Saussure's "Cours de Linguistique Générale"

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The "Cours de linguistique générale" was my first introduction
to linguistics. It struck me then as a peculiar mixture of obvious
truisms and obscure jargons. So I put it on an inaccessible shelf,
and, fifteen years later, having scattered most of my readable books
across Europe and Canada, found it again. Having recently stumbled
into the linguistic jungle, been bitten by Bopp and Rask, and stung
by Chomsky and Postal, I can now see the "Cours" for what it really
is. No, not the proverbial elephant, but an elementary trekkers'
guide for lost linguists.

The "Cours" was published in 1916, a compilation of Saussure's
and students' notes, principally Albert Riedlinger's, reflecting
Saussure's lectures at the University of Geneva, 1906-1911. Bally
and Sechehaye's compilation takes some liberties with the sequence of
ideas, according to Culler (1976:17). The first of Saussure's "bifur-
cations": langue and parole, was not an a priori postulation, but the
outcome of Saussure's reflexions on the "sign" (ibid., p.34). Slight
shifts in emphasis are also noted (ibid., p. 17). The "Cours", however,
was the only published version of Saussure's ideas until Godel's "Les
sources manuscrites du Cours", Paris, 1949, and R. Engler's 1967
publication of original notes.

Saussure's antecedents are not hard to find. Whitney is the
most obvious, extensively quoted by Saussure with reference to the
arbitrariness of the sign and the social nature of language ("Cours"
pp. 18, 26, 110). The eighteenth century French grammarians championed
by Bréal, whose lectures Saussure attended in 1880-1 (Mounin 1968:29),[1]
are also high on the list. Von Humboldt did write on these matters
(Salus 1969:196),[2] but it has been suggested that Saussure was not
acquainted with Humboldt's work.[3] Saussure's correspondent, Meillet,
was aware of Humboldt by 1923 (Brown 1967:106), but whether he had
earlier discussed these ideas with Saussure is not known. Saussure's
contemporaries, Baudouin de Courtenay and Kruszewski, were working
along the same lines and were known to Saussure[4] (Mounin 1968:40 & 46).
But Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud, whose structuralist method
Saussure applied to linguistics, are perhaps the most worthy of note.[5]

So much for the input. On the output side, Saussure is said
to have influenced, via the "Cours" or otherwise, the ideas of Jakobson,
Trubetskoy, Hjelmslev, Benveniste, Martinet, Bloomfield and Chomsky
(Culler 1976:80).[6] The question is, then, what transformation of
ideas took place in the environment of Saussure?

Saussure was no upstart dilettante travelling light. He was
in fact a solid practitioner of nineteenth century historical
linguistic method who only late in life returned, with his cumbersome
intellectual baggage, to the eighteenth century problematic. Born in
1857 in Geneva, he was interested in linguistics from an early age

(due to the influence of Adolphe Pictet, a family friend). He
studied Physics and Chemistry at the University of Geneva, 1875-6.
From 1876 to 1879 he sojourned in Leipzig and Berlin, where he
studied historical linguistics. His academic reputation was secured
at the age of twenty-one by the publication of "Mémoire sur le système
primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européenes" (Culler 1976:
14, Mounin 1968:15, Mounin 1972:49). In 1880 he presented his doctoral
thesis: ("De l'emploi du génitif absolu en sanskrit") at Leipzig.
From 1880 to 1891 he resided in Paris, lecturing on historical linguis-
tics at the Ecole pratique des hautes études.

On returning to Geneva, where he lectured at the University
from 1891 to 1911, his thoughts turned to more general matters, but
although from 1907 to 1911 he agreed to lecture on general linguistics,
he was not totally satisfied with his ideas on the subject, and so did
not get around to publishing. To paraphrase Meillet (Mounin 1968:19),
it was a neurotic perfectionism which prevented him from publishing
on the subject. He accordingly diverted himself in peripheral pur-
suits, and avoided the responsibility, which he must have felt had
been thrust upon him too late in life, of propagating his own embarass-
ingly unorthodox ideas.

The "Cours", then, represents the results of many years of
reflexion, solidly based in the linguistic science of the time and
taking into account recent developments in sociology and psychology.

As Saussure lectured on historical linguistics for the greater
part of his life, it would be surprising if his ideas on general lin-
guistics left no place for this particular discipline. In a letter to
Meillet, Jan. 1894 (Mounin 1968:19,, from R. Godel, "Sources manuscrites",
p. 31), Saussure declares:

"Sans cesse, cette ineptie de la terminologie courante,
la nécessité de la réformer, et de montrer pour cela
quelle espèce d'objet est la langue en général, vient
gâter mon plaisir historique quoique je n'aie de plus
cher voeu que de ne pas avoir à m'occuper de la langue
en général."

Although he felt compelled to remedy outstanding terminological and
theoretical inadequacies, his interest in historical linguistics had
not diminished. The "Cours" reflects this interest throughout, but
it is significant that the penultimate paragraph rejects the Darwinian
as well as the Humboldtian approach to language:

"Tout en reconnaissant que Schleicher faisait violence
à la réalité en voyant dans la langue une chose
organique qui porte en elle-même sa loi d'évolution,
nous continuons, sans nous en douter, à vouloir en
faire une chose organique dans un autre sens, en
supposant que le 'génie' d'une race ou d'un groupe
ethnique tend à ramener sans cesse la langue dans
certaines voies déterminées."

The whole purport of the "Cours" is to reorientate linguistic efforts away from the historical approach and towards static analysis.

Whitney is Saussure's point of departure ("Cours" pp.110-111). Whitney it was who insisted on the arbitrary character of signs: "et par là, il a placé la linguistique sur son axe véritable". But Whitney did not emphasize that this arbitrariness separates language from other social institutions in that language evolves or changes "sous l'influence de tous les agents qui peuvent atteindre soit les sons soit les sens"—the arbitrary sign may have a life of its own ("Cours" p.111). Nor did he appreciate the importance of static analysis:

> "... a mere apprehension and exposition of the phenomena
> of a language—of its words, its forms, its rules, its
> usages: that is work for grammarians and lexicographers."

> (Culler 1976:69)

Linguistics was by definition historical.

In "Language and the study of language" and "Life and growth of language",[7] Whitney defines language as an "institution" or "a body of usages prevailing in certain communities", but also a treasure of words and forms" (Culler 1976:69). This latter is a phrase which Saussure took up and elaborated ("Cours" p.30):

> "Si nous pouvions embrasser la somme des images verbales
> emmagasinées chez tous les individus, nous toucherions
> le lien social qui constitue la langue. C'est un trésor
> déposé par la pratique de la parole...un système gram-
> matical existant virtuellement...dans les cerveaux d'un
> ensemble d'individus."

Saussure, then, has moved from the observable social fact into the minds or "brains" of the speakers. He has thus taken two steps beyond Whitney's position: language is not only a social phenomenon but can be considered as a static entity in itself and studied as a system; it does moreover exist virtually as a grammatical system in the brain. Whitney mentioned a "treasure"; Saussure pointed out the value of that treasure, and told us not only where it came from but where it had been "deposited".

The influence of the seventeenth and eighteenth century French grammarians is quite straightforward. Saussure asks, a little unkindly, perhaps: "Comment ont procédé ceux qui ont étudié la langue avant la fondation des études linguistiques?" ("Cours" p.118), and answers:

> "... leur programme est strictement synchronique.
> Ainsi la grammaire de Port Royal essaie de décrire
> l'état du français sous Louis XIV et d'en déterminer

> les valeurs.   Elle n'a pas besoin pour cela de la
> langue de moyen age..."

Saussure wishes to reinstate this static approach to its rightful
place in linguistics; with respect to historical linguistics, he will
throw out the bath water but retain the baby ("Cours" p.119). What
he has contributed here is the notion that there are two equally
valid approaches to the study of language which are complementary and
not mutually exclusive.

> Baudouin de Courtenay was interested in language's psychologi-
cal and social affiliations as early as 1889:

> "Ce qu'on appelle la langue russe représente une pure
> fiction. Il n'existe aucune langue russe comme il
> n'existe en général aucune langue tribale ou nationale.
> Il n'existe, comme réalités psychiques, que des langues
> individuelles, ou plus exactement, des pensées lin-
> guistiques individuelles." (Mounin 1972:30)

It is clear, however, that the concept of "langue" to be found in the
"Cours" is not Baudouin de Courtenay's concept. Language for Baudouin
de Courtenay is: "une construction déduite d'une série entière de
langues individuelles existantes de façon réelle".[8] Saussure has pro-
gressed beyond this idea to the concept of an actually existing
internalized grammar.

> On Saussure's second "bifurcation", Baudouin de Courtenay's
thought may well have served as a catalyst. According to Mounin
(1968:46):

> "Baudouin de Courtenay, que Saussure a connu et bien
> pratiqué, préconisait déjà (1895) de distinguer
> l'observation des faits linguistiques à un point
> particulier du temps, de leur évolution."

A remarkably Saussurean formulation is to be found in "uзôранние"
p.349: "La statique de la langue est seulement un cas particulier
de sa dynamique" (Mounin 1972:30). This is essentially Saussure's
thought also.

> Kruszewski and Baudouin de Courtenay together probably con-
tributed to Saussure's thoughts on phonetics, rejecting over-meticulous
phonetic transcription practiced for its own sake and proposing a
"physiophonétique" and a "psychophonétique", the one for the transcrip-
tion of actual utterances, the other for the discernment of the meaning-
ful linguistic signal as such (Mounin 1968:41 & 67). What Saussure
may be said to have added to this idea is the negative approach to
defining the phoneme as well as the lexeme: a table is a table until
such time as it becomes more like a chair; "p" is near enough "p" until

it begins to sound like "b". The phoneme may only vary to the extent
that it remains distinguishable from other phonemes; it is what the
others are not ("Cours" p.164):

> "Ce principe est si essential qu'il s'applique à tous
> les éléments matériels de la langue, y compris les
> phonèmes... Or ce qui les caractérise, ce n'est pas,
> comme on pourrait le croire, leur qualité propre et
> positive, mais simplement le fait qu'ils ne se confondent
> pas entre eux. Les phonèmes sont avant tout des entités
> oppositives, relatives et négatives."

On Saussure's interaction with Durkheim and Freud, Culler
declares (Culler 1976:79):

> "Much more important than any possible surface borrowings
> are the affinities between the fundamental projects of
> these three thinkers and in particular the epistemological
> configuration of the disciplines they founded."

The project was basically to de-emphasize the historical causal method
of accounting for phenomena, and to emphasize the static structure and
system of these phenomena, the relationship between their constituent
elements at a given point in time. In all three cases the structure
of the phenomena relate directly to or are rooted in the mind. As
Culler points out (Culler 1976:76):

> "It is not so much that the unconscious replaces the
> historical series; rather it becomes the space where
> any antecedents which have an explanatory function
> are located."

Durkheim's social fact or "conscience collective";[9] Freud's "latent",
and Saussure's "langue" have this in common: that they are transcen-
dental internalized representations of the corresponding observable
phenomena: Durkheim's "individual", Freud's "manifest", and Saussure's
"parole". One cannot say that Saussure added significantly to Durkheim's
thought, but he did give it a new dimension. In doing so, he brought
linguistics into line with methodological advances being made in
psychology and sociology. Strangely, however, it is via Saussure and
linguistics that structuralism and functionalism extended its influence
in the human sciences—due perhaps to the clarity of exposition of the
"Cours" and the fundamental relevance of language.[10]

To judge from the diversity of linguistic schools Saussure is
said to have influenced, one might think he was after all the proverbial
elephant. But it is not so much a case of short-sighted linguists clutch-
ing at trunk or tail, as of informed but wary trekkers opting for dif-
ferent trails.

While accepting the essence of the "Cours", Jakobson reacts
negatively to the idea ("Cours" p.124) that "system" is only relevant
to synchronic states:

> "La conception de la langue comme système fonctionnel
> est à envisager également dans l'étude des états de
> langue passeés, qu'il s'agisse de les reconstruire ou
> d'en constater l'évolution. On ne saurait poser de
> barrières infranchissables entre les méthodes synchronique
> et diachrnoique comme le fait l'école de Genève." (Mounin
> 1972:145; Jakobson 1929)

Pioneer of diachronic phonology, Jakobson was not, strictly speaking,
a Saussurean.

Trubetskoy became acquainted with Saussure's ideas via
Karcevski who returned to Moscow from Geneva in 1916 (Mounin 1972:93).
After 1928, when Trubetskoy and Jakobson joined the "Cercle linguis-
tique de Prague", Trubetskoy quickly graduated from historical
linguistics to the "internal logic of systems"; i.e. phonology
(Mounin 1972:99). Trubetskoy is the Saussurean par excellence, even
though he espoused Jakobson's views on diachronic phonology (Mounin
1972:107). If Jakobson and Trubetskoy advanced much further in
phonological matters than Baudouin de Courtenay and Saussure, it is
none the less on Saussurean foundations that their theories were
constructed.

Hjelmslev claims specifically to have developed Saussure's
ideas along scientific lines (Mounin 1972:130). Language as "form,
not substance" ("Cours" p.157) is his point of departure, and abstract
"values" of terms ("Cours" p.156) are of prime importance—to such an
extent that linguistics as practiced by Hjelmslev is closer to
algebra than to language. Mounin's verdict is as follows:

> "Nul doute que Hjelmslev n'ait ainsi tenté quelque chose
> d'important...mais nul doute non plus que, ce faisant,
> il ne se soit plus d'une fois masqué l'impasse de ses
> analyses totalement désincarnées d'une part—et qu'il
> n'ait inutilement compliqué l'exégèse de sa doctrine
> d'autre part." (Mounin 1972:131)

It is doubtful whether Saussure ever envisaged a linguistics from
which not only "parole" but also the substantial manifestation of
"langue" would be excluded. Saussure was attempting to redress the
balance between the overemphasized diachronic and denigrated synchronic
approach—Hjelmslev has not only tipped the scales the other way; he
has dislodged the arm from its pivot.

Benveniste ("Acta linguistica" I, 1939; Mounin 1968:58) praises
Saussure but misinterprets and rejects his notion of the arbitrariness
of the sign. Saussure's arbitrary sign, according to Benveniste,

refers to the connexion between the signifier and the non-linguistic
reality. Benveniste accordingly agrees but points out that this
arbitrariness is self evident. The relationship between signifier
and signified (i.e. concept) for Beneveniste is not arbitrary: the
"tranche accoustique" would not exist without the "idée correspondante",
and vice versa:

> "...le signe, élément primordial du système linguistique,
> enferme un signifiant et un signifié dont la liaison doit
> être reconnue comme nécessaire, ces deux composantes
> étant consubstantielles l'une de l'autre." ("Problèmes"
> p.55; Mounin 1968:59)

Mounin considers that Benveniste is adding nothing to Saussure's
thought ("Cours" p.104):

> "Si par rapport à l'idée qu'il représente, le signifiant
> apparaît comme librement choisi, en revanche, par rap-
> port à la communauteé linguistique qui l'emploie, il
> n'est pas libre, il est imposé."

It would seem, however, that Benveniste is much closer than Saussure
to the idea of "linguistic thinking" elaborated by Whorf in a series
of articles 1936-42. Benveniste may not be Saussurean, but is cer-
tainly Saussuresque.

André Martinet was regularly in touch with Hjelmslev and
Trubetskoy between 1932 and '38, and with Bloomfield from 1946 to 55
(Mounin 1972:155), and was acquainted with the work of Bally and
Meillet (ibid., p.159). For Mounin, Martinet was the true French
successor to Saussure:

> "Bien que Merleau-Ponty ait eu plus d'importance que lui
> pour la diffusion de Saussure auprès des non linguistes,
> on peut déjà affirmer que Martinet est le linguiste fran-
> çais qui a recueilli en France l'héritage théorique
> véritable de Saussure..." (ibid., 161)

In "Economie" in 1955, Martinet states: "il ne suffit pas de raconter
les faits...il faut aussi les expliquer, les ramener à leur cause"
("Economie" p.17; Mounin 1972:162). In advocating that one step beyond
static descriptivism and phenomenal structuralism into some causal
dimension, Martinet is in effect digging for Saussure's "trésor déposé".
His method will be "un structuralisme explicatif". Saussure's trea-
sure is not easily got at, however, and Martinet's efforts are
deflected towards the demesne of diachronic linguistics. The "case
vide" explains nothing on the synchronic plane.

Bloomfield seems an unlikely Saussurean. He was certainly
acquainted with the "Cours". Mounin informs us that: "Son compte

rendu de la deuxième édition (1922) du 'Cours' de Saussure révèle...
une lecture compréhensive" (Mounin 1972:123). In the "Classical
Weekly" vol. 15 (1922) Bloomfield had written that Saussure pro-
vided a theoretical base for a science of language; in the "Modern
Languages Journal" 1924, that he was the "first to chart a territory
in which Indo-European historical grammar was no more than a province."
But Bloomfield, as a good behaviourist, rejected Saussure's psycholo-
gism, and his own work in static linguistic analysis should be
attributed to the Boas tradition, stemming from the practical neces-
sity of describing Amerindian languages, rather than to any theoretical
or ideological motivation.

Last but not least, Noam Chomsky, whose generative transforma-
tional grammar approach to linguistics is currently so popular, could
be said to be Saussurean in a number of ways. Firstly, of course, he
is primarily concerned with static analysis; secondly, the project is
essentialist in that it, arguably, supposes the observed structure to
be determining; thirdly, in spite of occasional denials, the analysis
is periodically claimed to embrace mental phenomena.[11]

According to Mounin, Chomsky was not directly influenced by
Saussure, but acknowledged him a posteriori for the purpose of legiti-
mizing his foundling project[12] (Mounin 1972:192). Culler, however,
includes Chomsky in his list of Saussureans (Culler 1976:80), and as
some "Course" related ideas certainly reached Chomsky via Bloomfield,
and as Chomsky himself took the trouble to relate his own theories to
Saussure's, he is certainly welcome here.

But Chomsky goes far beyond Saussure in the consideration of
syntax. Saussure considered the sentence to be part of "parole". The
notion of grammatical form of sentences as distinct from their lexical
content does not appear to have occurred to him. (cf. "Cours" p.173;
Culler 1976:82)[13] Chomsky's "competence" and "performance" are there-
fore more than simply "langue" and "parole"; in Chomsky's own words:

> "Clearly the description of intrinsic competence provided
> by the grammar is not to be confused with an account of
> actual performance, as de Saussure emphasized with such
> lucidity...but Saussure regards language as basically a
> store of signs with their grammatical properties, that is,
> a store of word-like elements, fixed phrases, and, per-
> haps, certain limited phrase types. He was quite unable
> to come to grips with the recursive processes underlying
> sentence formation as a matter of 'parole' rather than
> 'langue', of free voluntary creation rather than systematic
> rule. There is no place in his scheme for 'rule-governed
> creativity' of the kind involved in the everyday use of
> language."

In spite of his blind spot in matters of syntax, however, Saussure
seems to have been thinking very much along what came to be Chomskyan
lines:

> "Toute création doit être précedée d'une comparison
> inconsciente des matériaux déposés dans le trésor
> de la langue, où les formes génératrices sont
> rangées" ("Cours" p.227)

More than any of the above mentioned, Chomsky has assimilated and
developed some of the central ideas of Saussure's "Cours".

The diversity of the linguistic schools owing some allegiance
to Saussure is one of the few things they have in common. Each lost
linguist has consulted the guide and set out along his own chosen
trail, with varying degrees of fortune. What all seem to have neglected
is Saussure's example, if not his precept, that to keep language study
in perspective one must have a long memory and a lofty lookout post.
Perhaps he was, after all, the proverbial elephant.

Footnotes

[1]"Saussure...a été...pendant un an l'auditeur de Bréal (1880-1); et Bréal est très conscient dans son enseignement de représenter à la fois la tradition de Condillac, qu'il cite et déplore de voir trop oubliée, et la tradition de Bopp" (Mounin 1968:29) cf. also Bréal's "Essai de Sémantique".

Saussure also had some regard for the Port Royal grammarians (Cours, p.118).

[2]"Language, being the mass of its products, is different from whatever fragment is spoken at a given time." (Salus 1969:196) ("Variety of Language", 1835)

[3]Cf. Robins p.200.

[4]Baudouin de Courtenay, whom Saussure knew and associated with, already recommended (1892)"distinguishing the observation of linguistic facts at a particular point in time, from their evolution" (Rough transl. of Mounin 1968:46). See also p.40, Mounin 1968 & "Sources" p.51.

[5]Doroszewski 1933: "F.de S...je le sais de source certaine, suivait avec un intérêt profond le débat philosophique engagé entre Durkheim et Tarde" ("Durkheim et F.deS." Journal de Psychologie, 1933, pp.82-91)

Cf. Mounin 1968, p.22 "Saussure a donc connu ces thèses, qui circulent depuis 1893"

[6]This is Culler's list, p. 80.

[7]W. D. Whitney (1827-94): "Language & the Study of Language", 1867; "The Life & Growth of Language", 1875. French translation: "La vie du langage", Paris, 1875.

[8]издание I p.348 Also: "une moyenne fortuite de langues individuelles".

[9]Cf. Meillet, who almost certainly discussed Durkheim with Saussure, in the linguistics section of the 1906 "Année Sociologique" (established by Durkheim who was busy annexing stray social sciences to sociology!) pp.230-271 t.1. "Comment les mots changent de sens" where he says: "Le langage...entre exactement dans la définition qu'a proposée Durkheim; une langue existe indépendament de chacun des individus qui la parlent, et bien qu'elle n'ait aucune réalité en dehors de la somme de ces individus, elle est cependant, de par sa généralité, extérieure à chacun d'eux; ce qui le montre c'est qu'il ne dépend d'aucun d'eux de la changer...les caractères d'extériorité à l'individu et de la coercition par lesquels Durkheim définit le fait social apparaît dans le langage avec la dernière évidence."

[10]On Saussure and semiology, Levi-Strauss etc., see Edith Kurzweil: "The Age of Structuralism." Saussure intended linguistics to benefit from incorporation into a science of semiology, but no linguists have taken any interest in this aspect of the course. Saussure's influence outside linguistics is considerable, both with regard to semiology and to functionalism and structuralism.

[11]Also cf. Silverman & Torode, "The Material Word", 1980, p.43: "One remedy...succeeds only by killing the patient...working at the level of theology, it implies that what speech shows is an unseen and unseeable element which animates it. Whether formulated as God, deep structure (structuralism, Chomsky), Being or a capitalized Language (Heidegger) these (are) transcendental realities."

[12]"C'est plus tard, aux alentours de 1962 seulement, qu'il se cherchera des alliés idéologiques et des précurseurs a posteriori, pour des raisons polémiques, chez Descartes et les grammairiens de Port-Royal et du XVIIIe siécle, chez Humboldt—et qu'il lira cursivement Saussure ou Troubetskoy." (Mounin 1972, p.192)
     M. Posner, p. 452 in Iordan-Orr-Posner "Intro. to Romance Linguistics" thinks that the influence came via Jakobson: "recent American linguistics—probably quite independent of European idealism, though certainly influenced, via Roman Jakobson, by Prague structuralism—has taken on an anti-positivistic tinge: the Chomskyist distinction between 'surface structure' and 'deep structure' is especially reminiscent of Humboldt."

[13]I overlooked the following passage: "Ce serait une erreur de croire qu'il y a une syntaxe incorporelle en dehors des unités matérielles distribuées dans l'espace" ("Cours", p.191). It would seem that the idea was considered by Saussure, and rejected.

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