

Linguistics Grappling with the “Oddness” of Signs

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Abstract

In the last two decades of his career, Saussure continually tried to clarify the status of signs, considering however that it was an “absurd task” attacking this “odd entity” consisting of the association of two heterogeneous species. In his *Course II* Saussure showed that the semiological character of this entity does not derive from the properties of the material used but from the differential relations that this entity has with other coexisting entities. Previously, in the notes of *La double essence*, he had demonstrated that the internal link on which signs are based is “of a highly peculiar kind”, that is to say, totally unnatural. In this paper, we show the very important theoretical and methodological implications of this reversal of perspective, which consists in posing the psychic associative union in its entirety.

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A *linguistic entity* is unique in that it involves the association of two distinct elements. If we were invited first to determine the chemical classification of a sheet of iron, gold, or copper, and then the zoological species of horse, cow, or sheep, these would be two easy tasks. But if we were asked to determine what “species” is represented by the odd combination of an iron plaque attached to a horse, a gold plate on a cow, or a sheep adorned with something copper, we would exclaim that the task was absurd. The linguist has to realize that it is precisely this absurd task that faces him right from the very outset. (WGL, p. 3)

In the last two decades of his scientific career, Saussure continually questioned the status of signs and the conditions for constituting a discipline that could describe and conceptualize them. This is confirmed by numerous handwritten notes (see “On the Dual Essence of Language” in the *Writings in General Linguistics*—hereafter *WGL*, as well as the *Introduction* to *Course II* and several chapters of *Course III*).

As the quotation above shows, because of the enormous difficulties he experienced in this process, Saussure sometimes called it an “absurd task”, in that it involved tackling this “odd entity” consisting of the association of two perfectly heterogeneous species, an association that in any other field of knowledge would appear properly monstrous.

But rather than discouraging Saussure, this abnormal dimension of the sign object on the contrary encouraged a profound, constant, and truly brilliant reflection,

of which we can only comment here on three conceptual strata (for presentations complementing these analyses, see Bulea, 2006, 2010). The first consists of an examination of the specific properties of verbal signs with regard to entities belonging to other semiological systems; the second consists in examining the nature of both faces of the sign, and more specifically in demonstrating their radically psychical and formal character. The third concerns the particular mode of association of these two faces, which is the singularity and complexity of verbal signs, but which is also the very cause of their permanent productive and creative capacity.

1. What Is a Sign System and What Can Semiology Consist of?

It is in the *Introduction to Course II* that Saussure undertook the most explicit clarification concerning the status of language signs and the system in which they are organized; by making a comparative analysis of the various kinds of signs exploited by humans, he endeavored to differentiate the properties common to all semiotic systems and those that are specific to verbal signs. He pointed out that all systems are *systems of values*, and he argued that language has two major characteristics: on the one hand, the signs of this system only take their value in the context of *opposition relationships* and therefore do not constitute stable and concrete entities; on the other hand, these signs appear primarily as elements of acoustic chains and thus have a *temporal dimension*:

Any given semiological system is comprised of a quantity of units [...], and the true nature of these units <-what will prevent them from being confused with something else -> is that they are values. (Saussure, 1997, p. 14a)

Language, on the other hand, [...] fundamentally has the character of a system founded on oppositions. (*op. cit.*, p. 18a)

Seen from its internal side, <in its very object,> language thus strikes us <-for this is its primary characteristic->, as not offering a concrete unit (*op. cit.*, p. 20a)

[...] there is a crucial characteristic of phonic matter that is not sufficiently <stressed;> this is that it is presented to us as an acoustic chain, which immediately entails the temporal characteristic of having only one dimension. (*op. cit.*, p. 20a) (translations modified)

However, this didactic presentation with a rather declarative tone was preceded by reflections (revealed in the handwritten notes) which show a path of thought that led to a richer and more complex apprehension of the status of verbal semiology. Generally, during these reflections, Saussure endeavored to characterize semiology *from the inside*, that is to say, to define it from *the phenomena* which it is supposed to address:

[...] if we try to determine a few concepts by sketching out what we refer to as semiology, i.e. a sign system totally independent of what prepared it and as it exists in the minds of speaking subjects, we will still inevitably be drawn, despite ourselves, into setting semiology against the ever-present etymology.¹ (WGL, p. 25)

We have discussed whether linguistics belongs to the order of natural sciences or historical sciences. It belongs to neither, but to a part of science which if it does not exist, should

do so, under the name of semiology, i.e. science of signs or study of what occurs when a person tries to represent thought through a necessary convention. (WGL, p. 188)

Linguistic entities have no substratum whatsoever; they have the property of existing by virtue of their difference; nowhere may the pronoun *they* itself designate anything other than a difference. (WGL, p. 188)

If these disparate formulations can sometimes seem sibylline, Saussure has nevertheless highlighted another set of characteristics specific to linguistic semiology. As indicated in the first excerpt above, the system of verbal signs is “independent of what prepared it”, which means that there is *no causal relationship* between this system and its material, psychic or social environment.

As indicated in the second excerpt, this system depends on both the thought of the subjects and social conventions, and moreover it constitutes a certain type of *action* (the manifestation of thought) and thus belongs to the *process* rather than the product. Finally, the third excerpt highlights the insubstantial nature of semiological entities: the *semiological character* of an entity does not derive from the properties of the material used, but from the differential relations that this entity has with other coexisting entities.

2. The Psychic Character of Both Sides of the Sign

On the “content” side, or the side of the meaning of signs, Saussure immediately posited, like many of his predecessors, that it consisted of *mental representations*, and was therefore of a *psychic* order, but he especially emphasized that the form given to these representations emerges during the process of their association with the expressive side, and that consequently it was necessary to clearly distinguish meanings existing (maybe!) outside of linguistics and the meanings formatted by the signs of a language:

[...] the following are not features of langue: [...] meanings, ideas, grammatical categories outside signs; these may exist outside *the linguistic domain*; this is a very fraught question, which should certainly be taken on by non-linguists. (WGL, p. 48)

With regard to the “expression” side, he introduced a new distinction, consisting in delimiting what belongs to sound productions in their material properties *vs* their *semiological functioning*; and he grasped this operation in terms of *the conditions under which sound productions can assume the quality of signs*. He argued that while these productions certainly have physical and physiological properties, they cannot be reduced to this material dimension: in their actual functioning, the sounds necessarily produce *acoustic impressions*, unanalyzable in themselves and for this reason not falling within a phonological study. This dimension of acoustic impression is entirely *psychic*; it proceeds from traces or imprints that humans have or keep of sound productions, in the presence or absence of any effective utterance. For Saussure, it is this psychic dimension that intervenes in the constitution of signs; resulting from a *disengagement* of the empirical properties of the sound, it finds itself endowed with another *immaterial* existence, which has the property of transcending both the singularity of execution of each phonic act and the irreducibly ephemeral character of its properties, which are strictly physical.

To conceptualize this psychic aspect of the two sides of the sign, in *Course III* Saussure first used the term “image” rather than “impression” as regards the expressive side, then in the continuation of this teaching, he finally replaced the expression of acoustic image by that of *signifier* and the expression of “concept” by that of *signified*:

When one enters into a system of signs from the inside, it is necessary to pose, <to oppose> the signifier and the signified, which places them vis-à-vis one another <leaving aside the opposition image and concept>. The signifier <(is auditory) and the signified <(is conceptual)> are the two elements that make up the sign. (*Cours III*, in Constantin, 2005, pp. 237-238) (our translation)

3. The Unity of the Sign in Its Double Essence

On the basis of the foregoing analyses, Saussure then endeavored to identify what constitutes *semiological nature* in the strict sense of the word, that is to say, to explain what is really *a double nature in essence*.

In this perspective, he first substituted the traditional opposition “*form vs meaning*” for the distinction between *vocal figure* and *form-meaning*:

It is wrong (and impracticable) to oppose *form* and *meaning*. What does need distinguishing, however, is the *vocal figure* (*la figure vocale*) on the one hand, and the *meaning-form* (*la forme-sens*) on the other. (WGL, p. 3)

At the phenomenal level, this new opposition corresponds to a delimitation between the phenomena *external* to language, which are directly perceptible by the subject, and the phenomena *internal* to language, of a psychic order. On the methodological level, this distinction also aims to cancel two types of reduction: on the one hand, the reduction of sound entities to their physical characteristics and, on the other, the reduction of the psychic character of language to ideas or meanings alone:

In *langue* we need to differentiate between phenomena that are *internal* or in the mind and *external*, directly apprehensible, phenomena. (*ibid.*)

But this same opposition simultaneously introduces the differentiation between *simple* (or not combined) and *complex* (or combined). Proceeding from a seizure of the phenomena in their physical dimensions, and thus remaining external to language, the vocal figures belong to a “simple” domain in that the elements which constitute them are not as such associated with meaning or idea. On the other hand, the internal phenomena qualified as *form-meaning* appear as *composite* or *complex* elements in that they exist only by virtue of a union, of an association. Because of their internal nature, these entities have a certain *homogeneity*, insofar as their components are both of a mental nature; but by their complex nature, these entities also testify to a certain *heterogeneity* in that these same two components are neither confused nor destined to correspond naturally and immutably. This analysis will lead Saussure to a first characterization of the “order of signs”: it is a *psychic and necessarily complex order*, which comprises two sorts of indissolubly linked components whose status is *compatible* but *not analogous*; and it is this homogeneity of nature beyond the

constitutive heterogeneity of structure that gives (future) signs the status of “order” or of specific domain:

[...] we shall be consistent in our view that not only the meaning but also the sign is a fact of pure consciousness. (WGL, p. 4)

These two states of chaos, when brought together, lead to a state of *order*. Nothing could be more pointless than trying to instill order by separating them. (WGL, p. 32)

Saussure pursued this reflection by examining the situation of this “order” from a *general theoretical point of view*, which led him to present his alternative solution to the dualistic conception of language, his verdict on the latter being pronounced without leniency:

The profound dualism which splits language (*langage*) is not rooted in the dualism of sound and idea, of vocal phenomenon and mental phenomenon; that is a facile and dangerous way of conceiving this. This dualism is rooted in the duality of the vocal phenomenon AS SUCH, and in the duality of the vocal phenomenon AS SIGN—in the duality of the (objective) physical reality and the (subjective) physical-mental reality, and not at all in the duality of the “physical” reality of sound as against the “mental” reality of meaning. There is one domain, interior, psychic, where both sign and meaning are to be found, bound indissolubly one to the other; and there is another—exterior—domain, where only the “sign” is to be found, but in this case the sign reduced to a series of sound waves deserves in our view only the designation of vocal figure. (WGL, p. 6)

As can be seen from this quotation, Saussurean thinking deals here with the status of two domains and the relationship between them, and the problem is that of the very definition of the type of relationship that must be posed between the physical and the psychic to be able to handle the sign. For this purpose, it is first necessary to take the measure of *the dual status of the vocal phenomenon*: it includes on the one hand a physical side, AS SUCH, and on the other hand a psychic side, AS SIGN. For a first, very general understanding of the criterion of differentiation between these two sides, Saussure simply summons *the relationship of exteriority - the interiority of the “vocal” with regard to the sign*, and thus leaves open the possibility of a re-examination and of an explanation of this relationship, which he will realize gradually, and particularly through the elaboration of the concept of *form*.

From this same theoretical angle, abandoning the traditional “sound vs idea” opposition marks a total break with a twofold dualistic tradition. Saussure’s position on this subject is firm, constant and explicit, and has two fundamental aspects. He first rejects primary or substantive dualism, namely the conception which, admitting the radical separation between the order of the physical and the order of the psychic, had led, in matters of language, to considering that the two components of the sign - in this case the material sound and the idea - were two disjoint substances and were therefore each governed by irreducible principles or laws. Now, in this framework of thought, on the one hand, we cannot conceive of *an essence compatible with the reality of language*, that is, an order that is both *one* and not subject to all the contingencies covered by physical or ideal orders; on the other hand, one cannot understand what the irreducible characteristic features of language are, and even less what this *non-*

accidental character of its relation to man is. Adherence to this first dualistic postulate would therefore, according to Saussure, lead to an “easy and pernicious way” of conceiving the double character of signs.

But Saussure equally rejects a derivative dualism, namely, the conception that admits, explicitly or implicitly, the disjunction between thought and language. This conception leads to the thesis of the pre-eminence of pre-organized thought (or of structured ideas) endowed with an existence prior to language, and which would impose on this language a cognitively pre-established structure:

It is wrong to believe that there may be *forms* (existing in themselves, independently of their *use*) or *ideas* (existing in themselves, independently of their *representation*). (WGL, p. 15)

According to Saussure, even if we admit the existence of these preliminary “ideas”, they could not be considered as being of a “simple order”, which, although psychic, would be and remain outside the domain of the sign. In this case it would be a “pure” thought which, whatever its degree or mode of organization, is in no way of the order of the SIGN. This pure potential thought is consequently a phenomenon which, in any case, cannot be assigned to linguistics:

Non-linguistic domain of pure thought, or devoid and outside of vocal signs.

This domain, whatever its disciplinary association, is where any type of absolute category of idea should be consigned, if it is truly thought of as absolute. It thus applies for instance to a hypothetical category of sun or a category of the future or of the noun *always* *presuming that these are taken as truly absolute and independent of the vocal signs* of a language, or of the countless types of ordinary signs. (WGL, pp. 25-26)

This general position then led Saussure to a clarification of what the linguistic order is as a SIGN. This is not a mechanism for matching products, pre-organized or positive entities, even if they are psychic, but it is above all *a distinct “psychic place”*, the place of associations, which emerges during the process of generating complex entities:

Linguistic domain of thought becoming ideas within signs or of *vocal figures* becoming signs within ideas. This is not two things, but one, contrary to the first basic error. It is just as literally true to say that the word is the sign of the idea as it is to say that the idea is the sign of the word. The idea constantly fulfils this role, since it is likewise impossible to fix and limit a word materially within the sentence without an idea. (WGL, p. 26)

The double essence of language thus proceeds from a *double becoming* which creates a specific order; it resides neither in a conversion mechanism (from vocal figures to thoughts or thoughts to vocal figures), nor in a mechanism of replacement of one by the other. The dyadic nature of the SIGN essence is based on a *parallel and simultaneous process of disengagement*, and the physicality of sounds (the vocal figure *becomes* a sign in the idea), and “pure” thought (thought *becomes* an idea in the sign) through their “*coupling*” in “sign-idea” or “form-meaning”. Although exploiting a duality of phenomena (physical and psychic non-linguistic), the double essence constitutes from its emergence a surpassing of its duality: it has its own coherence, and its constitution coincides with (and rests on) a *principle of internal structuration* of its own specificity, namely the *generation of units by reciprocal delimitation*.

At the theoretical level, and even if it may seem paradoxical, Saussure aims, in fact, through the problematization of duality, to conceptualize a form of *unity*, or a *type of entity*, which is coherent but not simple. It is a process of reflection as complex as the type of entity in question, and Saussure resorts to metaphors to illustrate it, including that of the constitution of air or water. Because they belong to the material domain, these two elements are obviously very different from signs, but examining the modalities of their composition can nevertheless make it possible to understand the contents of the properties and the process of combination which is mentioned during the constitution of complex entities:

Hence the prime elements which are the focus of the activity and attention of the linguist are not only on the one hand *complex* elements, which it is wrong to want to simplify, but on the other hand they are elements *deprived* in their complexity of any natural unity. These elements are not comparable to a simple chemical substance, nor to a chemical compound. Instead they are very much like a *chemical mixture*, such as the mixture of nitrogen and oxygen in the air we breathe. Thus air is no longer air if the nitrogen or the oxygen is removed, although nothing joins the mass of nitrogen in the air to the mass of oxygen in the air. Thirdly, each of these elements is not subject to classification except in relation to other elements of the same order, although we are no longer dealing with air once we move to this classification. Fourthly, it is not impossible to classify the mixture of these elements. (WGL, p. 4)

These examples highlight the *productive nature* of the associative process, that is to say the *creation* of a qualitative difference by the passage from simple bodies to composite bodies. This type of comparison, however, does not provide a usable model for the order of signs. As Saussure has pointed out, besides the fact that material entities remain accessible to the senses, the physical or chemical orders *can* comprise simple entities with their own structure (nitrogen, oxygen, hydrogen) but also complex entities resulting from their synthesis. But this very difference highlights one of the irreducible characteristics of the order of signs: it possesses *exclusively* complex entities and exists only by virtue of this form of organization, so that the *association*, in its processual and resultative dimensions, becomes the *sine qua non* condition for the very existence of this order: “The central phenomenon of language is the association of a thought with a sign” (WGL, p. 28)—“[...] it is the association itself which makes the word, and without it there is nothing” (WGL, p. 63).

In light of the above, linguistic entities have three major characteristics. First, they are not given by the senses. Then, they cannot be simple and exist only by virtue of the association that creates them. Lastly, although this union is at once a condition and a form of their existence, the internal link on which they are based is “of a highly peculiar kind”, that is to say, *totally unnatural*. Throughout this reflection, Saussure refrains from qualifying this link: what is essential in his argumentation is its *necessary character* (without it the complex entities would not exist), as well as its *non-predetermined* character: the link in question cannot be based on any relationship of resemblance, imitation or correspondence between the elements it unites:

[...] if the unity of each linguistic entity itself results from a complex reality consisting of a union of elements, it results moreover from a union of a very particular sort in that there is nothing in common in essence between a sign and that which it signifies. (WGL, p. 5)

This analysis has very important methodological implications, as any ignorance of the dual character of the facts of language, any underestimation of the association process, is a simplification which leads to leaving the linguistic order and effectively addressing entities that do not belong (or no longer belong) to this area:

[...] when we attempt to classify the facts of a language we are thus faced with this problem: *classifying couplings of two different objects* (signs-ideas), and not at all, as we are led to suppose, classifying simple homogeneous objects, which would be the case if we had to classify *either signs or ideas*. They are two grammars, one flowing from the ideas, the other from the sign; each is wrong or incomplete. (ibid.)

The precautions to be taken are various, according to the very nature of the linguistic object. The first condition for us to be confronted by a linguistic entity is that the association between the two elements is present or maintained. (*Cours III*, in Constantin, 2005, p. 223) (our translation)

The study of the verbal system of signs therefore requires a real reversal of perspective, which respects its essence, and which consists in posing, both as a starting point and as a safeguard for any analysis, *the psychic associative union in its entirety*, and not one or the other of its elements².

Notes

- 1 To be faithful to the original text, we have been obliged to add the underlined passages to this translation.
- 2 We would like to thank Ian MacKenzie for help in revising the English version of this text.

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