


# COURSE IN GENERAL LINGUISTICS

FERDINAND de SAUSSURE

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## Translator's Introduction

Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* occupies a place of unique importance in the history of Western thinking about man in society. It is a key text not only within the development of linguistics but also in the formation of that broader intellectual movement of the twentieth century known as 'structuralism'. With the sole exception of Wittgenstein, no thinker has had as profound an influence on the modern view of *homo loquens* as Saussure.

The revolution Saussure ushered in has rightly been described as 'Copernican'. For instead of men's words being seen as peripheral to men's understanding of reality, men's understanding of reality came to be seen as revolving about their social use of verbal signs. In the *Cours de linguistique générale* we see this new approach clearly articulated for the first time. Words are not vocal labels which have come to be attached to things and qualities already given in advance by Nature, or to ideas already grasped independently by the human mind. On the contrary languages themselves, collective products of social interaction, supply the essential conceptual frameworks for men's analysis of reality and, simultaneously, the verbal equipment for their description of it. The concepts we use are creations of the language we speak.

Saussure's standing as the founder of modern linguistics remains unchallenged more than half a century after his death. It is based on two facts. One fact is that Saussure, although only one among many distinguished linguists of his day, was the first to recognise the particular range of theoretical questions which had to be answered if linguistics was ever to take its place among the sciences. The other fact is that Saussure himself proposed answers to those questions which have remained either the basis or the point of departure for all subsequent linguistic theory within the academic discipline which thereafter claimed the designation 'linguistics'.

This dual achievement suffices to explain Saussure's pivotal place in the evolution of language studies. But he plays a no less crucial role when his work is seen in a wider cultural context. For the founder of modern linguistics at the same time founded semiology, the general science of signs, within which linguistics was to be one special branch. In so doing, Saussure opened up a new approach to the study of many

other human patterns of behaviour. It was an approach later to be exploited by theorists in such diverse fields as art, architecture, philosophy, literary criticism and social anthropology. The implications of Saussure's technique for dealing with linguistic analysis extend far beyond the boundaries of language, in ways which make the *Cours de linguistique générale* without doubt one of the most far-reaching works concerning the study of human cultural activities to have been published at any time since the Renaissance.

\* \* \*

Saussure's proposals for the establishment of linguistics as an independent science may – at the risk of making them sound rather unexciting – be summarised as follows. He rejected the possibility of an all-embracing science of language, which would deal simultaneously with physiological, sociological, philosophical and psychological aspects of the subject. Instead, he proposed to cut through the perplexing maze of existing approaches to the study of linguistic phenomena by setting up a unified discipline, based upon a single, clearly defined concept: that of the *linguistic sign*. The essential feature of Saussure's linguistic sign is that, being intrinsically arbitrary, it can be identified only by contrast with coexisting signs of the same nature, which together constitute a structured system. By taking this position, Saussure placed modern linguistics in the vanguard of twentieth-century structuralism.

It was a position which committed Saussure to drawing a radical distinction between *diachronic* (or evolutionary) linguistics and *synchronic* (or static) linguistics, and giving priority to the latter. For words, sounds and constructions connected solely by processes of historical development over the centuries cannot possibly, according to Saussure's analysis, enter into structural relations with one another, any more than Napoleon's France and Caesar's Rome can be structurally united under one and the same political system.

Truism though this may now seem, there is no doubt that in arguing along these lines Saussure was swimming against the prevailing tide in language studies throughout his lifetime. For the great philological achievements of the nineteenth century had all been founded upon a historical and comparativist approach to language. Late-nineteenth-century philology was as uncompromisingly 'evolutionary' in outlook as Darwinian biology. Saussure was the first to question whether the historical study of languages could possibly provide a satisfactory foundation for a science of linguistics. The question was as profound as it was startling: for the assumption most of Saussure's contemporaries made was that historical philology already *had* provided the only possible scientific foundation. They believed, as Max Müller optimistically put it in the 1860s, that linguists were already dealing with the

facts of language just as scientifically as 'the astronomer treats the stars of heaven, or the botanist the flowers of the field'. In Saussure's view, nothing could have been more profoundly mistaken.

Where historical philology had failed, in Saussure's opinion, was in simply not recognising the structural nature of the linguistic sign. As a result, it had concentrated upon features which were merely superficially and adventitiously describable in mankind's recorded linguistic history. The explanations philological historians provided were in the final analysis simply appeals to the past. They did not – and could not – offer any analysis of what a language is from the viewpoint of its current speakers. Whereas for Saussure it was *only* by adopting the users' point of view that a language could be seen to be a coherently organised structure, amenable to scientific study. For linguistic signs, Saussure insisted, do not exist independently of the complex system of contrasts implicitly recognised in the day-to-day vocal interactions of a given community of speakers.

Similarly, in all other fields of human activity where signs are arbitrary, it is the system of structural contrasts implemented in human interaction which must become the focus of attention for any scientific semiological investigation. For signs are not physical objects. We cannot study them as we can plants, or animals, or chemical substances. Signs are not to be equated with sounds uttered, or marks on paper, or gestures, or visual configurations of various kinds. These are merely the vehicles by which signs are expressed. To confuse the two would make it impossible to establish a science of signs at all, in Saussure's estimation, whether in the domain of language or any other.

Nor, although the terminology of the *Cours* itself falls short of ideal consistency on this point, are signs to be equated simply with the signals (*signifiants*) by which they are identified. Each sign is a dual entity, uniting signal with signification (*signifié*). Neither facet of this duality exists independently of the other, just as no sign exists independently of the other signs united in the same system of structural contrasts. A language (*langue*) is for Saussure this whole system which alone makes it possible to identify and describe constituent parts: it is not a whole fortuitously built up out of parts already existing in their own right. Linguistic signs are therefore not like individual bricks, put together in a certain way to form an architectural structure. Unlike bricks, they are not separate self-contained units. Except as parts of the total structure, they do not even exist, any more than the circumference or the radii of a circle exist without the circle.

Thus to treat words as linguistic units somehow capable of surviving through time from Latin down to modern Italian is, for Saussure, no more than a historian's metaphor. It is a metaphor which does no harm provided we recognise it as a projection based on our own

acquaintance, as language-users, with the reality of the linguistic sign. But it is not a metaphor which can provide us with any genuine understanding of the reality, nor any foundation for a scientific account of it either.

This is not the place to discuss how far Saussure succeeded in answering his own searching questions about language and human signs in general, or in providing modern linguistics with the satisfactory theoretical basis he thought it lacked. These are issues which have been and still are controversial. There is no doubt, however, that it was Saussure who was responsible not merely for sparking the controversy, but also for giving that controversy the particular intellectual shape which it has taken ever since. Whether or not it is the right shape is another matter. But anyone who wishes to understand modern linguistics needs to be able to recognise that shape. In just the same way, although we may not agree with the terms in which the controversy between anomalists and analogists was formulated in Classical antiquity, we need to be able to recognise the shape that controversy took in order to appreciate both the achievements and the limitations of the linguistic theorising of that age.

\* \* \*

When Saussure died in 1913, he left no manuscript setting out his theories in detail. What was published three years later as the *Cours de linguistique générale* was put together by his colleagues, mainly from lecture notes taken by his pupils. The notes in question have now – belatedly – been published in full by R. Engler in his critical edition of the text (1967–74). On the evidence of this material, it has sometimes been suggested that by no means all the ideas in the *Cours de linguistique générale* are a faithful reflexion of Saussure's.

Understandably, a great deal of the blame has been laid at the door of Saussure's editors. What is beyond dispute is that they subsequently admitted to having failed to represent Saussure's view of the phoneme correctly. What is also beyond dispute is that since the publication of the original material on which their text was based, and the detailed analysis of this material by Saussurean scholars, there is ample scope for doubt or scepticism on a variety of points. Indeed, it seems clear that in certain instances the editorial treatment of the original notes, far from clarifying what Saussure said, introduces an element of uncertainty as to the correct interpretation. Even the much-quoted final sentence of the *Cours* turns out to be an editorial pronouncement for which there is no specific textual authority in the manuscripts.

It is, however, a somewhat crude critical procedure constantly to compare the published text of the *Cours* with the available notes, and complain that the editors have misrepresented Saussure every time a discrepancy is found. There may be discrepancies both of detail and of

arrangement. But what they prove is another matter. If we take the published text as a whole, there is no convincing reason for supposing that it seriously misrepresents the kind of synthesis towards which Saussure himself was working when he died. That synthesis is necessarily hypothetical, a projection of what might have happened had Saussure lived. But if its validity is questioned on quite basic points, then we are driven to one or other of two equally unlikely conclusions. Either Saussure's closest colleagues and sympathisers were not able fully to understand his thinking on linguistic topics; or else Saussure himself had inadvertently misled them, while at the same time managing not to mislead his pupils.

One comes back in the end to the fact that, whatever its imperfections, this publication was the authoritative text of Saussurean structuralism for a whole generation of scholars, and the instrument through which an entirely new approach to linguistic analysis was established. Thereby it acquires in its own right – 'mistakes' and all – a place in the history of modern thought which cannot retrospectively be denied to it.

This is the text, therefore, which has been taken as the basis of the present translation. Published by Payot in Paris in 1916, it had a second (slightly revised) edition in 1922, a third in 1931, a fourth in 1949, and a fifth in 1955. The standard pagination, adopted since the second edition, is indicated in the text published here. Current reprintings of the Payot edition unfortunately perpetuate overlooked printers' errors from previous editions, and these have been corrected in the text here translated. A new Index replaces the incomplete one given in the Payot editions.

\* \* \*

What Saussure thought of translators and translation does not emerge at all clearly from the pages of the *Cours*. It is arguable that if translation is taken as demanding linguistic equivalence between texts, then the Saussurean position must be that translation is impossible. But even those inclined to take a more sanguine or a more practical view of translatability must concede that Saussure has on the whole been poorly served by his English translators and commentators. To demonstrate this in detail would be both an invidious and a dreary undertaking, which will not be attempted here. Suffice it to say that the varied catalogue of mistranslations available for public inspection runs the whole gamut from the trivial to the grossly misleading (*langage* rendered as 'speech'). On crossing the Channel Saussure has been made to utter such blatantly unSaussurean pronouncements as 'language is a form, not a substance'. Surprisingly few have seen that it is not at all necessary to make heavy weather of the distinction between *langage* and *langue* provided one respects the

important semantic difference in English between using the word *language* with and without an article. It is small wonder that even Saussure's major theses on the subject of language are poorly understood in the English-speaking academic world. In particular, one is led to wonder whether this may not have played some part in the patently ill-informed view taken by those American generativists who dismiss Saussure's view of language structure as 'naive' (Chomsky) and lacking in any conception of 'rule-governed creativity'.

The new English translation presented here is intended primarily for the reader who is not a specialist in linguistics, but who wishes to acquaint himself in detail with a text which stands as one of the landmarks in the intellectual history of modern times. It is a text which is hard going for the non-specialist, for the lectures on which it is based were given to students who already had an extensive knowledge of Indo-European languages and comparative philology, as well as being able to speak French. The examples the *Cours* uses constantly presuppose this background. To have added footnotes explaining in detail the relevance of each example would have been a Herculean task, resulting in a corpus of notes longer than the text itself. Fortunately, most of Saussure's examples are merely illustrative: few are actually essential to the points he makes. This has made it possible to reduce glosses and comments upon examples to a minimum, on the assumption that a reader who will find this translation useful is not likely to be interested in a critical examination of Saussure's exemplificatory material.

However, a few comments on the problems involved in translating Saussure's technical terminology may be in order here. Some relate to changes in usage since Saussure's day. For example, it would nowadays be misleading to translate *phonème* by *phoneme*, since in the terminology currently accepted in Anglo-American linguistics the term *phoneme* designates a structural unit, whereas it is clear that for Saussure the term *phonème* designates in the first instance a unit belonging to *la parole* (whatever his editors may have thought, and in spite of remarks in the *Cours* which – rightly or wrongly – are held to have been influential in establishing the modern theory of phonemes). Similarly, Saussure's *phonologie* does not correspond to what is nowadays termed *phonology*, nor his *phonétique* to *phonetics*.

Again, *acoustique* no longer matches *acoustic* in its technical use in phonetics. Saussure was teaching long before the invention of the sound spectrograph. The term *acoustique* in the *Cours* appears to relate primarily to that section of the 'speech circuit' where the hearer's perception of sounds occurs. Consequently, *auditory* is preferable as a general equivalent. But this does not automatically resolve all the problems connected with translating *acoustique*.

In particular, there is the expression *image acoustique*, perhaps the

most unhappy choice in the whole range of Saussurean terminology. In practice, as teachers of linguistics are well aware, it is a serious obstacle to students in their initial attempts to understand Saussure's thought. The editors of the *Cours* themselves express serious reservations about it (p. [98] footnote). In an English translation, the problems increase. For 'acoustic image' is more or less nonsense by present-day usage, while 'sound-image' unfortunately suggests some combination of the spoken and the written word (as if words were stored in the brain in quasi-graphic form). Insofar as it is clear exactly what is meant by *image acoustique*, it appears to refer to a unit which supposedly plays a part in our capacity to identify auditory impressions (e.g. of sounds, tunes) and to rehearse them mentally (as in interior monologue, humming a tune silently, etc.). It is thus an auditory generalisation which the mind is able to construct and retain, just as it is able to construct and retain visual images of things seen or imagined. The English expression which seems best to designate this is 'sound pattern'.

Finally, some of the central problems of interpretation of the *Cours de linguistique générale* hinge upon the fact that the word *langue* seems to be used in a variety of ways. Critics of Saussure may take this variation as evidence that Saussure had not properly sorted out in his own mind various possible ways of conceptualising linguistic phenomena. They thus see the term *langue* as conflating important distinctions which should have been more carefully drawn and might have been if Saussure had lived longer. How to translate *langue* is consequently a question which cannot be kept altogether separate from one's analysis of the theorising underlying the *Cours* as published.

Engler's *Lexique de la terminologie saussurienne* distinguishes uses of *langue* under no less than ten different headings; but they fall into two main types. One type comprises those instances where *langue* appears to have its usual everyday meaning (*la langue française* 'the French language'). The other comprises those instances in which *langue* clearly has the status of a special technical term in Saussurean linguistics. To have at least that distinction clearly drawn in a translation would doubtless be particularly helpful to readers making their first acquaintance with Saussure's theories. Unfortunately, there are two difficulties in the way. One is that it is not always obvious whether we are dealing with a technical or a non-technical use of *langue*. The other is that in some passages of the text a more abstract view is taken of linguistic phenomena than is taken in other passages. The result is that even the technical uses of the term *langue* sometimes seem to be at odds with one another. To what extent this is due to unwitting vacillation on the part of Saussure or his editors is a matter for debate.

In view of these problems, an easy way out for the translator – and perhaps a justifiable way in the circumstances – would be to fix upon a single all-purpose translation of the word *langue* and stick to it throughout, leaving the reader to cope with the complexities of interpretation for himself. That is not, however, the course which has been followed here, since the effect seemed to be to render Saussure's ideas more difficult of access to a non-specialist English reader than they need be; and that would have defeated the basic purpose of this translation.

Instead, an attempt has been made to indicate the full range of implications associated with the term *langue* by using different renderings in different contexts. While *the language* or *a language* are often perfectly adequate English translations, there are also many instances where expressions such as *linguistic structure* and *linguistic system* bring out much more clearly in English the particular point that is being made.

Varying the translation of a key theoretical term may perhaps be objected to in principle on grounds of inconsistency. But the inconsistency in this case is superficial; whereas in compensation one gains the possibility of expressing nuances and emphases in Saussure's thought which would otherwise risk being lost to the English reader.

\* \* \*

I owe a debt of gratitude to a number of Oxford colleagues who have willingly answered queries on particular points arising from the text of the *Cours*, or discussed more general questions of interpretation of Saussure's views. They include Mr E. Ardener, Mr R. A. W. Bladon, Professor A. E. Davies, Professor P. F. Ganz, Mr H. R. Harré, Dr P. Mühlhäusler and Dr L. Seiffert. Without their help, my attempt to make Saussure available to present-day English readers would have had even more flaws than doubtless remain. It might well have had less if I had always taken their advice.

R. H.

## Preface to the First Edition

[7]

Ferdinand de Saussure's criticisms of the inadequate tenets and methods characteristic of the linguistics which prevailed during the period of his own intellectual development we heard from his own lips on many occasions. All his life he pursued a determined search for guiding principles to direct the course of his thinking through that chaos. But it was not until 1906, when he had succeeded Joseph Wertheimer at the University of Geneva, that he was able to expound his own views. They were the mature product of many years' reflexion. He gave three courses of lectures on general linguistics, in 1906–1907, 1908–1909 and 1910–1911. The requirements of the curriculum, however, obliged him to devote half of each course to a historical and descriptive survey of the Indo-European languages, and the essential core of his subject was thus considerably reduced.

All those fortunate enough to attend these seminal lectures were disappointed when no book subsequently appeared. After his death, when Mme de Saussure kindly made her husband's papers available to us, we hoped to find something which gave a faithful or at least adequate reflexion of those masterly courses. We envisaged the possibility of a publication based upon a straightforward collation of Saussure's own notes, together with those taken by his students. This expectation was to be frustrated. We found hardly anything which corresponded to what his pupils had taken down. Saussure never kept the rough notes he used for delivering his lectures. In his desk drawers we found only old jottings which, although not without value, could not be put together and integrated with the subject matter of the three lecture courses.

[8]

This came as an even greater disappointment to us inasmuch as we had been almost entirely prevented by our own academic duties from attending these last courses of lectures, which marked a phase in Ferdinand de Saussure's career no less brilliant than the already far off days of his *Mémoire sur les voyelles*.<sup>1</sup>

There was thus no alternative but to rely on the notes taken by the students who had attended the three courses of lectures. We were

<sup>1</sup> Saussure first made his mark in the philological world at the age of 21 with the publication of a study entitled *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* (*Dissertation upon the original vowel system of the Indo-European languages*). (Translator's note)



given very full notes on the first two courses by Messrs. Louis Caille, Léopold Gautier, Paul Regard and Albert Riedlinger; and on the third and most important by Mme Albert Sechehaye and Messrs. George Dégallier and Francis Joseph. From M. Louis Brüttsch we had notes on one special point. To all those mentioned we owe a debt of sincere gratitude. We should also like to express our warmest thanks to the eminent Romance scholar M. Jules Ronjat, who was kind enough to go through the manuscript before it went to the printer, and give us the benefit of his valuable advice.

What was to be done with the material available? A preliminary critical analysis was indispensable. For each course of lectures and every individual point, a comparison of all the versions was necessary in order to establish what Saussure's views had been. The notes gave us no more than echoes of his thought, and these were not always in unison. For the first two courses we enlisted the collaboration of one of Saussure's pupils who had followed his thinking most closely, M. A. Riedlinger. His help was of great assistance to us. For the third course, the same detailed work of collating and putting the material in order was undertaken by one of us, A. Sechehaye.

[9] But what was the next move to be? The form of oral delivery is often difficult to reconcile with the requirements of a book, and this posed serious problems. Furthermore, Saussure was one of those thinkers for whom thinking is a constant process of intellectual renewal. His ideas developed in all kinds of ways and yet managed to avoid inconsistency. To publish everything we had as it stood would have been impossible. The inevitable repetitions which resulted from extemporisation, the overlaps and the variations of wording would have made such a publication a hotchpotch. On the other hand, to publish only one (but which?) of the three courses would have meant sacrificing the valuable material contained in the other two. Even the third course of lectures, although more definitive than its predecessors, would not in itself have given a complete picture of Saussure's theories and methods.

One suggestion was that we should simply publish without emendation certain excerpts of particular importance. We found the idea attractive at first; but it soon became evident that this would fail to do justice to Saussure's thought. It would have dismembered a system which needed to be seen as a whole in order to be appreciated.

We eventually hit upon a bolder solution which was also, in our view, a more rational one. We would attempt a reconstruction, a synthesis. It would be based upon the third course of lectures, but make use of all the material we had, including Saussure's own notes. This would involve a task of re-creation. It would be by no means a straightforward one, since complete objectivity was essential. We should need to identify every essential idea by reference to the system

as a whole, analyse it in depth, and express it in a definitive form, unobscured by the variations and hesitations which naturally accompany oral delivery. We should then need to put each idea in its proper place, and present all the various parts in an order corresponding to the author's intentions, even if the intentions were not apparent but could only be inferred.

The book we now offer with all due diffidence to the academic world and to everyone interested in linguistics is the result of this attempt at synthesis and reconstitution.

Our main aim has been to present an organic whole, omitting nothing which could contribute to the sense of unity. But in that very respect we lay ourselves open to criticism on two different counts. [10]

In the first place, we may be told that this 'unity' is not complete. Saussure in his teaching never claimed to cover the whole of linguistics, or to throw equal light on every aspect of the subject. In practical terms this would have been an impossibility, and in any case his interests lay elsewhere. His main concern was with the fundamentals of the subject, to which he applied certain basic principles of his own. They are present throughout his work, running through it like the warp of a well woven cloth of varied texture. He does not attempt to cover wide areas of linguistics, but chooses topics where he can either provide his principles with particularly striking applications, or else test them against some rival theory.

This is why certain disciplines are scarcely mentioned – semantics, for example. But we do not feel that such gaps weaken the architecture of the whole. The absence of a 'linguistics of speech' is more serious. This had been promised to those who attended the third course of lectures, and it would doubtless have occupied a prominent place in later series. The reason why that promise was never kept is only too well known. Here, we confined ourselves to collecting together Saussure's elusive hints concerning this barely outlined project, and putting them in their natural place in the scheme. We felt we had no brief to go further.

On the other hand, we may perhaps be criticised for including parts which deal with ground already covered before Saussure's day. But in a survey of such scope as this, not everything can be expected to be new; and since principles already familiar are necessary for an understanding of the whole, it is questionable whether it would have been right for us to omit them. Thus the chapter on sound changes includes points already made elsewhere, and perhaps in a more definitive form. None the less, this section contains quite a number of original and valuable details. Moreover, it is evident even from a superficial reading that omitting it would have meant losing the contrast which is essential for an understanding of the principles on which Saussure based his system of static linguistics.

[11] We are fully aware of the responsibility we owe not only to our readers but also to Saussure himself, who perhaps might not have authorised the publication of this text.

We accept this responsibility, and it is ours alone. Will critics be able to distinguish between Saussure and our interpretation of Saussure? We hope that any blame may be laid at our door, rather than reflect upon the reputation of someone whose memory we cherish.

Geneva, July 1915

Charles BALLY, Albert SECHEHAYE.

### Preface to the Second Edition

This second edition does not depart in any essential respect from the text of the first. The editors have confined their attention to certain points of detail, which have been altered in the interests of clarity and precision.

Ch. B. A.S.

### Preface to the Third Edition

Apart from a few minor corrections, this edition does not differ from the second.

Ch. B. A.S.

## INTRODUCTION

[13]

### CHAPTER I

## A Brief Survey of the History of Linguistics

The science which has grown up around linguistic facts passed through three successive phases before coming to terms with its one and only true object of study.

First of all came what was called 'grammar'. This discipline, first instituted by the Greeks and continued mainly by the French, is based on logic. It offers no scientific or objective approach to a language as such. Grammar aims solely at providing rules which distinguish between correct and incorrect forms. It is a prescriptive discipline, far removed from any concern with impartial observation, and its outlook is inevitably a narrow one.

Next came philology. At Alexandria there had been a 'philological' school, but the term is chiefly applied to the scientific movement inaugurated by Friedrich August Wolf in 1777, which still thrives today. Linguistic structure, however, is not the central concern of philology. Philology seeks primarily to establish, interpret and comment upon texts. This main preoccupation leads to a concern with literary history, customs, institutions, etc.. In all these areas, philology applies its own method, which is that of criticism. Insofar as it touches upon linguistic questions, these arise principally in the comparison of texts of different periods, in establishing the language characteristic of each writer, and in deciphering and interpreting inscriptions couched in some archaic or problematic language. Such research undoubtedly paved the way for historical linguistics: Ritschl's work on Plautus may be described as 'linguistic'. But in this field philological criticism has one failing: it is too slavishly subservient to the written language, and so neglects the living language. Furthermore, its concern is almost exclusively with Greek and Roman antiquity.

[14]

The third period began when it was discovered that languages could be compared with one another. That discovery ushered in comparative philology, or 'comparative grammar'. In 1816, in a work entitled *The Sanskrit Conjugation System*, Franz Bopp studied the connexions between Sanskrit, Germanic, Greek, Latin, etc.. Bopp was not the first to observe these affinities or to consider that all these languages belonged to the same family. In that respect Bopp had been forestalled, notably by the English orientalist W. Jones (d. 1794). But isolated statements here and there do not prove that in 1816 there was already a general understanding of the significance and importance of the facts in question. Although Bopp cannot be credited with having discovered the relationship between Sanskrit and various languages of Europe and Asia, he did see that connexions between related languages could furnish the data for an autonomous science. What was new was the elucidation of one language by reference to a related language, explaining the forms of one by appeal to the forms of the other.

It is doubtful whether Bopp would have been able to inaugurate his science – or at least to inaugurate it so quickly – without the discovery of Sanskrit. Sanskrit, as a third source of evidence beside Greek and Latin, provided a broader and sounder basis for study. In addition, as [15] luck would have it, Sanskrit happens to be exceptionally well situated to provide illuminating linguistic comparisons.

For example, suppose we take the paradigms of Latin *genus* and Greek *génos*:

*genus, generis, genere, genera, generum, etc.*  
*génos, géneos, géneī, génea, genéōn, etc.*

These series of forms tell us little, either on their own or when compared with one another. But they tell us a great deal as soon as we set beside them the corresponding Sanskrit forms:

*ḡanas, ḡanasas, ḡanasī, ḡanassu, ḡanasām, etc.*

At a glance we now can see the relationship between the Greek and Latin paradigms. On the hypothesis – which seems explanatorily a productive one – that Sanskrit *ḡanas* represents the primitive form, one concludes that *s* fell in the Greek forms *géne(s)os* etc. wherever it occurred between vowels. A further conclusion is that under the same conditions *s* became *r* in Latin. Moreover, as regards grammatical analysis, the Sanskrit paradigm makes it evident that the stem of these forms is the stable and clearly isolable element *ḡanas-*. Only early Latin and early Greek ever had the primitive system preserved in Sanskrit. So it emerges that the maintenance of Proto-Indo-European *s* in all cases is what makes Sanskrit illuminating in this instance. It is true that in other respects Sanskrit remains less faithful

to the original prototype forms: it plays havoc with the original vowel system, for example. But in general the primitive elements which it maintains are vital for purposes of reconstruction. By chance it happens to be a language which is remarkably useful in throwing light on those languages related to it.

Along with Bopp there emerged straight away a number of linguists of distinction: Jacob Grimm, the founder of Germanic studies (his *German Grammar* was published 1822 – 1836); Pott, whose etymological researches provided linguists with a great deal of material; Kuhn, who worked both in linguistics and in comparative mythology, the [16] Sanskritists Benfey and Aufrecht, and others.

Finally, among the later representatives of that school, special mention must be made of Max Müller, G. Curtius and A. Schleicher. All three, in various ways, made important contributions to comparative studies. Max Müller popularised the subject in a series of brilliant if somewhat superficial lectures (*Lectures on the Science of Language*, 1861). Curtius, a distinguished philologist, known principally as the author of *Principles of Greek Etymology* (1879), was one of the first to reconcile comparative grammar with classical philology. Classical philologists had looked upon the progress made by the comparativists with less than enthusiasm, and the feeling had become mutual. Schleicher, finally, was the first to attempt a codification of the results of research on points of detail. His *Concise Comparative Grammar of the Indo-Germanic Languages* (1861) represents a systematisation of the science founded by Bopp. It is a volume which has remained of great value for many years, and it gives a better idea than any other book of what the comparativist school which dominated this first period of Indo-European linguistics stood for.

But although no one would deny that the comparativists succeeded in opening up a new and profitable field of investigation, they did not manage to found a true science of linguistics. For they never took very great care to define exactly what it was they were studying. And until this elementary step is taken, no science can hope to establish its own methods.

The first mistake made by the comparative philologists was one which contains the seeds of all their other mistakes. Their investigations, which were in any case limited to the Indo-European languages, show a failure to inquire into the significance of the linguistic comparisons they established and the connexions they discovered. Comparative grammar was exclusively comparative, instead of being [17] historical. Comparison is no doubt essential for all historical reconstruction. But in itself comparison does not warrant drawing conclusions. And the right conclusion was all the more likely to elude the comparativists because they looked upon the development of two languages much as a naturalist might look upon the growth of two

plants. Schleicher, for example, always starts from Proto-Indo-European, which seems at first sight a strictly historical approach; but he does not hesitate to treat Greek *e* and *o* as two 'grades' (*Stufen*) of the same vowel. This is because Sanskrit has a system of vowel alternations which suggests this notion of grades. So Schleicher takes Greek *o* as a reinforced vocalic grade of *e*, in the same way as he takes Sanskrit *ā* to be a reinforced grade of *ā*; rather as if these grades were stages that vowels would go through separately but in parallel development in each language, like plants of the same species passing through the same phases of growth. Whereas in fact we are dealing here with a Proto-Indo-European alternation which has different reflexes in Greek and Sanskrit. There is no necessary parity between the results in the grammars of these two languages (cf. p. [217] ff.).

An exclusively comparative approach of this kind brings with it a whole series of mistaken notions. They have no basis in reality and fail to reflect the conditions which do obtain in language everywhere. At that time languages were looked upon as belonging to a province of their own, a fourth realm of nature. Hence forms of reasoning were permissible which would have shocked any other science. Nowadays, one cannot read even a few lines of what was written by the linguists of that period without being struck by their bizarre ways of thinking about language and the bizarre terms they used in order to validate them.

[18] From a methodological point of view, however, it is of some interest to be acquainted with these errors. The mistakes a science makes in its initial stages present a magnified picture of the mistakes made by individuals starting out on scientific research. We shall have occasion to point out various instances of this later.

Not until about 1870 did anyone begin to inquire into the conditions governing the life of languages. It was then realised that correspondences between languages reflect only one aspect of language, and that comparison is only a tool, a method to be employed for reconstructing the facts.

Linguistics properly so called, in which comparison was relegated to its proper place, emerged from the study of the Romance and Germanic languages. Romance studies, founded by Diez, whose *Grammar of the Romance languages* dates from 1836-1838, contributed in particular to bringing linguistics nearer to its true object of study. The fact is that Romance scholars found themselves in a privileged position not enjoyed by their Indo-European colleagues. Latin, the prototype of the Romance languages, was itself an attested language. Furthermore, the wealth of available texts made it possible to follow the evolution of the different varieties of Romance in some detail. These two circumstances restricted the scope of speculation and gave Romance studies a particularly matter-of-fact approach. Germanic scholars were in a

similar position. Although Proto-Germanic is not itself attested, the evolution of those languages descended from it can be followed over the course of many centuries through copious documentary evidence. So those who studied Germanic, being in more direct contact with reality, came to look at language in a different way from the early Indo-European scholars.

Some first steps in the right direction were taken by the American scholar Whitney, author of *The Life of Language* (1875). Shortly afterwards a new school arose, the Neogrammarians (*Junggrammatiker*), whose leading figures were all Germans: K. Brugmann, H. Osthoff, the Germanic specialists W. Braune, E. Sievers, H. Paul, and the Slavist Leskien, and others. The achievement of the Neogrammarians was to place all the results of comparative philology in a historical perspective, so that linguistic facts were connected in their natural sequence. The Neogrammarians no longer looked upon a language as an organism developing of its own accord, but saw it as a product of the collective mind of a linguistic community. At the same time, there emerged a realisation of the errors and inadequacies of the concepts associated with philology and comparative grammar.<sup>1</sup> However, great as were the advances made by the Neogrammarians, it cannot be said that they shed light upon the fundamental problems of general linguistics, which still await a solution today. [19]

<sup>1</sup> The Neogrammarians, being more down-to-earth than the comparativists, attacked the comparativists' terminology, especially its illogical metaphors. From then on it became unacceptable to say 'the language does this or does that', to speak of the 'life of the language', and so on, because a language is not an entity, and exists only in its users. However, such an attitude must not be carried too far. What matters is that people should not be misled. There are certain figurative ways of speaking which are indispensable. To require that one should restrict oneself to a linguistic terminology corresponding to linguistic realities is to presuppose that we have already solved the mysteries surrounding these realities. But this is far from being the case. So in what follows we shall not hesitate occasionally to use expressions which were formerly censured as inappropriate.

## Data and Aims of Linguistics: Connexions with Related Sciences

Linguistics takes for its data in the first instance all manifestations of human language. Primitive peoples and civilised nations, early periods, classical periods, and periods of decadence, are all to be included. In each case due account must be taken not only of what is considered linguistically correct and 'elegant', but of all forms of expression. Furthermore, since the linguist is very often in no position to make his own linguistic observations at first hand, he cannot afford to neglect written texts, for these alone will acquaint him with the languages of far-off times or places.

The aims of linguistics will be:

- (a) to describe all known languages and record their history. This involves tracing the history of language families and, as far as possible, reconstructing the parent languages of each family;
- (b) to determine the forces operating permanently and universally in all languages, and to formulate general laws which account for all particular linguistic phenomena historically attested;
- (c) to delimit and define linguistics itself.

[21] Linguistics has very close connexions with other sciences. Sometimes they provide linguistics with data and sometimes linguistics provides them with data. The boundaries between linguistics and its neighbouring sciences are not always clearly drawn. For example, linguistics must be carefully distinguished from ethnography and prehistory, both of them disciplines in which linguistic facts may be utilised as evidence. It must likewise be distinguished from anthropology, which studies mankind as a species; whereas language is a social phenomenon. But ought linguistics on that account to be incorporated in sociology? What are the relations between linguistics and social

psychology? In the final analysis, where languages are concerned everything has its psychological aspect, including the physical and mechanical processes, such as sound change. And since linguistics supplies social psychology with such essential data, are not the two indissolubly linked? These are questions which will be given only brief answers here, but we shall return to them later.

The connexions between linguistics and physiology are less difficult to unravel. The relation is unilateral, in that the study of languages requires information about the physiological aspects of sound, but can supply physiology with no information in return. In any case, confusion between the two disciplines is impossible. The essence of a language, as we shall see, has nothing to do with the phonic nature of the linguistic sign.

The position of philology has already been clarified: it is clearly separate from linguistics, although there are points of contact between the two sciences, and they can be of mutual service.

Finally, we may ask, of what use is linguistics? Very few people have clear ideas on the subject, and this is not the place to give a detailed answer. However, what can be said is that for obvious reasons linguistic questions are of interest to all those, including historians, philologists and others, who need to deal with texts. Even more obvious is the importance of linguistics for culture in general. In the lives of individuals and of societies, language is a factor of greater importance than any other. For the study of language to remain solely the business of a handful of specialists would be a quite unacceptable state of affairs. In practice, the study of language is in some degree or other the concern of everyone. But a paradoxical consequence of this general interest is that no other subject has fostered more absurd notions, more prejudices, more illusions, or more fantasies. From a psychological point of view, these errors are of interest in themselves. But it is the primary task of the linguist to denounce them, and to eradicate them as completely as possible.

## The Object of Study

## §1. On defining a language

What is it that linguistics sets out to analyse? What is the actual object of study in its entirety? The question is a particularly difficult one. We shall see why later. First, let us simply try to grasp the nature of the difficulty.

Other sciences are provided with objects of study given in advance, which are then examined from different points of view. Nothing like that is the case in linguistics. Suppose someone pronounces the French word *nu* ('naked'). At first sight, one might think this would be an example of an independently given linguistic object. But more careful consideration reveals a series of three or four quite different things, depending on the viewpoint adopted. There is a sound, there is the expression of an idea, there is a derivative of Latin *nūdum*, and so on. The object is not given in advance of the viewpoint: far from it. Rather, one might say that it is the viewpoint adopted which creates the object. Furthermore, there is nothing to tell us in advance whether one of these ways of looking at it is prior to or superior to any of the others.

Whichever viewpoint is adopted, moreover, linguistic phenomena always present two complementary facets, each depending on the other. For example:

- [24] (1) The ear perceives articulated syllables as auditory impressions. But the sounds in question would not exist without the vocal organs. There would be no *n*, for instance, without these two complementary aspects to it. So one cannot equate the language simply with what the ear hears. One cannot divorce what is heard from oral articulation. Nor, on the other hand, can one specify the relevant movements of the

vocal organs without reference to the corresponding auditory impression (cf. p. [63] ff.).

(2) But even if we ignored this phonetic duality, would language then be reducible to phonetic facts? No. Speech sounds are only the instrument of thought, and have no independent existence. Here another complementarity emerges, and one of great importance. A sound, itself a complex auditory-articulatory unit, in turn combines with an idea to form another complex unit, both physiologically and psychologically. Nor is this all.

(3) Language has an individual aspect and a social aspect. One is not conceivable without the other. Furthermore:

(4) Language at any given time involves an established system and an evolution. At any given time, it is an institution in the present and a product of the past. At first sight, it looks very easy to distinguish between the system and its history, between what it is and what it was. In reality, the connexion between the two is so close that it is hard to separate them. Would matters be simplified if one considered the ontogenesis of linguistic phenomena, beginning with a study of children's language, for example? No. It is quite illusory to believe that where language is concerned the problem of origins is any different from the problem of permanent conditions. There is no way out of the circle.

So however we approach the question, no one object of linguistic study emerges of its own accord. Whichever way we turn, the same dilemma confronts us. Either we tackle each problem on one front only, and risk failing to take into account the dualities mentioned above: or else we seem committed to trying to study language in several ways simultaneously, in which case the object of study becomes a muddle of disparate, unconnected things. By proceeding thus one opens the door to various sciences – psychology, anthropology, prescriptive grammar, philology, and so on – which are to be distinguished from linguistics. These sciences could lay claim to language as falling in their domain; but their methods are not the ones that are needed.

One solution only, in our view, resolves all these difficulties. *The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure as his primary concern, and relate all other manifestations of language to it.* Indeed, amid so many dualities, linguistic structure seems to be the one thing that is independently definable and provides something our minds can satisfactorily grasp.

What, then, is linguistic structure? It is not, in our opinion, simply the same thing as language. Linguistic structure is only one part of language, even though it is an essential part. The structure of a language is a social product of our language faculty. At the same time,

It is also a body of necessary conventions adopted by society to enable members of society to use their language faculty. Language in its entirety has many different and disparate aspects. It lies astride the boundaries separating various domains. It is at the same time physical, physiological and psychological. It belongs both to the individual and to society. No classification of human phenomena provides any single place for it, because language as such has no discernible unity.

A language as a structured system, on the contrary, is both a self-contained whole and a principle of classification. As soon as we give linguistic structure pride of place among the facts of language, we introduce a natural order into an aggregate which lends itself to no other classification.

It might be objected to this principle of classification that our use of language depends on a faculty endowed by nature: whereas language systems are acquired and conventional, and so ought to be subordinated to – instead of being given priority over – our natural ability.

To this objection one might reply as follows.

First, it has not been established that the function of language, as manifested in speech, is entirely natural: that is to say, it is not clear that our vocal apparatus is made for speaking as our legs for walking. Linguists are by no means in agreement on this issue. Whitney, for instance, who regards languages as social institutions on exactly the same footing as all other social institutions, holds it to be a matter of chance or mere convenience that it is our vocal apparatus we use for linguistic purposes. Man, in his view, might well have chosen to use gestures, thus substituting visual images for sound patterns. Whitney's is doubtless too extreme a position. For languages are not in all respects similar to other social institutions (cf. p.[107] ff., p.[110]). Moreover, Whitney goes too far when he says that the selection of the vocal apparatus for language was accidental. For it was in some measure imposed upon us by Nature. But the American linguist is right about the essential point: the language we use is a convention, and it makes no difference what exactly the nature of the agreed sign is. The question of the vocal apparatus is thus a secondary one as far as the problem of language is concerned.

This idea gains support from the notion of *language articulation*. In Latin, the word *articulus* means 'member, part, subdivision in a sequence of things'. As regards language, articulation may refer to the division of the chain of speech into syllables, or to the division of the chain of meanings into meaningful units. It is in this sense that one speaks in German of *gegliederte Sprache*. On the basis of this second interpretation, one may say that it is not spoken language which is natural to man, but the faculty of constructing a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas.

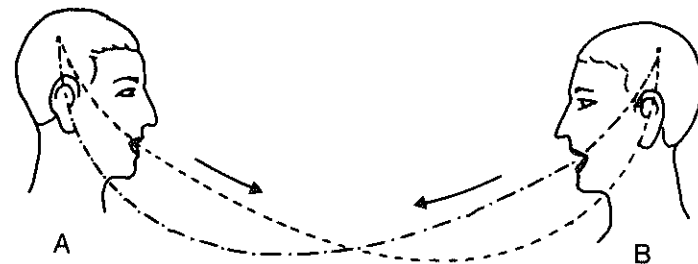
Broca discovered that the faculty of speech is localised in the third

frontal convolution of the left hemisphere. It has been seized upon to justify regarding the localization of language as a matter of convenience. But the same localisation is also connected with language, including writing. It is indicated, when we take into consideration the various forms of aphasia due to lesions in the brain, that is: (1) that the various disorders which affect language are interconnected in many ways with disorders affecting other faculties, and (2) that in all cases of aphasia or agraphia it is not so much the ability to utter or inscribe this or that word in language. All this leads us to believe that, over and above the particular governing signs, there exists a more general governing sign, which may be regarded as the linguistic faculty *excellence*. So by a different route we are once again led to the same conclusion.

Finally, in support of giving linguistic structure pride of place in our study of language, there is this argument: that, whether natural or not, the faculty of articulating words is put to use only by means of the linguistic instrument created and provided by society. Therefore it is no absurdity to say that it is linguistic structure which gives language what unity it has.

## §2. Linguistic structure: its place among the facts of language

In order to identify what role linguistic structure plays within the totality of language, we must consider the individual act of speech and trace what takes place in the speech circuit. This act requires at least two individuals: without this minimum the circuit would not be complete. Suppose, then, we have two people, *A* and *B*, talking to each other:



The starting point of the circuit is in the brain of one individual, for instance *A*, where facts of consciousness which we shall call concepts [28]

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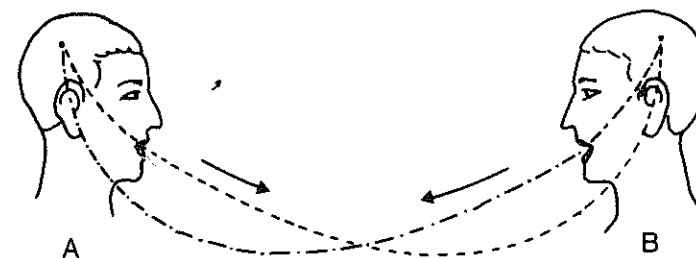
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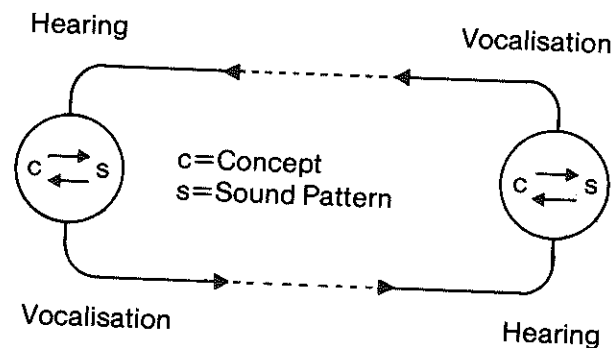
In order to identify what role linguistic structure plays within the totality of language, we must consider the individual act of speech and trace what takes place in the speech circuit. This act requires at least two individuals: without this minimum the circuit would not be complete. Suppose, then, we have two people, A and B, talking to each other:



The starting point of the circuit is in the brain of one individual, for instance A, where facts of consciousness which we shall call concepts [28]



are associated with representations of linguistic signs or sound patterns by means of which they may be expressed. Let us suppose that a given concept triggers in the brain a corresponding sound pattern. This is an entirely *psychological* phenomenon, followed in turn by a *physiological* process: the brain transmits to the organs of phonation an impulse corresponding to the pattern. Then sound waves are sent from A's mouth to B's ear: a purely *physical* process. Next, the circuit continues in B in the opposite order: from ear to brain, the physiological transmission of the sound pattern; in the brain, the psychological association of this pattern with the corresponding concept. If B speaks in turn, this new act will pursue – from his brain to A's – exactly the same course as the first, passing through the same successive phases, which we may represent as follows:



This analysis makes no claim to be complete. One could go on to distinguish the auditory sensation itself, the identification of that sensation with the latent sound pattern, the patterns of muscular movement associated with phonation, and so on. We have included only those elements considered essential; but our schematisation enables us straight away to separate the parts which are physical (sound waves) from those which are physiological (phonation and hearing) and those which are psychological (the sound patterns of words and the concepts). It is particularly important to note that the sound patterns of the words are not to be confused with actual sounds. The word patterns are psychological, just as the concepts associated with them are.

The circuit as here represented may be further divided:

- (a) into an external part (sound vibrations passing from mouth to ear) and an internal part (comprising all the rest);
- (b) into a psychological and a non-psychological part, the latter comprising both the physiological facts localised in the organs and the

physical facts external to the individual; and

(c) into an active part and a passive part, the former comprising everything which goes from the association centre of one individual to the ear of the other, and the latter comprising everything which goes from an individual's ear to his own association centre.

Finally, in the psychological part localised in the brain, one may call everything which is active 'executive' ( $c \rightarrow s$ ), and everything which is passive 'receptive' ( $s \rightarrow c$ ).

In addition, one must allow for a faculty of association and co-ordination which comes into operation as soon as one goes beyond individual signs in isolation. It is this faculty which plays the major role in the organisation of the language as a system (cf. p.[170] ff.).

But in order to understand this role, one must leave the individual act, which is merely language in embryo, and proceed to consider the social phenomenon.

All the individuals linguistically linked in this manner will establish among themselves a kind of mean; all of them will reproduce – doubtless not exactly, but approximately – the same signs linked to the same concepts.

What is the origin of this social crystallisation? Which of the parts of the circuit is involved? For it is very probable that not all of them are equally relevant. [30]

The physical part of the circuit can be dismissed from consideration straight away. When we hear a language we do not know being spoken, we hear the sounds but we cannot enter into the social reality of what is happening, because of our failure to comprehend.

The psychological part of the circuit is not involved in its entirety either. The executive side of it plays no part, for execution is never carried out by the collectivity: it is always individual, and the individual is always master of it. This is what we shall designate by the term *speech*.

The individual's receptive and co-ordinating faculties build up a stock of imprints which turn out to be for all practical purposes the same as the next person's. How must we envisage this social product, so that the language itself can be seen to be clearly distinct from the rest? If we could collect the totality of word patterns stored in all those individuals, we should have the social bond which constitutes their language. It is a fund accumulated by the members of the community through the practice of speech, a grammatical system existing potentially in every brain, or more exactly in the brains of a group of individuals; for the language is never complete in any single individual, but exists perfectly only in the collectivity.

By distinguishing between the language itself and speech, we distinguish at the same time: (1) what is social from what is individual,

and (2) what is essential from what is ancillary and more or less accidental.

The language itself is not a function of the speaker. It is the product passively registered by the individual. It never requires premeditation, and reflexion enters into it only for the activity of classifying to be discussed below (p.[170] ff.).

[31] Speech, on the contrary, is an individual act of the will and the intelligence, in which one must distinguish: (1) the combinations through which the speaker uses the code provided by the language in order to express his own thought, and (2) the psycho-physical mechanism which enables him to externalise these combinations.

It should be noted that we have defined things, not words. Consequently the distinctions established are not affected by the fact that certain ambiguous terms have no exact equivalents in other languages. Thus in German the word *Sprache* covers individual languages as well as language in general, while *Rede* answers more or less to 'speech', but also has the special sense of 'discourse'. In Latin the word *sermo* covers language in general and also speech, while *lingua* is the word for 'a language'; and so on. No word corresponds precisely to any one of the notions we have tried to specify above. That is why all definitions based on words are vain. It is an error of method to proceed from words in order to give definitions of things.

To summarise, then, a language as a structured system may be characterised as follows:

1. Amid the disparate mass of facts involved in language, it stands out as a well defined entity. It can be localised in that particular section of the speech circuit where sound patterns are associated with concepts. It is the social part of language, external to the individual, who by himself is powerless either to create it or to modify it. It exists only in virtue of a kind of contract agreed between the members of a community. On the other hand, the individual needs an apprenticeship in order to acquaint himself with its workings: as a child, he assimilates it only gradually. It is quite separate from speech: a man who loses the ability to speak none the less retains his grasp of the language system, provided he understands the vocal signs he hears.

2. A language system, as distinct from speech, is an object that may be studied independently. Dead languages are no longer spoken, but we can perfectly well acquaint ourselves with their linguistic structure. A science which studies linguistic structure is not only able to dispense with other elements of language, but is possible only if those other elements are kept separate.

[32] 3. While language in general is heterogeneous, a language system is homogeneous in nature. It is a system of signs in which the one essential is the union of sense and sound pattern, both parts of the

sign being psychological.

4. Linguistic structure is no less real than speech, and no less amenable to study. Linguistic signs, although essentially psychological, are not abstractions. The associations, ratified by collective agreement, which go to make up the language are realities localised in the brain. Moreover, linguistic signs are, so to speak, tangible: writing can fix them in conventional images, whereas it would be impossible to photograph acts of speech in all their details. The utterance of a word, however small, involves an infinite number of muscular movements extremely difficult to examine and to represent. In linguistic structure, on the contrary, there is only the sound pattern, and this can be represented by one constant visual image. For if one leaves out of account that multitude of movements required to actualise it in speech, each sound pattern, as we shall see, is only the sum of a limited number of elements or speech sounds, and these can in turn be represented by a corresponding number of symbols in writing. Our ability to identify elements of linguistic structure in this way is what makes it possible for dictionaries and grammars to give us a faithful representation of a language. A language is a repository of sound patterns, and writing is their tangible form.

### §3. Languages and their place in human affairs. Semiology

The above characteristics lead us to realise another, which is more important. A language, defined in this way from among the totality of facts of language, has a particular place in the realm of human affairs, whereas language does not. [33]

A language, as we have just seen, is a social institution. But it is in various respects distinct from political, juridical and other institutions. Its special nature emerges when we bring into consideration a different order of facts.

A language is a system of signs expressing ideas, and hence comparable to writing, the deaf-and-dumb alphabet, symbolic rites, forms of politeness, military signals, and so on. It is simply the most important of such systems.

It is therefore possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it *semiology*<sup>1</sup> (from the Greek *sēmeton*, 'sign'). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready

<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with *semantics*, which studies changes of meaning. Saussure gave no detailed exposition of semantics, but the basic principle to be applied is stated on p.[109]. (Editorial note)

for it in advance. Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge.

It is for the psychologist to determine the exact place of semiology.<sup>1</sup> The linguist's task is to define what makes languages a special type of system within the totality of semiological facts. The question will be taken up later on: here we shall make just one point, which is that if we have now for the first time succeeded in assigning linguistics its place among the sciences, that is because we have grouped it with semiology.

[34]

Why is it that semiology is not yet recognised as an autonomous science with its own object of study, like other sciences? The fact is that here we go round in a circle. On the one hand, nothing is more appropriate than the study of languages to bring out the nature of the semiological problem. But to formulate the problem suitably, it would be necessary to study what a language is in itself: whereas hitherto a language has usually been considered as a function of something else, from other points of view.

In the first place, there is the superficial view taken by the general public, which sees a language merely as a nomenclature (cf. p. [97]). This is a view which stifles any inquiry into the true nature of linguistic structure.

Then there is the viewpoint of the psychologist, who studies the mechanism of the sign in the individual. This is the most straightforward approach, but it takes us no further than individual execution. It does not even take us as far as the linguistic sign itself, which is social by nature.

Even when due recognition is given to the fact that the sign must be studied as a social phenomenon, attention is restricted to those features of languages which they share with institutions mainly established by voluntary decision. In this way, the investigation is diverted from its goal. It neglects those characteristics which belong only to semiological systems in general, and to languages in particular. For the sign always to some extent eludes control by the will, whether of the individual or of society: that is its essential nature, even though it may be by no means obvious at first sight.

So this characteristic emerges clearly only in languages, but its manifestations appear in features to which least attention is paid. All of which contributes to a failure to appreciate either the necessity or the particular utility of a science of semiology. As far as we are concerned, on the other hand, the linguistic problem is first and foremost semiological. All our proposals derive their rationale from this

[35]

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. Naville, *Classification des sciences*, 2nd ed., p.104. (Editorial note)

basic fact. If one wishes to discover the true nature of language systems, one must first consider what they have in common with all other systems of the same kind. Linguistic factors which at first seem central (for example, the workings of the vocal apparatus) must be relegated to a place of secondary importance if it is found that they merely differentiate languages from other such systems. In this way, light will be thrown not only upon the linguistic problem. By considering rites, customs, etc., as signs, it will be possible, we believe, to see them in a new perspective. The need will be felt to consider them as semiological phenomena and to explain them in terms of the laws of semiology.

## Linguistics of Language Structure and Linguistics of Speech

In allocating to a science of linguistic structure its essential role within the study of language in general, we have at the same time mapped out linguistics in its entirety. The other elements of language, which go to make up speech, are automatically subordinated to this first science. In this way all the parts of linguistics fall into their proper place.

Take, for example, the production of sounds necessary to speech. The vocal organs are as external to the language system as the electrical apparatus which is used to tap out the Morse code is external to that code. Phonation, that is to say the execution of sound patterns, in no way affects the system itself. In this respect one may compare a language to a symphony. The symphony has a reality of its own, which is independent of the way in which it is performed. The mistakes which musicians may make in performance in no way compromise that reality.

[37] One may perhaps object to regarding phonation as separate from the language system. What about the evidence provided by phonetic changes, coming from alterations in sounds as produced in speech? Do not these have a profound influence upon the destiny of the language itself? Have we really the right to claim that a language exists independently of such phenomena? Yes, for they affect only the material substance of words. The language itself as a system of signs is affected only indirectly, through the change of interpretation which results. But that has nothing to do with phonetic change as such (cf. p. [121]). It may be of interest to investigate the causes of such changes, and the study of sounds may be of assistance. But it is not essential. For a science which deals with linguistic structure, it will always suffice to take note of sound changes and to examine what effects they have on the system.

What applies to phonation will apply also to all other elements of speech. The activity of the speaker must be studied in a variety of disciplines, which are of concern to linguistics only through their connexions with linguistic structure.

The study of language thus comprises two parts. The essential part takes for its object the language itself, which is social in its essence and independent of the individual. This is a purely psychological study. The subsidiary part takes as its object of study the individual part of language, which means speech, including phonation. This is a psycho-physical study.

These two objects of study are doubtless closely linked and each presupposes the other. A language is necessary in order that speech should be intelligible and produce all its effects. But speech also is necessary in order that a language may be established. Historically, speech always takes precedence. How would we ever come to associate an idea with a verbal sound pattern, if we did not first of all grasp this association in an act of speech? Furthermore, it is by listening to others that we learn our native language. A language accumulates in our brain only as the result of countless experiences. Finally, it is speech which causes a language to evolve. The impressions received from listening to others modify our own linguistic habits. Thus there is an interdependence between the language itself and speech. The former is at the same time the instrument and the product of the latter. But none of this compromises the absolute nature of the distinction between the two. [38]

A language, as a collective phenomenon, takes the form of a totality of imprints in everyone's brain, rather like a dictionary of which each individual has an identical copy (cf. p. [30]). Thus it is something which is in each individual, but is none the less common to all. At the same time it is out of the reach of any deliberate interference by individuals. This mode of existence of a language may be represented by the following formula:

$$1 + 1 + 1 + 1 \dots = I \text{ (collective model).}$$

In what way is speech present in this same collectivity? Speech is the sum total of what people say, and it comprises (a) individual combinations of words, depending on the will of the speakers, and (b) acts of phonation, which are also voluntary and are necessary for the execution of the speakers' combinations of words.

Thus there is nothing collective about speech. Its manifestations are individual and ephemeral. It is no more than an aggregate of particular cases, which may be represented by the following formula:

$$(1 + 1' + 1'' + 1''' \dots).$$

For all these reasons, it would be impossible to consider language

systems and speech from one and the same point of view. Language in its totality is unknowable, for it lacks homogeneity. But the distinction drawn above and the priority it implies make it possible to clarify everything.

That is the first parting of the ways that we come to when endeavouring to construct a theory of language. It is necessary to choose between two routes which cannot both be taken simultaneously. Each must be followed separately.

[39] It would be possible to keep the name *linguistics* for each of these two disciplines. We would then have a linguistics of speech. But it would be essential not to confuse the linguistics of speech with linguistics properly so called. The latter has linguistic structure as its sole object of study.

We shall here concern ourselves strictly with linguistics proper, and although in the course of our discussion we may draw upon what the study of speech can tell us, we shall endeavour never to blur the boundaries which separate the two domains.

## Internal and External Elements of a Language

Nation  
→  
Language

Our definition of a language assumes that we disregard everything which does not belong to its structure as a system; in short everything that is designated by the term 'external linguistics'. External linguistics is none the less concerned with important matters, and these demand attention when one approaches the study of language.

First of all, there are all the respects in which linguistics links up with ethnology. There are all the relations which may exist between the history of a language and the history of a race or a civilisation. The two histories intermingle and are related one to another. This situation is in some measure reminiscent of the correspondences already noted between linguistic phenomena proper (cf. p. [23] ff.). A nation's way of life has an effect upon its language. At the same time, it is in great part the language which makes the nation.

Secondly, mention must be made of the relations between languages and political history. Major historical events such as the Roman Conquest are of incalculable linguistic importance in all kinds of ways. Colonisation, which is simply one form of conquest, transports a language into new environments, and this brings changes in the language. A great variety of examples could be cited in this connexion. Norway, for instance, adopted Danish on becoming politically united to Denmark, although today Norwegians are trying to shake off this linguistic influence. The internal politics of a country is of no less importance for the life of a language. The governments of certain countries, such as Switzerland, allow the coexistence of several languages. Other countries, like France, aspire to linguistic unification. Advanced stages of civilisation favour the development of certain special languages (legal language, scientific terminology, etc.).

This brings us to a third point. A language has connexions with institutions of every sort: church, school, etc. These institutions in

turn are intimately bound up with the literary development of a language. This is a phenomenon of general importance, since it is inseparable from political history. A literary language is by no means confined to the limits apparently imposed upon it by literature. One has only to think of the influence of salons, of the court, and of academies. In connexion with a literary language, there arises the important question of conflict with local dialects (cf. p. [267] ff.). The linguist must also examine the *reciprocal* relations between the language of books and the language of colloquial speech. Eventually, every literary language, as a product of culture, becomes cut off from the spoken word, which is a language's natural sphere of existence.

Finally, everything which relates to the geographical extension of languages and to their fragmentation into dialects concerns external linguistics. It is on this point, doubtless, that the distinction between external linguistics and internal linguistics appears most paradoxical. For every language in existence has its own geographical area. None the less, in fact geography has nothing to do with the internal structure of the language.

[42] It is sometimes claimed that it is absolutely impossible to separate all these questions from the study of the language itself. That is a view which is associated especially with the insistence that science should study 'Realia'. Just as a plant has its internal structure modified by outside factors, such as soil, climate, etc., in the same way does not grammatical structure depend constantly upon external factors of linguistic change? Is it not difficult to explain technical terms and borrowings, which commonly appear in a language, if we give no consideration to their provenance? Is it possible to distinguish the natural, organic development of languages from artificial forms, such as literary languages, which are due to external factors, and consequently not organic? Do we not constantly see the development of a common language alongside local dialects?

In our opinion, the study of external linguistic phenomena can teach linguists a great deal. But it is not true to say that without taking such phenomena into account we cannot come to terms with the internal structure of the language itself. Take the borrowing of foreign words. We may note, first of all, that this is by no means a constant process in the life of a language. There are in certain remote valleys patois which have rarely if ever accepted any word of outside provenance. Are we to say that these languages do not conform to the normal conditions for language, and are therefore invalid as examples? Would such languages have to be studied as special cases of linguistic abnormality because they had never been affected by outside influences? The main point here is that a borrowed word no longer counts as borrowed as soon as it is studied in the context of a system. Then it exists only in virtue of its relation and opposition to words associated

with it, just like any indigenous word. In general, it is never absolutely essential to know the circumstances in which a language has developed. In the case of certain languages, such as Zend and Old Slavonic, we do not even know exactly which peoples spoke them. But our ignorance in no way prevents us from studying their internal structure, or from understanding the developments they underwent. In any case, a separation of internal and external viewpoints is essential. The more rigorously it is observed, the better.

[43] The best demonstration of this is that each viewpoint gives rise to a distinct method. External linguistics can accumulate detail after detail, without ever being forced to conform to the constraints of a system. For example, the facts concerning the expansion of a language outside its territorial boundaries can be presented in any way a writer decides. If a scholar is dealing with the factors which gave rise to the creation of a literary language as opposed to dialects, he can always proceed by simple enumeration. If he orders his facts in a more or less systematic fashion, that will be simply in the interests of clarity.

As far as internal linguistics is concerned, the situation is quite different. Any old order will not do. The language itself is a system which admits no other order than its own. This can be brought out by comparison with the game of chess. In the case of chess, it is relatively easy to distinguish between what is external and what is internal. The fact that chess came from Persia to Europe is an external fact, whereas everything which concerns the system and its rules is internal. If pieces made of ivory are substituted for pieces made of wood, the change makes no difference to the system. But if the number of pieces is diminished or increased, that is a change which profoundly affects the 'grammar' of the game. Care must none the less be taken when drawing distinctions of this kind. In each case, the question to be asked concerns the nature of the phenomenon. The question must be answered in accordance with the following rule. Everything is internal which alters the system in any degree whatsoever.

[44]

## CHAPTER VI

## Representation of a Language by Writing

## §1. Why it is necessary to study this topic

The actual object we are concerned to study, then, is the social product stored in the brain, the language itself. But this product differs from one linguistic community to another. What we find are languages. The linguist must endeavour to become acquainted with as many languages as possible, in order to be able to discover their universal features by studying and comparing them.

Languages are mostly known to us only through writing. Even in the case of our native language, the written form constantly intrudes. In the case of languages spoken in remote parts, it is even more necessary to have recourse to written evidence. The same is true for obvious reasons in the case of languages now dead. In order to have direct evidence available, it would have been necessary to have compiled throughout history collections of the kind currently being compiled in Vienna and in Paris, comprising recordings of spoken samples of all languages. Even then writing is necessary when it comes to publishing the texts thus recorded.

Thus although writing is in itself not part of the internal system of the language, it is impossible to ignore this way in which the language is constantly represented. We must be aware of its utility, its defects and its dangers.

[45]

## §2. The prestige of writing: reasons for its ascendancy over the spoken word

A language and its written form constitute two separate systems of signs. The sole reason for the existence of the latter is to represent the former. The object of study in linguistics is not a combination of the written word and the spoken word. The spoken word alone consti-

tutes that object. But the written word is so intimately connected with the spoken word it represents that it manages to usurp the principal role. As much or even more importance is given to this representation of the vocal sign as to the vocal sign itself. It is rather as if people believed that in order to find out what a person looks like it is better to study his photograph than his face.

This misconception has a long history, and current views about languages are tainted with it. For instance, it is commonly held that a language alters more rapidly when it has no written form. This is quite false. In certain circumstances, writing may well retard changes in a language. But, on the other hand, linguistic stability is in no way undermined by the absence of a written form. The Lithuanian which is still spoken today in Eastern Prussia and part of Russia is attested in written documents only since 1540; but at that late period it presents on the whole as accurate a picture of Proto-Indo-European as Latin of the third century B.C. That in itself suffices to show the extent to which a language is independent of writing.

Certain very subtle linguistic features can long survive without the assistance of written notation. Throughout the Old High German period, we find the written forms *töten*, *fuolen* and *stözen*, but at the end of the twelfth century appear the spellings *töten*, *füelen*, whereas *stözen* persists. What is the origin of this difference? Wherever it occurred, there had been a *y* in the following syllable: Proto-Germanic had *\*daupyan*, *\*fölyan*, but *\*stautan*. On the eve of the literary period, about 800, this *y* weakened and vanished from writing for three hundred years. However, it had left a slight trace in pronunciation, with the result that about 1180, as noted above, it reappears miraculously in the form of an 'umlaut'! This nuance of pronunciation had been faithfully transmitted without any support in writing.

A language, then, has an oral tradition independent of writing, and much more stable; but the prestige of the written form prevents us from seeing this. The first linguists were misled in this way, as the humanists had been before them. Even Bopp does not distinguish clearly between letters and sounds. Reading Bopp, we might think that a language is inseparable from its alphabet. His immediate successors fell into the same trap. The spelling *th* for the fricative *þ* misled Grimm into believing not only that this was a double consonant, but also that it was an aspirate stop. Hence the place he assigns to it in his Law of Consonantal Mutation or 'Lautverschiebung' (see p. [199]). Even nowadays educated people confuse the language with its spelling: Gaston Deschamps said of Berthelot 'that he had saved the French language from ruin' because he had opposed spelling reforms.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The reforms in question were proposed just a few years before Saussure's lectures were given. The issue was a topical one. (Translator's note)

[46]

But what explains the prestige of writing?

1. The written form of a word strikes us as a permanent, solid object and hence more fitting than its sound to act as a linguistic unit persisting through time. Although the connexion between word and written form is superficial and establishes a purely artificial unit, it is none the less much easier to grasp than the natural and only authentic connexion, which links word and sound.
2. For most people, visual impressions are clearer and more lasting than auditory impressions. So for preference people cling to the former. [47] The written image in the end takes over from the sound.
3. A literary language enhances even more the unwarranted importance accorded to writing. A literary language has its dictionaries and its grammars. It is taught at school from books and through books. It is a language which appears to be governed by a code, and this code is itself a written rule, itself conforming to strict norms – those of orthography. That is what confers on writing its primordial importance. In the end, the fact that we learn to speak before learning to write is forgotten, and the natural relation between the two is reversed.
4. Finally, when there is any discrepancy between a language and its spelling, the conflict is always difficult to resolve for anyone other than a linguist. Since the linguist's voice often goes unheeded, the written form almost inevitably emerges victorious, because any solution based on writing is an easier solution. In this way, writing assumes an authority to which it has no right.

### §3. Systems of writing

There are only two systems of writing:

1. The ideographic system, in which a word is represented by some uniquely distinctive sign which has nothing to do with the sounds involved. This sign represents the entire word as a whole, and hence represents indirectly the idea expressed. The classic example of this system is Chinese.
2. The system often called 'phonetic', intended to represent the sequence of sounds as they occur in the word. Some phonetic writing systems are syllabic. Others are alphabetic, that is to say based upon the irreducible elements of speech.

Ideographic writing systems easily develop into mixed systems. Certain ideograms lose their original significance, and eventually come to represent isolated sounds.

The written word, as mentioned above, tends to become a substitute [48] in our mind for the spoken word. That applies to both systems of writing, but the tendency is stronger in the case of ideographic writing. For a Chinese, the ideogram and the spoken word are of equal validity as signs for an idea. He treats writing as a second language, and when in conversation two words are identically pronounced, he sometimes refers to the written form in order to explain which he means. But this substitution, because it is a total substitution, does not give rise to the same objectionable consequences as in our Western systems of writing. Chinese words from different dialects which correspond to the same idea are represented by the same written sign.

Our survey here will be restricted to the phonetic system of writing, and in particular to the system in use today, of which the prototype is the Greek alphabet.

At the time when an alphabet of this kind becomes established, it will represent the contemporary language in a more or less rational fashion, unless it is an alphabet which has been borrowed from elsewhere and is already marred by inconsistencies. As regards its logic, the Greek alphabet is particularly remarkable, as will be seen on p. [64]. But harmony between spelling and pronunciation does not last. Why not is what we must now examine.

### §4. Causes of inconsistency between spelling and pronunciation

There are many causes of inconsistency: we shall be concerned here only with the most important ones.

In the first place, a language is in a constant process of evolution, whereas writing tends to remain fixed. It follows that eventually spelling no longer corresponds to the sounds it should represent. A spelling which is appropriate at one time may be absurd a century later. For a while spelling is altered in order to reflect changes in pronunciation; but then the attempt is abandoned. This is what happened in French [49] to *oi*.<sup>1</sup>

	<i>period</i>	<i>pronounced</i>	<i>written</i>
1	11th c.	<i>rei, lei</i>	<i>rei, lei</i>
2	13th c.	<i>roi, loi</i>	<i>roi, loi</i>
3	14th c.	<i>roè, loè</i>	<i>roi, loi</i>
4	19th c.	<i>rwa, lwa</i>	<i>roi, loi</i>

In this case, spelling followed pronunciation as far as stage 2, the

<sup>1</sup> The examples in the table are the French words for 'king' (*roi*) and 'law' (*loi*). (Translator's note)



history of orthography keeping in step with the history of the language. But from the fourteenth century onwards, the written form remained stationary while the language continued its evolution. From that point, there has been an increasingly serious disparity between the language and its spelling. Eventually, the association of incompatible written and spoken forms had repercussions on the written system itself: the digraph *oi* acquired a phonetic value ([wa]) unrelated to those of its constituent letters.

Such examples could be cited *ad infinitum*. Why is it that in French we write *mais* and *fait*, but pronounce these words *mè* and *fè*? Why does the letter *c* in French often have the value of *s*? In both cases, French has kept spellings which no longer have any rationale.

Similar changes are going on all the time. At present our palatal *l* is changing to *y*: although we still go on writing *éveiller* and *mouiller*, we pronounce these words *éveyer* and *mouyer* (just like *essuyer* and *nettoyer*).

Another cause of discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation is the borrowing of an alphabet by one people from another. It often happens that the resources of the graphic system are poorly adapted to its new function, and it is necessary to have recourse to various expedients. Two letters, for example, will be used to designate a single sound. This is what happened in the case of *p* (a voiceless dental fricative) in the Germanic languages. The Latin alphabet having no character to represent it, it was rendered by *th*. The Merovingian king Chilperic tried to add a special letter to the Latin alphabet to denote this sound, but the attempt did not succeed, and *th* became accepted. English in the Middle Ages had both a close *e* (for example, in *seed*) and an open *e* (for example, in *lead* 'to lead'): but since the alphabet did not have distinct signs for these two sounds, recourse was had to writing *seed* and *lead*. In French, to represent the consonant *š*, the digraph *ch* was used. And so on.

Etymological preoccupations also intrude. They were particularly noticeable at certain periods, such as the Renaissance. It is not infrequently the case that a spelling is introduced through mistaken etymologising: *d* was thus introduced in the French word *poids* ('weight'), as if it came from Latin *pondus*, when in fact it comes from *pensum*. But it makes little difference whether the etymology is correct or not. It is the principal of etymological spelling itself which is mistaken.

In other cases, the reason for a discrepancy is obscure. Some bizarre spellings have not even an etymological pretext. Why in German did they write *thun* instead of *tun*? It is said that the *h* represents the aspiration following the consonant: but in that case an *h* should have been written wherever the same aspiration occurred, and yet there are very many words (*Tugend*, *Tisch*, etc.) which have never been spelt this way.

## §5. Consequences of this inconsistency

An exhaustive list of the inconsistencies found in writing systems cannot be given here. One of the most unfortunate is having a variety of characters for the same sound. In French, for *ž* we have: *j*, *g*, *ge* (*joli*, *geler*, *geai*). For *z* we have both *z* and *s*. For *s* we have *c*, *ç* and *t* (*nation*), *ss* (*chasser*), *sc* (*acquiescer*), *sç* (*acquiesçant*), and *x* (*dix*). For *k* we have *c*, *qu*, *k*, *ch*, *cc*, *cqu* (*acquérir*). On the other hand, different sounds are sometimes represented by the same sign: we have *t* representing *t* or *s*, *g* representing *g* or *ž*, and so on.

Then there are 'indirect' spellings. In German, although there are no double consonants in *Zettel*, *Teller*, etc., the words are spelt with *tt*, *ll*, simply in order to indicate that the preceding vowel is short and open. An aberration of the same kind is seen in English, which adds a silent final *e* in order to lengthen the preceding vowel, as in *made* (pronounced *mēd*) as distinct from *mad* (*mād*). This *e* gives the misleading appearance of indicating a second syllable in monosyllabic words.

Irrational spellings such as these do indeed correspond to something in the language itself: but others reflect nothing at all. French at present has no double consonants except in the future tense forms *mourrai*, *courrai*: none the less, French orthography abounds in illegitimate double consonants (*bourru*, *sottise*, *souffrir*, etc.).

It also happens sometimes that spelling fluctuates before becoming fixed, and different spellings appear, representing attempts made at earlier periods to spell certain sounds. Thus in forms like *ertha*, *erdha*, *erda*, or *thri*, *dhri*, *dri*, which appear in Old High German, *th*, *dh*, and *d* evidently represent the same sound; but from the spelling it is impossible to tell what that sound is. Hence we have the additional complication that when a certain form has more than one spelling, it is not always possible to tell whether in fact there were two pronunciations. Documents in neighbouring dialects spell the same word *asca* and *ascha*: if the pronunciation was identical, this is a case of fluctuating orthography; but if not, the difference is phonetic and dialectal, as in the Greek forms *paizō*, *paizdō*, *paiddō*. In other cases the problem arises with a chronological succession of spellings. In English, we find at first *hwat*, *hweel*, etc., but later *what*, *wheel*, etc., and it is unclear whether this is merely a change in spelling or a change in pronunciation.

The obvious result of all this is that writing obscures our view of the language. Writing is not a garment, but a disguise. This is demonstrated by the spelling of the French word *oiseau*, where not one of the sounds of the spoken word (*wazo*) is represented by its appropriate sign and the spelling completely obscures the linguistic facts.

Another result is that the more inadequately writing represents

what it ought to represent, the stronger is the tendency to give it priority over the spoken language. Grammarians are desperately eager to draw our attention to the written form. Psychologically, this is quite understandable, but the consequences are unfortunate. The use acquired by the words 'pronounce' and 'pronunciation' confirms this abuse and reverses the true relationship obtaining between writing and the language. Thus when people say that a certain letter should be pronounced in this way or that, it is the visual image which is mistaken for the model. If *oi* can be pronounced *wa*, then it seems that *oi* must exist in its own right. Whereas the fact of the matter is that it is *wa* which is written *oi*. To explain this strange case, our attention is drawn to the fact that this is an exception to the usual pronunciation of *o* and *i*. But this explanation merely compounds the mistake, implying as it does that the language itself is subordinate to its spelling. The case is presented as contravening the spelling system, as if the orthographic sign were basic.

These misconceptions extend even to rules of grammar: for example, the rule concerning *h* in French. French has words with an unspirated initial vowel, but which are nevertheless spelt with an initial *h*, because of the corresponding Latin form, e.g. *homme* 'man' (in former times *ome*), corresponding to Latin *homo*. But there are also French words of Germanic origin, in which the *h* was actually pronounced: *hache* ('axe'), *hareng* ('herring'), *honte* ('shame'), etc. As long as the *h* was pronounced, these words conformed to the laws governing initial consonants. You said *deu haches* ('two axes'), *le hareng* ('the herring'), whereas in accordance with the law for words beginning with a vowel you said *deu-z-hommes* ('two men'), *l'omme* ('the man'). At that period, the rule which said 'no liaison or elision before aspirate *h*' was correct. But nowadays this formulation is meaningless. For aspirate *h* no longer exists, unless we apply the term to something which is not a sound at all, but before which there is neither liaison nor elision. It is a vicious circle: the aspirate *h* in question is an orthographic ghost.

The pronunciation of a word is determined not by its spelling but by its history. Its spoken form at any given time represents one stage in a phonetic evolution from which it cannot escape. This evolution is governed by strict laws. Each stage may be ascertained by referring back to the preceding stage. The only factor to consider, although it is most frequently forgotten, is the etymological derivation of the word.

The name of the town of Auch is *oʃ* in phonetic transcription. It is the only case in French orthography where *ch* represents *ʃ* at the end of a word. It is no explanation to say: *ch* in final position is pronounced *ʃ* only in this word. The only relevant question is how the Latin *Auscii* developed into *oʃ*: the spelling is of no importance.

Should the second vowel of the French noun *gageure* ('wager') be

pronounced *ö* or *ü*? Some say *gazör*, since *heure* ('hour') is pronounced *ör*. Others say it should be pronounced *gazür*, since *ge* stands for *z*, as in *geôle* ('jail'). The dispute is vacuous. The real question is etymological. For the noun *gageure* was formed from the verb *gager* ('to bet'), just like the noun *tournure* ('turn') from the verb *tourner* ('to turn'). Both are examples of the same type of derivation. The only defensible pronunciation is *gazür*. The pronunciation *gazör* is simply the result of ambiguous spelling.

But the tyranny of the written form extends further yet. Its influence on the linguistic community may be strong enough to affect and modify the language itself. That happens only in highly literate communities, where written documents are of considerable importance. In these cases, the written form may give rise to erroneous pronunciations. The phenomenon is strictly pathological. It occurs frequently in French. The family name *Lefèvre* (from Latin *faber*) had two spellings: the popular, straightforward spelling was *Lefèvre*, while the learned etymological spelling was *Lefebvre*. Owing to the confusion of *v* and *u* in medieval writing, *Lefebvre* was read as *Lefébure*, thus introducing a *b* which never really existed in the word, as well as a *u* coming from an ambiguous letter. But now this form of the name is actually pronounced. [54]

Probably such misunderstandings will become more and more frequent. More and more dead letters will be resuscitated in pronunciation. In Paris, one already hears *sept femmes* ('seven women') with the *t* pronounced. Darmsteter foresees the day when even the two final letters of *vingt* ('twenty') will be pronounced: a genuine orthographic monstrosity.

These phonetic distortions do indeed belong to the language but they are not the result of its natural evolution. They are due to an external factor. Linguistics should keep them under observation in a special compartment: they are cases of abnormal development.

## PART ONE

[97]

### General Principles

#### CHAPTER I

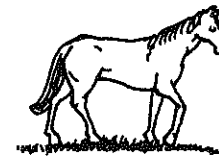
### Nature of the Linguistic Sign

#### *§1. Sign, signification, signal*

For some people a language, reduced to its essentials, is a nomenclature: a list of terms corresponding to a list of things. For example, Latin would be represented as:



: ARBOR



: EQUOS

etc.

etc.

This conception is open to a number of objections. It assumes that ideas already exist independently of words (see below, p. [155]). It does not clarify whether the name is a vocal or a psychological entity, for

[98] *ARBOR* might stand for either. Furthermore, it leads one to assume that the link between a name and a thing is something quite unproblematic, which is far from being the case. None the less, this naive view contains one element of truth, which is that linguistic units are dual in nature, comprising two elements.

As has already been noted (p. [28]) in connexion with the speech circuit, the two elements involved in the linguistic sign are both psychological and are connected in the brain by an associative link.<sup>1</sup> This is a point of major importance.

A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern.<sup>2</sup> The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses. This sound pattern may be called a 'material' element only in that it is the representation of our sensory impressions. The sound pattern may thus be distinguished from the other element associated with it in a linguistic sign. This other element is generally of a more abstract kind: the concept.

The psychological nature of our sound patterns becomes clear when we consider our own linguistic activity. Without moving either lips or tongue, we can talk to ourselves or recite silently a piece of verse. We grasp the words of a language as sound patterns. That is why it is best to avoid referring to them as composed of 'speech sounds'. Such a term, implying the activity of the vocal apparatus, is appropriate to the spoken word, to the actualisation of the sound pattern in discourse. Speaking of the *sounds* and *syllables* of a word need not give rise to any misunderstanding,<sup>3</sup> provided one always bears in mind that this refers to the sound pattern.

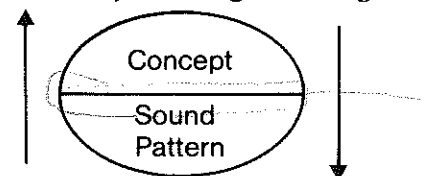
[99] The linguistic sign is, then, a two-sided psychological entity, which may be represented by the following diagram (top of p. 67).

These two elements are intimately linked and each triggers the other. Whether we are seeking the meaning of the Latin word *arbor* or the word by which Latin designates the concept 'tree', it is clear

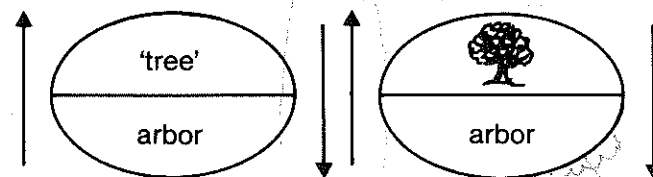
<sup>1</sup> This associative link is to be distinguished from the associative relations which link one sign with another: cf. p. [170] ff. (Translator's note)

<sup>2</sup> Saussure's term 'sound pattern' may appear too narrow. For in addition to the representation of what a word sounds like, the speaker must also have a representation of how it is articulated, the muscular pattern of the act of phonation. But for Saussure a language is essentially something acquired by the individual from the outside world (cf. p. [30]). Saussure's 'sound pattern' is above all the natural representation of the word form as an abstract linguistic item, independently of any actualisation in speech. Hence the articulatory aspect of the word may be taken for granted, or relegated to a position of secondary importance in relation to its sound pattern. (Editorial note)

<sup>3</sup> None the less, as various passages in the *Cours* bear witness, it would have been in the interests of clarity to introduce a terminological distinction and keep to it. (Translator's note)



that only the connexions institutionalised in the language appear to us as relevant. Any other connexions there may be we set on one side.



This definition raises an important question of terminology. In our terminology a *sign* is the combination of a concept and a sound pattern. But in current usage the term *sign* generally refers to the sound pattern alone, e.g. the word form *arbor*. It is forgotten that if *arbor* is called a sign, it is only because it carries with it the concept 'tree', so that the sensory part of the term implies reference to the whole.

The ambiguity would be removed if the three notions in question were designated by terms which are related but contrast. We propose to keep the term *sign* to designate the whole, but to replace *concept* and *sound pattern* respectively by *signification* and *signal*. The latter terms have the advantage of indicating the distinction which separates each from the other and both from the whole of which they are part. We retain the term *sign*, because current usage suggests no alternative by which it might be replaced. [100]

The linguistic sign thus defined has two fundamental characteristics. In specifying them, we shall lay down the principles governing all studies in this domain.

## §2. First principle: the sign is arbitrary

The link between signal and signification is arbitrary. Since we are treating a sign as the combination in which a signal is associated with a signification, we can express this more simply as: *the linguistic sign is arbitrary*.

There is no internal connexion, for example, between the idea 'sister' and the French sequence of sounds *s-ø-r* which acts as its signal. The same idea might as well be represented by any other sequence of

sounds. This is demonstrated by differences between languages, and even by the existence of different languages. The signification 'ox' has as its signal *b-ô-f* on one side of the frontier,<sup>1</sup> but *o-k-s* (*Ochs*) on the other side.

No one disputes the fact that linguistic signs are arbitrary. But it is often easier to discover a truth than to assign it to its correct place. The principle stated above is the organising principle for the whole of linguistics, considered as a science of language structure. The consequences which flow from this principle are innumerable. It is true that they do not all appear at first sight equally evident. One discovers them after many circuitous deviations, and so realises the fundamental importance of the principle.

[101] It may be noted in passing that when semiology is established one of the questions that must be asked is whether modes of expression which rely upon signs that are entirely natural (mime, for example) fall within the province of semiology. If they do, the main object of study in semiology will none the less be the class of systems based upon the arbitrary nature of the sign. For any means of expression accepted in a society rests in principle upon a collective habit, or on convention, which comes to the same thing. Signs of politeness, for instance, although often endowed with a certain natural expressiveness (prostrating oneself nine times on the ground is the way to greet an emperor in China) are none the less fixed by rule. It is this rule which renders them obligatory, not their intrinsic value. We may therefore say that signs which are entirely arbitrary convey better than others the ideal semiological process. That is why the most complex and the most widespread of all systems of expression, which is the one we find in human languages, is also the most characteristic of all. In this sense, linguistics serves as a model for the whole of semiology, even though languages represent only one type of semiological system.

The word *symbol* is sometimes used to designate the linguistic sign, or more exactly that part of the linguistic sign which we are calling the signal. This use of the word *symbol* is awkward, for reasons connected with our first principle. For it is characteristic of symbols that they are never entirely arbitrary. They are not empty configurations. They show at least a vestige of natural connexion between the signal and its signification. For instance, our symbol of justice, the scales, could hardly be replaced by a chariot.

The word *arbitrary* also calls for comment. It must not be taken to imply that a signal depends on the free choice of the speaker. (We shall see later than the individual has no power to alter a sign in any respect once it has become established in a linguistic community.) The

<sup>1</sup> The frontier between France and Germany. (Translator's note)

term implies simply that the signal is *unmotivated*: that is to say arbitrary in relation to its signification, with which it has no natural connexion in reality.

In conclusion, two objections may be mentioned which might be brought against the principle that linguistic signs are arbitrary.

1. *Onomatopoeic* words might be held to show that a choice of signal is not always arbitrary. But such words are never organic elements of a linguistic system. Moreover, they are far fewer than is generally believed. French words like *fouet* ('whip') or *glas* ('knell') may strike the ear as having a certain suggestive sonority. But to see that this is in no way intrinsic to the words themselves, it suffices to look at their Latin origins. *Fouet* comes from Latin *fāgus* ('beech tree') and *glas* from Latin *classicum* ('trumpet call'). The suggestive quality of the modern pronunciation of these words is a fortuitous result of phonetic evolution.

As for genuine onomatopoeia (e.g. French *glou-glou* ('gurgle'), *tic-tac* 'ticking (of a clock)'), not only is it rare but its use is already to a certain extent arbitrary. For onomatopoeia is only the approximate imitation, already partly conventionalised, of certain sounds. This is evident if we compare a French dog's *ouaoua* and a German dog's *wauwau*. In any case, once introduced into the language, onomatopoeic words are subjected to the same phonetic and morphological evolution as other words. The French word *pigeon* ('pigeon') comes from Vulgar Latin *pīpiō*, itself of onomatopoeic origin, which clearly proves that onomatopoeic words themselves may lose their original character and take on that of the linguistic sign in general, which is unmotivated.

2. Similar considerations apply to *exclamations*. These are not unlike onomatopoeic words, and they do not undermine the validity of our thesis. People are tempted to regard exclamations as spontaneous expressions called forth, as it were, by nature. But in most cases it is difficult to accept that there is a necessary link between the exclamatory signal and its signification. Again, it suffices to compare two languages in this respect to see how much exclamations vary. For example, the French exclamation *aié!* corresponds to the German *au!* Moreover, it is known that many exclamations were originally meaningful words (e.g. *diable!* 'devil', *mordieu!* 'God's death').

In short, onomatopoeic and exclamatory words are rather marginal phenomena, and their symbolic origin is to some extent disputable.

### §3. Second principle: linear character of the signal

The linguistic signal, being auditory in nature, has a temporal aspect, and hence certain temporal characteristics: (a) *it occupies a certain*

[102]

[103]

temporal space, and (b) *this space is measured in just one dimension: it is a line.*

This principle is obvious, but it seems never to be stated, doubtless because it is considered too elementary. However, it is a fundamental principle and its consequences are incalculable. Its importance equals that of the first law. The whole mechanism of linguistic structure depends upon it (cf. p. [170]). Unlike visual signals (e.g. ships' flags) which can exploit more than one dimension simultaneously, auditory signals have available to them only the linearity of time. The elements of such signals are presented one after another: they form a chain. This feature appears immediately when they are represented in writing, and a spatial line of graphic signs is substituted for a succession of sounds in time.

In certain cases, this may not be easy to appreciate. For example, if I stress a certain syllable, it may seem that I am presenting a number of significant features simultaneously. But that is an illusion. The syllable and its accentuation constitute a single act of phonation. There is no duality within this act, although there are various contrasts with what precedes and follows (cf. p. [180]).

Word + Sign  
Space + Time

## CHAPTER II

[104]

## Invariability and Variability of the Sign

### §1. Invariability

The signal, in relation to the idea it represents, may seem to be freely chosen. However, from the point of view of the linguistic community, the signal is imposed rather than freely chosen. Speakers are not consulted about its choice. Once the language has selected a signal, it cannot be freely replaced by any other. There appears to be something rather contradictory about this. It is a kind of linguistic Hobson's choice. What can be chosen is already determined in advance. No individual is able, even if he wished, to modify in any way a choice already established in the language. Nor can the linguistic community exercise its authority to change even a single word.<sup>1</sup> The community, as much as the individual, is bound to its language.

A language cannot therefore be treated simply as a form of contract, and the linguistic sign is a particularly interesting phenomenon to study for this reason. For if we wish to demonstrate that the rules a community accepts are imposed upon it, and not freely agreed to, it is a language which offers the most striking proof.

Let us now examine how the linguistic sign eludes the control of our will. We shall then be able to see the important consequences which follow from this fact.

At any given period, however far back in time we go, a language is always an inheritance from the past. The initial assignment of names

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<sup>1</sup> This is not a denial of the possibility of linguistic legislation, nor even of its potential effectiveness. What Saussure denies is that the collective ratification required is a matter for collective decision. It may be illegal for trade purposes to call Spanish sparkling wine 'champagne': but that will be merely one external factor bearing on speech (*parole*), which may or may not ultimately affect the word *champagne* as a linguistic sign. (Translator's note)

to things, establishing a contract between concepts and sound patterns, is an act we can conceive in the imagination, but no one has ever observed it taking place. The idea that it might have happened is suggested to us by our keen awareness of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign.

In fact, no society has ever known its language to be anything other than something inherited from previous generations, which it has no choice but to accept. That is why the question of the origins of language does not have the importance generally attributed to it. It is not even a relevant question as far as linguistics is concerned. The sole object of study in linguistics is the normal, regular existence of a language already established. Any given linguistic state is always the product of historical factors, and these are the factors which explain why the linguistic sign is invariable, that is to say why it is immune from arbitrary alteration.<sup>1</sup>

But to say that a language is an inheritance from the past explains nothing unless we take the question further. Is it not possible from time to time to change established laws which have been handed down from the past?

This question leads us to consider a language in its social context and to pursue our enquiry in the same terms as for any other social institution. How are social institutions handed down from generation to generation? This is the more general question which subsumes the question of invariability. It is first necessary to realise the different degrees of freedom enjoyed by other institutions. Each of them, it will be seen, achieves a different balance between the tradition handed down and society's freedom of action. The next question will be to discover why, in any given case, factors of one kind are more powerful or less powerful than factors of the other kind. Finally, reverting to linguistic matters in particular, it may then be asked why historical transmission is the overriding factor, to the point of excluding the possibility of any general or sudden linguistic change.

[106]

The answer to this question must take many considerations into account. It is relevant to point out, for example, that linguistic changes do not correspond to generations of speakers. There is no vertical structure of layers one above the other like drawers in a piece of furniture; people of all ages intermingle and communicate with one another. The continuous efforts required in order to learn one's native language point to the impossibility of any radical change. In addition, people use their language without conscious reflexion, being largely

<sup>1</sup> For Saussure's generation, questions of language planning had not acquired the importance they have today. Although criticism of commonly accepted linguistic forms of expression has a long history in the Western tradition, only small minorities of thinkers, teachers and writers had ever concerned themselves with such matters. (Translator's note)

unaware of the laws which govern it. If they are not aware of these laws, how can they act to change them? In any case, linguistic facts are rarely the object of criticism, every society being usually content with the language it has inherited.

These considerations are important, but they are not directly to the point. Priority must be given to the following, which are more essential, more immediately relevant, and underlie all the rest.

1. *The arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign.* The arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign was adduced above as a reason for conceding the theoretical possibility of linguistic change. But more detailed consideration reveals that this very same factor tends to protect a language against any attempt to change it. It means that there is no issue for the community of language users to discuss, even were they sufficiently aware to do so. For in order to discuss an issue, there must be some reasonable basis for discussion. One can, for example, argue about whether monogamy is better than polygamy, and adduce reasons for and against. One could likewise discuss the pros and cons of a system of symbols, because a symbol has a rational connexion with what it symbolizes (cf. p. [101]). But for a language, as a system of arbitrary signs, any such basis is lacking, and consequently there is no firm ground for discussion. No reason can be given for preferring *sœur* to *sister*, *Ochs* to *bœuf*, etc.<sup>1</sup>

[107]

2. *The great number of signs necessary to constitute a language.* The implications of this fact are considerable. A system of writing, comprising between 20 and 40 letters, might conceivably be replaced in its entirety by an alternative system. The same would be true of a language if it comprised only a limited number of elements. But the inventory of signs in any language is countless.

3. *The complex character of the system.* A language constitutes a system. In this respect, it is not entirely arbitrary, for the system has a certain rationality. But precisely for this reason, the community is unable to change it at will. For the linguistic system is a complex mechanism. Its workings cannot be grasped without reflexion. Even speakers who use it daily may be quite ignorant in this regard. Any such change would require the intervention of specialists, grammarians, logicians, and others. But history shows that interference by experts is of no avail in linguistic matters.

4. *Collective inertia resists all linguistic innovations.* We come now to a consideration which takes precedence over all others. At any

<sup>1</sup> Saussure's general point here is confirmed by the fact that current debates about, for instance, whether 'sexist' terms (such as *chairman*) should be replaced by unbiassed terms (e.g. *chairperson*) arise only when a reason can be given for preferring one to the other. But in such cases the reason given is usually social or political, rather than linguistic. (Translator's note)

time a language belongs to all its users. It is a facility unrestrictedly available throughout a whole community. It is something all make use of every day. In this respect it is quite unlike other social institutions. Legal procedures, religious rites, ships' flags, etc. are systems used only by a certain number of individuals acting together and for a limited time. A language, on the contrary, is something in which everyone participates all the time, and that is why it is constantly open to the influence of all. This key fact is by itself sufficient to explain why a linguistic revolution is impossible. Of all social institutions, a language affords the least scope for such enterprise. It is part and parcel of the life of the whole community, and the community's natural inertia exercises a conservative influence upon it. [108]

None the less, to say that a language is a product of social forces does not automatically explain why it comes to be constrained in the way it is. Bearing in mind that a language is always an inheritance from the past, one must add that the social forces in question act over a period of time. If stability is a characteristic of languages, it is not only because languages are anchored in the community. They are also anchored in time. The two facts are inseparable. Continuity with the past constantly restricts freedom of choice. If the Frenchman of today uses words like *homme* ('man') and *chien* ('dog'), it is because these words were used by his forefathers. Ultimately there is a connexion between these two opposing factors: the arbitrary convention which allows free choice, and the passage of time, which fixes that choice. It is because the linguistic sign is arbitrary that it knows no other law than that of tradition, and because it is founded upon tradition that it can be arbitrary.<sup>1</sup>

### §2. Variability

The passage of time, which ensures the continuity of a language, also has another effect, which appears to work in the opposite direction. It allows linguistic signs to be changed with some rapidity. Hence variability and invariability are both, in a certain sense, characteristic of the linguistic sign.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The epigrammatic concision of this summary of the connexion between the nature of the linguistic sign and its socio-historical role epitomises Saussure's brilliance as a linguistic theorist. It was not until half a century after his death that detailed socio-linguistic investigations began to provide in abundance the kind of evidence which would corroborate the connexion Saussure here postulates. What is ironical is that the evidence in question was often interpreted as throwing doubt upon the validity or adequacy of a Saussurean approach to the study of language. What is perhaps even more ironical is that the Saussurean implications of a reciprocal limitation between choice and tradition remained largely unexplored as a result. (Translator's note)

<sup>2</sup> It would be a mistake to criticise Saussure for being illogical or paradoxical in assigning two contradictory characteristics to the linguistic sign. The striking contrast

In the final analysis, these two characteristics are intimately connected. The sign is subject to change because it continues through time. But what predominates in any change is the survival of earlier material. Infidelity to the past is only relative. That is how it comes about that the principle of change is based upon the principle of continuity. [109]

Change through time takes various forms, each of which would supply the subject matter for an important chapter of linguistics. Without going into detail here, it is important to bring out the following points.

First of all, let there be no misunderstanding about the sense in which we are speaking of change. It must not be thought that we are referring particularly to phonetic changes affecting the signal, or to changes of meaning affecting the concept signified. Either view would be inadequate. Whatever the factors involved in change, whether they act in isolation or in combination, they always result in a *shift in the relationship between signal and signification*.

As examples, one might cite the following. The Latin word *necāre* meaning 'to kill' became in French *noyer* meaning 'to drown'. Here the sound pattern and the concept have both changed. It is pointless to separate one aspect of the change from the other. It suffices to note as a single fact that the connexion between sound and idea has changed. The original relationship no longer holds. If instead of comparing Latin *necāre* with French *noyer*, one contrasts it with Vulgar Latin *necare* of the fourth or fifth century, meaning 'to drown', the case is somewhat different. But even here, although the signal has undergone no appreciable change, there is a shift in the relationship between the idea and the sign.<sup>1</sup>

The Old German word *dritteil* meaning 'a third' became in modern German *Drittel*. In this case, although the concept has remained the same, the relationship has changed in two ways. The signal has altered not only phonetically but also grammatically. We no longer recognise it as a combination including the unit *Teil* meaning 'part': instead, it has become a single unanalysable word. That counts too as a change in relationship. [110]

In Anglo-Saxon, the preliterary form *fōt* meaning 'foot' remained as *fōt* (modern English *foot*), while its plural *\*fōti*, meaning 'feet', became *fēt* (modern English *feet*). Whatever changes may have been involved here, one thing is certain: a shift in the relationship occurred. New correlations between phonic substance and idea emerged.

between these terms is intended simply to emphasise the fact that a language changes even though its speakers are incapable of changing it. One might also say that it is impervious to interference although open to development. (Editorial note)

<sup>1</sup> In the interests of terminological consistency, the term *sign* should here be replaced by *signal*. (Translator's note)



A language is a system which is intrinsically defenceless against the factors which constantly tend to shift relationships between signal and signification. This is one of the consequences of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign.

Other human institutions – customs, laws, etc. – are all based in varying degrees on natural connexions between things. They exhibit a necessary conformity between ends and means. Even the fashion which determines the way we dress is not entirely arbitrary. It cannot depart beyond a certain point from requirements dictated by the human body. A language, on the contrary, is in no way limited in its choice of means. For there is nothing at all to prevent the association of any idea whatsoever with any sequence of sounds whatsoever.

In order to emphasise that a language is nothing other than a social institution, Whitney quite rightly insisted upon the arbitrary character of linguistic signs. In so doing, he pointed linguistics in the right direction. But he did not go far enough. For he failed to see that this arbitrary character fundamentally distinguishes languages from all other institutions. This can be seen in the way in which a language evolves. The process is highly complex. A language is situated socially and chronologically by reference to a certain community and a certain period of time. No one can alter it in any particular. On the other hand, the fact that its signs are arbitrary implies theoretically a freedom to establish any connexion whatsoever between sounds and ideas. The result is that each of the two elements joined together in the linguistic sign retains its own independence to an unparalleled extent. Consequently a language alters, or rather evolves, under the influence of all factors which may affect either sounds or meanings. Evolution is inevitable: there is no known example of a language immune from it. After a certain time, changes can always be seen to have taken place.

This principle must even apply to artificial languages. Anyone who invents an artificial language retains control of it only as long as it is not in use. But as soon as it fulfils its purpose and becomes the property of the community, it is no longer under control. Esperanto is a case in point. If it succeeds as a language, can it possibly escape the same fate? Once launched, the language will in all probability begin to lead a semiological life of its own. Its transmission will follow laws which have nothing in common with those of deliberate creation, and it will then be impossible to turn the clock back. Anyone who thinks he can construct a language not subject to change, which posterity must accept as it is, would be like a hen hatching a duck's egg. The language he created would be subject to the same forces of change as any other language, regardless of its creator's wishes.

The continuity of signs through time, involving as it does their alteration in time, is a principle of general semiology. This principle

is confirmed by systems of writing, by deaf-and-dumb languages, and so on.

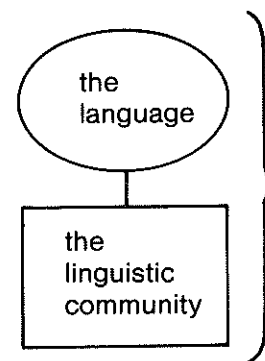
But on what is the necessity for change based? We may perhaps be criticised for not being as explicit upon this point as upon the principle of invariability. The reason is that we have not gone into the different factors involved in change. A great variety of such factors must be taken into account in order to determine to what extent change is a necessity.

The causes of linguistic continuity are in principle available to observation. The same is not true of the causes of change through time. That is why in the first instance it would be misleading to attempt to identify them precisely. It is more prudent to speak in general terms of shifts in relations. For time changes everything. There is no reason why languages should be exempt from this universal law. [112]

The argument advanced so far, based on the principles established in the introduction, may be summarised as follows.

1. Avoiding the sterility of merely verbal definitions, we began by distinguishing, within the global phenomenon of *language*, between *linguistic structure* and *speech*. Linguistic structure we take to be language minus speech. It is the whole set of linguistic habits which enables the speaker to understand and to make himself understood.

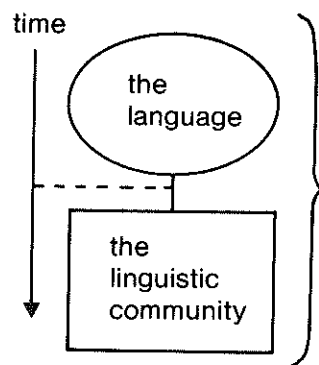
2. But this definition fails to relate linguistic structure to social reality. It is a definition which misrepresents what a language is, because it takes into account only how the individual is affected. But in order to have a language, there must be a *community of speakers*. Contrary to what might appear to be the case, a language never exists even for a moment except as a social fact, for it is a semiological phenomenon. Its social nature is one of its internal characteristics. A full definition must recognise two inseparable things, as shown in the following diagram:



But even then there is something missing. The language thus represented is a viable system, but not a living one. It is a social reality, but not a historical fact.

[113] 3. Since the linguistic sign is arbitrary, a language as so far defined would appear to be an adaptable system, which can be organised in any way one likes, and is based solely upon a principle of rationality. Its social nature, as such, is not incompatible with this view. Social psychology, doubtless, must operate on more than a purely logical basis: account must be taken of everything which might affect the operation of reason in practical relations between one individual and another. But that is not the objection to regarding a language as a mere convention, which can be modified to suit the interests of those involved. There is something else. We must consider what is brought about by the passage of time, as well as what is brought about by the forces of social integration. Without taking into account the contribution of time, our grasp of linguistic reality remains incomplete.

If a language were considered in a chronological perspective, but ignoring the social dimension (as in the case of a hypothetical individual living in isolation for hundreds of years), there might perhaps be no change to observe. Time would leave no mark upon the language. On the other hand, if one looked at the community of speakers without taking the passage of time into account, one would not see the effect of social forces acting upon the language. In order to come to terms with reality, therefore, one must supplement our first diagram by some indication of the passage of time:



When this is taken into account, the language is no longer free from constraints, because the passage of time allows social forces to be brought to bear upon it. One is left with a principle of continuity which precludes freedom of choice. At the same time, continuity necessarily implies change. Relations will alter in some respect or other.

## Static Linguistics and Evolutionary Linguistics

### §1. Internal duality of all sciences concerned with values

Very few linguists realise that the need to take account of the passage of time gives rise to special problems in linguistics and forces us to choose between two radically different approaches.

Most other sciences are not faced with this crucial choice. For them, what happens with the passage of time is of no particular significance. In astronomy, it is observed that in the course of time heavenly bodies undergo considerable changes. But astronomy has not on that account been obliged to split into two separate disciplines. Geology is constantly concerned with the reconstruction of chronological sequences. But when it concentrates on examining fixed states of the earth's crust, that is not considered to be a quite separate object of study. There is a descriptive science of law and a history of law: but no one contrasts the one with the other. The political history of nations is intrinsically concerned with successions of events in time. None the less, when a historian describes the society of a particular period, one does not feel that this ceases to be history. The science of political institutions, on the other hand, is essentially descriptive: but occasionally it may deal with historical questions, and that in no way compromises its unity as a science.

Economics, by contrast, is a science which is forced to recognise this duality. Unlike the preceding cases, the study of political economy and of economic history constitute two clearly distinguishable disciplines belonging to one and the same science. Recent work in this field emphasises this distinction. Although it may not be fully realised, the distinction is required by an inner necessity of the subject. It is a necessity entirely analogous to that which obliges us to divide linguistics into two parts, each based upon a principle of its own. The