

## **The Saussurean myth and the reality of Sechehaye**

The main thesis of the paper is that Saussure's august status in present-day (European) linguistics is based on a myth created by his environment during and after his lifetime, while his younger colleague Sechehaye, now largely forgotten, was the man with the great visions, anticipating much of modern linguistic theory. I maintain that present-day linguistics would hardly have been different if Saussure had never existed, but that it would have benefited greatly if Sechehaye's ideas had been properly valued. Saussure is famed mainly for his threefold distinction between (a) diachrony and synchrony, (b) 'langue' and 'parole', and (c) 'signifiant' and 'signifié'. The first two were extensively discussed in Sechehaye's (1908) "Programme et méthodes de la linguistique théorique", published during Saussure's lecture courses, where it is stated that you cannot see the (diachronic) change if you do not first see the (synchronic) system. The third is mainly terminological: for the legion references to this distinction in the (European) literature it would make no difference if these terms were replaced with the traditional 'form' and 'meaning'. Moreover, both Saussure's notion of sign and his 'circuit de la parole' fail to relate (the use of) language to the things in the actual or any virtual world referred to and spoken about—the main *raison d'être* of language. His notion of grammar went no further than morphology. For him, syntax belonged in the parole, not in the langue, whereas Sechehaye already had a much more advanced notion of syntax, corresponding to the modern notion (though he failed to see its formal aspects). Saussure's notion of 'valeur' was confused and has remained without any serious follow-up. Likewise for his view that everything in language is negative and oppositional. Saussure himself seems not to have been instrumental in the creation of the myth around his person. On the contrary, the sources show him as a perennial doubter, plagued by his own thoughts on the nature of language and unable to form a coherent theory out of them, let alone get them into a publishable form. He was the victim of the precocious brilliance of his "Mémoire" and of the fact that some of his students and colleagues turned him into a myth, mistaking his doubts and uncertainties for profundity. Sechehaye, by contrast, anticipated the basic principles of both generative and transformational grammar and made essential contributions to the great subject-predicate debate that raged from the 1850s until the 1930s. An uncluttered view of the period reveals an intriguing linguistic landscape, both in and outside France, teeming with powerful and highly fertile ideas that form an essential part of present-day linguistic thinking, but in which Saussure's ideas play no role of significance. Sechehaye's ideas, by contrast, are still topical nowadays and are hotly debated. My book "The Saussurean Myth" is in production.