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The linguistic lesson in contemporary Western philosophical thought according to De Saussure

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Abstract:

According to Ferdinand de Saussure, language consists of fundamental units called linguistic signs or symbols. He pointed out that language is a system of signs, making the linguistic sign crucial in linguistic studies. The linguistic sign represents a basic unit of communication and comprises two essential aspects: the signifier and the signified. Saussure sought to move beyond the traditional concept that focuses on terms like word, expression, name, and object, introducing instead the concepts of the signifier and the signified. Thus, the linguistic sign is the complete integration of these two elements.

Keywords: signifier, signified, linguistic sign, system, arbitrary.

Introduction:

Ferdinand de Saussure: Biography and Intellectual Journey

Ferdinand de Saussure was born on November 26, 1857, and passed away on February 22, 1913. He was a renowned Swiss linguist and is considered the father of structuralism in linguistics, as well as the founder of modern linguistics. Saussure focused on the study of Indo-European languages, and his work remains some of the most significant in the field of linguistics. He is also the founder of semiology (the study of signs) and was the first to define the subject of linguistics. Although he did not use the term "structure," he referred to it as a "system" or "network." His most important work is the book "Course in General Linguistics," which was published posthumously in 1916 by his students. This book was a compilation of notes taken by students who attended his lectures. Two of them, Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, took the initiative to publish these notes under the title *Cours de linguistique générale* (Course in General Linguistics) in 1916¹. This work encapsulates the essence of the lectures he delivered at the University of Geneva from 1907 to 1911, with some interruptions. The global intellectual community soon recognized its importance, with translations into Japanese in 1928, German in 1931, and Russian in 1933².

Saussure learned Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit. He began his higher education at the University of Leipzig in 1876, and two years later published his first book, "Memoir on the Primitive Vowel System in Indo-European Languages." He then moved to Berlin, where he studied Celtic languages under the supervision of Heinrich Zimmer, while continuing his studies in Sanskrit, the oldest language in the world, under the guidance of Hermann Oldenberg. Saussure later returned to Leipzig, Switzerland, where he defended his dissertation titled "On the Use of the Genitive in Sanskrit," earning his

doctorate in 1880. He then moved to Paris, where he delivered numerous lectures on Sanskrit, Gothic, Old German, and other linguistic topics at the University of Paris³.

The Linguistic System according to Saussure:

Saussure views language as a social phenomenon used to facilitate communication between people. He considers it a system of signs based on conventional agreements. Saussure distinguishes between three concepts in the study of language: language, langue, and speech.

Language:

Saussure sees language as a general phenomenon unique to humans. It is the faculty of expression through vocal symbols. He states, "When we look at language in its totality, we find it diverse and varied in nature." Language comprises heterogeneous elements such as psychological, physiological, social, and physical issues, making it unsuitable to be the sole subject of linguistics. Language, in Saussure's view, does not represent a purely social fact because it concerns both the individual and the community. Therefore, it lacks the unity of subject matter, which is essential for any scientific field. Language belongs to both the individual realm, as it is a faculty that distinguishes humans from other living beings, and the collective realm, as all individuals possess it biologically in every time and place⁴.

Saussure explains that language exists as a collection of imprints stored in the brain of every member of society, similar to a dictionary that holds words and preserves them. The imprints are identical and distributed among all individuals, unaffected by the will of those who hold them, forming a collective model.

Langue:

Langue is the communicative system that every human being possesses within a society, governed by specific rules connected to social and cultural aspects. It refers to the general system of language and includes everything related to direct speech. Simply put, *langue* is the language of a community. It consists of two different forms: language and speech⁵. Therefore, language can be seen as the social manifestation of *langue*, while speech represents its individual manifestation.

Saussure distinguishes between *la langue* (langue) and *la langage* (language). *Langue* is only a limited part of language, but it is an essential part. In this sense, *langue* is a societal product that arises from the faculty of language and the conventions and agreements established by society to enable individuals to practice and use this ability.

Langue refers to a specific language, such as Arabic, German, Turkish, English, and so on. Saussure considers *langue* a social phenomenon that encompasses all individuals belonging to a particular linguistic community⁶. One of the characteristics of *langue* according to Saussure is that it is an inseparable part of language, making it a purely human social phenomenon. Additionally, *langue* can sometimes be studied independently from speech, as it becomes the subject of linguistic research.

In this sense, language (*langue*) has the potential for life, but it does not actively live. Over time, language inevitably undergoes changes. Similarly, texts have their own temporal existence and are interpreted differently as time progresses.

Parole:

Parole is the actual, concrete manifestation of language—its expressive materialization, which varies from person to person based on differences in environment, social standing, culture, and economics. Parole represents the tangible realization of language and, therefore, becomes the focus of linguistic research to establish rules and laws governing the language. Parole is an individual, free, and voluntary output chosen by the speaker from the available linguistic stock to express their thoughts and convey their message.

In Saussure's view, parole depends on the individual's will, intelligence, and ability to express ideas. It involves two automatic processes: the physiological-physical movement of sound and the psychological (mental) process of the speaker to express their personal thoughts⁷. Parole encompasses everything spoken by individuals within a particular society what they select from words and structures produced by their speech organs, relying on the shared knowledge of the linguistic community. Speech requires both a speaker and a listener, making it a concrete, individual execution of the rules of language.

Since parole involves the element of choice, and choice cannot be predicted, it cannot be studied scientifically. Parole corresponds to the concept of "performance," and Saussure defined it as "the sum of what individuals say"⁸.

In Conclusion: Ferdinand de Saussure distinguished between what is a human faculty (language), what is a social convention (langue), and what is an individual, conscious, and voluntary expression (parole). This distinction separates what is social from what is individual, and what is essential.

Saussure is considered the founder of modern linguistics. It is impossible to discuss modern linguistics, its subject matter, history, and scope without mentioning the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He is credited with re-establishing and grounding the field of linguistics, defining its methods and subject matter. His lectures, compiled by his students Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye into the book *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916, are considered the starting point of modern linguistics.

According to Saussure, linguistic research should encompass all aspects of human speech, whether it pertains to the languages of primitive peoples, the speech of civilized nations, classical languages, or languages of decline. The focus should not only be on correct or beautiful language but on all forms of human expression.

The Linguistic Sign According to Saussure:

Ferdinand de Saussure regarded language as a system of symbols and signs, where the meanings of these symbols are determined through their relationships and differences with other symbols. In this sense, the linguistic sign is a complete whole, consisting of both a phonetic image (the sound) and a mental image (the concept). Saussure preferred to call this integrated whole the "linguistic sign" and replaced the terms "concept" and "phonetic image" with "signifier" (*le signifiant*) and "signified" (*le signifié*).

Saussure saw language as a system of signs, giving the linguistic sign great importance in linguistic study. The linguistic sign represents a fundamental unit of communication and consists of two essential components: the signifier and the signified. He emphasized the unity between these two components, likening them to the two sides of a sheet of paper—one cannot tear one side without tearing the other.

The Signifier:

The signifier, also referred to as the phonetic image, represents the sound sequence perceived by hearing. According to Saussure, the signifier is "a vocal choice agreed upon by the speakers of a particular language to represent a specific signified." Therefore, the signifier is the sound or word that people of the same language agree upon to express a certain meaning, which exists in the mind beforehand. The signifier thus conveys the phonetic image of the word from a psychological perspective, reflecting the impression it leaves on the senses⁹.

The Signified:

The signified refers to the conceptual image that represents the mental perception, also known as the concept. For Saussure, the signified is "the set of semantic features that the word or term refers to"¹⁰. This means that the signified is the mental image or concept that exists in our minds, manifested through the signifier or word we articulate. It is the concept that the individual forms from their perception of an object.

Saussure explains that "the linguistic sign is thus a psychological entity with two faces, consisting of the concept and the phonetic image (the word's image in the mind)." He suggests replacing the terms "concept" and "phonetic image" with "signified" and "signifier," respectively¹¹.

The Relationship Between the Signifier and the Signified According to Saussure:

Saussure argued that the relationship between the signifier (sound/image) and the signified (concept) is arbitrary, meaning it is neither natural nor logically justified. By this, Saussure meant that there is no inherent or rational connection between the signifier and its signified, regardless of the type of relationship. In other words, the signified is not inherently linked to the signifier in any way.

This view contrasts with the theory of imitation led by Plato, who believed that linguistic symbols and signs directly correspond to what they represent in the external world. Plato asserted that language is a reflection of nature, where the relationship between words and their meanings is material. Words mimic natural sounds, so simply hearing a word would reveal its meaning. For example, "chirping" indicates a bird, "rustling" indicates leaves, and "babbling" indicates water.

Saussure, on the other hand, considered language to be conventional. Signs, symbols, words, and sounds carry meaning only as agreed upon by society. Humans assign names to things as they wish, without any necessary connection between those names and the objects they represent. There is no essential link between things and their names. For example, the word "table" in Arabic (ط، ا، و، ل، ة) is the signifier, while the concept of a table is the signified. There is no rational or empirical necessity for the Arabic language to represent this meaning with those particular sounds. This idea is known as the arbitrary or conventional nature of linguistic signs.

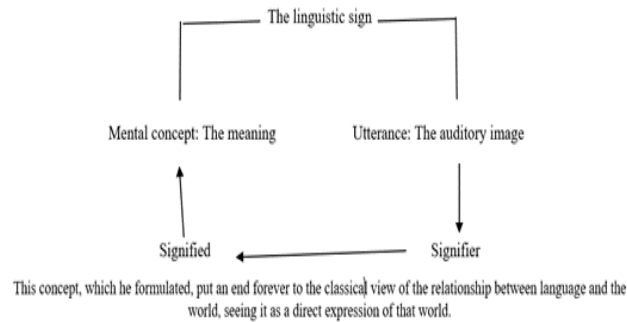
There is further evidence supporting the arbitrariness of the relationship between words and objects, as the same signifier can have multiple signifieds. For instance, the Arabic verb "ضرب" can mean different things depending on the context: "ضرب الأستاذ مثالا" means the teacher gave an example, while "ضرب الأخ أخته" means the brother punished his sister by hitting her. Similarly, the word "زهرة" can refer to a girl, a star, a magazine, or a plant.

Moreover, a single signified can have multiple signifiers, as seen with different names for a lion, such as "أسد"، "ليث"، "أسامة"، "هزير"، and "أسامة".

Additionally, Saussure emphasized the conventional and arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified, noting that signifiers change across languages while the signified remains the same. For example, the concept of "sister" (the signified) has no intrinsic connection to the specific sounds that form the word "أخت" in Arabic, and it can just as easily be represented by other sound sequences, such as "Sœur" in French or "Sister" in English. This highlights the conventional nature of the signifier-signified relationship.

As Jean Piaget stated, "The existence of multiple languages itself clearly demonstrates the conventional nature of verbal signs." Saussure also remarked, "The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary"¹².

Thus, what Saussure means by arbitrariness is that there is no real, material connection between the signifier and the signified, like the natural connection between smoke and fire. There is no causal relationship between the spoken word and the meaning it represents. Instead, the relationship between them arose by chance, but it evolved with repeated use into something resembling attachment. Evidence of this is that a single word can refer to more than one thing¹³.



Linearity of the Linguistic Sign:

Since the signifier is an auditory and phonetic image that unfolds in time, its characteristics are derived from time itself. The signifier thus operates on a single dimension—a linear path. This principle is clear and self-evident, meaning that auditory signifiers follow one another in succession, forming a sequence and a type of hierarchy. When these elements are represented in writing, replacing the temporal relationship of linearity with spatial representation, this characteristic becomes immediately apparent.

In other words, the mental processes accompanying even the simplest linguistic event take a flat, spatial form when represented visually. This becomes more evident when we embody language in writing and replace the spatial linearity of written signs with their temporal succession in speech. Therefore, Saussure emphasizes that human speech has a linear nature, meaning that each element in its composition must be delivered sequentially in a spoken chain¹⁵.

Change in the Linguistic Sign:

Saussure emphasizes that linguistic meaning is subject to continuous change and modification. This change aligns with the principle of continuity and connectivity. He explains that linguistic change affects the relationship between the signifier and the signified, leading to transformations in meaning. Saussure provides numerous examples of this phenomenon in the three well-known languages: French, German, and English.

The Synchronic System in Linguistics (according to Saussure):

Saussure introduced the concept of synchronic linguistics, which refers to the logical and psychological relationships that connect simultaneous elements, forming a system in the collective mind of speakers¹⁶. This approach, according to Saussure, should "address the linguistic state at a specific moment in time," focusing on describing the current state of a language. In this state, language appears as a systematic structure existing in the linguistic consciousness of a particular society.

Synchronic linguistics, therefore, is the study of language at a specific moment, within a defined timeframe and linguistic community¹⁷. This approach is more about describing the linguistic level of a particular era through a comprehensive collection of examples, excluding any historical explanations for changes that occur. In practice, this method becomes a general approach for analysis rather than just a scientific theory. While science has its hypotheses and theories, a method has its foundations and steps. According to Saussure, synchronic linguistics is essentially a descriptive study that confines itself to analyzing a language at a specific time, focusing on its essential characteristics without delving into historical explanations. As such, it is characterized by its present, structural, and descriptive nature within the field of linguistics.

Diachronic System in Linguistics:

The diachronic system studies the relationships between linguistic units that succeed each other over time, without being consciously perceived by speakers. Each element replaces another in succession, but these elements do not form a systematic structure. Diachronic linguistics deals with the temporal evolution of a language, focusing on changes that occur over historical periods. The researcher identifies and analyzes these changes during a particular historical phase, tracking the development of the language without being constrained by the conscious awareness of the language-speaking community.

Thus, the historical dimension of linguistics "follows the historical evolution of a language and records the changes that occur between two consecutive points in time."

The Duality of Substitution and Distribution:

This duality is also referred to as the axis of (substitution/distribution), (vertical/horizontal), or (selection and combination). It arises from Saussure's distinction between two fundamental stages in the process of speech production, which are interconnected and performed simultaneously by the speaker. Saussure explains that "a phrase in a particular structure gains its value only by its contrast with what precedes or follows it, or both."

Saussure was among the first to introduce these innovative dualities, laying the foundation for contemporary linguistic philosophy. Through this, he advanced linguistic studies and shifted away from the classical view of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, which was previously seen as a mere imitation¹⁸. He opened new avenues for scholars to develop new theories and contributed to the emergence of linguistic schools that adopted much of what Saussure introduced, ultimately benefiting modern linguistics and various fields of language studies.

Conclusion:

Through this presentation, we can summarize the results derived from Saussure's philosophy of language, which took a completely different direction from the philosophers who previously addressed the relationship between the signifier and the signified:

- Saussure's linguistic theory introduced innovative dualities, unique and new, that framed the relationship between the signifier and the signified based on an arbitrary and conventional model.
- Language, according to Saussure, is an extraordinary phenomenon, a structural system. It is a whole that does not consist of the accumulation of parts, but rather is built from elements that are in a relationship of exchange with one another, forming a cohesive system.
- Saussure was the first to draw attention to the concepts of diachrony and synchrony in linguistic studies. Diachrony represents the study of language by describing its historical development over time, tracking its evolution across different eras. Synchrony, on the other hand, focuses on studying a particular state of a language without considering its historical development or transformation.
- Language is a social phenomenon that serves a social function, and langue is a social product. Therefore, there are no significant distinctions between linguistics and sociology, as both fields aim to uncover the relationship between language and social life, as well as the impact of social structures on linguistic phenomena, with language reflecting social reality.
- Saussure defined language as a human phenomenon with many forms, resulting from linguistic faculty. Langue is a specific realization of language in its broad human sense, socially acquired, forming a recognized system within a specific human community.
- Linguistic study, as defined by Saussure, focuses on language as a set of linguistic habits or a system embedded in the speaker's mind, which is resistant to change. In contrast, speech is the individual expression of this system by the speaker.
- Time plays a role in the stability and continuity of language, as language occupies a place in time and is tied to it as a product of a vast inheritance.

- Ferdinand de Saussure's theory opened new horizons for scholars to develop new theories, leading to the emergence of numerous linguistic schools. These schools offered fresh perspectives, adopted by various linguistic schools such as the Prague, London, and Copenhagen schools, among others.

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