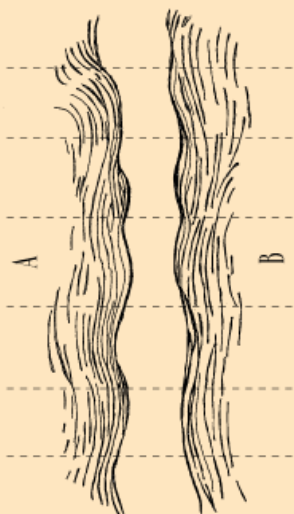


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The Place of Motivation in the *Cours de linguistique générale*

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The published *Cours de linguistique générale* makes the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign the foundation stone of the linguistics that Saussure sought to promote: this principle “domine toute la linguistique de la langue; ses conséquences sont innombrables.”¹ The arbitrary nature of the sign lies at the basis of the history of a language: “l’arbitraire de ses signes entraîne théoriquement la liberté d’établir n’importe quel rapport entre la matière phonique et les idées. Il en résulte que ces deux éléments unis dans les signes gardent chacun leur vie propre dans une proportion inconnue ailleurs, et la langue s’altère, ou plutôt évolue, sous l’influence de tous les agents qui peuvent atteindre soit les sons, soit les sens” (110-111). Synchronically also “arbitraire et différentiel sont deux qualités corrélatives” (163), so that *la langue* becomes that paradoxical object: “dans la langue il n’y a que des différences sans termes positifs” (166). A language is not a nomenclature because of the doubly arbitrary nature of the sign.

The emphasis on the absolute centrality of the principle of arbitrariness in the *Course* had profound consequences for the reception of Saussure outside of linguistics: it becomes the dominant, dominating point to be drawn from Saussure. In *Mythologies* Roland Barthes claims that “Ce qu’il y a de gênant dans le mythe, c’est précisément que la forme est motivée. S’il y a une ‘santé’ du signe, c’est l’arbitraire du signe qui la fonde.”² Arbitrariness becomes a moral value as well as a central semiotic principle, and a good deal of semiotic analysis is devoted to exposing the unjustified ideological motivations that societies have allowed to encrustate signs that are in principle arbitrary. It is scarcely self-evident that in society arbitrariness is ethically and politically superior to motivation, but that is taken to be the great lesson we can draw from Saussure. I shall come back to this point at the end.

Despite the firm declarations in the *Course* about the foundational character of the arbitrary nature of the sign, however, when one revisits the notes on which the *Course* was based, one can see that in his lectures Saussure in fact gave considerable weight to processes of motivation in the linguistic system. This fact has been obscured by the ordering of the published *Course*, which relegates these discussions to a minor place, after the major issues have been discussed. If we go back to the lecture notes, we find a different line of argument. In his third course of lectures, according to the students’ notes, Saussure moved expeditiously—in the very next lecture—from his account of the arbitrariness of the sign (“La Nature du signe linguistique”) to another chapter entitled “L’Arbitraire absolu et l’arbitraire relatif dans la langue.”³ This is a chapter that has been neglected by readers of Saussure because in the published *Course* it is moved out of Part One, “Principes généraux,” and relegated to the end of Part Two, “La linguistique synchronique,” after the chapters on linguistic units, linguistic identity, syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, and, above all, after the crucial chapter on linguistic value. In the published *Course*, then, the discussion of absolute and relative arbitrariness thus appears as an afterthought, not even a separate chapter but the last section in a chapter entitled

¹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. Tullio de Mauro, Paris, Payot, 1973, p. 100. Henceforth cited simply by page number: (100).

² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 1957, p. 212.

³ The notes of Constantin, the best source, are easier to follow in Ferdinand de Saussure, *Troisième Cours de linguistique générale (1910-1911), d’après les cahiers d’Emile Constantin*, ed. and trans. Eisuke Komatsu and Roy Harris, Oxford, Pergamon, 1993, which publishes them in sequence. I will also give references to Engler’s critical edition: Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. Rudolf Engler, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1967, in the form “Engler x, y, z,” where x = page number, y = column, and z = segment number.

“Mécanisme de la langue,” where it is explicitly designated as “another angle”: “le mécanisme de la langue peut être présenté sous un autre angle” (180). Here is that other angle in the published *Course*: “Le principe fondamental de l’arbitraire du signe *n’empêche pas de distinguer* dans chaque langue ce qui est radicalement arbitraire, c’est à dire immotivé, de ce qui ne l’est que relativement” (180, my italics). This distinction between absolute and relative arbitrariness is one that the fundamental nature of the sign does not prevent one from making but that, implicitly, is not decisive for the nature of the linguistic system.

In the students’ notes, however, the topic is introduced quite differently: “Nous avons posé comme étant une vérité évidente que le lien du signe par rapport à l’idée représentée est radicalement arbitraire. Dans toute langue, il faut distinguer ce qui reste radicalement arbitraire et ce qu’on peut appeler l’arbitraire relatif.”⁴ Here relative arbitrariness belongs to the logical development that leads us from the principle that the relation between signifier and signified is “radicalement arbitraire”—that is to say, arbitrary in its root --to the notion of value (based on difference) and to the description of the linguistic system, which, surprisingly, is based on motivation. “Tout ce qui fait de la langue un système demande d’être abordé sous ce point de vue, par lequel on ne l’aborde guère en général comme une *limitation de l’arbitraire* par rapport à l’idée.”⁵ Far from being an option one is merely not prevented from pursuing, this line of thought is presented in the notes as required by the nature of the linguistic system.

A version of the key sentence I have just cited appears in the published *Course*, but since it does not come until after the discussions of syntagmatic and associative relations and linguistic value, it has seemed ancillary, especially since the editors immediately offer a gloss: “mais l’esprit réussit à introduire un principe d’ordre et de régularité dans certaines parties de la masse des signes, et c’est le rôle du relativement motivé” (182). The editors thus make it very plausible to treat motivation as not part of the system itself but something introduced by users, perhaps even an illusion, like false analogy or dubious onomatopoeia, perhaps not an authentic feature of *la langue* at all, but at any rate no more than a minor principle at work in certain portions of the system – perhaps portions of the lexicon (*vingt* is arbitrary; *dix-neuf* is motivated). I confess that in my own little book on Saussure I take the discussion of absolute and relative arbitrariness as a concession to the obvious fact that some lexical items are motivated with respect to others, but not as a point having much bearing on the nature of the linguistic system itself, since these other signs to which the relatively motivated ones are related are themselves arbitrary signs.⁶ The student notes, however, present motivation as the perspective from which everything that makes a language a system must be approached; and few commentators -- Françoise Gadet and Akatane Suenga are exceptions -- have highlighted the importance of motivation as basis of the linguistic system.⁷

The crucial point can be stated simply: for Saussure the sign is in its foundations arbitrary but the linguistic system is a system of motivation, and the two principles are interdependent. It is because the relation between signifier and signified is unmotivated that *la langue* becomes a system of motivation.

This is important to the history of the language: “Tout le mouvement que représente pour la langue l’évolution peut se résumer en un va-et-vient entre la somme respective du parfaitement immotivé et du relativement motivé.”⁸ What is motivated at one point can become unmotivated at another, and vice versa. But motivation is central to the synchronic system of *la langue*. Saussure broaches the topic of absolute and relative arbitrariness with lexical pairs, where one is unmotivated and the other motivated. “Ormeau ‘elm,’ is unmotivated while poirier ‘pear tree,’ relatively motivated, refers to a coexisting term, poire and also the

⁴ *Troisième cours*, p. 85; Engler 297, 5, 2090 & 2092.

⁵ *Troisième cours*, p. 87, Constantin’s italics; Engler 301, 5, 2108.

⁶ Jonathan Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure*, rev. ed., Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986, p. 30.

⁷ Françoise Gadet introduces the concept of relative arbitrariness in her initial discussion of the arbitrary nature of the sign as a sense of arbitrariness that suggests the preconditions for the establishment of a distinctly linguistic terrain that the whole Saussurian enterprise is geared to constructing through the definition of the relations between signs. *Saussure: une science de la langue*, Paris, PUF, 1987, pp. 42-4. See also Akatane Suenga, “Des deux arbitraires, absolu et relatif, à un arbitraire ‘primaire’ —le fait linguistique et le devenir du signe chez Saussure,” *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* 52, 1999, pp. 189-200.

⁸ *Troisième cours*, 87; Engler 303, 2, 2112.

ending *ier*. “Il essaie de se motiver.”⁹ The linguistic system works to motivate. Saussure analyses diverse grammatical and morphological examples, from verb tenses to plurals: “Le pluriel anglais *ships* ‘navires’ rappelle par sa formation toute la serie *flags, birds, books*, etc., tandis que *men* ‘hommes’ et *sheep* ‘moutons’ ne rappellent rien” (181). The fundamental nature of the linguistic sign is its arbitrariness, but the linguistic system provides motivation as the basis of its constructions: motivation that makes it possible, for instance, to infer the meaning of words, phrases and sentences from the arbitrary meanings of their parts. It is not, Saussure adds, that *grammaire* and *motivation* are synonymous, “mais ils partagent quelque chose dans le principe” (183). “Grammar,” which means “system,” is the motivation of signs that are at root arbitrary and thus available for motivation. The system of motivation is what makes it possible to produce new forms (by creative analogy) “je puis former redémisionner, recontempler, sans les avoir jamais entendus,” – to produce and understand them: a form one has never heard before can be related to other forms and a meaning inferred only because the language is a system of motivation. “La création analogique,” which Saussure calls “un immense phénomène,”¹⁰ is itself only a special case of the general operation of language, synchronically AND diachronically: “La langue passe son temps à interpréter et à décomposer ce qui est en elle de l’apport des générations précédentes – c’est là sa carrière! – pour ensuite avec les sous-unités qu’elle a obtenues combiner de nouvelles constructions. Ainsi *somnoler* n’a pu être formé qu’en décomposant des verbes en *-er* et *somnolent* d’une certaine façon.”¹¹ That is, *somnolent* comes from Latin *somnolentus*, “smelling of sleep,” composed of *somn*+*olentus* “sleep” + “smelling,” but in modern French *somnolent* is analyzed *somnol*+*ent*, as if it were a present participle, and therefore the verb of which it would be the participle, *somnoler*, has been created. This is an example of how language – the linguistic system – leads a life of its own, representing itself to itself. *Il essaie de se motiver*. The processes of motivation that Saussure identifies as the grammar of the language (which governs combinations) are the same as those at work in historical evolution driven by analogy, in which elements are decomposed and recomposed.

All of these issues – the status of prefixes, analogy versus false analogy, and the system’s decomposition or self-analysis -- lead us back to the same point, which is Saussure’s view of the linguistic system, a view that is, finally, startling in its simplicity. The *Course* speaks of “la nature au fond identique de tout les faits de synchronie” (187) and maintains that “unité et fait de grammaire ne sont que des noms différents pour désigner des aspects divers d’un même fait général: le jeu des oppositions linguistiques” (168). “Chaque élément nous fait penser à l’autre: tout ce qui est semblable et dissemblable en quelque sorte se présente autour de chaque mot, autrement le mécanisme de la langue serait impossible.”¹² Or again, “Un mot quelconque évoque inévitablement par association tout ce qui peut lui ressembler.”¹³

It is not just that in denying the motivation of signs, one would eliminate a significant aspect of language, but rather that one would deny the nature of the fundamental mechanisms of the linguistic system, since the system can be conceived as a mechanism of motivation. Saussure’s conception of the mechanisms of the linguistic system, as presented in the lecture notes –the play of differences, the operation of analogy, the series which generate units of indeterminate status and, above all, grammar as a process of motivation -- precludes a theory based on signs exempt from motivation. If this is so then we need to think differently about language and not conceive of motivation as an accident that fortuitously befalls a system of arbitrary signs.

Now linguists know these things—that morphology, syntax, and even semantics involve systemic relations that could be called motivation -- but, as I said at the beginning, outside of linguistics the assertions of the published *Course* that the sign is radically arbitrary have had a very potent effect, especially since they are seconded by other specific points, such as the claim in the discussion of onomatopoeia that apparently motivated signs “ne sont jamais des éléments organiques d’un système linguistique” (102); and the argument, in the discussion of a future science of semiology, that though there doubtless exist motivated or naturally

⁹ *Troisième cours*, 85; Engler 297, 5, 2094.

¹⁰ Engler 390, 2, 2591.

¹¹ Engler 386, 2, 2573.

¹² Engler 288, 2, 2038.

¹³ Engler 287, 2, 2029.

expressive signs, “en supposant qu’elle [la sémiologie] les accueille, son principal objet n’en sera pas moins l’ensemble des systèmes fondés sur l’arbitraire du signe” (100), for “les signes entièrement arbitraires réalisent mieux que les autres l’idéal du procédé sémiologique” (101). Arbitrary signs are made the norm, so that the goal of semiotic analysis often seems to be to expose supposedly natural or motivated signs as fundamentally arbitrary, and thus open to change. I quoted Barthes earlier on the health of the sign. His analyses of cultural myths aim to expose the supposedly natural meanings of these signs as “alibis” –his term. “La motivation est nécessaire à la duplicité du mythe,” which is always trying to transform history into nature.¹⁴ The unmasking of what is received as natural has become a common thread of a whole range of projects in cultural studies. Many of these are potent and valuable –I would cite Judith Butler’s work on the performance of gender, founded on a suspicion of categories presented as natural. Gender roles are cultural interpretations dubiously linked to biological differences, where the choice of certain features as the basis for broad cultural categories is fundamentally arbitrary and conventional, not determined by any natural necessity.¹⁵ Let me stress that I am not resisting this Saussurian legacy, whose projects need to be judged on their own merits. But insofar as the authority of Saussure is taken to support the idea that the essence of the sign is to be arbitrary and conventional and that motivation is a dubious cultural production, we should correct this impression, making it better known that without motivation language as we know it would be impossible. We could not produce new sentences or understand utterances. This is something that Saussure knew very well, as the lecture notes show, though his knowledge has been obscured by the construction of the *Cours de linguistique générale*.

But I would also emphasize that in constructing the *Course* so as to make a splash, with authoritative declarations about the arbitrariness of the sign, the need to clearly distinguish synchrony from diachrony, and to take *la langue* as the object of analysis, the editors made it possible for the *Course* to have an impact, and for there to be a Saussurian legacy, which there might not have been if they had produced a more nuanced and less declarative text.

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¹⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 212.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, London, Routledge, 1990, and *Bodies that Matter*, London, Routledge, 1993.

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