

Chapter 3: The Object of Linguistics

1. Defining Language

First Saussure tells us why defining and studying language is so hard. One reason is, that the objects of study in language are not given in advance. In **other sciences, the facts, the objects of study, are entities already existing prior to their observation**. These pre-existing facts can therefore be considered from different points of view. In **Linguistics, however, the objects don't antedate the viewpoint**: "it would seem that it is the viewpoint that creates the object" (p.8). Worse, there's no objective way to determine which point of view, if any, is 'correct'.

No matter the viewpoint we take, he stresses, the linguistic phenomenon always has two interdependent sides, like a piece of paper. No matter what aspect of language we consider, there is some opposition of two aspects, each of which 'deriv[es] its values from the other' (p. 8). One example of this two-sidedness is the case of acoustic perceptions and articulatory productions. An articulated [n] by itself, unperceived, is nothing. We can't reduce the unit to just its sound, or just its articulation. Both are required for it to exist as the kind of thing it is.

But let's say we recognize the two-sidedness of the sound units. It turns out, he shows us, that even when you put together sound and speech as an 'acoustic-vocal unit', it still isn't language. There is something essential missing. We have to combine the complex sound unit with an idea, a unit of thought, to form a "complex physiological/psychological unit". (p. 8)

Yet even this is still not enough to characterize the basic objects in language. We have to consider that language has both an individual and a social dimension. Neither can exist without the other.

Then, there are still two more planes or dimensions: the synchronic and diachronic. "Speech always implies both an established system and an evolution; at every moment it is an existing institution and a product of the past."(p.8) It is not easy in fact to disentangle these two things.

For all these reasons, it is hard to find the 'true object' of linguistic study, without risking ignoring something fundamental.

What's the solution to this conundrum? Saussure sees only one way out: Forget trying to find some all embracing science that includes all of these dimensions at once. How can we do ethnography, sociology, phonetics, philosophy, and psychology simultaneously?

Instead, he says, let's study a carefully delimited thing called a Language [langue], separating this essential core away from everything else relating to speech. Aspects of speech are merely derived from language in some way. Language is primary, speech is secondary. We have to always look at Langue instead of langage.

Langage : Saussure's first English translator, Baskin, translates this as "human speech". But other Saussure scholars, including Harris, suggest it should be translated as "human language" in general. Langage in this generalized sense, according to Saussure, is many-sided and heterogenous; it straddles many fields and kinds of phenomena--physical, physiological, psychological; both individual and social. Trying to study **langage** or language in general, in one all-encompassing discipline which simultaneously has to deal with all these disparate types of phenomena with no overarching aim would, in Saussure's view, lead to chaos; and indeed it did at that time, given what he saw as a confusing maze of studies that did not fit together comfortably.

Langue: This is best translated as "a Language". I capitalize Language to show that Saussure means this in a technical sense; it is not a language as ordinary people normally think of languages, for example in terms of the folk theory of a language as a collection of names pointing to things, or considering the facts of articulation as central, which most people do. **He means by Langue a language in the sense of a system of linguistic social conventions.** A Language is unitary. It is self-contained, a whole. It is a principle of classification (in modern terms, a categorization system.) It is a social product of human speech and a collection of conventions adopted by a social body to facilitate speech. **It is acquired and conventional, and not strictly instinctual or natural. Humans have to learn it, unlike most of the animal communication systems** that we know about.

Because a Language is a convention, Saussure points out, the exact nature of what is agreed on doesn't matter. This means that vocal speech and auditory linguistic perception are secondary. This was a revolutionary view at the time but is now accepted by all linguists. The fundamentally identical linguistic nature of signed languages such as American Sign Language, British Sign Language, French Sign language, etc., supports the idea. All these

signed languages are conventional systems with conventional units, just like spoken languages except for the fact that instead of a 'sound image' there is a 'gesture image'.

Saussure says that what is natural to mankind is not oral speech but the faculty of constructing a language--in other words, a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas. He says, ..."Beyond the functioning of the various organs there exists a more general faculty which governs signs and which would be the linguistic faculty proper." (my emphasis).

So, the Saussurean Sign is the basis of what for him should be the new field. It is the true object of study of the field of Linguistics.

Next Saussure goes on to try to define the Sign as clearly as possible. To do this he needs to separate the true realm of the Sign, so to speak, from the extraneous aspects commonly thought of as essential to the nature of language, but in his view are really not. That true realm is a Language (Langue)--a shared system of linguistic signs.

2. Separating Langue (a Language) from Parole (Speech)

Here Saussure presents an analysis of how a Language relates to Speech in a communicative act. First he examines an "individual act" of Speech. This is an act of a complete transfer of communication between two interlocutors. It apparently consists of more than Langacker's notion of "usage event" which has some things in common with the act of Speech--for example, it is situated in a speech context--but the Langackerian concept lacks an explicit social dimension.

Next Saussure describes "the speaking circuit" in a conversation. It includes actions involving the following body parts (where S and H are Speaker and Hearer): (S) brain, (S) mouth, (H) ear, (H) brain, (H) mouth, (S now H) ear, (S now H) brain. To be more technically precise, 'mouth' really refers to the whole speech-producing vocal tract.

- The sound (air vibrations) physically acts on the parts of the inner ear so as to produce activations of the sensory nerves, which then arrive at the brain (Physiological) and create a perceptual sensation --the 'sound image'. (Psychological)
- The sound image evokes its associated concept. (Psychological)

Saussure notes that the sound image is a complex psychological thing, and can actually be split down further into the following components: