different language can impose itself on another, mostly by vocabulary, but why does a language left to itself change at all? For one thing change is usually very slow and very marginal. The very arbitrariness of the signs in relation to the signified makes for a conservative tradition, because there is after all very little incentive to change one arbitrary choice for another, and in fact the only way signs can be transmitted is by tradition, i.e. copying, and copying by its very nature is slow to change. But of course everything is not arbitrary in a language, there are patterns or as Saussure prefers to say analogies. New words are formed on the patterns provided by paradigms. This is of course a powerful way of having language evolve, and the inherent logic such analogies bring to the otherwise amorphous structure of a collection of signs, lies at the root of the grammatical structure of a language.

Language is spoken, in fact it cannot be understood unless this primary aspect of it is fully understood. The spoken sound is volatile and hence subject to changes, in fact so pervasive are those changes over time that general linguistic laws have been formulated, and which to their discoverers must have been very exciting analogies to physical laws allowing an almost deductive approach enabling changes to be calculated in advance. Those changes do not appear simultaneously, but just as fashions, they have specific origins, and for some mysterious reasons, like fashions, they catch on and spread as waves geographically. Of course different changes occur at different locations, so at each point in time, one can in principle subdivide a region in subregions corresponding to different dialectal usage. But of course a dialect consists of many different usages and phenomena, and the boundaries of each may not coincide. This makes it very hard to delineate specific dialects, unless for various reasons, there happen to be a marked correlation between the different boundaries. Now the distinction between a language and a dialect is a notoriously difficult one. One says that two people speak different dialects of the same language if they can basically understand each other, but in practice a geographical expanse presents a continuous deformation of dialects, so while in principle any two adjacent communities may understand each other, more distantly spaced may not, illustrating that understanding being both a reflexive and hopefully symmetric relationship is not a transitive one. In fact there is on the ground a continuous deformation between Dutch, Low German and High German, while politically of course the official languages of Dutch and German have been codified, making the political boundary also a language boundary. As civilization and communication within it, favours unification, this continuous merging is being phased away. Thus although the same phenomenon is duplicated between southern France and Italy, as well on the Scandinavian peninsula, there are also many cases when there are abrupt changes, such as between German speakers and Slavic, where there at some time may have been intermediate forms, but which now have disappeared. It is of course a big mixture, reflecting the history of subsequent conquests and explorations.

Language is as far as the human animal is concerned both very diversifying as well

as unifying. On the level of the individual, given the right upbringing, there are no racial obstructions of learning the local language as a mother tongue. As Saussure remarks, a Negro brought up in France, speaks French as well as any Native Frenchman, there being no racial differences neither in the vocal apparatus, as in the wiring of the brain. On this issue Saussure is very clear, when at the time there probably was much wilful obfuscation. On the other hand language barriers make for very powerful ethnic identities, and with those very different cultures and ways of thinking. This is to speak the other side of the coin. Nowadays ethnic diversity is prized partly for its own sake and partly for the benefits it may give human civilization, however, ethnic diversity has developed thanks to isolation and repulsion of strangers - barbarians, in the words of the ancient Greeks. This diversification is of course part of the general picture, offset by a general desire of intra-communication, the latter, especially strong within well-defined ethnic communities, also tends to unify language through its changes by analogies, counteracting the splitting effect of blind and arbitrary phonetic drift, according to Saussure. Deeper than language is the sense of reason to which the most diverse people can make a common appeal, and analogies in language is nothing but reason manifested, and hence intuitively so understandable.

One traditional obsession of linguistics is the reconstruction of Proto languages, Proto-Indo-European being the most studied. The purpose of such exercises is not, as Saussure points out, to reconstruct in order to revive, in fact reconstructions vary from the almost absolute certain to the most speculative, and the hope of ever being able to reconstruct the full language is of course forlorn. Nevertheless the exercises are well worth the trouble, as they illustrate the progress of the comparative analysis, the methodology on which they are based, and give many linguistic insights. (In particular one notes that Proto-Indo-European had a rather limited collection of vowels, double consonants never appeared, nor did prepositions, the language being very inflected, a feature which has been lost among most of its descendants.). But when it comes to use those reconstructions in order to do anthropological archeology, one enters upon very speculative missions, Saussure warns.

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