Lost and not found:

The *Course in General Linguistics* between "Saussurism" and "Saussurology"

Saussure's quest for constitutive features of language resulted in his formulation of two fundamental principles: first, the bipolarity of the sign, according to which neither form nor meaning of a sign exists as of itself, outside of their mutual relation; and second, the arbitrariness of that relation, i.e., the fact that their link is based solely on convention. The purely relational nature of language, the fact that its entities have no positive identity of their own result in the unceasing development of language whose direction and results can be neither programmed nor predicted. In the first half of the twentieth century, Saussure's idea of language as a pure "structure" interpreted in a static way, as a matrix of relations whose elements occupy secure positions in the overall relational network. When critique of the structural approach has been raised in the 1960-80s, Saussure's champions tried to distance Saussure's "genuine" views, ostensibly expressed in his private papers, from his posthumously published *Course*, which was declared unreliable or even falsified. The present paper argues that the problem with interpreting Saussure arises primarily from the way his works were read by different generations and in different intellectual contexts. Saussure's work needs to be examined in the context of its own time, as an integral part of the philosophical revolution of the turn of the twentieth century.

In 1950, John Rupert Firth — at the time, a rather lonely figure whose views on language stood apart from the tides that were predominant among his contemporaries — suggested, with a tinge of irony, that all contemporary linguists could be classified as "Saussureans," "anti-Saussureans," "post-Saussureans," and "non-Saussureans" (Firth 1964: 179). Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that all major trends in theoretical linguistics that emerged in Europe between the two world wars — the "Linguistic Circles" of Moscow, Prague, and Copenhagen, the "Swiss school," French structuralism — considered the *Course in General Linguistics* to be the starting point from which their respective approaches to language evolved. Beyond continental Europe, Bloomfieldian "descriptive linguistics," for all its important methodological distinctions from European approaches, maintained a dialogue and positioned itself in connection with Saussure's ideas.

During the first two decades after the Second World War the impact of Saussure (or rather, of what the post-war generation was willing and able to draw from the book published under his name) continued to grow exponentially both in scope and in depth, with the (presumably Saussurean) idea of "structure" spreading far beyond the study of language. In the domain of literary studies and aesthetics, it gave rise to structural poetics (Jakobson), narratology (Bremond), and the relativist theory of aesthetic value (Mukarovsky). "Structuralism" proved seminal for the theory of psychological development (Piaget), anthropology (Lévi-Strauss), and eventually, for the studies of various forms of cultural behavior that assumed the umbrella name of "semiotics." As to the domain of theoretical linguistics proper, generative grammar, while setting itself in opposition to the structural linguistics of the 1920s-50s, seemed (at least in the beginning) to adopt some of Saussure's fundamental ideas.

As it often happens in the history of ideas, the very moment when the presence of a certain intellectual phenomenon seems to become inexorable, even in the view of those trying to resist it, marks a turning point at which its fortunes start to decline. Piaget's triumphant summation of the premises and principal achievements of "structuralism" as an intellectual paradigm whose applicability seemed to have no limits (1968) nearly coincided in time with Derrida's critique of Saussure's concept of the sign in *Of Grammatology* (1967). Another instance of insightful critique of Saussurean linguistics — V. N. Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1973 [1928]), inspired by Bakhtin's ideas of meaning and discourse — although written forty years earlier, became widely known about the same time.

The impact of those ideas was to a large extent responsible for a sweeping paradigm shift in the fields of philosophy of language, cultural studies, and literary theory, which had its origin in France and eventually spread all over the world. For a scholar in the early 1960s, a single glance at any cultural phenomenon — be it language, a work of art or

literature, a cultural mythology, social institution, or a feature of everyday behavior — predictably exposed structured patterns pointing to a semiotic code at its foundation; with equal predictability, a glance at the same phenomenon cast by a scholar a decade later revealed in it disruptions, inconsistencies, and a mixture of contradictory voices.

Claudine Normand in her book on Saussure (2000: 10) recalls how the post-war generation — eager to move forward from the horrors of the recent past and perceiving their vigorous struggle against intellectual routine as an integral part of challenges to the compromised social and moral order — enthusiastically embraced the "radical modernism" of the *Course*, alongside other major influences of the time, such as Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche. By the end of the 1970s, however, the structuralist model was viewed by many precisely as a vestige of the compromised past — a brainchild of turn-of-the-century modernism whose vision of the totalized semiotic order of human behavior had not withstood the tumultuous social and spiritual opening up of the 1960s. In this new intellectual climate, the outstanding recognition received by the *Course* over the previous half-century made it the prime target of critique. To a large extent, the new intellectual wave drew its identity from opposing the postulates ostensibly laid down in the *Course*. Saussurean *parole* as an empirical activity contingent on the command of the linguistic code turned into *écriture* as a spontaneously evolving continuum; Saussure's *différence* between nodal points of an internalized semiotic system transformed itself into *différ^e/ance*, an emblem of "superscription" as the fundamental principle of the palimpsest that was "writing."

For half a century after the *Course*'s appearance in 1916, few seemed to pay attention to the fact that the book published under Saussure's name was actually not written by him at all. As has always been well known, the book was compiled, after Saussure's death in 1913, by his younger colleagues in Geneva, Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, with the

assistance of one of participants in Saussure's classes, Albert Riedlinger, by combining

different sets of students' notes from Saussure's three yearly courses in general linguistics,

which he taught biennially between 1906 and 1911. With minute exceptions, nothing in the

book came from Saussure's pen. The extent to which the structuralist generations, while

taking the *Course* as their banner, remained indifferent to its provenance, was in itself

characteristic of a mindset that tended to focus on the inner "essence" of every matter, to the

neglect of "outward" circumstances. If anything, the absence of any direct indicators of

Saussure's authorship contributed to the book's quasi-mystical, Gospel-like aura. For

decades, the book stayed at the pinnacle of a powerful intellectual canon as its foremost

expression. Many of its aphoristic pronouncements — crowned with the famous concluding

phrase about language "in itself and for itself" being "the sole and true object" of linguistic

studies — stood etched in the memory of several generations of adherents of the intellectual

paradigm it inspired.

During last years of his life Saussure — who, if one is to judge by testimonies left by

his interlocutors, felt dejected by what he perceived as his failure to bring into shape a new

science of language — consistently declined any possibility of publishing the ideas he laid

out in his lectures, citing, among other reasons, the totally chaotic state of his notes that

rendered them unusable.[1] Saussure's would-be publishers, upon examining some of his

papers, concurred with that judgment, hence their decision to rely predominantly on the

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[1] Characteristic was a conversation Saussure held with one of his devoted students, Léopold Gautier, in the spring of 1911, close to the end of his third lecture course (Gautier 2005: 69-70):

— I [Gautier] told him that one would be very eager to learn at least a part of his system of philosophy of language.

"I don't believe so. All this is not worked out sufficiently." <...>

— I asked him if he had put his ideas on paper.

"Yes, I have some notes, but they are lost in those piles [*monceaux*], so I wouldn't be able to retrieve them."

— I impressed it on him that he should publish something about these matters.

"It would be absurd to begin the lengthy research work [needed] for a publication, while I have here (he made a pointing gesture) lots and lots of works yet unpublished."

students' notes. We know now that they were wrong, thanks to a massive and lengthy research effort by a dedicated international group of scholars that involved discovering, sorting out, and publishing thousands of scattered pages, at times truncated or elliptical to the extent of opacity, which Saussure produced in the last twenty years of his life. Beginning with Godel's (1957) pioneering study of "manuscript sources" of the *Course*, the stream of sensational publications has never dried up.[2] The spirit of archeological assiduity and revelatory eagerness that has been characteristic of this entirely new branch of Saussurean studies was aptly captured in the mildly jocular name "Saussurology" given to it (according to Normand 2000) by René Amacker.

What "Saussurological" studies have made evident is, first of all, the extraordinary range of Saussure's tentative studies that by far exceeded the thematic scope of the *Course*. It comprised a variety of subjects, from theoretical and historical linguistics to the anagram, the theory of versification, the Nibelung epos, and Hinduism. Out of these discoveries "the other Saussure" has gradually emerged — an adventurous traveler into the nocturnal world of the trans-rational and oneiric, a pursuer of discontinuities,[3] a passionate champion of the unfettered freedom of semiotic behavior, whose statements to this effect at times sound not unlike those by Bakhtin or Derrida. Speaking of Saussure's notes on language and linguistics proper, their content often stands in striking contrast to the picture of language as an immanent system posited above and beyond all the accidents of its real-life usage, a

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[2] In a series of publications in the 1960s, culminating in a book (1971), Jean Starobinski introduced Saussure's studies of the anagram. A large set of Saussure's writings on general linguistics was found in mid-1990 in the *orangerie* of the Saussures' mansion in Geneva during renovations; together with previously discovered documents, they have been published as a book (Saussure 2002). Yet another large collection of Saussure's notes on a variety of subjects appeared in (Saussure 2003). A stream of publications of minor documents on various subjects continued to appear in print through the 1990s and 2000s, chiefly in *CFS*.

[3] Cf. effusive comments on the Saussurean anagram: "Readers assist in dismemberment of corpses worthy of the Chinese 'death by a thousand cuts.' Afterwards the *disjecta membra* recompose, the corpses glue themselves back together <...> Dance of

picture which generations of Saussure's readers owed to their reading of Saussure's book. By the same token, the notes seemed to answer much of the post-structuralist critique leveled at the conventional image of Saussure as one of the chief instigators of immanent system-building. Saussure's labyrinthine notes seemed to dispel the clouds of excessive rationalist stiffness that had been gathering around his name.

With the conventional image of Saussure inextricably linked to the *Course in General Linguistics*, it was only natural for the new breed of Saussure loyalists to point to the gap between the book and the notes in an effort to wrest Saussure from Jakobson's embrace, so to speak, and co-opt him into the post-modern world.[4] The success of that mission hinged on giving preponderance to Saussure's notes as the "genuine" expression of his thought, and by the same token, on distancing the thus construed "genuine Saussure" from the book published in his name. The stronger the desire to exculpate Saussure from all the sins of structuralism grew, the more vehemently denunciations of the published book as an act of betrayal or even deliberate falsification sounded.[5] The *Course*, that gospel of the preceding epoch, would now become referred to as a *vulgate* opus (a term artfully balancing the original Latin meaning 'in the public mode,' i.e., 'published,' and its modernized interpretation as 'in a vulgar mode').[6] It has become habitual among "Saussurologists" to address the now-refuted structuralist paradigm as "Saussurism" — a loaded term whose deprecatory "ism" suggests a false and deviant characterisation (as far as the "genuine"

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corpses, chaos of the text" (Gandon 2003: 440). In another recent study Saussure is celebrated as a "chasseur de fantômes et poursuiveur de chimères" (Malinger 2006: 42).

[4] See for example (Bouquet 1997); particularly strong statements to this effect can be found in André-Jean Pétroff (1999: 254), where "the other Saussure," emerging from the notes, is proclaimed to be "totally alien" to the structuralist tradition.

[5] Bouquet (1997: ii) speaks of the "most profound and most insidious falsification" of Saussure's thought committed by the editors. See similar assertions in: Claude Hagège 2003; Bouquet & Engler 2002. "La vulgate et la lettre, ou Saussure par deux fois restitué. De l'arbitraire du signe et de la syntaxe dans le *Cours de linguistique générale*." *CFS* 56 (2003); Simon Bouquet & Rudolf Engler, "Préface des éditeurs" in *Écrits...*, etc.

Saussure was concerned) of the intellectual phenomenon to which it alluded. One could sense an almost religious zeal in the way the new wave of Saussure scholars strove to refute as apocryphal the book on which "Saussurism" had been founded.

We are greatly indebted to these scholars, some of whom have spent their entire scholarly lives searching for, investigating, and publishing large portions of the enormous agglomeration of Saussure's secretive writing. Thanks to their determined and skillful efforts, what might have looked (and for a long time, did look) like an incoherent and almost illegible pile of fragments has emerged as a palpable if labile textual corpus whose importance for the history of ideas cannot be overestimated. What makes the premises of "Saussurological" studies questionable is that restoring the textual authenticity of Saussure's writings and putting their meaning to their historical context often appears in them as one and the same task.

The strategic argument of "Saussurology" has been that all the ideas in the *Course* that most greatly irritated its critics since the late 1960s — such as the strict separation of language as an immanent structure from the actuality of speech; postulating "synchrony" as the mode of existence of that structure; and the view of language as a *fait social*, which individual speakers have to accept unconditionally — had nothing to do with Saussure, and belonged to the book's editors instead. The treatment of Bally and Sechehaye (especially the former) by today's critics of the textology of the *Course* has been excessively harsh. The prevailing attitude toward the *Course* in contemporary Saussure scholarship recalls the methods of nineteenth-century comparative linguistics, whose heavy-handed positivist literalness provoked many scornful and furious remarks in Saussure's notes. The "genuine" Saussure is postulated in just the way the Indo-European proto-language used to be, as the ultimate archetype that is to be reconstructed by comparing diverse available documents.

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[6] The expression has become a piece of scholarly folklore to such an extent as to defy any definitive attribution; Gadet (1987: 14) suggested that it was introduced by Giulio

Among such sources, to which all the notes by Saussure himself and by his students are admitted uncritically, the *Course* is treated as the one least reliable, because of the alleged tampering by its editors. Consequently, if no direct correspondence to a certain passage in the book can be found in the "manuscript sources," this passage is deemed to be the editors' addition; by the same token, if a certain thesis found in a manuscript is not present in the book, the discrepancy is resolved in the favor of the former.

Ironically, the attitude of "Saussurology" toward Saussure's heritage has been based on the very premises from which it strove to exculpate the "true" Saussure. The treatment of the *Course* as a given phenomenon whose message is entirely determined by its "text" and not by the way it is read, itself can be seen as a fine example of "Saussurism." This position does not take into account the fact that what the interwar and first post-war generation saw in the *Course* owed at least as much to a selective perception spurred by their own intellectual agenda as by what was objectively present in the "text" of the book itself. A differently contextualized reading of the *Course* — greatly facilitated by the presence of its manuscript background — can expose in the fabric of the book important clues that the adherents of various strains of structuralism neither saw nor wanted to see. Instead of making the *Course* and the notes compete for textological primacy, they should be placed in a mutually illuminating dialogue.

The result, perhaps inadvertent, of the philological critique of the *Course* is that when viewed from this perspective, it in effect ceases to exist as a coherent book. It dissolves into a plurality of particular points, each appraised according to its correspondence to available alternative sources or the lack thereof. In his critical edition of the *Course* (Saussure 1968-1974), Rudolf Engler divided the book into 3,281 segments, each put alongside (more or less) corresponding passages in one or other manuscript source, be it Saussure's own or of one of his students. The apportioned text of the book and its virtual "sources" are printed in

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Lepschy.

parallel columns, with all the corresponding passages being matched against each other. The reading of the book forced by the critical edition is uncompromisingly "synchronic": attention is shifted from the way the book's message evolves (often through complex and manifold reverberations between its different sections) to the relations between carved-out (one is tempted to say, "arbitrary") textual portions.

If the book faces the danger of an arbitrary fragmentation, the manuscript sources, on the contrary, face the danger of an artificial structuring. Treating Saussure's notes — written at different times, in an unknown order, and under unknown circumstances — alongside the book puts them in a putative order that, paradoxically but inevitably, follows thematic lines established in the *Course*.[7] Supported by this artificial scaffolding, Saussure's fragments turn into a semblance of a theoretical edifice, losing in the process their peculiar quality, namely, their essentially non-linear character that allows them to be freely juxtaposed with and superimposed upon each other. Turned into a shadowy "text" with a coherent conceptual agenda, Saussure's "writings in general linguistics" lose the tremendous power of their fragmentariness.

Attempts to "recall" the *Course in General Linguistics* as a defective item in need of amendment and repair seem rather inept, due to the inexorable reality of the intellectual trend for which the book had been instrumental. It does gross injustice to those who made Saussure's thoughts a tangible fact of intellectual history. But historical scores aside, I am convinced that setting Saussure's manuscripts against the published book undermines their significance as well. After all, the question of who Saussure "really" was and what he "really" thought seems to be of limited interest outside the rather narrow bounds of "Saussurology." Much more interesting would be an attempt to consider Saussure in the context of his own time, that is, not as a proto-structuralist (as the conventional reading of

the *Course* suggested), and not as a proto-post-structuralist (as some of the *Course*'s critics claim), but as an integral (and very significant) part of the anti-positivist revolution in philosophy, sciences, and arts at the turn of the twentieth century.

As one navigates through Saussure's desperately fragmented writing, one finds ample evidence of his recognition of the importance of *la parole*; moreover, one notes his awareness of the preponderance of speech, with its ceaseless improvisations and transformations, as the only existential condition under which *la langue* can become a reality. The speakers' presumed submission to the rules of *la langue*, proclaimed in the *Course*, gives way in the notes to the picture of language at the hands of its users who leave their traces at every instance of use. The very principle of the oppositional organization of language makes every local impact reverberate through the system as a whole, rendering its synchronic "state" in constant flux and therefore, ungraspable.

The picture of language emerging from Saussure's notes is mirrored in the character of his writing: fragmentary, perpetually evolving and vacillating, with an emerging message typically being abruptly abandoned or superseded with a fresh attempt that in the end turns out to be just as inconclusive. All of this is a far cry from the perceived impassive clarity with which the *Course* lay out its theoretical postulates.

At first sight, the carefully structured discourse of the published book stands in remarkable contrast to the "pile" of Saussure's notes. Saussure's anger and frustration palpable in his notes, rarely surface in the printed discourse; and while in the notes their usual effect is to divert the train of Saussure's own thought, in the book their disruptive potential is never permitted to grow uncontrollable. To some extent, the *Course* probably owed its quiet orderliness to its editors; but judging by the notes of Saussure's students, this was the predominant mode of his own oral presentations as well. The discourses employed

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[7] In their Preface to Saussure's *Écrits*, the editors (Bouquet & Engler 2002) conceded that Saussure's newly recovered notes were "disparate and fragmentary," which made it

by Saussure in class and on paper belonged to different "speech genres." They evolved each according to its own rules, as if illustrating Saussure's idea of the infinite variety of forms of semiotic expression, each immanent to itself. And yet — for all the overt differences between the two principal parts of Saussure's heritage, the "substance" of their message was, if not identical, at least related and overlapping to a considerable degree.

If we take a look at the *Course* keeping in mind what we have learned from Saussure's manuscripts, its text loses its presumed homogeneity. Saussure's fragmentariness is present in the *Course*, albeit implicitly. Under the veneer of the lucid and orderly narrative in which it is clad (apparently, a trademark of Saussure's oral presentations), one can discern hidden contradictions, subtle yet perceptible shifts of earlier stated premises, and instances when the discussed subject is abruptly abandoned (when it becomes increasingly clear that its explication is leading nowhere). These discrepancies and tensions in the book are obfuscated by its neat division into chapters and sections. Paradoxically, it was the physical discontinuity of a lecture course that helped to maintain a rhetorical simulacrum of sequentiality. Every lecture (and every course at large) signified a fresh start at which a new subject could be introduced, leaving behind the unresolved dilemmas, and saving the lecturer from being trapped under excessive scrutiny of how each new step fitted with previous ones. It was the burden of these responsibilities that incapacitated Saussure the writer whenever he faced a sheet of paper. The oral mode of communication did not leave time for procrastination. The moment a certain thesis had been expressed, it inexorably receded into the past, leaving no time for musings about its manifold consequences that might have proven disruptive. What would emerge later in the flow of the course's narrative might in fact contradict some earlier points, but those contradictions appeared smoothed out by the inexorable linearity of the sequence of lectures. The discontinuous sequence of lectures, "arbitrarily" apportioned, made cracks in the logical fabric of the whole

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necessary to group them thematically.

imperceptible — or at least, if we speak of Saussure himself, bearable. It helped Saussure to "stay the course" (more or less) in his lectures, something which proved impossible for him to do when facing nothing but his own thoughts in the process of writing.

In the third (and last) course, this appearance of unperturbed coherence had already started to crumble. At some point, Saussure had to stop the train of his "theorems," making a fresh start in a way reminiscent of his notes. The last segment of the course, comprising about a half of the second semester, turned into a reexamination and redefinition of what had been said in the preceding lectures. The same problems were presented anew, by way of variation on what had been said about them in the previous semester. It was in the process of this peculiar footnoting that some of the crucial terminology known to everyone from the *Course* (such as *signifié* vs. *signifiant*) was introduced for the first time. One can see Saussure drifting toward the strategy of non-linear, incremental presentation that dominated his notes.

The book's publishers had to compile the sources that were available to them as a coherent narrative, without which the book could not have come into existence. Still, the *Course* did not completely abandon the implicit discontinuities that were inherent in Saussure's representations of his ideas. In different chapters of the book, its intellectual edifice undergoes incremental changes. At one point, "arbitrariness" is proclaimed to be the absolute principle; at another, its absoluteness seems to be undermined by the concept of "relative arbitrariness"; at yet another, it is suggested that different languages may feature relative arbitrariness to a different extent, with the consequence that absolute arbitrariness also assumes a different relative weight in such languages; still later, any hierarchy of different structural types of languages is resolutely rejected: no structural principle is superior or inferior to any other, Saussure proclaims emphaticaly. Some issues whose relevance for the whole remains unclear, are discussed at length; this happens, for example, when Saussure indulges his lifelong fascination with classifying speech sounds according to

their physical properties, putting aside for a while his theoretical claim of the irrelevance of the physical aspect outside its relational value in the sign. Finally, there are subjects that never receive any development beyond an initial mention — first and foremost, the issue of the linguistics of speech.

These tensions are genuine; they can be observed in the corpus of Saussure's notes as well. While bringing in the notes can illuminate the reading of the book, the book is needed to make the notes readable by giving them some shape. The full value of what Saussure expressed in his written fragments comes to light only in the face of what he has managed to achieve — while perceiving it as a failure — in his lectures.

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Following Saussure's consecutive courses in general linguistics through the notes of some of his students (Saussure 1996, Saussure 1997, and Saussure 1993) allows us to observe how tensions and discontinuities between various points in their corpus coalesce into a rhetorical semblance of unity within the frame of a book. Reading the *Course* with this background in mind, we become witnesses of Saussure's insistent search for a feasible starting point from which one could begin language exploration (*unde exoriar*: the words put at the head of one of his now famous notes), underlain by his awareness of the fact that there exist many possible ways of "proceeding," each of which could be as good, or as bad, as any other, due to the protean elusiveness of his subject.

There is a profound difference between the corpus of Saussure's explorations in general linguistics (including his courses and the book, alongside his notes), on the one hand, and such landmarks of theoretical linguistics as, for instance, Hermann Paul's *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte*, Trubetzkoy's *Grundzüge der Phonologie*, or Chomsky's *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, on the other. All works of the latter type introduce a theoretical model that allows a more effective description of facts of language. Yet one receives little guidance from Saussure's inquiry about "what is to be done" in terms of

building linguistic descriptions. The paucity of concrete examples in Saussure's discourse about language is rather striking. A few illustrations that accompany his far-reaching postulates look as if they have been produced spontaneously, as just the first thought that has come to the lecturer's (or note-writer's) mind; some of them are of manifestly poor quality, the result being that they create confusion instead of illuminating the matter. The famous instance of such carelessness is the way Saussure illustrates the principle of arbitrariness of the sign by saying that the same phenomenon is designated (arbitrarily) by the sound chain 'b-ö-f' (*boeuf*) and 'o-k-s' (*ochs*) "on either side of the [Franco-German] border"; as Jakobson (1978: 111) has pointed out, this example implies that the content of those signs is indeed "the same," which goes against the grain of Saussure's own argument about the inalienable interdependence of the *signifiant* and the *signifié*.

This peculiarity ceases to be puzzling if we acknowledge that the tenor of Saussure's inquiry belongs to philosophy or epistemology of language rather to linguistics in a traditional sense. There is, however, another contextual frame into which Saussure's inquiry fits rather well. Saussure's quest for unconditional, aprioristic properties of language that could be laid out as the foundations of linguistics had been born out of the philosophical revolution of the 1890s-1910s that resulted in the profound reassessment of epistemological premises in general, and of the foundations of various domains of knowledge, from the natural sciences, mathematics, and logic, to social studies and the humanities, in particular. What could be seen as the common denominator of the new approach was a sharp critique of the positivist faith in empirical "facts." As critics of positivist philosophy and science pointed out, what one recognizes as an empirically given "fact" is contingent on the implicit premises with which one approaches the continuum of one's perceptions of reality. From this insight arose the demand for each domain of knowledge to be built on the firm ground of explicitly formulated postulates that would construct the object of the study from a particular perspective. What Saussure says about how to approach language finds close

parallels in what Helmholtz said about the foundational premises of optics, Ostwald about those of chemistry, and Frege and Russell about the foundations of mathematics and logic; it was an approach that was summarized and codified some time later by Cassirer in his comprehensive analysis of various domains of knowledge as "symbolic forms."

Almost from the very beginning, the *Course* emphatically points to the ubiquitous empirical presence of language in various facets of human life. "The whole world," from history and anthropology to psychology, physiology, and acoustics, has a stake in language, Saussure asserts; but — a paradoxical consequence of this universal interest — "there exists no other field that germinates more absurd ideas, prejudices, mirages, and fictions" (*Cours*, 21-22).[8] In his notes, Saussure speaks in the same vein about "twenty kinds of analysis" to which language can be subjected (*Écrits*, 232).[9] This intolerable situation makes it urgent to define language — which in a purely empirical sense can mean virtually everything, or nothing — specifically as the object of linguistic inquiry. As early as 1894 in a letter to Meillet Saussure spoke bitterly about having realized that what he and his colleagues had been doing lacked any definitive foundation, a discovery that had "spoilt" for him all the joy of finding linguistic patterns and rules, an occupation in which he had excelled in the past.[10] With the anger and scorn characteristic of his private writing, Saussure finds "exceedingly amusing" the lack of awareness of this cognitive abyss over which linguists trod in blissful oblivion, as if what they would find in language were "the truth itself" (*Écrits*, 116).

Saussure's efforts to remedy this situation was in line with the ideas and methods of epistemological critique of his time. The uncompromising strictness with which he drew the distinction between *la langue* and *la parole* has caused uneasiness even among adepts of

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[8] All references to the *Course* are to the edition (Saussure 1967).
[9] This and all the following quotations from Saussure's writings in general linguistics refer to the edition (Saussure 2002).
[10] "I am seeing more and more both the immensity of labor that is needed to show a linguist *what he is doing* [Saussure's emphasis], ... and at the same time, the fairly great

"Saussurean linguistics" (including Bally, whom today's "Saussurologists" try to make responsible for it); and those who took Saussure's distinction as a descriptive strategy sought a more "dynamic" understanding of how the practices of speech and the system of language interact.[11] What these criticisms did not take into account was the epistemological, rather then empirical, significance of this distinction. Language and speech are not two domains, or two strata, of language's phenomenal existence. Rather, their distinction is metaphysical: Saussure's *langue* shows what belongs to language *a priori*, outside of any contingencies of its use. In this, Saussure's critique of language that strips it of everything empirically contingent follows the guidelines of Kantian epistemological critique. Saussure's "language," in its opposition to "speech," comes out as a metaphysical construct. His system of signs, "oppositive, relative, and negative" (*Course*, 164), is not a "system" or "structure" that can be directly approached as a generalized extension of empirical objects, but a transcendental construct that reveals itself precisely after everything that is tied to its phenomenal appearance has been removed.

Yet another general thesis in the *Course* — its distinction between "synchrony" and "diachrony" — parallels the universal division of the studies into "natural" and "historical" by Rickert. Rickert's opposition was not meant as the division between substantial domains of knowledge; rather, it pointed to two different perspectives from which any phenomenon could be viewed. In a similar spirit, Saussure's synchronic and diachronic linguistics can be seen as two interrelated aspects rather than two distinct domains of linguistic studies.

Saussure's exploration was aimed at establishing linguistics as a modern science that proceeds from postulating the foundational properties of its object; at one point in his notes, he speaks about his wish to shape linguistics into a set of "theorems." The epistemological

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vanity in thinking that anything could, in the final account, be done in linguistics." Letter of January 4, 1894. (Saussure 1964: 95).

[11] In particular, the Prague school made this dynamism of *language-speech* and the interaction of *synchrony-diachrony* the center point of their methodological stance.

drama of Saussure's inquiry consisted in the fact that when he has arrived at the construct of *la langue*, its properties turned out to be so uniquely peculiar as to set language apart from all the other logically constructed domains of knowledge

That feature that stood at the core of Saussure's transcendental vision of language was the principle of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, i.e., of the absence of any link, except sheer convention, between their form and their meaning. As Saussure asserted (in the third set of his lectures), arbitrariness occupies "the place at the summit" in the hierarchy of the ideas discussed in his course (Saussure 1993: 76); yet he never expounded it in a definitive and unambiguous way, perhaps because (as he once suggested) he considered his audience unfit for going the full course in exploring the matter.[12] A note of despair sounds in a phrase in the *Course* that, although the consequences of arbitrariness are "innumerable," large exploratory "detours" were needed for the "primordial" importance of the principle to be appreciated (*Course*, 100). Saussure's own vagueness, his misleadingly simplistic examples, his vacillations on how to qualify what he called "relative arbitrariness" (i.e., the cases of an overtly motivated connection between the form and meaning, as in onomatopoetic words or in derivative signs, such as *vingt-deux*), did much to trivialize the issue into something that Shakespeare's metaphor of "the name of the rose"[13] had expressed with more elegance. Saussure's lack of resolve in explicating his key thesis, coupled with emphatic assertions of its crucial significance, seemed to invite the criticism that followed, notably by Jakobson and Benveniste.

The concept of arbitrariness becomes explicable and in fact, quite coherent, if it is stripped of the empirical circumstances of language, i.e., of the various concrete

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[12] In the above cited conversation with Gautier, Saussure mentioned that he remained worried (*tracassé*) about his teaching: should he present the subject in all its complexity, revealing to the students all its ambiguities and unsolvable dilemmas, which would ill serve their purpose of simply getting credit for the course, or simplify the matter, compromising the complexity of the issues to adapt them to the needs of the audience? (Gautier 2005: 69).

configurations of sound and meaning in different words of different languages. What it signifies on this level of transcendental abstraction is, first of all, the absolute irrelevance of either sound or meaning of a sign separately from each other. If stripped from its correlation with its *signifié*, the *signifiant* is reduced to an amorphous continuum of noises; likewise, the *signifié* thus isolated turns into an indefinite continuum of impressions. Saussure once ingeniously compared this state of events with a balloon filled with nitrogen: without nitrogen, the balloon would turn into a pile of cloth; without the balloon, nitrogen would dissolve in the atmosphere without a trace. Yet this is only one side of the matter; the other side consists in the fact that the convention that has brought the two components of the sign together into an inseparable unity, is essentially (to use Saussure's words) "blind," "empty" of any logical or empirical foundation, and therefore susceptible to any accidental conjunction of circumstances that might arise in the history of a language.

The purely accidental nature of the linguistic sign as its universal property does not mean that the composition of at least some signs could not be explained by referring to experience, or by logical inference. One points to a proliferation of words signifying various kinds of "coldness" or "snow" in Northern languages; one arrives at the meaning of *vingt-deux* just by putting together the meaning of 'twenty' and 'two.' Yet one's exposure to a subpolar climate would not make one able to predict how many different signs related to these topics should be present in one language or another in the area; and no considerations of numerical order will guarantee a preference for *vingt-deux* over *zwei und zwanzig*, or any other compositional configuration of the word (or the lack thereof).

Arbitrariness does not mean that any reasoning about the connection between the form and the content of a sign is impossible, what it does mean is the fact that any such reasoning is contingent on our primary knowledge of the sign. It is the existence of the sign as a given

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[13] "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet."

(i.e., arbitrary) fact that makes its analysis possible, not the other way around; no life experience or analytical procedure can guarantee that this thus construed sign will actually exist in a given language. "Far from the case of objects preceding a point of view, one can say that it is the point of view that creates an object [of language], while nothing tells us in advance that one of the ways of considering the facts in question should precede or would be superior to the others" (*Course*, 23).

To Saussure, the inseparability, and at the same time total mutual irrelevance, of the unity of "thought-sound" (*pensée-son*) appears "mysterious." The linguistic sign can neither be drawn from experience nor construed "synthetically" (to use Kant's term); it is neither the "materialization of thought" nor the "spiritualization of sound" (*Course*, 156). Saussure speaks of the "fatality" of the science of language (*Écrits*, 227), due to the essential "emptiness" of the linguistic sign. In his quest for the transcendental essence of language Saussure has come to the conclusion that this essence is purely negative. Whatever the entities of language, they do not have any substantial property of their own; all that supports them is the fact that they are related to each other.

Structural linguistics adopted the Saussurean principle of systemic relations, while ignoring, or passing lightly over what he said about its negative emptiness. For the next generation of linguists, inspired by a selective reading of Saussure's *Course*, the "structure" of language (and eventually, of any semiotic system) emerged as a tangible blueprint, to be discerned in its representations in speech and described accordingly in terms of "patterns" and "rules."

Jonathan Culler — characteristically, not a linguist but a literary scholar — has shown remarkable insight into the consequence of the unbreakable yet arbitrary link between the signifier and the signified by pointing out that this means the fatal instability of the sign. Its lack of any substantial property it could claim as its own makes it the playground of chaotic forces that are involved in its usage at any given moment (Culler 1986: 32-33). *La langue* as

a semiotic system is not a ship at anchor, Saussure remarks, but a ship at sea: "The moment it touches the sea, it is vain to think that one could predict its course by projecting it from one's knowledge of the material out of which it has been made, and of its interior construction" (*Écrits*, 289); in fact, Saussure's metaphor envisions *la langue* as an "empty shell" of a ship, with neither sails nor the rudder to sustain its course.

Understanding arbitrariness as the transcendental *a priori* given property of the linguistic sign allows Saussure to resolve the seeming contradiction between the principles of "mutability" and "immutability," both proclaimed in the *Course* to be universal modes of existence of a sign system. Typically for the book's rhetoric (probably reflecting the character of Saussure's oral presentation in his lectures), the formulation of this thesis is accompanied by a vague protestation to the effect that these two principles are not as contradictory as they look, and can be reconciled (*Course*, 108-109); a suggestion that, however, is left hanging in the air without any further elaboration. Again, to resolve this contradiction one must be aware of the distinction between the postulated metaphysical nature of language and its empirical presence. The state of the system of signs is absolute in a sense that it has no justification but itself; in this sense, nothing that happens in the empirical world in which the speakers dwell can touch it — it is immutable. Yet that very absoluteness, or "arbitrariness" of the system strips it of any stabilizing force, making it defenseless against the force of blind accident. In this sense, its mutability is as absolute as its immutability. Not only does language change, but it cannot exist otherwise than in a state of incessant spontaneous changes; it evolves inexorably, like a stream running down a mountain (*Écrits*, 94).

The "immutability" of signs stems from their nonexistence as distinct entities outside the intrasystemic relations by which they are defined. Speakers cannot willfully target any selected item within the system, since there is no such thing as a single sign to be targeted. Conversely, as Saussure pointed out, one cannot purposefully alter the meaning or the form

of a particular word without causing incalculable side effects to ripple through the system as a whole.

However, when speakers act unconsciously, just by using language on the spur of the moment, they provoke imperceptible and uncontrollable changes — in fact, cannot help provoking them. Each time a speaker applies a certain expression to the unique circumstances of a given moment of speech, he opens the way to inflecting its meaning. To say "adopting an idea," by analogy with "adopting a child," or "fleur de la noblesse" by analogy with "fleur du pommier," is to affect not just a single utterance but the whole state of linguistic values (*Course*, 151/107). Likewise, each time a speaker produces a given expression with a particular unique combination of pitch curve, tempo, dynamics, and vocal timbre — responding, with the help of these tools, to the demands of the moment — he affects the balance of established signifiers.

The principles of immutability and mutability look contradictory if understood as two facets of the empirical existence of language, its "synchronic" state, and its "diachronic" changeability; hence the efforts, most notably by the Prague school and Swiss-French structuralism, to reconcile this perceived contradiction in a unified "dynamic" model of the structure of language. Yet if looked upon not as features objectively present in language itself but as two different metaphysical projections of it, immutability and mutability come out as complementary conceptual frames which reflect different positions of the speaker towards language in his role as the subject who has to appropriate language in order to be able to use it. To an uninvolved observer who approaches language analytically, it looks like a stream of uninterrupted and uncontrollable transmutations: no single instance of language use is ever an exact repetition of a previous one, with regard to either its signified or its signifier. When, on the other hand, the speaker approaches his language from an inside perspective, as one who uses it spontaneously, his linguistic consciousness evolves alongside the evolution of the language itself. No matter how many changes in a language

can be noted by an outside observer, for its speakers it always appears as a "state." As Saussure pointed out on several occasions in his notes, the differences between "old," "middle," and "modern" French, or the idea of French as the offspring of Latin, are no more than abstractions constructed by linguists (in their capacity as outside observers). As far as the actual speakers were concerned, they could never have known — without an outside prompt — that the language they spoke was not "Latin" anymore but "French." Had there been a speaker whose life span comprised two thousand years, he might have thought of himself as still speaking the language of Cicero — with perhaps a few "generational" changes— while in fact speaking modern French or Italian.

Saussure's depiction in the *Course* of a speaker whose every choice is being made for him by his language addresses the way speakers cognize their linguistic behavior, not their behavior itself. The latter, on the contrary, proceeds as an incessant meddling with the system, to which it yields without resistance and most often, imperceptibly.

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It should not be forgotten that the image of the *Course in General Linguistics* that prevailed through the first two-thirds of the twentieth century — that of an immaculately logical model of language based on an uncompromising assertion of the primacy of the "structural" element — was not an objective property of this "text" but the result of readings done in a certain context or contexts and answering certain intellectual purposes. If the perception of Saussure's theory eventually underwent radical changes, it was primarily due to the change of intellectual perspectives that occurred in the last third of the twentieth century. If read from a different perspective, the *Course in General Linguistics* does not contradict Saussure's manuscript notes, although each of these sources presents its content in a particular way, largely due to their differences of genre and discourse. To interpret these differences to the effect that only one of these alternatives is "genuine," while by the same token the other one has to be a "forgery," means repeating the error of approaching a "text"

as an empirical fact whose meaning is given once and for all. Such an approach in fact reinforces the "nomenclaturist" (as Saussure called it), or "logocentric" (to use modern terminology) image in which Saussure's philosophy of language was cast in the age of structuralism, and which made him the primary target of the post-structuralist critique.

This does not mean that the structuralist reading of Saussure was just a historical error, or a malicious falsification. It was a typical product of an era that had largely lost touch with the the irresolvable antinomies that underscored the turn-of-the century philosophical revolution, while embracing the idea of constructing the object of knowledge. What we need to take into account when reading Saussure today is the framework of fundamental epistemological controversies that marked the spirit of the "dawns" of the twentieth century. Saussure's revolution emerged from this background. Only after Saussure's philosophical postulates underwent translation into the theoretical premises of structural linguistics did they emerge as an all-encompassing model of language. What was lost in the translation, however, was Saussure's insight into the negative aspect of language, into what it is not and cannot be: no substance, no logical consistency, no stability. The structuralist (and later generativist) translation of Saussure's philosophical antinomies into operational strategies made Saussure's postulates into a powerful heuristic tool that possessed — for a time— great explanatory power. Even while its intellectual appeal has largely faded, the formidable tradition of "Saussurean" linguistics and semiotics continues to hide from view his philosophical intuitions concerning the uniquely contradictory nature of human language.

We should reconcile ourselves to the fact that the definitive or "genuine" representation of Saussure's ideas does not exist, nor has it ever existed. A plurality of representations, freely evolving in different directions, was constitutive of Saussure's thought, and essential for the conceptual vision he pursued. It corresponded to the central principle of his approach to language which, in the end, has made any definitive picture impossible: the principle of unfettered freedom, grounded in the arbitrariness, whose result

is the infinite plurality of forms which language assumes, and the infinite diversity of the directions in which they may evolve.

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