

# Linguistic Theory

Gramley, WS 2008-09  
de Saussure

# Ferdinand de Saussure

**“...the true and unique object of linguistics is language studied in and for itself” (230)**

- **published posthumously from notes taken from his lectures (1897-1911) by his students**
- **was very critical of his predecessors (chiefly: classical or traditional grammar; classical philology, and comparative philology)**
- **understood himself as the founder of a new discipline, which was to be**
  - **synchronic**
  - **descriptive**
- **sought to study**
  - **the system of language**
  - **within the larger area of semiology (signs within society)**

Structural Linguistics

Ferdinand  
de Saussure

Carolin Kirchhof

# Structural Linguistics

- 1916: *Course in General Linguistics*
- synchronic treatment of language
- *langue* and *parole*
- *sign*, *signifier*, and *signified*

# *Langue and Parole*

## Saussure

- *langage*: human capacity for communication  
through speech  
→ universal faculty
- *langue*: shared linguistic structure by convention  
→ community
- *parole*: execution of speech acts  
→ individual

# *Langue*

- model of which *parole* is the realization  
→ complete only in combination with *parole*
- *parole* is product of individuals  
→ *langue* only complete in collectivity  
→ in contrast to Chomsky's *ideal speaker*

# Chomsky: *Ideal Speaker/Listener*

## **competence**

- ideal, gold standard
- flawless command of language (cf. *langue*)

→ full obedience to rules

→ not affected by feelings, situations, etc.

## **performance**

- individual
- with human error

# *Ideal Speaker vs. Langue*

(Competence)

## **ideal speaker**

- individual
- standard
- model for  
*performance*

## ***langue***

- collectivity
- varying  
instantiations  
through *parole*
- model for *parole*



# *Lingue and Parole*

1976: *Ferdinand de Saussure* by Jonathan  
Culler

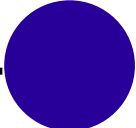
**Problem:** duality of *langue* and *parole*

→ *individual vs. collective*

**Do you see other problems?**

# *Parole: Sign-Formation*

***sign***: sound-image + concept = meaning

e.g. /blu:/ +  = the color *blue*

→ pronunciation is individual (*parole*)

→ mental relation ('associative')

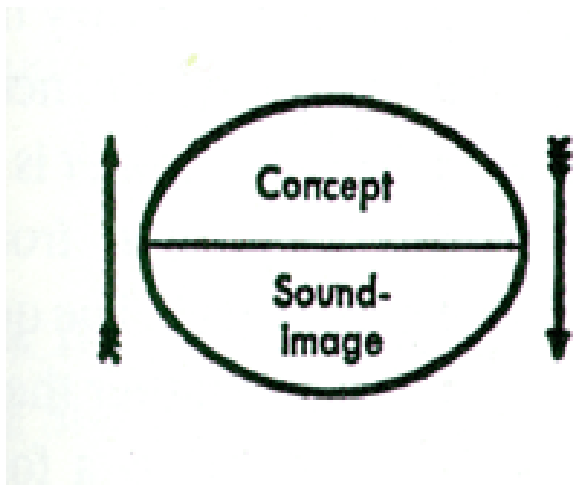
→ meaning agreed on by convention

(*langue*)

# The *Sign*

'Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them'

(Saussure:16)



# The *Sign*

- *sign*:    *signifier*    +    *signified*    = meaning  
              sound-image    +    concept    = meaning
- meaning results only through **combination**
- *signifier* and *signified* are **interdependent**
- *parole* and *langue* are **interdependent**

# Arbitrariness of the *Sign*

*signs* are **arbitrary**, but:

- understanding comes only through community
- is bound by convention

**exceptions:**

- onomatopoeia (69)
- interjections

# Arbitrariness of the *Sign*

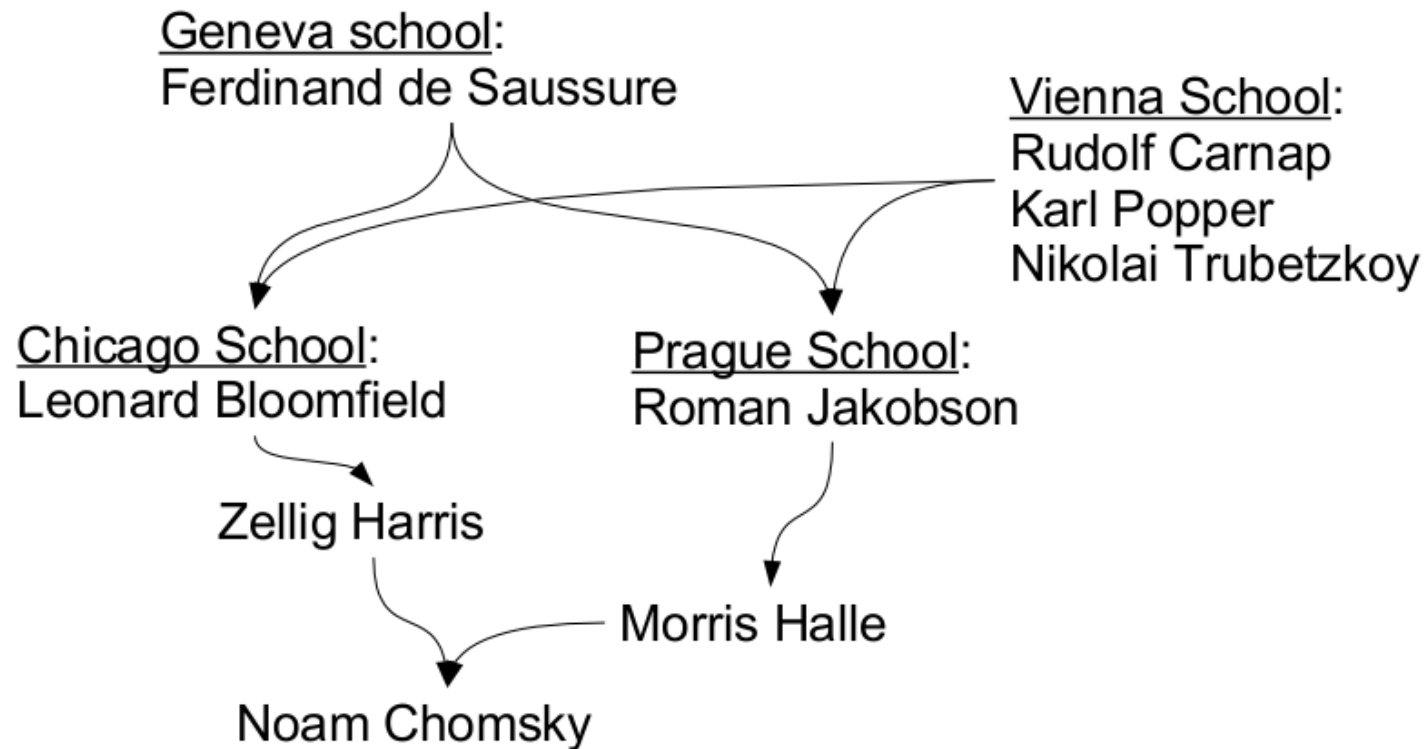
Criticism by J. Culler:

He misses

- motivations within languages (Culler:30)
  - compounding, blending
- the fact that concepts exist prior to / independently of any language (32)
  - the understanding that each language creates own categories, e.g. colors
- mention that arbitrariness enables gradual language change

# Post-Saussure Linguistics

- Intellectual ancestry:



# Issues

- Arbitrariness of signs → encouraging/enabling language change?
- No thoughts without language?
- Where is language located?
- What role does variation play?
- Is language really only systematic?



# Sources

Culler, Jonathan. *Ferdinand de Saussure*, Ithaca: Cornell UP: 1986.

de Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*, N.Y.; McGraw-Hill: 1966.

Gibbon, D. Presentation on *Linguistic Theory*, WS 05/06.

(end of presentation by Kirchhof)

## Linguistics and language

**Linguistics** differs from other social disciplines in that its viewpoint **creates its object**.

- a word is not an independently given linguistic object
- it involves a sound
- it involves the expression of an idea
- it has an etymology (is derived from some source)

None of these ways of approaching the word is better than the others (8).

Saussure's solution:

**"The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure as his primary concern, and relate all other manifestations of language to it." (9)**

## Linguistic Structure

- not the same as language
- the social product of the human faculty for language (9f), i.e. conventions (collective agreement) (15)
- a self-contained whole
- a principle of classification
- a natural faculty of human beings (10)
- the association of sound patterns with concepts
- learned gradually from childhood in the community (14)

## Speech

- an act of individual will and intelligence
- use of the code (*langue*)
- psycho-physical mechanism of expression

## Linguistics and language

Basic is not spoken language per se, but the faculty of constructing a language (10).

Language uses concepts (“mental facts”), analogy (“a universal fact”), a phonological system (“set of facts”), etc.

This is made difficult by the **lack of permanence** of facts (**there is always change**).

This makes the use of **sound laws** (as in historical linguistics) **untenable**; laws in language are fortuitous, not a matter of regular fact.

Yet Saussure does recognize laws (e.g. those of phonotactics).

**Dialectal diversity** plays havoc with his concept of system.

## **Language**

**Language is not directly accessible.**

**It consists of associations in the brain.**

**It is form and not substance.**

**Yet our evidence is concrete – in the form of phonic substance, which we divide into elements of signification.**

**Yet it exists independently of this form.**

**This form exists because it has meaning and function (cf. the relationship between signifier and signified, viz. the signal).**

**In a purely sense Saussure works with linguistic entities as if they were concrete.**

## **Opposition**

**Language is thought coupled with sound (an idea is fixed in a sound and a sound becomes the sign of an idea).**

**The sign results from the association of a signified with a signifier, and the latter two are both necessary.**

**As in any semiological system whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it. This is the fundamental principle of opposition.**

**The sign itself is arbitrary, but not the relationship between the signified and the signifier.**

**The grammatical side is relatively motivated; the lexical, less so.**

## External Elements of a Language

- an ethnological link to a race or a civilization
- strongly, but not necessarily, identified with nation
- special language in advanced civilizations
- literary language and
- local dialects

**Dialect and language** are unimportant distinctions in view of the systematic nature of the language.

## Phonetics and linguistics

**"The essence of a language ... has nothing to do with the phonic nature of the linguistic sign." (7)**

# Language, languages, and speech

He works with the following terms:

langage

human speech

langue

a language

parole

speaking (or speech)

The first is not a human phenomenon (despite the translation) because it is not a unity.

Only a particular language has systematic unity and as such passive, receptive, collective and homogeneous.

Speaking is active, executive, individual, heterogeneous.

To deal with langue (the true object of linguistics) we have to rely on the particular, parole.



## **Sign = Signifier + Signified**

This is a systematic relationship, hence a part of *langue*.

The sound uttered is arbitrary, i.e. the relationship between **sound pattern** (= **signifier**, in this translation: **signal**) and **concept** (= **signified**; here: **signification**) is arbitrary (more exactly: unmotivated).

They form an **associative link**.

## **Synchrony**

**“Language is a system of pure values determined by nothing except the momentary arrangement of terms.” (see chap. 3)**

## **Diachrony**

**This involves shift and so is only partial, not well delimited. It observes not the language, but the events that modify it.**

**The two stand in an opposition which is absolute and without compromise.**

**Change is systematic change – the point when one speaker’s change is adopted by the community.**

**But generally Saussure sees change as inevitable, but does not see it positively and does not explain where it comes from.**

**However, *analogy* as a motor of change is regarded positively because it is an expression of system.**

## **Speech and writing**

**Speech is primary; writing is merely a way of representing it.  
(Writing obscures language, disguises it, is a travesty of it.**

**Yet he realizes that writing is sometimes the only way to access  
some types of speech.**

**Saussure is also highly reserved about literary language because  
it is so uncoupled from spoken language.**

**A sound image is not the material sound but the psychological  
imprint of it in our senses.**

**Language is seen as the “sum total of word-images stored in the  
minds of all individuals; more appealing is the idea that it is the  
categories and notions which are shared. this might transpire in  
the “collective mind.”**

## Literature:

de Saussure, Ferdinand (1983) *Course in General Linguistics*. trans by Roy Harris. Chicago: Open Court.

1. Read: Radford 1988 (27-30)
2. Write and turn in Essay no. 2: This should be about 400 words

On the concept of adequacy

Please be sure to exemplify each of the types.

3. Use the logic of abduction to explain how the word *cardinal* came to mean a kind of red colored bird (the crested finch *Cardinalis cardinalis*).