

Lecture 9 20th Century: New Depth of Understanding

In our brief historical survey of linguistic thought, we talked about the major shift in the way scholars began to see Language just over a hundred years ago: instead of analyzing selected bits and pieces of languages, they for the first time approached Language as a WHOLE, as one integrated living structure.

Today we will first revise the characteristics of a living structure (and see how Language fits the description). We will then go over (once again!) the most important ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure, who is often referred to as the “Father” of modern linguistics. He was one of the first to

try to define the object of linguistic study and examine the relationship between Human Language as a universal human trait and individual languages, such as English, Motu or Tok Pisin. Next, we’ll talk about the faculty of language vs language as a social product, and at how all of us, speakers, participate in keeping the language we speak alive.

Finally, we will look at the nature of this uniquely human ability to learn a language, and at how individuals collectively create and use language.

Characteristics of a Living Structure

Since we want to approach Language as a whole, as a complete, integrated system, we should first define the concept of *structure*. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines it as ‘*the way in which something is organized, built, or put together.*’ Basically, that’s it – we talk about the structure of a house, or of an organization, for example. In what ways is a **living structure** different from a non-living structure, like a house?

A living structure has three properties which are not found in non-living structures:

- **Wholeness**: This means that the system functions *as a whole*, not just as a collection of independent parts. Take, for example, the human body: you are not just a collection of your parts (head, legs, arms, ears, etc.) – you function as a *whole*, and any change in any of your organs will affect the system *as a whole*. This takes us to the next property of structure:

- **Transformation**: This means that the system is not static, but is capable of change. New units can enter the system, but when they do, they are governed by the *rules of the system*. Your red blood cells are renewed every 120 days – old ones go, new ones replace them. The body (as a living system) does maintenance work on all its cells: the cells that make up *you* today are not the ones you came into this world with, but you are still *you*, and all the new cells fit into the system and follow its rules.

* This brings to mind Winnie’s words from Samuel Beckett’s play ‘Happy Days’:

“Then ... now... What difficulties here, for the mind... to have been always what I am – and so changed from what I was... I am the one, I say the one, then the other... Now one, then the other... There is so little one can say, one says it all.”

- **Self-Regulation**: This is related to the idea of transformation. You can add elements to the system, but you can’t change the basic structure of the system (rules of *how* it operates), no matter what you add to it. The transformations of a system never lead to anything *outside* the system. We can add new

words to a language, ‘borrowed’ from other languages, but the loanwords will have to obey the rules of the language system that has adopted them.

Just like your own body, each **language is a living structure** made up of arbitrary symbols, and each structure functions as a whole, is constantly changing, and self-regulating. Just like metabolic processes govern the functioning of your cells and organs (the *units* of your living structure), so *rules of possible combinations* of sounds, words, phrases and clauses govern the way these units of the living structure of language can combine/ function within one ‘whole.’

Food for Thought: Can you think of other examples of living structures?

So What Is *Language*?

It is the combination of the idea with a vocal sign which suffices to constitute the whole language
Ferdinand de Saussure

Linguistics looks at what we know when we know a language. ‘Knowing’ a language means not just knowing the sounds and words of a language, but also the rules of their combination, the rules of how we can put them together into sentences. That is how all living structures function – they all have units and rules of putting them together.

Through a complex network of interlocking patterns of symbols, the structure of Human Language creates hierarchical *layers of meaning* (on the level of morphemes, words, phrases, sentences, whole utterances, etc.). Animals, in contrast to humans, do not need interpreters for international communication: dogs bark, pigs grunt, and frogs croak much the same way today as they did a thousand years ago, in Papua New Guinea, and anywhere else.

Ferdinand de Saussure was the first to view Language as an integral system. He asked his students a hundred years ago:

“What is this *Language* phenomenon in its concrete, complete, and integral form? Where do we find the object we have to confront? With all its characteristics as yet contained within it and unanalysed?” (Saussure: Lectures on General Linguistics, 1910-1911 Retrieved 02/17/08, from <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/saussure.htm>)

This is a difficulty which does not arise in many other sciences - not having your subject matter there in front of you. We cannot just pick out what is most general in this integral, complete object – to generalize, we must know the parts of the whole! But, warned de Saussure, neither must we focus on what is only a part of language:

“Thus, it is clear that the vocal apparatus has an importance which may monopolise our attention, and when we have studied this articulatory aspect of languages we shall soon realise that there is a corresponding acoustic aspect. But even that does not go beyond purely material considerations. It does not take us as far as the word, the combination of the idea and the articulatory product; but if we take the combination of the idea and the vocal sign, we must ask if this is to be studied in the individual or in a society, a corporate body: we still seem to be left with something which is

incomplete. Proceeding thus, we see that in catching hold of the language by one end at random we are far from being able to grasp the whole phenomenon. It may seem, after approaching our study from several angles simultaneously, that there is no homogeneous entity which is the language, but only a conglomerate of composite items (articulation of a sound, idea connected to it) which must be studied piecemeal and cannot be studied as an integral object” (Ibid.).

Physical Faculty of Language as opposed to Language, the Product of Society

De Saussure offered a solution to this dilemma:

“In every individual there is a faculty which can be called the faculty of articulated language. This faculty is available to us in the first instance in the form of organs, and then by the operations we can perform with those organs. But it is only a faculty, and it would be a material impossibility to utilise it in the absence of something else - a language - which is given to the individual from outside: it is necessary that the individual should be provided with this facility - with what we call a language - by the combined effort of his fellows” (Ibid.).

So language exists on two levels: social and individual: “It is an abstract thing and requires the human being for its realisation. ... A language presupposes that all the individual users possess the organs” (Ibid.).

By distinguishing between what he called ‘The Language’ and ‘the faculty of language,’ de Saussure distinguished between

- 1) what is social from what is individual
- 2) what is essential from what is more or less accidental.

He said, “We shall see later on that *it is the combination of the idea with a vocal sign which suffices to constitute the whole language*. Sound production - that is what falls within the domain of the faculty of the individual and is the individual's responsibility. But it is comparable to the performance of a musical masterpiece on an instrument; many are capable of playing the piece of music, but it is entirely independent of these various performances. *The acoustic image linked to an idea - that is what is essential to the language*. It is in the phonetic execution that all the accidental things occur; for inaccurate repetition of what was given is at the root of that immense class of facts, phonetic changes, which are a host of accidents” (Ibid.).

Language, then, is a 'social product'; it is not just the operation of our organs of speech. We can get a clear idea of this product “by focusing on what is potentially in the brains of ... individuals (belonging to one and the same community) even when they are asleep; we can say that in each of these heads is the whole product that we call the language. We can say that the object to be studied is the hoard deposited in the brain of each one of us. Doubtless, this hoard, in any individual case, will never turn out to be absolutely complete” (Ibid.).

Human Language

De Saussure captured the essence of Human Language, when he said that “*it is the combination of the idea with a vocal sign which suffices to constitute the whole language*.” Indeed, all human languages are living **systems of symbols** (*symbol is a form that represents an idea*).

We learn to represent ideas symbolically (i.e., to ‘connect’ the sound forms of words to the ideas they represent) from the people that speak the language around us, as we grow up. That is why Saussure said that “*language always works through a language*’ – without that, it does not exist.”

Remember the stories of ‘wild’ children, who never learned human language, because they had not been exposed to a language (the wolf-boy in India, the antelope-boy in South Africa, Genie in the US, etc.)?

While we all speak a language, the language that we speak is independent of us; it is not a creation of any individual. Each language is a social product: it is the *collective* creation of each speech community.

Thus, the only *essential* feature of Human Language (i.e., of all languages) is their symbolic nature [i.e., the “*combination of sound /acoustic image with an idea*” (Ibid.)].

De Saussure introduces here the concept of *acoustic image* (sound image), and defines it as the “impression that remains with us, the latent impression in the brain. There is no need to conceive language as necessarily spoken all the time” (Ibid.).

Language: Another Social Institution?

Let us now consider language as a social product. What is the nature of a social product? Are there other social products we can compare language with? De Saussure tells us that the American linguist Whitney ‘caused astonishment’ around 1870, when he compared languages to other social institutions in his book *The principles and the life of language*. In this, said de Saussure, “he was on the right track – his ideas are in agreement with mine.”

Saussure quotes Whitney as saying that ‘It is, in the end, fortuitous that men made use of the larynx, lips and tongue in order to speak. They discovered it was more convenient; but if they had used visual signs, or hand signals, the language would remain in essence exactly the same: nothing would have changed’ (Ibid.).

Indeed, said de Saussure: “the only change would be the replacement of the acoustic images ... by visual images. Whitney wanted to eradicate the idea that in the case of a language we are dealing with a *natural* faculty; in fact, **social institutions stand opposed to natural institutions**” (Ibid.).

On the other hand, no other social institution is quite like language:

“There are very many differences,” said de Saussure, “The very special place that a language occupies among institutions is undeniable, but there is much more to be said; a comparison would tend rather to bring out the differences. In a general way, institutions such as legal institutions, or for instance a set of rituals, or a ceremony established once and for all, have many characteristics which make them like languages, and the changes they undergo over time are very reminiscent of linguistic changes. But there are enormous differences:

- 1) No other institution involves all the individuals all the time; no other is open to all in such a way that each person participates in it and naturally influences it
- 2) Most institutions can be improved, corrected at certain times, reformed by an act of will, whereas ... we see that such an initiative is impossible where languages are concerned, that

even academies cannot change by decree the course taken by the institution we call the language” (Ibid.).

Language as a ‘product of society at work’ is a “set of signs fixed by agreement between the members of that society; these signs evoke ideas. In that respect it's rather like rituals, for instance” (Ibid.).

Most social institutions are based on signs. For various purposes, all societies have established systems of signs that directly bring to mind certain ideas. Language is one such system, but it is the most important of them all! Why? Because it is through language that we learn to represent ideas through symbols (signs). We must remember, though, that language is not the only system of signs used in societies: for example, ships' signals (visual signs), Morse code, the Sign language of the deaf-and-dumb, etc. Writing is also a system of signs. All these systems are social conventions, which change over time.

Human Language vs. Individual Languages

“Having identified the language as a social product to be studied in linguistics, one must add that language in humanity as a whole is manifested in an infinite diversity of languages: a language is the product of a society, but different societies do not have the same language” (Ibid.).

Where does this diversity come from? Why does this product (lodged in the brain of each of us) vary from society to society, depending on where we are in the world? Human communities developed in isolation, and in different environments – this accounts for cultural/ linguistic differences we see today. We can also see how globalization / increase in communication have led to a certain ‘cultural convergence’: English particularly is now used globally for international communication; we can now eat Chinese, Indian, Thai, etc.; dress code in most civil societies has become more or less the same, etc.

De Saussure said that a linguist has ‘no other choice’ than to study as many languages as possible, and that, from the study and observation of these languages, “the linguist will be able to abstract general features, retaining everything that seems essential and universal, and setting aside what is particular and accidental. He will thus end up with a set of abstractions, which will be the language” (Ibid.).

Individual Performance: Part of Linguistic Analysis?

“However, there is still the individual to be examined, since it is clear that what creates general phenomena is the collaboration of all the individuals involved. Consequently we have to take a look at how language operates in the individual. This individual implementation of the social product is not a part of the object I have defined. This third chapter reveals, so to speak, what lies underneath - the individual mechanism, which cannot ultimately fail to have repercussions in one way or another on the general product, but which must not be confused, for purposes of study, with that general product, from which it is quite separate” (Ibid.).

Linguists often consider languages from an external point of view, without analyzing the mechanism of thought that underlies language. Now, however, the focus is gradually shifting to include the “**logical side of the language, involving invariables unaffected by time, race, culture or geography**” (Ibid.).

THE SIGN, THE SIGNIFIER, AND THE SIGNIFIED:

Associative vs. Syntagmatic Relations between Linguistic Signs

The sign, the signifier, and the signified are concepts of the school of thought known as structuralism, founded by De Saussure during lectures he gave between 1907 and 1911 at the University of Geneva. His views revolutionized the study of language and inaugurated modern linguistics. The theory also profoundly influenced other disciplines, especially anthropology, sociology, and literary criticism.

The **central tenet of structuralism** is that the phenomena of human life, whether **language** or media, are **not intelligible except through their network of relationships**, making the **sign** and the **system** (or **structure**) in which the sign is embedded primary concepts.

As such, a sign -- for instance, a word -- gets its meaning only in relation to or in contrast with other signs in a system of signs.

In general,

- The *signifier* and the *signified* are the components of the *sign*, which is itself formed by the associative link between the signifier and signified.
- Even with these two components, however, signs can exist only in opposition to other signs. That is, **signs are created by their value relationships with other signs**. The contrasts that form between signs of the same nature in a network of relationships is how signs derive their meaning.

As the translator of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, Roy Harris, puts it:

"The essential feature of Saussure's linguistic sign is that, being intrinsically arbitrary, it can be identified only by contrast with coexisting signs of the same nature, which together constitute a structured system" (p. x).

In Saussure's theory of linguistics, the signifier is the sound and the signified is the thought. The linguistic **sign is neither conceptual nor phonic, neither thought nor sound**. Rather, it is the whole of the link that unites sound and idea, signifier and signified. The properties of the sign are by nature abstract, not concrete. Saussure: "A sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern" (Course, p. 66).

SIGN VS. SYMBOL

Saussure chose the term "sign" over "symbol" because the latter implies motivation. For Saussure, the sign is arbitrary. Virtually all signs, Saussure maintains, have only arbitrarily ascribed meanings. Since Saussure, this notion has been taken as axiomatic in Western linguistics and philosophy.

MISTAKES

- A common mistake is to construe the signifier and the sign as the same thing.
- ... another common mistake, perhaps related to the first, is
 - to speak of a signifier without a signified or a sign, or
 - to speak of a signified without a signifier or a sign.

Used in reference to Saussure's original formulations, both locutions are nonsensical. In language, a lone signifier would be an utterly meaningless sound or concatenation of sounds.

- But it is even more absurd to speak of a signified without signifier or sign: It would, I believe, have to be a sort of half thought, something never thought before, a thought that exists solely outside the domain of language, a fleeting, private, chaotic thought that makes no sense even to the thinker -- an **unthought**.

- Another mistake is to endow a sign with meaning outside the presence of other signs. Except as part of the whole system, signs do not and cannot exist.

EXPANSION BEYOND LANGUAGE

Saussure provides an explicit basis for the expansion of his science of signs beyond linguistics: "It is possible," he says, "to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. ... We shall call it semiology. It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance."

Roland Barthes is one scholar who took Saussure's counsel to heart. He helped found the modern science of semiology, applying structuralism to the 'myths' he saw all around him: media, fashion, art, photography, architecture, and especially literature. For Barthes, "myth is a system of communication." It is a "message," a "*mode of signification*," a "form" (Mythologies, p. 109). With a plethora of complexities and nuances, Barthes extends Saussure's structuralism and applies it to myth as follows:

"Myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. We must here recall that the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth" (Mythologies, p. 114).

Because of the complexities and nuances of Barthes's semiology, I will stop here and let you pick up the strand for yourself by reading the highly informative chapter "Myth Today" in Mythologies.

A FINAL WORD: THE INDETERMINANCY OF MEANING

Regardless of how linguistic signs (and perhaps other signs, too) are analyzed, meaning may in fact be unrecoverable, both to the analyst and to the participants in an exchange of signs. It is my belief that meaning is indeed ultimately indeterminate, a position that bodes well with what very well be a fact of language. With respect to indeterminacy, some linguists, postmodern theorists, and analytic philosophers seem to be in agreement. Brown and **Yule**, both of whom are linguists, write that "the perception and interpretation of each text is essentially subjective."

The postmodern theorists, meantime, hold that every decoding is another encoding. **Jacques Derrida**, for example, maintains that the possibility of interpretation and reinterpretation is endless, with meaning getting any provisional significance only from speaker, hearer, or observer: Meaning is necessarily protection. **Bachtin**, too, says

"the interpretation of symbolic structures is forced into an infinity of symbolic contextual meanings and therefore it cannot be scientific in the way precise sciences are scientific."

Both Bakhtin's and Derrida's views are surprisingly not unlike those of W. V. O. **Quine's** in "The Indeterminacy of Translation," where Quine argued that "the totality of subjects' behavior leaves it indeterminate whether one translation of their sayings or another is correct."

Wittgenstein pays homage to the indeterminacy of meaning as well: "Any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning."

Steve Hoenisch: Saussure's Sign Retrieved 05/24/2008 <http://www.criticism.com/md/the_sign.html>