FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE

COURSE IN GENERAL LINGUISTICS

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CHINA SOCIAL SCIENCES PUBLISHING HOUSE
CHENGCHENG BOOKS LTD.

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

普通语言学教程:英文/(瑞士)索绪尔著. -影印本.
-北京:中国社会科学出版社,1999.12
(西学基本经典·哲学类/西学基本经典工作委员会 编)
ISBN 7-5004-2652-6

Ⅰ.普… Ⅱ.索… Ⅲ.语言学-英文 Ⅳ.H0

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(1999)第 68405 号

版权总代理:TAO MEDIA INTERNATIONAL
(2790 19th Avenue,Ste.20,San Francisco,CA 94132 U.S.A)

西学基本经典·哲学类
西学基本经典工作委员会 编
中国社会科学出版社 出版发行
(北京鼓楼西大街甲 158 号 邮编 100720)
E-mail:5004@Peoplespace.net
诚成图书有限公司 制作
中国建筑工业出版社密云印刷厂印刷
新华书店经销
1999 年 12 月第 1 版 1999 年 12 月第 1 次印刷
开本 880×1230 1/32 印张 355.75
哲学类全 22 册 定价:1100.00 元

总 策 划　严　平　野　夫
项目策划　张自文　任建成

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Few other figures in the history of the science of language have commanded such lasting respect and inspired such varied accomplishments as Ferdinand de Saussure. Leonard Bloomfield justly credited the eminent Swiss professor with providing "a theoretic foundation to the newer trend in linguistics study," and European scholars have seldom failed to consider his views when dealing with any theoretical problem. But the full implications of his teachings, for both static and evolutionary studies, have still to be elaborated.

Saussure succeeded in impressing his individual stamp on almost everything within his reach. At the age of twenty, while still a student at Leipzig, he published his monumental treatise on the Proto-Indo-European vocalic system. This treatise, though based on theories and facts that were common property in his day, is still recognized as the most inspired and exhaustive treatment of the Proto-Indo-European vocalism. He studied under the neogrammarians Osthoff and Leskien, yet refuted their atomistic approach to linguistics in his attempt to frame a coherent science of linguistics. Despite the paucity of his publications (some 600 pages during his lifetime), Saussure's influence has been far-reaching. At Paris, where he taught Sanskrit for ten years (1881–1891) and served as secretary of the Linguistic Society of Paris, his influence on the development of linguistics was decisive. His first-hand studies of Phrygian inscriptions and Lithuanian dialects may have been responsible for some of the qualities that subsequently endeared him to his students at the University of Geneva (1906–1911). His unique insight into the phenomenon of language brought to fruition the best of contemporary thinking and long years of patient investigation and penetrating thought.

The dominant philosophical system of each age makes its imprint on each step in the evolution of linguistic science. The nineteenth century had a fragmentary approach to reality which prevented scholars from getting beyond the immediate facts in

matters of speech. To those investigators, language was simply an inventory or mechanical sum of the units used in speaking. Piecemeal studies precluded the development of an insight into the structure (*Gestalteinheit*, pattern, or whole) into which the fragmentary facts fit. The atomistic conception of speech, reflected in the historical studies of the comparative philologists, had to give way to the functional and structural conception of language. Saussure was among the first to see that language is a self-contained system whose interdependent parts function and acquire value through their relationship to the whole.

By focusing attention on the distinctly human side of speech, i.e. the system of language, Saussure gave unity and direction to his science. Until the publication of his work (later translated into German and Spanish), only those who enjoyed the privilege of close association with Saussure had access to his theories. By making available an English translation of his *Course*, I hope to contribute toward the realization of his goal: the study of language in and for itself.

To all those who have given generously of their time and talents in the preparation of this translation, I offer heartfelt thanks: to Gerald Dykstra, Daniel Girard, Lennox Grey, Aileen Kitchin, and André Martinet of Columbia University; to Charles Bazell of Istanbul University; to Henri Frei, Robert Godel, and Edmond Sollberger of the University of Geneva; to Dwight Bolinger of the University of Southern California; to Rulon Wells of Yale University; and to my good friends Kenneth Jimenez, Paul Swart, and Hugh Whittemore. For the shortcomings of the translation, I alone am responsible.

Wade Baskin

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

We have often heard Ferdinand de Saussure lament the dearth of principles and methods that marked linguistics during his developmental period. Throughout his lifetime, he stubbornly continued to search out the laws that would give direction to his thought amid the chaos. Not until 1906, when he took the place of Joseph Wertheimer at the University of Geneva, was he able to make known the ideas that he had nurtured through so many years. Although he taught three courses in general linguistics—in 1906–1907, 1908–1909, and 1910–1911—his schedule forced him to devote half of each course to the history and description of the Indo-European languages, with the result that the basic part of his subject received considerably less attention than it merited.

All those who had the privilege of participating in his richly rewarding instruction regretted that no book had resulted from it. After his death, we hoped to find in his manuscripts, obligingly made available to us by Mme. de Saussure, a faithful or at least an adequate outline of his inspiring lectures. At first we thought that we might simply collate F. de Saussure's personal notes and the notes of his students. We were grossly misled. We found nothing—or almost nothing—that resembled his students' notebooks. As soon as they had served their purpose, F. de Saussure destroyed the rough drafts of the outlines used for his lectures. In the drawers of his secretary we found only older outlines which, although certainly not worthless, could not be integrated into the material of the three courses.

Our discovery was all the more disappointing since professorial duties had made it impossible for us to attend F. de Saussure's last lectures—and these mark just as brilliant a step in his career as the much earlier one that had witnessed the appearance of his treatise on the vocalic system of Proto-Indo-European.

We had to fall back on the notes collected by studellts during the course of his three series of lectures. Very complete notebooks were placed at our disposal: for the first two courses, by Messrs.

Louis Caille, Léopold Gautier, Paul Regard, and Albert Riedlinger; for the third—the most important—by Mme. Albert Sechehaye and by Messrs. George Dégallier and Francis Joseph. We are indebted to M. Louis Brütsch for notes on one special point. All these contributors deserve our sincere thanks. We also wish to express our profound gratitude to M. Jules Ronjat, the eminent Romance scholar, who was kind enough to review the manuscript before printing, and whose suggestions were invaluable.

What were we to do with our materials? First, the task of criticism. For each course and for each detail of the course, we had to compare all versions and reconstruct F. de Saussure's thought from faint, sometimes conflicting, hints. For the first two courses we were able to enlist the services of M. Riedlinger, one of the students who have followed the thought of the master with the greatest interest; his work was most valuable. For the third course one of us, A. Sechehaye, performed the same detailed task of collating and synthesizing the material.

But after that? Oral delivery, which is often contradictory in form to written exposition, posed the greatest difficulties. Besides, F. de Saussure was one of those men who never stand still; his thought evolved in all directions without ever contradicting itself as a result. To publish everything in the original form was impossible; the repetitions—inevitable in free oral presentation—overlappings, and variant formulations would lend a motley appearance to such a publication. To limit the book to a single course—and which one?—was to deprive the reader of the rich and varied content of the other two courses; by itself the third, the most definitive of the three courses, would not give a complete accounting of the theories and methods of F. de Saussure.

One suggestion was that we publish certain particularly original passages without change. This idea was appealing at first, but soon it became obvious that we would be distorting the thought of our master if we presented but fragments of a plan whose value stands out only in its totality.

We reached a bolder but also, we think, a more rational solution: to attempt a reconstruction, a synthesis, by using the third course as a starting point and by using all other materials at our disposal, including the personal notes of F. de Saussure, as supplementary

sources. The problem of re-creating F. de Saussure's thought was all the more difficult because the re-creation had to be wholly objective. At each point we had to get to the crux of each particular thought by trying to see its definitive form in the light of the whole system. We had first to weed out variations and irregularities characteristic of oral delivery, then to fit the thought into its natural framework and present each part of it in the order intended by the author even when his intention, not always apparent, had to be surmised.

From this work of assimilation and reconstruction was born the book that we offer, not without apprehension, to the enlightened public and to all friends of linguistics.

Our aim was to draw together an organic whole by omitting nothing that might contribute to the overall impression. But for that very reason, we shall probably be criticized on two counts.

First, critics will say that this "whole" is incomplete. In his teaching the master never pretended to examine all parts of linguistics or to devote the same attention to each of those examined; materially, he could not. Besides, his main concern was not that. Guided by some fundamental and personal principles which are found everywhere in his work—and which form the woof of this fabric which is as solid as it is varied—he tried to penetrate; only where these principles find particularly striking applications or where they apparently conflict with some theory did he try to encompass.

That is why certain disciplines, such as semantics, are hardly touched upon. We do not feel that these lacunae detract from the overall architecture. The absence of a "linguistics of speaking" is regrettable. This study, which had been promised to the students of the third course, would doubtlessly have had a place of honor; why his promise could not be kept is too well known. All we could do was to collect the fleeting impressions from the rough outlines of this project and put them into their natural place.

Conversely, critics may say that we have reproduced facts bearing on points developed by F. de Saussure's predecessors. Not everything in such an extensive treatise can be new. But if known principles are necessary for the understanding of a whole, shall we be condemned for not having omitted them? The chapter on

phonetic changes, for example, includes things that have been said before, and perhaps more definitively; but, aside from the fact that this part contains many valuable and original details, even a superficial reading will show to what extent its omission would detract from an understanding of the principles upon which F. de Saussure erects his system of static linguistics.

We are aware of our responsibility to our critics. We are also aware of our responsibility to the author, who probably would not have authorized the publication of these pages.

This responsibility we accept wholly, and we would willingly bear it alone. Will the critics be able to distinguish between the teacher and his interpreters? We would be grateful to them if they would direct toward us the blows which it would be unjust to heap upon one whose memory is dear to us.

Geneva, July 1915. Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The second edition is essentially the same as the first. The editors have made some slight changes designed to facilitate reading and clarify certain points. Ch. B. Alb. S.

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

With the exception of a few minute corrections, this edition is the same as the preceding. Ch. B. Alb. S.

CONTENTS

APPENDIX

PRINCIPLES OF PHONOLOGY

PART ONE

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

PART THREE

DIACHRONIC LINGUISTICS

INTRODUCTION

Chapter I

A GLANCE AT THE HISTORY OF LINGUISTICS

The science that has been developed around the facts of language passed through three stages before finding its true and unique object.

First something called "grammar" was studied. This study, initiated by the Greeks and continued mainly by the French, was based on logic. It lacked a scientific approach and was detached from language itself. Its only aim was to give rules for distinguishing between correct and incorrect forms; it was a normative discipline, far removed from actual observation, and its scope was limited.

Next appeared philology. A "philological" school had existed much earlier in Alexandria, but this name is more often applied to the scientific movement which was started by Friedrich August Wolf in 1777 and which continues to this day. Language is not its sole object. The early philologists sought especially to correct, interpret and comment upon written texts. Their studies also led to an interest in literary history, customs, institutions, etc.[1] They applied the methods of criticism for their own purposes. When they dealt with linguistic questions, it was for the express purpose of comparing texts of different periods, determining the language peculiar to each author, or deciphering and explaining inscriptions made in an archaic or obscure language. Doubtless these investigations broke the ground for historical linguistics. Ritschl's studies of Plautus are actually linguistic. But philological criticism is still deficient on one point: it follows the written language too slavishly

[1] At the risk of offending some readers, certain stylistic characteristics of the original French are retained. [Tr.] (The bracketed abbreviations *S.*, *Ed.* and *Tr.* indicate whether footnotes are to be attributed to Saussure, to the editors of the *Cours de linguistique générale*, or to the translator.)