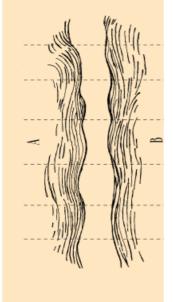# TRAVAUX DES COLLOQUES

LE COURS DE LINGUISTIQUE GÉNÉRALE, 1916-2016.

L'ÉMERGENCE, LE DEVENIR

Éditeurs scientifiques : Daniele GAMBARARA, Fabienne REBOUL.

Vinicius CLARO, « Course in General Linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), Background and Formulation by Michel Bréal (1832-1915) »

CERCLE FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE

Pour consulter le programme complet de l'atelier de Jean-Yves Beziau,

The Arbitrariness of the Sign :

https://www.clg2016.org/geneve/programme/ateliers-libres/the-arbitrariness-of-the-sign/

The Arbitrariness of the Sign

Course in General Linguistics

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)

Background and formulation by

Michel Bréal (1832-1915)

Marcus Vinicius dos Santos CLARO
Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro/IFCS
profviniciusclaro@gmail.com

Introduction
1. What has driven Saussure to formulate the arbitrariness of the sign principle in the CGL?
2. Which issues, related to this principle, had been thematized before the CGL (i) in Saussure's works and (ii) in which contexts did Bréal refer to it?
3. What kind of relation is possible between naming things (nominalization and identification) and functional language mechanisms, according to Saussure and Bréal's theoretical views?

I shall limit my talk to these three questions, for a discussion of the arbitrariness of the sign, postulated in the CLG, (Part II, Chapter 1, 2o. paragraph).

Which arbitrariness are we dealing with?

It is necessary to delimit the field of signification to help us understand the arbitrariness of the sign principle. Anthropologists suppose, in general, that in immemorial times there was an initial or original moment when sign was created, through human voice. It was when the sound gained meaning. Nevertheless, we must consider the dual nature or composition of the sign, in**significant** – acoustic image – and **signification** – the idea that this acoustic image evokes in the mind.

The relation between phonetics (enunciation of concrete sounds) and the mental meaning thus evoked is therefore arbitrary, that is, *a priori*, there is no referential present in speech to justify the sound structure of an utterance.

In certain Brazilian indigenous languages, we can find sound elements that make words using referential meanings to imitative sounds of the real world. In Linguistics, we call this process of speech phonic composition **onomatopoeia**. By the use of onomatopoeias, the speaker refers to sound phenomenona of nature, such as the running waters of a river, the wind, the thunder clap, voices of animals, among others. This linguistic resource may prove useless when one designates exclusively visual elements, such as the Sun, the Moon, and the stars, entirely devoid of a sound association from the speaker´s view point. The CLG presents other arguments: different languages realize different onomatopoeias in the same way. (Part I – Cap. 1 The nature of the linguistic sign).

We don't think that Saussure really worried about indigenous languages. His examples came from the European languages only. He, his academic fellows and pupils followed the tradition of XIXth century linguists, who would be involved in pursuing earlier primitive causes, regarding the formation of the sign in its phonic materiality, or "**acoustic image**", which he called **significant** (Part I - Cap. I; CLG).

The Writings in General Linguistics (Écrits de Linguistique Générale)

Before the formulation of the arbitrariness of the sign principle in the CLG, the ***Écrits de Linguistique Générale*** (***Writings in General Linguistics**– WGL*), discovered in 1996 and published for the first time in 2002, already sketched the principles postulated in the CLG. There, we see in ELG multiple occurrences of the terms "contract" (4 occurrences), "convention" (8 occurrences) and "arbitrary" (12 occurrences).

The use of each of these words had some intend and some shade of meaning, that is, we suppose that Saussure wrote them already on the way to the proclamation of the principle of arbitrariness, in a crescendo. We consider that the following excerpt delineates the most important argument and is the closest to the formulation of the said principle:

> "**10 c [notes for a book on General Linguistics, 3]**
> Is there, within the entirety of what is known, anything which may be accurately compared to language?
>
> We must first note that this question, in any case a difficult one, will at least not have the same vague meaning for us as it inevitably had for all those who sought to solve it without thinking first to define their ideas concerning language itself.
>
> As far as we are concerned, to ask this question is ultimately to ask something very different from what it has hitherto seemed. It comes down to asking whether there is any social fact, lending itself to expression as a formula, which may be found at any given moment to be conventional, and thus arbitrary, wholly lacking in any natural link with the object, completely free of and unregulated by it; (2) in itself the non-arbitrary, non-free product of what preceded it of its type." (WGL, p.139-140).

We deem the excerpt below fundamental, because it unites both expressions in just one predicate: "arbitrary convention", outlining two moments of the language:

> "I. in a given time: [1st.] language represents an internally ordered system, in all its parts, [2nd] and depends on an object, but is free and arbitrary with respect to the same object.
>
> II. The same language represents an arbitrary convention, it is the free product of facts that don't […] (sic) " (ibid.).

We believe this is a very strong suggestion in the direction of the arbitrariness principle.

However, the articulation of such a principle has, as we know it, only appeared formally in the *CLG*. It is clear that the *CLG* had an oral gestation: the principle was constructed by a Saussure´s construction, until a formal concept was achieved: "the arbitrariness principle". The discussion about the boundary of this principle must be extended. (It will be revisited in chapters about Mutability & Immutability – Part I, ch. 2 – and Linguistic Value – Part I, ch. IV).

We consider these occurrences to be general elements for multiple definitions of sketches of principles issued by Saussure, such as the mutability of the sign, as well as the differentiation of *langue* and *parole*, and as synchronic and diachronic Linguistics (ELG).

Antecedents of the *Cours* in Michel Bréal

Saussure´s predecessors, in particular, Professor Michel Bréal, following a positivist and naturalist tradition, researched historical sources faithfully, especially **metaplasms**, animated by the rational intention to explain the linguistic phenomena of sign transformations. They were coherent in their scientific effort to explain and describe the structure of languages, using etymology and philology. These were the tools to study their object: the word, that is, the sign.

Under the strong influence of the myth of the savage mind, concept theorized in 1962 by Levi-Strauss (1908 - 2009), scientist observers of the natural languages did not abandon the inspirations from Kant and Aristotle, their analysis of the facts of nature: **intuition** and **cognition**. They were so convinced of this that they did not feel any doubt as scientific observers with the observed phenomenon, even considering language as a natural phenomenon and not necessarily as a product of cultural, human work. (Bréal discusses the nature of language, whether natural or human). Therefore, the presence of the word "law" for their descriptions of phenomena of natural language, such as: speciality law, distribution law, irradiation law. These descriptions are defending principles based on rules such as the laws of natural science. So, we understand that Bréal does not depart from a positivist approach.

Bréal is worried about the word, its meaning (substantivation). He wrote an article dedicated to this substantivation, whose responsibility and function may be called primary, since the structure of a language, according to philosophers such as Wittgenstein (1889 - 1951) and Abelard (1079 - 1142), has its fundamental bases on appointment and their denotative articulation with the objective world. This articulation was a remarkable point, revealing their reflections about language.

How did Michel Bréal express his concern with the sign?

What indications did Bréal give, regarding the arbitrary aspect of the sign?

Bréal's methodology demonstrates a diachronic perspective; the tools available are etymology and historical grammar. The term **word** is used as the main object of the study of language. To Bréal, language's history and evolution are the way to study the **word**. Regarded as the central unit, the word (as an object) focuses the memory, its formation and the possibilities of relationships. Among these relationships, we can find the mechanisms and significations of a building of meanings that the word is able to offer.

In his book *Essai de Sémantique*, Michel Bréal raises questions from an approach less positivist. His argument defends that language is an instrument of "civilization" and "represents an accumulation of intellectual work". It is argued in his article named "Is Linguistics a Natural Science?"

Bréal wants to deduce from the words' history their mechanisms, by which the meaning works through them. He mentions a book written by Arsène Darmesteter (1846-1888), in order to illustrate how words rise and fall. This principle, although loaded with a naturalistic content, contributes greatly to early reflections on the arbitrariness of the sign; on the other side, it is premature to use the word arbitrary.

What is considered is the acceptance of an intuitive act:

> "The changes which have supervened in the meaning of words are as a rule the work of people, and as always when the popular intelligence is in question, we must be prepared, not for a great depth of reflection, but for intuitions, for association of ideas, sometimes unexpected and strange, but always easy to follow." (BRÉAL, p. 279).

This might be a way to think about the most primeval of beginning postulated by the arbitrary principle.

Bréal challenges the metaphor of language as a living organism, and concludes: "out of our spirit, the language has neither life nor reality", which leads us to understand an anti-naturalist position. He analyzes other books in opposition to that of Darmesteter, referring to Paul German and also Hermmann using native language as a basis for the study. Bréal considers thinking that a word has justification in its meaning is a mistake. Both are considered semantic books (Essay, p. 280). He suggested that semantic studies would solve the problem of motivation of the word's meaning:

> "When the general outlines of the science of Semantics have been traced out, there will be no difficulty in verifying in other languages the observations taken in the mother-tongue. Once the general divisions established, we can add to them all facts of a like order gathered from no matter where." (BRÉAL, 280)

However, Bréal propose us the following:

"Let us therefore, without further delay, penetrate into the domain of Semantics, and observe some of the causes which govern this world of speech." (BRÉAL, p. 282).

Besides this perception, the author seeks a historicity, a historical consciousness:

"Every new word introduced into a language causes a disturbance analogous to that resulting from the introduction of a new-comer into the physical or social world. A certain length of time is needed for things to settle down and subside. At first the mind hesitates between the two terms: this is the beginning of a period of fluctuation. When, to denote plurality, it became the custom in fifteenth-century France to employ the periphrase *beaucoup*, the ancient adjective *moult* did not incontinently disappear, but it began from that time forward to age. (BRÉAL, p. 284).

This quote raises two questions: 1. Systematic concern with a methodological study of the mechanisms operating on words, their modifications and variations; 2. The aspect of manipulation by the speaker on the meanings of the words. Bréal, in his *Essai de Sémantique* puts the speaker in the opposition of the parole agent who interferes in the langue, if we use the *Cours* terms.

It would be, from our point of view, possibly to conclude that a principle of conventionalism or convention precedes the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign postulated in the *Cours*. This possibility applies, effectively, at the inaugural moment of the substantivation or predication, since vocabulary evolution mechanism and internal operating mechanism of language derive from a logical understanding, in our point of view. The *Cours* itself agrees on this point. The text brings us certain dialogism, a swing or different moments the sign passes through – absolute arbitrariness and relative arbitrariness (cap. VI – Part II), where the words **ultra-lexicological** and **ultra-grammatical** appear:

"But the ultra-lexicological type is Chinese while Proto-Indo-European and Sanskrit are specimens of the ultra-grammatical type. Within a given language, all evolutionary movement may be characterized by continual passage from motivation to arbitrariness and from arbitrariness to motivation; this see-saw motion often results in a perceptible change in the proportions of the two classes of signs." (CLG, Part II – Chapter VI – 3.Absolute and Relative Arbitrariness).

We saw the issues that we believe to be more relevant and worthy of a particular highlight:

-what are the predecessors of Saussure, before what had been constructed of the oral classes of the *Cours*, and before the *Cours* edition, formalized by his students Bally and Sechehaye;

- what kind of arbitrariness we're dealing with, as soon as we are re-reading Saussure;

- what limitations refer to the principle of arbitrariness, given the previous Breal's principle of conventionality;

- and finally, what does the arbitrary character of word mean, regarding a General Linguistics, since arbitrariness of the sign is perceived by the contrast between the languages (Comparative Linguistics).

The subject is vast and deserves special attention. Summarizing it without mutilation is an absolutely challenging task, which explains that they have indeed inspired so many others and will continue to inspire us in the future.

Marcus Vinicius dos Santos Claro

Jan-Nov/2017

profviniciusclaro@gmail.com

References:

BRÉAL, Michel. « Semantics: Studies in the Science of Meaning», Translation: Mrs. Henry Cust. Preface: John Percival Postgate. London. William Heinemann. 1900.

SAUSSURE, Ferdinand de. « Course in General Linguistics»Edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Translated from French by Wade Baskin. The Philosophical Library, Inc. New York. 1959

SAUSSURE, Ferdinand de. « Writings in General Linguistics»Translation Carol Sanders and Mathew Pires. Oxford University Press. Oxford/New York.2006