



Course in General Linguistics

Ferdinand de Saussure



Course in General Linguistics **Ferdinand de Saussure**

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In collaboration with Albert Riedlinger

Translated, with an introduction
and notes by Wade Baskin

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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.

De 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 Curtius, Hüschmann, Leskien, and Windisch, but his attempt to frame a coherent science of linguistics owes more to William Dwight Whitney's concept of the arbitrary nature of the sign than to the comparative studies of the neogrammarians. Despite the paucity of his publications (some 600 pages during his lifetime), De Saussure's influence has been far-reaching. In Paris, where he taught first Germanic languages and then comparative grammar, and also served as secretary of the Linguistic Society of Paris (1881-1891), 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, where he taught comparative grammar, Sanskrit (1891-1907), and later general linguistics (1907-1911). 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 (*Gestaltseinheit*, 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. De 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, De Saussure gave unity and direction to his science. Until the publication of his work (later translated into German, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish), only those who enjoyed the privilege of close association with De 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 Harvard University; to Rulon Wells of Yale University; and to my good friends Kenneth Jimenez, Paul Swart, and Hugh Whittemore. In making minor revisions for the reprinting of the *Course*, I have been guided by the remarks of M. Godel, Professor Leger Brosnahan of the University of Maryland, and Professor Ralph Paul deGorog, who reviewed the *Course* in *The Modern Language Journal*.

Wade Baskin
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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 students 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 Brütisch 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

	<i>Page</i>
Translator's Introduction	xi
Preface to the First Edition	xiii

INTRODUCTION

Chapter

I. A Glance at the History of Linguistics	1
II. Subject Matter and Scope of Linguistics; Its Relations with Other Sciences	6
III. Object of Linguistics	
1. Definition of Language	7
2. Place of Language in the Facts of Speech	11
3. Place of Language in Human Facts; Semiology	15
IV. Linguistics of Language and Linguistics of Speaking	17
V. Internal and External Elements of Language	20
VI. Graphic Representation of Language	
1. Need for Studying the Subject	23
2. Influence of Writing; Reason for Its Ascendancy over the Spoken Form	23
3. Systems of Writing	25
4. Reasons for the Discrepancy between Writing and Pronunciation	27
5. Results of the Discrepancy	29
VII. Phonology	
1. Definition	32
2. Phonological Writing	33
3. Validity of Evidence Furnished by Writing	34

APPENDIX

PRINCIPLES OF PHONOLOGY

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
I. Phonological Species	
1. Definition of the Phoneme	38
2. The Vocal Apparatus and its Functioning . . .	41
3. Classification of Sounds According to Their Oral Articulation	44
II. Phonemes in the Spoken Chain	
1. Need for Studying Sounds in the Spoken Chain .	49
2. Implosion and Explosion	51
3. Different Combinations of Explosions and Im- plosions in the Chain	54
4. Syllabic Boundary and Vocalic Peak	57
5. Criticism of Theories of Syllabication	58
6. Length of Implosion and Explosion	60
7. Phonemes of Aperture 4; Diphthongs; Questions about Transcription	60
Editor's Note	62

PART ONE

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

I. Nature of the Linguistic Sign	
1. Sign, Signified, Signifier	65
2. Principle I: The Arbitrary Nature of the Sign .	67
3. Principle II: The Linear Nature of the Signifier .	70
II. Immutability and Mutability of the Sign	
1. Immutability	71
2. Mutability	74
III. Static and Evolutionary Linguistics	
1. Inner Duality of All Sciences Concerned with Values	79
2. Inner Duality and the History of Linguistics . .	81
3. Inner Duality Illustrated by Examples	83

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
4. The Difference between the Two Classes Illustrated by Comparisons	87
5. The Two Linguistics Contrasted According to Their Methods and Principles	90
6. Synchronic Law and Diachronic Law	91
7. Is There a Panchronic Viewpoint?	95
8. Consequences of the Confusing of Synchrony and Diachrony	96
9. Conclusions	98

PART TWO

SYNCHRONIC LINGUISTICS

I. Generalities	101
II. The Concrete Entities of Language	
1. Definition of Entity and Unit	102
2. Method of Delimitation	104
3. Practical Difficulties of Delimitation	105
4. Conclusion	106
III. Identities, Realities, Values	107
IV. Linguistic Value	
1. Language as Organized Thought Coupled with Sound	111
2. Linguistic Value from a Conceptual Viewpoint	114
3. Linguistic Value from a Material Viewpoint	117
4. The Sign Considered in Its Totality	120
V. Syntagmatic and Associative Relations	
1. Definitions	122
2. Syntagmatic Relations	124
3. Associative Relations	125
VI. Mechanism of Language	
1. Syntagmatic Solidarities	127
2. Simultaneous Functioning of the Two Types of Groupings	128
3. Absolute and Relative Arbitrariness	131

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
VII. Grammar and Its Subdivisions	
1. Definitions: Traditional Divisions	134
2. Rational Divisions	136
VIII. Role of Abstract Entities in Grammar	137

PART THREE

DIACHRONIC LINGUISTICS

I. Generalities	140
II. Phonetic Changes	
1. Their Absolute Regularity	143
2. Conditioned Phonetic Changes	144
3. Points on Method	145
4. Causes of Phonetic Changes	147
5. The Effect of Phonetic Changes Is Unlimited	151
III. Grammatical Consequences of Phonetic Evolution	
1. Breaking of the Grammatical Bond	153
2. Effacement of the Structure of Words	154
3. There are No Phonetic Doublets	155
4. Alternation	157
5. Laws of Alternation	158
6. Alternation and Grammatical Bond	160
IV. Analogy	
1. Definition and Examples	161
2. Analogical Phenomena Are Not Changes	162
3. Analogy as a Creative Force in Language	165
V. Analogy and Evolution	
1. How an Analogical Innovation Enters Language	168
2. Analogical Innovations as Symptoms of Changes in Interpretation	169
3. Analogy as a Renovating and Conservative Force	171
VI. Folk Etymology	173
VII. Agglutination	
1. Definition	176
2. Agglutination and Analogy	177

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
VIII. Diachronic Units, Identities, and Realities . . .	179
Appendices to Parts Three and Four	
1. Subjective and Objective Analysis	183
2. Subjective Analysis and the Defining of Subunits	185
3. Etymology	189

PART FOUR

GEOGRAPHICAL LINGUISTICS

I. Concerning the Diversity of Languages	191
II. Complications of Geographical Diversity	
1. Coexistence of Several Languages at the Same Point	193
2. Literary Language and Local Idiom	195
III. Causes of Geographical Diversity	
1. Time, the Basic Cause	197
2. Effect of Time on Continuous Territory . . .	199
3. Dialects Have No Natural Boundaries . . .	201
4. Languages Have No Natural Boundaries . . .	203
IV. Spread of Linguistic Waves	
1. Intercourse and Provincialism	205
2. The Two Forces Reduced to One	207
3. Linguistic Differentiation on Separate Territories	208

PART FIVE

CONCERNING RETROSPECTIVE LINGUISTICS

I. The Two Perspectives of Diachronic Linguistics . .	212
II. The Oldest Language and the Prototype	215
III. Reconstructions	
1. Their Nature and Aim	218
2. Relative Accuracy of Reconstructions	220
IV. The Contribution of Language to Anthropology and Prehistory	
1. Language and Race	222
2. Ethnic Unity	223

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
3. Linguistic Paleontology	224
4. Linguistic Type and Mind of the Social Group .	227
V. Language Families and Linguistic Types	228
Index	233

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 De Saussure, to the editors of the *Cours de linguistique générale*, or to the translator.)

and neglects the living language. Moreover, it is concerned with little except Greek and Latin antiquity.

The third stage began when scholars discovered that languages can be compared with one another. This discovery was the origin of "comparative philology." In 1816, in a work entitled *Über das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache*, Franz Bopp compared Sanskrit with German, Greek, Latin, etc. Bopp was not the first to record their similarities and state that all these languages belong to a single family. That had been done before him, notably by the English orientalist W. Jones (died in 1794); but Jones' few isolated statements do not prove that the significance and importance of comparison had been generally understood before 1816. While Bopp cannot be credited with the discovery that Sanskrit is related to certain languages of Europe and Asia, he did realize that the comparison of related languages could become the subject matter of an independent science. To illuminate one language by means of another, to explain the forms of one through the forms of the other, that is what no one had done before him.

Whether Bopp could have created his science—so quickly at least—without the prior discovery of Sanskrit is doubtful. With Sanskrit as a third witness beside Latin and Greek, Bopp had a larger and firmer basis for his studies. Fortunately, Sanskrit was exceptionally well-fitted to the role of illuminating the comparison.

For example, a comparison of the paradigms of Latin *genus* (*genus, generis, genere, genera, generum*, etc.) and Greek (*génos, géneos, génei, génea, genéōn*, etc.) reveals nothing. But the picture changes as soon as we add the corresponding Sanskrit series (*śanas, śanasas, śanasi, śanasu, śanasām*, etc.). A glance reveals the similarity between the Greek forms and the Latin forms. If we accept tentatively the hypothesis that *śanas* represents the primitive state—and this step facilitates explanation—then we conclude that *s* must have fallen in Greek forms wherever it occurred between two vowels. Next we conclude that *s* became *r* in Latin under the same conditions. Grammatically, then, the Sanskrit paradigm exemplifies the concept of radical, a unit (*śanas*) that is quite definite and stable. Latin and Greek had the same forms as Sanskrit only in their earlier stages. Here Sanskrit is instructive precisely because it has preserved all the Indo-European *s*'s. Of course