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SAUSSURE
AND LINGUISTICS TODAY

edited by

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ESTRATTO

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MY SAUSSURE

When the friends who organized this symposium invited me to participate, they told me that I would be — more than a guest speaker — one of the subjects of discussion.

To tell the truth, all of us should be considered subjects of discussion because we are all linguists who, in this day and age, continue to talk of Saussure!

Our theme here today, then, is Saussure and contemporary linguistics. I intend to take that title literally. Indeed, since I can claim to speak fairly knowledgeably about myself as a contemporary linguist, I propose to treat Saussure with respect to my own conception of language and of linguistics. In this sense I will speak to you of "my" Saussure.

A famous linguist was asked some time ago what he owed to his predecessors and to his fellow linguists. He answered that he had found in others either a confirmation of his own ideas or contrasting opinions which proved useful in defining more clearly his own views. In particular, he mentioned that, with respect to Saussure, it had taken him a long time to free himself of the distinction between *langue* and *parole*.

(This occurs frequently in the sciences dealing with man: we learn from others and forget that we have done so. Then, upon reading these authors again, we have the impression that they simply confirm our views. As for those ideas we fail to grasp, we pass them by as extraneous to our intuitive convictions!)

But can we really reject the distinction between *langue* and *parole?* In my opinion, we can undoubtedly perfect the way we present it and explain it; but I feel we cannot reject the distinction outright.

Indeed, I would prefer to take a different approach altogether to the question. For you see, I am willing to recognize that everything of value in my writings and in my conceptions and in the methods I follow is the

fruit of a dialectical reworking of the reflections and of the elaborations that may be found in other linguists and philosophers of language. The ever-present touchstone in this process is the reality of language — the reality that reveals itself through reflective observation and hermeneutic meditation. I would describe my conceptions as essentially an attempt to reconcile — while keeping a firm eye on the reality of language — Saussure with Humboldt and Pagliaro, aided by the suggestions coming from Hjelmslev, Sapir, Menendez Pidal and from the philosophy and episte-mology of Aristotle, Leibniz, Vico, Hegel and Croce (Aristotle and Hegel above all).

Thus, my guiding principle has been to give full credit to the ideas which I have encountered and which I have attempted to integrate into a unitary conception. This is because all researchers worthy of the name have attempted to describe things as they are; and while, at times, what they explicate may prove to be partial and may require completion, rather than reject these explanations outright, I feel we should ask our-selves to what extent we can use them, in what sense and to what extent we may consider them valid.

Let me give you an immediate example using Saussure. I find it ill-advised to reject outright Saussure's assertion that signifier and signi-fied are inseparable: after all, Saussure himself was perfectly aware of the sense in which the two may in fact be considered separately. I find it, therefore, better to ask ourselves, instead, *in what sense* we may indeed consider signifier and signified to be inseparable. And the answer to that question is: language as a system. It is at that level that the signified is, properly speaking, the signified, and not a designation; and it is there-fore at that level that the signified is inseparable from the sign.

In the same way, let us not reject outright, as clearly absurd, the thesis that linguistic change is external to the system. Rather, let us ask ourselves in what sense this thesis may be considered valid.

We may apply this attitude to entire conceptual systems. We should not reject structuralism outright but should, instead, determine in what way structuralism may be useful in bettering our effective understanding of language.

Our motto should therefore be: *alcanzar y limitar, Leistungen und Grenzen* — use and circumscribe every concept.

This attitude characterizes my approach to Saussure, although it has at times led to misunderstandings. It has been asserted that I have criticized Saussure from the outside, failing to see his worth and reducing him to ba-nalities. This is simply not the case. I have always sought to move *from* Saussure, not *against* him or *without* him.

My critics suffer from an error of perspective: they fail to see that I have never sought to interpret Saussure or to offer an exegesis of his work; rather, what I have attempted to do is to use Saussure as a guide in my inquiries, as a model of research into the object of linguistics. "My" Saussure is therefore the Saussure who, in his *Cours*, established the fun-damental distinctions that subsequently determined the development and the progress of linguistics in this century. Note that I am not speaking of the development of "Saussurian linguistics" — indeed, I con-sider the term improper. I am speaking of linguistics *tout court*, even the linguistic research that apprently ignores or even negates Saussure.

Let us now consider how Saussure's fundamental distinctions are still indispensable to an understanding of language and languages.

My studies have focused on languages as homogeneous systems within the complex world of language-like phenomena. This is because I am convinced that Saussure, following a tradition stemming from Hum-boldt, saw any language *qua talis* as a system in which *tout se tient*. (The expression was, of course, coined by Meillet; but it expresses both Hum-bodlt's and Saussure's views.) I have therefore rigorously applied Saus-sure's distinctions as *real*; and, using further distinctions derived from them, I have managed to circumbscribe the primary object of immanent linguistics: it is the free technique of functional language at the level of the system of functions and propositions.

I thereby obtained two results. One was a justification of phonology and a justification of the system as homogeneous at the level of expres-sion (it is, in fact, entirely paradigmatic and syntagmatic at that level). The other was the construction both of a functional lexical semantics (a "lexematics") and of a functional syntax corresponding to the *langue* (i.e., the object of immanent linguistics) — one which, therefore, I con-sider a perfectly Saussurian discipline.

Obtaining these results required, as I mentioned, creating a series of

distinctions derived from Saussure's. One was the distinction between that which comprises knowledge of things and that which comprises purely linguistic knowledge. (Saussure already did something of the kind in his theory of the sign: he distinguished between *the signified* and its *external reference*.) Another distinction involved metalanguage and primary language: the use of metalanguage requires a different kind of treatment. This led to distinguishing *wiederholte Rede* (Jakobson's *reported speech*). Furthermore, following the indications of Saussure, Hjelmslev, Daniel Jones and Zellig Harris, I was led to distinguish between the architecture of a language (in its homogeneity) and linguistic variety. Saussure himself tells us, in his *Cours*, that in order to grasp a language synchronically and idiosynchronically, we must take into consideration dialects and *patois* but that, in the end, we are forced to circumscribe the language artificially and thus sacrifice its reality. I had no desire, however, to sacrifice reality. That is why, in order to grasp languages functionally (as systems belonging to a given moment, place, social stratum, style), I distinguished various levels: system, norm and linguistic type.

All that produced new ways of viewing language. It led me to consider languages as techniques forged by our expressive activity (something Antonino Pagliaro had said). To consider languages and their mechanisms, not as unconscious, but as given and understood intuitively (and I believe that is what Saussure meant in saying that the linguistic mechanisms speakers use are unconscious to them). To consider the social dimension of language as belonging, not to the mass, but to individuals — or, more precisely, to the immanent otherness within each individual: for language is not proper of an individual in isolation, but is always the language of others. (This, too, was something I got from Pagliaro, although it may be found earlier in Humboldt as well.)

Finally, I conceived linguistic structures as dynamic structures. Saussure left clues to that effect, as may be seen in his chapter on analogy, which he portrays as a synchronic phenomenon belonging to language virtually. The problem of diachronic identity that Saussure raised, led me to the same solution: linguistic structures are dynamic and various languages exist within the same speaker.

My remarks so far have concerned establishing the object of immanent linguistics. Let us now attempt to recuperate the material that we were forced to eliminate in circumscribing our object, the material studied by integral linguistics and descriptive linguistics.

That material is the *parole*, the activity of speaking. What we know of the *langue* does not explain all there is to know about the *parole*, although it constitutes the foundation. Explaining the *parole* requires other kinds of knowledge belonging to the domain of linguistics. Thus, in considering linguistics generally, I distinguished three levels: the linguistics of the *langue*, the linguistics of discourse or of a text (as early as 1955), and the linguistics of the *parole*.

Dealing with the *parole* obliges us to recuperate, within the domain of integral linguistics, all that which immanent linguistics ignores, eliminates or brackets — the existence of which, as Engler has clearly shown, Saussure was well aware. This has led me to propose a new science of "knowing things", a *skeuology* (from the Greek *skeûos*, "object, gadget, thing"). Cognitive semantics practices *skeuology*, for it investigates the semantics of our knowledge of things, not just the semantics of the language we use. I also proposed a special grammar of metalinguistics and a synchronic linguistics comprehending the three major disciplines dealing with variety: dialectology, sociolinguistics, and language stylistics. All this was to leave room for the speaker, as Saussure requested, and particularly in the field of applied linguistics (translation theory, linguistic policy, linguistic planification, and so on).

One last word concerning my interpretation of the concept of arbitrariness and all the other fundamental distinctions formulated by Saussure. As I mentioned, I consider Saussure's distinctions as *real*, inherent in their object, and founded on the intuitions of every speaker. What is more, as I have tried to show, other thinkers had already noted them. This is not, however, an attempt to trace the influence of Saussure's predecessors on him; it is rather an attempt to uncover previous formulations as autonomous expressions of a shared vision of language. It would be wrong to reduce Saussure to a product of some tradition; and yet, it would be wrong to consider him as a starting point without recognizing that he was, at the same time, a point of arrival. He tied together what others had seen as *disiecta membra* and it is from this synthesis that we, as contemporary linguists, have taken our first steps.