

Semiology: A Comparative Science of Institutions¹

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Abstract

The Saussurian notion of *semiology* is closely linked to that of *institution*. In fact, in Saussure's words, "systems of signs" are "social institutions". Furthermore, language is conceived as a "special system" in relation to others "in the set of semiological facts". Among different semiological systems, writing also occupies a special place. If there is a real difference between language and writing, we could look for it in the power of externalization, which confers to writing a sort of exemplarity among the other institutions. As we will see in this article, writing reveals the process of institutionalization itself, as well as the rational sociality of reasoning institutions and the irrational sociality of unreasoning institutions as languages. *Semiology*, which is the discipline studying these phenomena and their differences, can be considered as a *comparative science of institutions*.

Keywords: *semiology, language, writing, institution, signs, systems*

To make it clear that language [*langue*] is an institution, Whitney rightly insisted on the arbitrary character of the signs, and thereby placed linguistics on its true axis. But he did not go all the way and did not see that the arbitrary character radically separates the language [*langue*] from all the other institutions. (CLG, p. 110, our translation)

1. Semiology—A Science of Institutions

The Saussurian notion of *semiology* is closely linked to that of *institution*. As we can read in the CLG: "It is up to the psychologist to determine the exact place of semiology" (CLG, p. 33). In fact, in Saussure's words, "systems of signs" are "social institutions": sociality is an internal factor and not an external one. *Sociality defines systems of signs as institutions*. Furthermore, the radically arbitrary character of linguistic signs makes the difference between "that particular semiology which is the language [*langue*]"² and other, non-linguistic signs. The language is conceived as a "special system" (CLG, p. 33) in relation to others "in the set of semiological facts" (*ibid.*). As we shall see in later sections, the radically arbitrary character of linguistic signs combined with their necessarily social nature explains the particular "semiological life" of language. These two internal criteria, that is to say the particular nature of sign and sociality, support the idea of *semiology as a science of culture* having as objects all the institutions sharing the same cultural space with a particular language.

As we can read in the critical edition of the CLG edited by Engler (henceforth CLG/E), "sign systems" are identified as "institutions"³, "social institutions"⁴, "ritual

institutions”⁵, “semiological institutions”⁶. Nevertheless, the concept of *institution* is not present as such either in the Saussurian lexicon prepared by Godel (1957), nor in that by Engler (1968) where it refers to the notions of “language, semiology”. These expressions attempt to create order in the set of “facts” subject to semiological study: the set of “human facts”⁷, “facts of language” and, more specifically, “linguistic facts”⁸, “semiological facts”⁹.

Language and “other institutions” are “semiological institutions” (Costantin, 2005, p. 89; CLG, p. 149), as noted by Godel (1957, p. 275) and Engler (1968, pp. 44-45). But in the notes taken by Saussure’s students during his courses in general linguistics, we can read about “sign systems” as “social institutions” (Riedlinger in Komatsu & Wolf, 1997p. 13; Costantin, 2005, p. 88), an expression also imported into the CLG (p. 33), even if language is not similar to other “institutions such as legal institutions” (Costantin, 2005, p. 88), rites, customs, etc. Indeed, there are important differences between language and “other institutions” (CLG, p. 34). But despite their differences, “systems of signs” share the same foundation: sociality. It is the reason why “social institution opposes natural institution” (Costantin, 2005, p. 88). “This social nature is one of its internal and non-external elements” (Riedlinger in Komatsu & Wolf, 1997, p. 14) justifying the semiological study of language and “political, legal and other institutions” (CLG, p. 33).

2. Institutions, Reasoning and Unreasoning

The notions of “institution” and “semiology” share a fundamental principle: the social nature of any semiological fact. According to Saussure, “language [*langue*] is not a social institution in all respects similar to others” (CLG, p. 26) but “it is distinguished by several features of other institutions, political ones, legal ones, etc.” (CLG, p. 33).

As recorded in Riedlinger’s notes¹⁰ and in Saussure’s handwritten sources, Whitney’s work leads to a more complex consideration of the relationship between language and other *institutions*. Saussure deals with institution in his handwritten notes identified as *Cahier Whitney*¹¹ and his reflections “come to the CLG essentially from this notebook” (Gambarara, 2007, p. 255):

Whitney said: language is a human institution. This has changed the axis of linguistics. The following will say that we believe: it is a human institution, but of such nature that all other human institutions, except that of writing, can only deceive us as to its true essence, if we rely on their misfortunate analogy. The other institutions, in fact, are all founded (to varying degrees) on NATURAL relations, [on a congruence between] things, as the final principle. For example, the right of a nation, or the political system, or even the fashion of its clothing, even the capricious fashion that fixes our clothing, which cannot deviate for a moment from the data of [] human bodies. As a result, all changes, all innovations... continue to depend on the first principle which is located nowhere else than at the bottom of the human soul, [acting in this same sphere].¹²

But language and writing are NOT based on a natural relationship of things. There is no relation, at any moment, between a certain sibilant sound and the form of the letter *S*, and likewise it is no more difficult for the word *cow* than for the word *vacca* to designate a cow. That is what Whitney was never tired of repeating, to make it clear that language is a pure institution. Only this proves much more: namely, that language is an institution

without analogies (if we join it with writing) and that it would be very presumptuous to believe that the history of language must resemble, even from afar, after that, that of another institution.¹³

Within Luis J. Prieto's theory of institutions¹⁴, founded essentially in the CLG and confirmed by Saussure's handwritten sources, *writing* (more precisely, *phonematic writing*¹⁵) represents the only institution that can be considered *analogous* to language and let to understand its "true essence".

Indeed, language and writing share the radically arbitrary character of the sign. This characteristic explains their process of institutionalization¹⁶. "What arbitrariness allows, what it makes possible, it prohibits at the same time; and the irrationality it introduces into the language, far from taking the form of a contract, takes the form of a constraint." (Chiss & Puech, 1997, p. 73, our translation)

The radically arbitrary character of the signs represents the fundamental difference between language and other institutions.

Whether it is the costume or [...] it is always the natural relation of things which takes over after an extravagance and which remains through the ages the guiding unit, which remains the rule through all the changes. While language, to accomplish the function that comes back between human institutions, is stripped of any limit in its processes (at least a limit that someone would have shown us). The absence of affinity from the beginning between [...] being a RADICAL thing, not a thing with the least bit of a nuance, it is by this that it happens subsequently that the language is not contained in a human rule, constantly corrected or directed, correctable or directable by human reason. This is the reason that dictates the other [institutions.] The institution of marriage in the monogamous form is probably more reasonable than in the polygamous form. It can be discussed philosophically. But the institution of any sign, for example, σ or s , to designate the sound s , or *cow* or *vacca* to designate the idea of a cow, is based on unreason itself; that is to say, there is no reason here based on the nature of things and the convenience which intervenes at any time, either to maintain or to suppress a [...]¹⁷

The distinction between language—conceived as "an institution without analogies (if we join writing)"—and the other institutions sharing with it the same cultural space, requires us to evaluate their reciprocal relations. And it is possible only in Semiology considered as a comparative *science of culture* having as its object all the institutions sharing the same cultural space.

As Saussure says, language [*langue*] "is not subject to the continual correction of the mind, because it does not follow, from the beginning, a visible harmony between the idea and means of expression; this remains a capital difference, despite all the external mirages, with respect to cases, for example religious rituals, political forms, uses [] not to speak of instruments"¹⁸. We can read the distinction between language (and writing) and the other institutions as a distinction respectively between *unreasoning institutions*, based on the radically arbitrary character of signs, and *reasoning institutions*, managed by a human rule constantly directing or correcting them, so that they are always dirigible or correctable by human reason. In Semiology considered as a comparative science of culture, reasoning and unreasoning institutions can be studied in respect of their mutual relations because they contribute all together to produce practices, discourse and texts within which they leave traces. "The *Cours*

de linguistique générale indeed lays the foundations of what can be considered as the theory of institutions.” (Prieto, 1990, p. 16, our translation)

3. The Process of Institutionalization

Writing is present everywhere in Saussure’s manuscript, either in the tension between linguistic practice and linguistic theorization, “graphic order and theoretical order” (Gambarara, 2007, p. 237, our translation), or in view of a theory of institutions which “comes to the CLG mainly from this notebook” (ibid., p. 255, our translation).

The relationship between language and writing becomes clearer when we take into account their modes of transmission. Linguistic communities are responsible for ensuring language transmission. They appear both as a plurality of individuals in the form “1 + 1 + 1 + 1 ... = I (collective model)” (CLG, p. 38) and as a “speaking mass” (CLG, pp. 112-113), a supra-individual entity. “Languages [*langue*] are systems of activity whose external data/social component is stronger and prevails over the internal, voluntary / individual one [] What is called ‘intersubjectivity’ is nothing else than sociality stratified and recapitulated by languages [*langues*] with the situation of reciprocity found in the act of speech.” (Gambarara, 2003, pp. 154-155, our translation) In fact, the other institutions (for example, fashion, law, religion) already presuppose the mastery of a common language which guarantees the reciprocity in which institutions are shared and assures their transmission in the history of human cultures.

So, there is a difference between what happens in language in which we already and always agree in using linguistic signs of which are composed linguistic systems, and what happens in the other institutions which involve agreeing on their own functioning through language. The agreement concerning language is unreasoning, a spontaneous and unthinking adaptation to common linguistic usages adopted in the linguistic community, which in turn guarantees the individual and collective use of the linguistic system, and hence its institutionalization. This spontaneous and unthinking adaptation reminds us of the (a)semiotic concept of *contagion*¹⁹, developed to describe collective phenomena of spontaneous and unreasoning adaptation:

That language is, at every moment of its existence, a historical product, is what is evident. But that at no moment of language, this historical product represents anything but the compromise (the last compromise) that the mind accepts with certain symbols; it is a truth more absolute still, because without this last fact there would be no language. (Saussure, 2002, p. 209, our translation)²⁰

Before a language can be reworked in individual usages, before the reciprocity of the speech act can be recognized, it undergoes a process of institutionalization that is both unreasoning and social: unreasoning because of the necessarily arbitrary character of linguistic signs; social because of the necessarily collective nature of the acts of reproduction and transmission. “Language [*langue*] is social, or does not exist. Language [*langue*], to impose itself on the mind of the individual, must first have the sanction of the community.” (ibid., pp. 298-299, our translation) The process of language institutionalization is based on this collective sanction reiterating (or not) common linguistic usages. Saussure’s ideas about institutions and institutionalization open up to more complex ideas of sociality and social proceedings to explain

semiological phenomena.

Among other institutions, language singularity depends on the arbitrary character of the linguistic signs and on the nature of the agreement responsible for its transmission. Indeed, in language we do not begin to agree about current linguistic usages, but we agree already and always. A passage from Riedlinger's notes of the second general linguistics course held by Saussure (1908-1909) deals with the nature of this agreement:

In the third place—when we recognize that we must consider the sign socially—we are tempted to take at first only what seems to depend most on our wishes; and we limit ourselves to this aspect by believing that we have taken the essential: this is what makes us speak of a language [*langue*] as “a contract, an agreement”. What is most interesting to study in the sign are the aspects by which it escapes our will; this is its true sphere since we can no longer reduce it. [...] The moment when we agree on the signs does not really exist, it is only ideal; and were it to exist it would not enter into consideration alongside the regular life of the language [*langue*]. (Riedlinger in Komatsu & Wolf, 1997, p. 11, our translation, our underlining)

The first type of agreement (*agreement1*: we agree already and always) means that we can always share a language and that it becomes a common language. “Language [*langue*] is the social part of language, external to the individual, who on his own cannot create or modify it; it exists only by virtue of a kind of contract between the members of the community.” (CLG, p. 31) Its institutionalization depends on the nature of this contract: a spontaneous and unreasonable adaptation to current linguistic usages. Then the mastery of a common language gives to individuals, members of the same linguistic community, the opportunity to agree on other institutions. This represents a second type of agreement (*agreement2*: we decide to agree or not and negotiate for it).

Agreement1, spontaneous and unreasoning, can be recognized in a collective language action: according to Saussure, it is the sanction of the linguistic community which is responsible for language institutionalization. Because of its specific characteristics, agreement1, spontaneous and unreasoning, is assumed by agreement2, thoughtful and reasoning. The fact of being in agreement already and always in this singular institution that is language must be supposed by the possibility to agree itself. The distinction between unreasoning institutions, such as languages, and reasoning institutions, such as fashion, law, religion, morality, traffic code, etc., depends on this theoretical point. Reasoning institutions imply agreement on something, that is to say a thoughtful and reasoning agreement2, an action taking place within a linguistic community being in agreement1 in a spontaneous and unreasoning way in using a common language. This process guarantees the institutionalization of both linguistic and non-linguistic institutions.

Reading again Saussure's handwritten notes, we notice that the irrationality that determines the “semiological life” of languages is valuable also for writing²¹. It guarantees their transmission in a cultural tradition, and also their possibility of innovation: “It is because the sign is arbitrary that it knows no other laws than that of tradition, and it is because it is based on tradition that it can be arbitrary.” (CLG, p. 108) It is because language is inserted in a tradition that we can already and always agree1 on current linguistic usages. It supposes also that language does not allow us

to agree² on language itself, because it is based on the radically arbitrary character of signs. Agreement¹ determining the “semiological life” of language supposes that each individual linguistic action is constantly subjected to a collective sanction²². This represents also a guarantee for the conditions of mutability and immutability of linguistic signs, for the “semiological life” of languages.

Agreement¹ assures the transmission of all institutions constituting a cultural environment. “What makes human action praxis is the predisposition to sociality, which always requires the ratification of the community. Here, we finally find the extent to which we have lost the relation to the environment in the constant proportion of our individual action to that of others.” (Gambarara, 2006, p. 225, our translation) This “measure” cannot be obtained *a priori*, nor once and for all, but it constantly identifies the gap between particular human actions referring to a cultural environment. The reiteration of this process is therefore assured “in the space and time typical of historical sociality: [by] the institution of always new and always contingent forms of collective agreement” (*ibid.*, our translation).

4. Writing, an Institution Analogous to Language

What is true of language in its “spontaneous linguistic praxis” (Gambarara, 2006, our translation) can also be attributed to writing. Writing is the only institution that can be considered analogous to language.²³

The place that writing acquires within a theory of institutions makes it possible to explain the “true essence” of language. Prieto (1975, 1983, 1986) rejects any hypothesis of “secondarity” of the written language with respect to the spoken language, explaining the “parallelism” that exists between phonic languages and graphic languages. The possibility of considering a spoken language and the related written language as “parallel” semiological systems depends on the correspondences that are established “between the semes and between the signs, or between the semes and between the figures, or between the semes only” (Prieto, 1975, p. 87, our translation). In the relationship between phonic language and graphic language, the parallelism between analogous entities is perfect only if the writing is a “phonematic” one because each element of the spoken language corresponds to one and only one element of the written language, and reciprocally. This difference can be grasped comparing phonetic and syllabic or ideographic writings.

Like language, writing is based on the radically arbitrary character of the signs. Nevertheless, writing is an autonomous semiological system. In two passages from the notes of Saussure’s second course of general linguistics, taken respectively by Riedlinger and Constantin²⁴ and which contributed to the paragraph of the CLG concerning the principle of arbitrariness of the sign (CLG, pp. 100-102), we can find the theoretical point governing the analogy between language and writing as institutions:

<In writing there is still an extrinsic series> of characters: 1° <Writing> supposes an agreement of the community, a contract between its different members. But almost as soon as we have laid down the necessity of a convention, another fact reminds us of the true nature of this convention: writing is based on a convention, on an arbitrary thing, but: 2° It is impossible for the individual to change anything, and even the whole community cannot do anything. Once adopted, we see an evolution that might be called fatal in this writing; all will, social as well as individual, cannot change anything. This convention, originally

voluntary, is no longer so, after the first generation. Other generations undergo it passively. These two characters are also found in the language [*langue*]. <1°. Social convention: it is obvious that it exists, but no less obvious than that we cannot stop at this primitive agreement, which is, so to speak, only theoretical; immediately we see that, this perfectly free convention being made, we find ourselves in front of the 2° second character: at any moment, the following generations cannot change the convention>. (Riedlinger in CLG/E, pp. 153-154, our translation)

Writing, in order to exist, presupposes a social convention, an agreement in a community. This is the first character in another series (extrinsic). But another fact reminds us of the true character of this agreement; from a fact of will, as for a contract, it is done on an arbitrary thing. The second characteristic is that it is impossible for an individual to change anything; the whole community cannot change it either. By a sort of fatal evolution, the whole destiny of writing unfolds. The changes of writing brought about by any kind of convention (any assembly, academy). This convention, voluntary at the beginning, is no longer so in the future. These two things we find in language [*langue*]: social convention exists, but this first act has no importance and the second character is the same as writing. This free, arbitrary convention is received by the following generations who cannot change anything. (Constantin in CLG/E, pp. 153-154, our translation)

Once we agree on the system of graphic signs to be used, writing shares the same semiological life as language. So, we have no longer any right of action over it, as we do not have any right of action over language. But writing is the only institution that reveals the passage between these forms of agreement (1 and 2) conceived within a theory of institutions. Indeed, what guarantees the transmission of writing as a semiological system is a collective, spontaneous and unreasoning agreement¹ on the common graphic system in use, and it has the same nature of the collective, spontaneous and unreasoning agreement¹ which guarantees the transmission of languages. Finally, the detachment power of the act and the situation of enunciation allows writing to make this process of institutionalization evident and visible.

5. Conclusion

If there is a real difference between language and writing within a theory of institutions, we could finally look for it in its power of externalization, which confers to writing a sort of exemplarity among the other institutions. Since it reveals the passage between these two forms of agreement (1 and 2) and sociality, we can endow writing with a special place among institutions, both unreasoning and reasoning ones. Writing is the only institution that can occupy an intermediate place. Moreover, because of its power of externalization, writing makes obvious and visible any access to the institutional dimension.

Writing reveals the process of institutionalization itself, as well as the rational sociality of reasoning institutions and the irrational sociality of unreasoning institutions as languages. As we've seen at the first pages of this article, writing and all reasoning and not reasoning institutions are semiotic phenomena. Semiology, which is the discipline studying these phenomena and their differences, can be so considered as a comparative science of institutions.

Notes

- 1 I sincerely want to thank John Joseph for reading this text.
- 2 *Cfr.*: “cette sémiologie particulière qui est la langue” (Saussure, ms. fr. 3951/10: f. 33r, our translation).
- 3 CLG/E: D 7; S 1.6; J 5; III C 15, 16.
- 4 CLG/E: D 7; J 5; III C 15.
- 5 CLG/E: D 7.
- 6 CLG/E: 281-326 ; CLG/E: D 7; III C 17, II C 11.
- 7 CLG/E: III C 273.
- 8 CLG/E: III C 274.
- 9 CLG/E: D 7; S 1.6; S 2.7; J 5; III C 11.
- 10 “L’idée de l’Américain Whitney < cf. Vapereau, *Les Contemporains* > qui dit que la langue est une institution est juste. Va trop loin < quand il dit que > c’est une institution qui a pris par hasard pour moyen d’expression les organes vocaux, < et que si nous parlons, c’est que nous avons reconnu que c’était plus commode que de se servir < par exemple > de nos doigts ; mais > M. de Saussure ne veut pas insister sur le côté naturel de la langue. Cette institution est avant tout une convention, mais ce qui distingue immédiatement la langue de toute autre convention c’est qu’elle porte sur des milliers de signes employés des millions de fois tous les jours. Donc c’est un système extrêmement multiple par le nombre des pièces qui le mettent en jeu.” (Riedlinger, in Komatsu & Wolf, 1997, pp. 3-4)
- 11 This manuscript was first published in the work of R. Godel, *Les sources manuscrites du “Cours de linguistique générale” de F. de Saussure*, Genève, Droz, 1957, pp. 43-46. Then, in the critical edition of Saussure (De) F., *Cours de linguistique générale*, edited by R. Engler, t. 1; *Notes de F. De Saussure sur la linguistique générale*, t. 2, Wiesbaden, O. Harrassowitz, 1968-1974. Finally, in Saussure (De) F., *Écrits de linguistique générale*, edited by R. Engler and S. Bouquet, Paris, Gallimard, 2002, pp. 203-222. Classified under “Papiers Ferdinand de Saussure”, Ms. fr. 3951/10, with the title “Notes pour un article sur Whitney”, it has been published in full as Saussure (De) F., “N. 10: notes pour un article sur Whitney [Ms. fr. 3951/10]”, *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, n. 60/2007, with a digital version annexed. An analysis of the different editions of this manuscript has been published by Gambarara (2007).
- 12 Saussure De F., « N. 10: notes pour un article sur Whitney [Ms. fr. 3951/10] », f° 17, p. 16 v°, 17 r°, our translation.
- 13 Saussure De F., « N. 10: notes pour un article sur Whitney [Ms. fr. 3951/10] », f° 8, p. 18 r°, our translation.
- 14 *Cfr.* Prieto, 1990, pp. 15-16.
- 15 *Cfr.* Prieto, 1983, pp. 6-20.
- 16 These pages constitute a single textual unit (17recto, 16verso, 18recto, 17verso) dealing with language as institution. *Cfr.* Gambarara, 2007, p. 246.
- 17 Saussure De, Ferdinand, «N. 10: notes pour un article sur Whitney [Ms. fr. 3951/10]», *op. cit.*, f° 25, p. 24 v°, our translation.
- 18 Saussure De, Ferdinand, «N. 10: notes pour un article sur Whitney [Ms. fr. 3951/10]», *op. cit.*, f° 37, p. 36 v°, 37 r°, our translation.
- 19 *Cfr. contagion esthétique vs manipulation cognitive*, (Landowski, 2004, pp. 95-96 and *passim*). This idea of thoughtless adaptation is similar to the (a)semiotic idea of *contagion*: the passage from the action of the individual actant to the action of the collective actant depends on mental contagion (Le Bon, 1921, pp. 129-130).

- 20 This quotation has been corrected by comparing it with Ms 3951, 14recto.
- 21 “Joindre ici ce fait qu’on lit une écriture couramment sans se douter de la forme des signes: ainsi la majorité des personnes interrogées se trouve très embarrassée de reproduire exactement la forme d’un g (minuscule ronde) imprimé que chacun lit tous les jours cinquante fois si n’est mille. Le phénomène paraît être très exactement le même que celui de l’inconscience du son des mots en lui-même. D’une manière plus générale il me semble que, soit dans le champ de l’effet individuel (= sémiologique) soit dans la perspective historique, les faits relatifs à l’écriture présentent peut-être pour tous les faits sans exception qui sont dans le langage une mine d’observations intéressantes, et de fait non seulement analogues mais complètement homologues, d’un bout à l’autre, à ceux qu’on peut discerner dans le langage parlé. Pour l’écriture le sens est représenté par le son, pendant que le son est représenté par les traits graphiques; mais le rapport entre le trait graphique et le son parlé est le même qu’entre le son parlé et l’idée.” (Saussure, 2002, p. 49).
- 22 “En effet quand un système sémiologique devient le bien d’une communauté, il est vain de vouloir l’apprécier hors de ce qui résultera pour lui de ce caractère collectif et il est suffisant <pour avoir son essence> d’examiner ce qu’il est vis-à-vis de la collectivité. <Nous disons qu’il cesse de pouvoir être apprécié selon un caractère interne ou immédiat parce qu’> en effet, dès ce moment, rien ne garantit plus <que ce soit> une raison individuelle qui gouverne le rapport du signe et de l’idée. A priori nous ne savons pas quelles forces vont être mêlées à la vie du système de signes [...] Et il suffit de considérer la langue comme quelque chose de social, de collectif [...] Ce n’est donc que ce système de la communauté qui mérite le nom de système de signes, et qui l’est. Les caractères antérieurs < — <c’est-à-dire> les éléments purement individuels — > à cette venue dans la collectivité sont inimportants. Le système de signes est fait pour la collectivité, <et non pour l’individu,> comme le vaisseau <est fait> pour la mer; c’est pourquoi, contrairement à l’apparence, à aucun moment le phénomène sémiologique ne laisse hors de lui le fait de la collectivité sociale. <Cette nature sociale> c’est un de ses éléments internes et non externes.” (Riedlinger in Komatsu and Wolf, 1997, pp. 13-14, our underlining)
- 23 Cfr. De Angelis, 2012; Testenoire, 2017.
- 24 These passages correspond to II R 15, 16 and II C 14 in CLG/E.

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