

Day 5: de Saussure and Semiotics

Ferdinand de Saussure will be introduced. In addition to de Saussure's linguistics and view of language, we will consider semiotics. We will also consider the difference between semiotics and semantics. Ferdinand de Saussure (November 26, 1857–February 22, 1913) was a Swiss linguist and philosopher of language. He laid the foundations of semiotics and later influenced structuralist thought. de Saussure studied comparative linguistics in Germany, where comparative linguistics, the study of empirical history, was popular. He is known as the “father of modern linguistics.”



Ferdinand de Saussure
1857–1913

1 Sign, Signifier, Signified

In French, sign, signifier, and signified are called *signe*, *signifiant*, and *signifié*, respectively. Saussurean linguistics is said to be the beginning of semiotics.

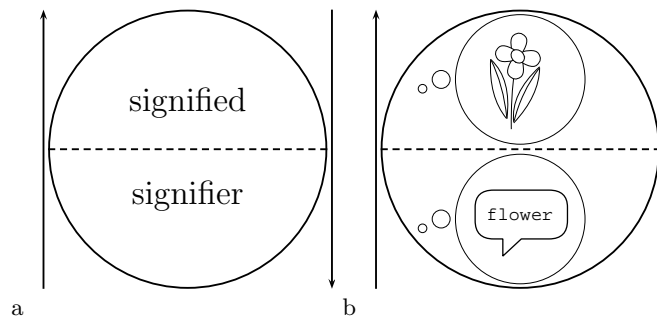


FIGURE 1: Saussure's Model of Symbols (Chandler 2002: 18–9): a) In Saussure's diagram, a symbol is closed as a circle with two parts. In Saussure's diagram, a symbol is closed as a circle and contains two parts: a signifier and a signified; the up arrow shows the view from the signifier and the down arrow shows the view from the signified; the horizontal dotted line means that it is not clear where the boundary is between the signifier and the signified. b) The diagram is applied to a flower as an example. Signifier is a phonetic symbol and signified is a visual image of a flower.

Signifier and Signified

A signifier is a sensory aspect of a word, such as the letter “hana” in the word “flower” or the sound “hana.” Signified refers to the image of a flower, the concept of a flower, or its semantic content. The two sides of a signifier-signified pair are called a “sign” or “symbol.” There is no necessity for the relationship between signifier and signify. There is no necessity to write “flower” itself as “hana” and pronounce it as “hana” in Japanese. Symbols are used arbitrarily. This is called the arbitrariness of symbols. Even though it is not necessary, it is made necessary in the system in which it is understood. When a person who understands Japanese sees the character for “flower” and hears the sound “hana,” the basis of what is imagined there is basically the same. It is also very difficult to answer the question, why is “flower” called “hana”?

Q1 Explain in your own words, using other examples, the relationship between what points and what is pointed to.

Q2 If the relationship between what points and what is pointed to is

- a. If you're thinking in your own head
- b. If you are pointing and someone else is listening, or
- c. If the relationship between what you are pointing at and what is being pointed at is in your mind, or if someone else is pointing at it and you are listening to it.

Explain, using concrete examples, the relationship between the three

- Q3 Discuss possible issues in the above three cases.
- Q4 Discuss how the above problems are solved in actual communication.

2 Linguistic Relativity

Depending on the language, the world will change!

Saussure shows that the phonology of a language, and the concepts that represent it, are separated differently depending on the language.

In Japanese, the sounds are separated by 50 sounds. The sound “a” is distinguished from other sounds (i, u, e, o, ...). How to distinguish sounds depends on the language. In the Japanese phonological system, there is no distinction between [r] and [l], and there is no distinction between four tones (Chinese). If you distinguish the sounds of languages, you should be able to classify them infinitely, but in Japanese, the sounds are classified into Japanese syllabary, and other languages also distinguish sounds by their own methods.

What about the concept? For example, the number of the colors of the rainbow is physically infinite, but there are not only seven, but also three in the language. In Japanese, we distinguish between “tuna” and “bonito,” but in English, both are “tuna.”

There are not many ways to call a camel in Japanese, only “Hitokoburakuda” and “Futakoburakuda.” The general term for camels in Arabic is Jamal, but it is also called in many other ways. For example, Hawar (up to 6 months), Mahroud (up to 1 year), Hedge (up to 2 years), Reg (up to 3 years), Jeda (up to 4 years), Sini (up to 5 years), Lubar (up to 6 years), Siddhis (up to 7 years), Shaag (up to 8 years), etc. Jamal is a male camel and has been used to refer to 8 years or more. (Honda 1981)

It is an *arbitrary choice* made by the speakers of each language as to which distinctions to focus on. These choices create a language-specific system, which in turn becomes the *world* for the speakers of that language. Saussure calls this *value*. Although the English word ‘sheep’ and the French word ‘mouton’ have the same signifier, they have different *values* for speakers of those languages. In other words, each language has its own unique *value*.

- Q5 Some languages do not make the distinction, while others do. Why is this?
- Q6 Find something that is expressed in many ways in Japanese, but is only said in one or two ways in other languages.
- Q7 Look at FIGURE 2 and answer which one is Booba and which one is Kiki.
- Q8 Discuss whether language is truly arbitrary.

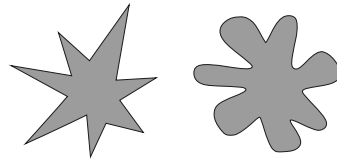


FIGURE 2: Which is Booba, which is Kiki?(Maurer et al. 2006)

3 Linguist's material

Among linguists, Saussure is one of the oldest scholars. How can we learn the ideas of such an old researcher?

Lecture notes and source documents

Saussure did not publish a single book during his lifetime. Saussure's disciples compiled the lectures on general linguistics given at the University of Geneva three times between 1906 and 1911, the last year of his life. Those are called a series of "Lectures on General Linguistics." However, the disciples did not hear this lecture directly because they were attending other lectures at the University of Geneva. The lecture notes, however, by the students who directly attended the lectures have all been published from the first to the third lectures.

From around 1954, Saussure's lecture notes and other materials were collected at the Geneva Public University Library. In 1957, *Les sources manuscrites du Cours de linguistique générale de F. de Saussure* was published by Godel.(Godel 1957) In 1968, A revised edition of "Lectures on General Linguistics" was published by Rudolf Engler.(Engler 1968)

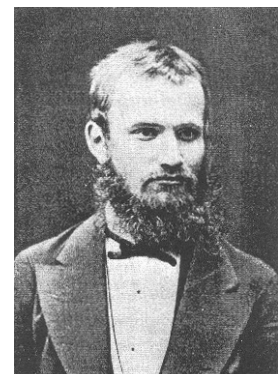
- Q9 How do contemporary researchers who cite Saussure learn about Saussure's linguistics and view of language?
- Q10 Now that you cannot listen to Saussure's lectures in person, what kind of attention do you need to pay to Saussure's linguistics that you study/learned?
- Q11 How did Saussure become such a famous scholar when he never published a single book during his lifetime?

4 Baudouin de Courtenay

Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929) was a French-Polish linguist who was active in Imperial Russia. He is one of Russian linguists for his large number of papers written in Russian.

He is a pioneer of structuralism along with Saussure, and Saussure is said to have been influenced in not a few aspects by Courtenay. However, because he was active in Kazan, a remote part of Russia, he was not as widely known as Saussure.

The basic concepts of structuralism (the symbolism of words, morphemes, and phonemes, the clear distinction between diachronic and synchronic states, the distinction between lang and parole, etc.), he proposed key concepts in linguistics such as economy in language change and the distinction between phonetics and phonology.



Baudouin de Courtenay
1845–1929

5 Courtenay's Economic theory of language change

Courtenay argued that there are five directions in which language change can occur.

1. Unconscious habits
2. The desire to make language an easier system to use
3. Forgetting
4. An unconscious feeling of wanting to distinguish between two words of the same form.
5. Generalization

Q12 Why did Courtenay claim that there are five directions, and what are the reasons for each of the five directions?

Q13 Let's consider these five directions to see if they can explain language change.

Q14 Discuss why Courtenay named his theory "Economic Theory."

References

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