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Reading Ferdinand de Saussure. Again!²

Abstract: Ferdinand de Saussure claimed linguistics as the only science proper to study the language. Different developments along the years seemed to contradict this position. The present paper discusses the issue. Language, if seen as a complex phenomenon, falls under the study of different disciplines, like anthropology, psychology, sociology, which seems to contradict Saussure. Just apparently, as we should pay attention to the concepts Saussure as well as the authors invoked here use. For Saussure, language is made of a (historical) tongue and the totality of the linguistic acts it allows, and this is how he makes his choices: linguistics’ only object is the tongue, and also the only discipline that should study the tongue is linguistics. For other specialists, language is a complex object. One shouldn’t see a hard contradiction between those views, as Saussure had predicted the coming of a science which he considered necessary for the study of the life of signs within the social life of humans, and linguistics was going to be a part of this new science. The present paper tries to prove that there is no contradiction, so Saussure was right and he still is.

Keywords: Ferdinand de Saussure, langue vs. parole, semiology, language, linguistics, expression of emotions, Internet, Facebook.

¹ With a special input by Iolanda Prodan concerning the Korean language and culture. Iolanda Prodan is a professional translator of Korean and Japanese literature into Romanian.

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1. Saussure Was Right

It's been a while since Saussure was revisited explicitly, so I decided to have once again a look at his Course, just to verify – again! – that one cannot go far away from his ideas if working in linguistics and/or in related domains. This time, it is about the object of linguistics and the strict protection of it.

Using natural language in verbal communication is – from a linguistic perspective – making use of a historical language as means of communication by actual human beings in an actual context with a purpose. In Saussure's words, this comes down to the actualization of the social part of the language (the historical language, Saussure's *LANGUE*) in a particular event (Saussure's *PAROLE*) consisting of the concrete uttering of a linguistic segment (cf. Saussure 1922). In the present paper the French terminology will be used, as it cannot be well enough equivalated with English terms. So we shall have *LANGUE* and *PAROLE* as constituents of the *LANGAGE*. Let us first have a look of the difficulties coming from the impossibility of a perfect translation of the Saussurian opposition in English.

In search for the pure object of linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure marks a distance between *language* (fr. *langage*) and (generic) *tongue* (fr. *LANGUE*) by defining the second as the first one without particular actualizations (fr. *PAROLE*), and retaining as sole object of his science what the French call *LANGUE* (corresponding to the English *generic tongue*, *historical native languages* in their general aspects, or even simply *language* (when it is obvious that the meaning is the same as in the first two notions)). Being aware of the difficulty of translating in other languages what he had set up as an opposition, Saussure suggests his fellow researchers in linguistics to use the French terms in expressing the opposition while thinking it at a conceptual level. Following this generous offer, we will have the opposition *LANGUE* vs. *PAROLE*, both of those existences being components of a complex phenomenon called *langage* (one could now remark once more how difficult it is to mark the Saussurian distinction in English!).

2. Saussure's Risky Position

As he was interested by the *LANGUE* alone, Saussure claimed that linguistics was the only appropriate science to undertake its study. Abstracted to any actualization in speech acts (*PAROLE*), this *LANGUE*

is a virtual existence, an object in itself with no relation and no reference to actual users or any other external reality. Linguistics, said Saussure, will be part of a science to come – and which is to be called *sémiologie*, (Eng. *semiology*) – as needed for the study of signs within the social life, and it will study the *LANGUE* as means of signifying. To discourage any interference (or worse, any intrusion), Saussure makes it clear: it would be an improper approach letting sciences like psychology, anthropology, normative grammar, philology, etc. claim *LANGUE* as their object.

Saussure was anxious about the possible confusion between *LANGUE* and *LANGAGE*, the latter being perceived as a pile of heterogeneous items with no relation between them, which would make it an improper object for linguistics. An observation: “pile” – whether confused or not – is a notion that presupposes only the co-existence in space and in time of two or more elements/materials/substances, with no necessary relation between them. A pile of things can only be the object of several sciences if taken piece by piece, but it does not allow reaching a holistic view, not allowing itself to be revealed to the human spirit as a whole inside which one could postulate, with the help of those sciences, relations between the things it is made of.

3. Alternative Position

In opposition to the Saussurian term of “pile” (*supra*), the notion of “complex phenomenon” allows for the hope of reaching that holistic view we were talking about. Implicitly, propositions pertaining to the sciences on Saussure’s list – and many other sciences – stenographe the concept of language. The language is a unique phenomenon in its own way. And a complex one, no doubt about it. If we call it by a name in a singular form with a definite article, it is because we ought to consider it as a unique and unitive object, not as a unitary and homogeneous one. Under this light, developments occurred.

One century later, we can count some developments going apart from Saussure’s way. Language had been seen as a whole (*LANGUE* and *PAROLE*) and treated from a discursive perspective. This gave room for sciences like the ones banned by Saussure and we have now psycholinguistics, socio-linguistics, we have pragma-linguistics and pragma-stylistics, as well as language anthropology, rhetoric and the argumentation theory, discursive logic and a relevance theory, to name only the main approaches. On the other hand, normative grammar is the way societies reproduce themselves at the language level, while philology

has always been the chance to understand where we come from, language wise. But these are not to be taken into attention here, as they mean extending the concept of *LANGUE* (from Saussure) to the complex phenomenon of *LANGAGE*, Eugeniu Coșeriu (among others) talks about¹ (cf. Coșeriu 1995, 92 ssq.).

Language can be seen as an assemblage of differently organized parts, about which we have to admit, empirically, that they keep together, without the possibility for us to see there any homomorphy, nor homogeneity. No doubt, as a domain of many sciences, the language has to exist as a defined object with coherent properties, but these properties, within each of those sciences, will not be general and analytical, but specific and synthetic.

4. The Actual Discussion

After having layed the general framework for the discussion, my attention will go to studies concerning what happens within the Saussurian *LANGUE*, like the studies in the pragmatics of the *LANGUE*, or those in the expression of emotions as they are to be found in different languages (historical *LANGUES*).

For the first I will mention, as examples, the studies made by Oswald Ducrot and Jean Claude Anscombe². The integrated pragmatics of Ducrot, for example, is about the semantic source of pragmatics: in other words, speakers can produce effects while speaking because of the way the language they use (the historical *LANGUE*) signifies. Here, it is the right place to say that I couldn't ignore Henri Meschonnic's remarks on the opposition *LANGUE* vs. *PAROLE* (Meschonnic 1997). This author sees the things all the way around: the *LANGUE*, he says, does not exist *per se*, but we can find it in literature. So, it's like some people create it and present it at its best, and then leave it there for us to find it. It's the same idea from Ducrot's writings: the *LANGUE* is a set of rules for players (speakers) to play a game (discursive activity), and this resembles Saussure's idea that *LANGUE* is not substance, but form. The *LANGUE*, says Meschonnic, has no subject. The discourse does. But we can observe that the discourse – and the literature for that matter – bears

¹ „A complex phenomenon implying several simultaneous aspects which are nevertheless situated at different levels and thus can be approached from different points of view”.

² See, for example, Ducrot's *Les échelles argumentatives* (Ducrot 1980), where linguistic paradigms are proven to be oriented, meaning that they point in some direction. Hierarchies are revealed at the *LANGUE* level, with effects at the argumentative level.

subject within the frames of the LANGUE. Therefore, we can stick with Saussure's theory about LANGUE and PAROLE, by following Coşeriu who states that the language, as a complex phenomenon, presents itself with two aspects, a virtual one, and a concrete one: the "langue" (as in Saussure's writings) and the discursive acts (Saussure's "parole") (cf. Coşeriu 1995, 92).

For the emotions expression part, I will refer to the researches undertaken by Clifford Goddard, Anna Wierzbicka and other linguists aiming to produce a metalanguage able to describe emotions at a supra-cultural level, as if they were perceived all alike no matter of the native tongue at use. Not that I see that endeavour reaching its goal soon, but I do admire the comparative¹ effort which lead to it (see for example papers published by Anna Gladkova and Anna Wierzbicka in *Emotion Review* (Gladkova 2010; Wierzbicka 2009)).

While Ducrot and Anscombe present the exhaustive usage values of some word, pointing out the various possibilities of French to signify, Wierzbicka and Gladkova study the vagueness of the equivalence of terms from different languages, like English and Russian, in compared translations (like that of verses from Marc's Gospel). Of course, we could use the Whorf-Sapir theory lens to look to their findings, but the first two authors are native French speaking people having a good look of their mother tongue, while the latter seem to have no interest in that anthropological view as they are seeking for a common metalanguage. Nevertheless, the authors mentioned above are all dealing in discursive analysis, which Saussure would have disagreed with. Nevertheless, we shouldn't forget that Saussure was still talking of that science to come (the *sémiologie*) which was supposed to study the life of signs within the social life of humans, a science linguistics would be a part of. So, linguistic signs, as determined and analysed by linguistics alone (in their syntactic and their semantic dimensions) would also be looked at in their functional dimension (pragmatics wise), to understand their life within the social life of humans. This is how we came to wonder whether the pragmatics of LANGUE and the socio-linguistic, the pragma-linguistic

¹ A few words about comparativisme will serve to clarify the view over the rest of the presentation. To make sure I won't go wrong, I will seek support in Aristotle's writings: when comparing objects close one to another – Aristotle said – we should stress on the differences, while when comparing objects far apart, we should stress on common characteristics. I shall start from the assumption that we are dealing with very ressemblant objects (native tongues, historical languages), which will force us to pay attention to the differences, mainly.

and the pragma-stylistic studies are that far apart from linguistics itself as seen by Saussure. It seems not.

Taking the above remarks as a starting point, a great deal of interesting observations would appear from focussing our attention on the differences between what terms naming emotions in different native tongues really mean and how far they are from one another even if they are considered equivalent in translating texts from one language to the other. Such discussions have already been presented in the *Emotion Review*, but we could go further by approaching facts which can be observed in the globalized space by excellence, the Internet.

And now, the Internet and the expression of emotions.

Question: how could a native French speaking person make the difference between *like* and *love*, for example, when using Facebook? And then: what does such a Facebook user really understand or really express when using those English terms as such?

A first observation: since the Internet, we are all English speaking people and it seems that we all feel like being all Americans. Globalisation moves faster than anticipated.

A second observation: expressing emotions is a tricky issue. Sometimes it's because what we feel is hard to put in words and we are aware of it: the inefable is where our language betraides us, but we should be aware of what they call "imprecisions of the language" (cf. Solomon Marcus). Sometimes we just rely on what our mother tongue offers and we don't question the semantics of it. It works every time we interact with people from our own culture and we never care about what content we really deliver when we interact with someone coming from a different cultural background.

Let us now put those observations together and try to see what the "like" and "love" from Facebook mean for people from different cultures.

A visit on the site of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English* (the online version) helped me with a definition of the word in English (so what native English speaking world would feel and understand when using the word). Here it is:

Definition of *like* liked; liking

1. transitive verb
2. *I chiefly dialectal*: to be suitable or agreeable to *I like onions but they don't like me*
3. *2a*: to feel attraction toward or take pleasure in: *enjoy likes baseball*: to feel toward: regard *how would you like a change*
4. *3*: to wish to have: want *would like a drink*

5. 4: to do well in *this plant likes dry soil my car does not like cold weather*
6. intransitive verb
7. 1 *dialect*: approve
8. 2: to feel inclined: choose, prefer *leave any time you like*

One can easily remark that only the first position of the description as a transitive verb then the first position as an intransitive verb could be close to what they say on FB when using the emoticon saying “like”, but it comes with the specification “dialect”. At any rate, even with its signification from the first positions and even at its superlative (“like very much”) the term can cover but slightly the signification of “love” (and we are not talking only of the sentiment somebody can have for someone else). See for comparison the definition for “love” given by the same dictionary (mainly position 3 from “verb”):

Definition of *love* (noun)

1. 1a (1): strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties *maternal love for a child* (2): attraction based on sexual desire: affection and tenderness felt by lovers: *After all these years, they are still very much in love.* (3): affection based on admiration, benevolence, or common interests *love for his old schoolmates*: an assurance of affection *give her my love*
2. 2: warm attachment, enthusiasm, or devotion *love of the sea*
3. 3a: the object of attachment, devotion, or admiration *baseball was his first love* (1): a beloved person: darling – often used as a term of endearment (2) *British* – used as an informal term of address
4. 4a: unselfish loyal and benevolent (see benevolent 1a) concern for the good of another: such as (1): the fatherly concern of God for humankind (2): brotherly concern for others *b*: a person's adoration of God

Love (verb)

1. to hold dear (*patriots who loved their country well enough to die for it*)
2. to feel passion, devotion, or tenderness for (*a husband who loves his wife more than anything*)
3. to take pleasure in (*I love playing Frisbee in the summer rain*). Synonyms *adore, delight (in), dig, fancy, get off (on), groove (on), like, enjoy, rejoice (in), relish, revel (in), savor (also savour)*

This situation is hardly replicable in Romanian, but it is much harder to understand in French (where they use the same verb – “*aimer*” – to say they like the milk or they love their mother). It is interesting to see that both Romanian and French FB users gave up the idea of relating with the deep meaning of the words (in their respective mother tongues) and

just cope with some kind of a ritual where all you have to do is to place your sign of appreciation by clicking on the small hand (*j'adopte*, would say the French users, OK!, would say the Romanian ones, who have been using this American formula for a very long time already). Further down that line of action, French and Romanians alike assimilated the English term “like” and now they have the verb “*liker*” [laikε] in French and in Romanian they have the noun “*like* [laik], plural *likuri* [laikur’]” which refers to one or many occurrences of the small hand. In usages as “how many likes did you receive?” or “I hope for at least one million likes” (one like, many likes), the word describes the result of clicking the icon “like” of the platform to make public your position in support for somebody’s post.

For the French, we can have a look of the image below:



“Likez notre page” shows that they assimilated the verb and they use the whole paradigm of any French verb at use (here, the imperative, second person of the plural).

The thing is that Romanian language makes a sharp difference between the semantics of the equivalent of “like” (a plăcea) and of the equivalent of “love” (“a iubi”): the first relies on a mainly rational basis (one needs to have good arguments in order to “plăcea” something or somebody), while the second needs no arguments, no reason, or should

we say it is mostly irrational (one “iubește” just because). On the other hand, we can imagine that native French speakers make the difference between “aimer” as “like” and “aimer” as “love” on a context basis. Here is a scene from a French movie (*Manon des sources*), where a character makes it clear by saying “*Je t’aime d’amour*” (which would be pretty strange if reproduced *mot-à-mot* in English, or in Romanian, for that matter: *I love you with love*, respectively *Te iubesc cu iubire*).

One could assume that the French users of the social platform as well as the Romanians escape their respective cultures and forget their emotions when using Facebook. They simply integrate a group of people from everywhere in the world, all of which use ritual formulas to interact with the others. The fact that those formulas seem to be English words is unimportant. It is a new code, for a new collectivity, bearing new significations. A new code, more or less, instituted by a large but tacit agreement and transcending cultures and historical languages.

To spice up the presentation, I chose to include here the situation from the Korean culture. In doing this I rely on my colleague, Miss Iolanda Prodan, a very well known and appreciated specialist in the domain. I take the opportunity to thank her very much for her help. Here it is, the Korean expression of emotions related to the use of Facebook:

1. Like – 좋아요 (*joayo*)

Interestingly, for *Like*, in Korean they have an adjective, instead a verb. This adjective receives the particle *yo* in the end, which is considered, in the current use, to be a form of politeness. As a derivative form from 좋다, *joayo* shouldn’t be translated as *Like*. In Romanian, it is equivalent of *bine* (Eng. *good* or *OK*).

2. Love – 최고예요 (*choegoyeyo*)

For the *Love* button, the Korean chose another adjective, with the meaning *the best, of first quality, top quality*. This adjective is of Chinese origin, and it is transliterated as 최고-最高, where 最 (*choe*) means *the most*, while 高 (*ko/go*) means *up, high, height*.

3. Haha – 웃겨요 (*utgyeoyo*)

For the *HaHa* button, they use the verb 웃다 (*utda*), which means *to laugh*. We should notice that it is used in a causative mode and this allows it to mean *making someone laugh* but also *be laughable*.

4. Wow – 멋져요 (*meotjyeoyo*)

For *Wow*, Koreans don't use an interjection nor an onomatopoeia. They opted for a Korean adjective, frequently used in common language, mostly by youngsters. The standard form, from the dictionary, 멋지다 (*meotijida*) means *superb, great, fabulous*, accordingly to the context. A good English equivalent would be *cool*.

5. Sad – 슬포요 (*seulpoyo*)

For *Sad*, they use the Korean adjective 슬프다 (*seulpeuda*), which could be translated into English as *to be sad*.

6. Angry – 화나요 (*hwanayo*)

For *Angry*, they use a verb which is a compound word. It is made of the Chinese originated noun 화-火 (*hwa/pul*), meaning *fire* and the Korean verb 나다 (*nada*) meaning *getting out, bursting, starting up*, accordingly to the context. *Nada* is mainly used to express emotional states of mind or attitudes like *being afraid, getting irritated, being brave*.

We can remark the specificity of the Korean language in signifying. This was just another example of a different way in signifying, but also an example of using different signs to cope with a trans-cultural situation: expressing emotions on an international platform. .

5. Saussure, Right Again

Saussure was right and he still is: the signifying process inside any *LANGUE* lays sign-like virtualities setting up possibilities (which, finally, would serve the needs of expression of any *LANGUE* user in their *PAROLE*, of course). Only, the particular semantic description of equivalent terms from different *LANGUES* will lead to different offers of each mother tongue for its native speakers in comparison to what they offer to the non-native speakers. This counts also as basis for cultural differences. Translation studies mention this as difficulties in translating¹.

As a recurrent tribute to Saussure, it is worth having a look, at least once in a while, of the *LANGUE*, meaning have a close look at your mother tongue or at any other *LANGUE* you know well (or you think you do!). I was thinking we should do so, but I felt I was right only when reading Richard A. Lanham's *Style: an Anti-Textbook* (Lanham 2007) where this

¹ On this topic, see *After Babel*, by George Steiner, for example.

teacher of creative writing explicitly says: “You see that you can look at language in a different way, look at it rather than through it” (Lanham 2007, 65). And this comes in a section of the book called *Afterthoughts* of a chapter called *The Uses of Obscurity*. I was seduced by the approach of this university teacher, and I think it was because he said it while I was hesitating to say it. Richard Lanham teaches his students how to get a hard look at the language (English, as we can easily imagine) to find out what happens there, how many things are to be found in those possibilities of signifying laying in the (English) *LANGUE* and then he teaches those students what an opac style could be, where playing with the vast offer of the *LANGUE* counts, without thinking of what is to be said *per se*.

But Richard Lanham does not forget to cite “the old Oscar Wilde jibe, ‘How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?’ ” (Lanham 2007, 57) and adds that this is literally true. This observation should make us all look at the *LANGUE* the way Saussure invites us to do (system of significations), but assuming that signifying itself is something our minds do together (the common spirit of each community of native speakers of some *LANGUE*), each one for themselves and together with the others. Sometimes we need to hear ourselves thinking loudly to make sure we are thinking rightly, and there are moments when we can hear someone saying “Now, that I hear myself saying this, I realize it is not what I was thinking” or “It didn’t sound right, it is not what I meant”. It is like verifying our capacity of rightly signifying things, verifying our ability of seeking support in our language in order to think. This could be easier in another language, a language different from our mother tongue, a language we just happen to have learned, and that because we feel somehow detached from the deep meaning of its words: we weren’t shaped by that language, the universe around us wasn’t shaped by it for us, so it is just a tool for expression.

I would rely on Umberto Eco’s *Theory of Semiotics* in an attempt to make all this clearer. Here are the paragraphs which could help:

“[...]Therefore each of these processes [of communication] would seem to be permitted by an underlying system of significations. It is very important to make this distinction clear in order to avoid either dangerous misunderstandings or a sort of compulsory choice imposed by some contemporary semioticians: it is absolutely true that there are some important differences between a semiotics of communication and a semiotics of significations; this distinction does not, however, set two mutually exclusive approaches in opposition” (Eco 1976, 8).

And then:

“Once we admit that the two approaches must follow different methodological paths and require different sets of categories, it is methodologically necessary to recognize that, in cultural processes, they are strictly intertwined” (Eco 1976, 9).

This is why different systems of significations will generate different meanings in communication.

Languages (those LANGUES from Saussure) are not alike from the point of view of their capacity to signify, nor are they alike as ways of signifying. This is why translation is more an effort of approximating and equating different capacities and ways of signifying.

To get a better grip of the problem, a good exercise could be taking a step up and look at this very text from a metadiscursive level, analysing it: take now for example the case of Saussure’s opposition, *LANGUE* vs. *PAROLE* discussed in the first paragraph. We cannot have the same opposition in so many other languages, like English for example; translations have been made, but they are all imperfect and they get to be understood just because this opposition is always used in linguists’ talks, and these specialists know what they are talking about.

This was just one case study.

Think now of the impossibility for Dan Sperber of translating “relevance” in his own mother tongue (when giving the French version of his own *On Relevance Theory*)! In French he had to use “pertinence”, which is an English word too, but saying something different from what “relevance” says: pertinence is appropriation (a meaning showing the precise state of things in a precise moment of time), while relevance is also appropriation but it is gradual (one could be appropriate, but not that relevant in expressing something). Dan Sperber had to accept that the French “pertinence” will do it as much as possible. As good as it gets, as they say.

This could make one think of an interesting book, *Le français, dernière des langues*, by Gilles Philippe (Philippe 2010), where the author discusses remarks made by French writers on their own mother tongue. Starting in the 17th century and going on until the present time, a long list of reproches were made to the French language by its authors, by the translators (mostly those who have given translations from Latin into French): they did write in French and they did translate Latin texts into French, but they felt something wasn’t quite right there, French had let them down somehow, sometime, somewhere in their creative effort. I

myself have published some considerations (Stoica 2016) on the fact that French does not have a word for the English *home* (Romanian *acasă*). The Latin *ad casam* evolved just to be a preposition, in French: *chez*. The question was “can you really feel *at home* in French if you happen to be a native speaker of this language?”. The rest of us will never know. Nor will the native French speakers, because they don’t have a reference point. Maybe the bilinguals, French and English, or French and Romanian. Maybe.

6. In the End, ...

... we can agree once again that Saussure was right. He still is the forerunner of clear cut concepts in linguistics. This serves us all, setting the basis for discussing LANGUE’s issue as well as issues concerning the LANGAGE. Coșeriu, Eco, Ducrot, Meschonnic are good examples of reinterpreting Saussure without losing touch with his work. Benveniste himself was a saussurianist when he came with the idea of a two-fold linguistics: one studying the LANGUE, the other studying the enunciation. Then, Saussure was talking of that science which had to come, the semiology, having linguistics as a sub-part. Later on, there is Umberto Eco, who sees semiotics as two-folded too: a semiotic of signification (codes, systems, ... LANGUES) and a semiotic of communication (process, ...PAROLE). Is there any dynamics in the LANGUE? Ducrot proves that there is. Before of and independently from PAROLEs, the system contains tensions and it points in different directions. All we have to do is look at the system (the LANGUE), as if it were opaque, and take joy in discovering the multitude of possibilities of signifying laying there. Coșeriu proposes a holistic view of the object language, which encourages us to accept the study of the saussurian LANGUE together with the study of its manifestations in linguistic acts. But none of the above mentioned authors is far from Saussure, as he put linguistics (the only proper science for the study of the LANGUE) inside semiology (which was imagined as the science which was to study the life of signs inside the social life of humans).

In other words, Saussure was right.

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