

## A comparison of the figures representing the “fait linguistique” in the *Cours* (1916) and its sources

CONTEXT: It is well-established that the representation of the “fait linguistique” in the 1916 version of the *Cours* (Fig. 1) stems from the editors rather than from Saussure himself. Yet Fig. 1 continues to be among the most often reproduced figures of the *Cours*, allegedly representing the basis of two central aspects of Saussure’s theory of the linguistic sign, i.e. its bilateralness and arbitrariness.

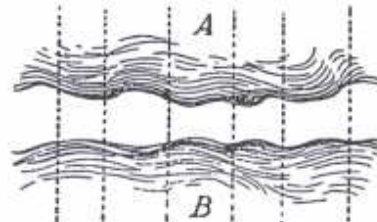


Fig. 1: The “fait linguistique” in the  
*Cours de linguistique générale* (1916: 161 [155])

RESEARCH QUESTIONS: The paper addresses the following questions:

1. In what ways do the figures representing the “fait linguistique” in the 1916 *Cours* and in the sources resemble and differ from each other?
2. Is the figure in the 1916 *Cours* compatible with Saussure’s account of the “fait linguistique” and his theory of the linguistic sign?

METHODOLOGY: The paper compares Fig. 1 with the diagrams in the student notes that can be found in Godel (1957), Engler’s critical edition of the *Cours* (CLG-E 1968 and 1974) and the Constantin notes (Komatsu/Harris 1993). The original diagrams in the student notes are reproduced below:

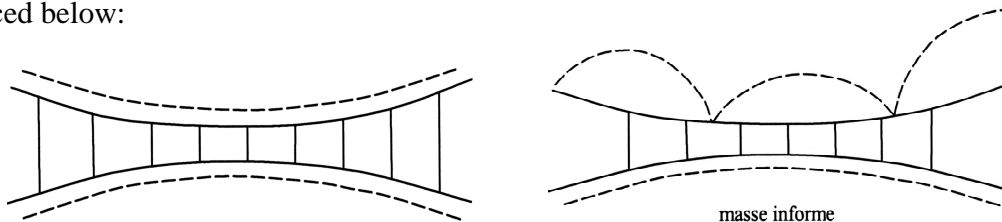


Fig. 2: The “fait linguistique” in Engler’s version of the  
*Cours de linguistique générale* (CLG-E 1968: 252)

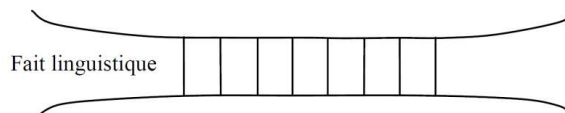


Fig. 3: The “fait linguistique” in Constantin’s notes to the  
*Troisième Cours* (Komatsu/Harris 1993: 138)

The right-hand diagram in Fig. 2 can also be found, with a minor variation, in Godel (1957: 214).

RESULTS: Fig. 1 resembles the figures in the sources with respect to the principle of bilateralness. However, the addition of vertical dotted lines extending over the two “amorphous masses” of thought (A) and sound (B) points to an interpretation by the editors of the 1916 *Cours* which is not consistent with Saussure’s account of arbitrariness. In particular, Fig. 1 does not adequately represent Saussure’s observation that the linguistic sign resulting from “le fait linguistique” is not reducible to thoughts and sounds. The sign constitutes an original phenomenon: “C’est entre deux [‘idées’ and ‘sons’] que le fait linguistique se passe” (Godel 1957: 214 ; CLG-E 1968: 252). Fig. 1 suggests a delimitation of thoughts, resulting in “signifiés”, and of sounds, resulting in “signifiants”. Yet Saussure states that thoughts and sounds are not to be considered “substrates” of the linguistic sign (CLG-Notes 1974: 47; ELG 65). Rather than resulting from a combination of thoughts and sounds, linguistic units are the prerequisite for such a combination: “Son et pensée ne peuvent se combiner que par ces unités” (CLG-E 1968: 253; cf. Willems 2005). This is adequately represented in Fig. 2 and 3. The editors’ interpretation in the 1916 *Cours* may also explain why they saw no contradiction between Saussure’s account of the “fait linguistique” and the famous, yet profoundly un-Saussurean, diagram of the linguistic sign which they provide in the *Cours* (Fig. 4), along with two other diagrams, and which since the late 1980s has been heralded as foundational to current Cognitive Linguistics.

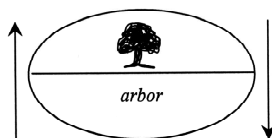


Fig. 4: Diagram of the “signe linguistique” the *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916: 101 [99])