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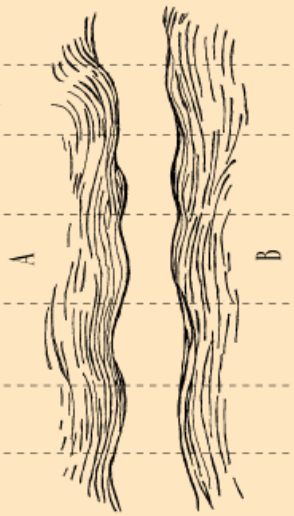

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Saussure on individual linguistic knowledge: a non-nativist notion of instinct?

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No linguist in the 20th century underwent
as many ideologically-driven readings
as Saussure.
John E. Joseph

Anzi procede
per sì lungo cammino,
che sembra star.
Giacomo Leopardi

ABSTRACT The mainstream account of Saussurean theory describes it as completely objective, taking language (*la langue*) as a social, abstract object having no relation at all with the speaker/listener and her knowledge. Generative Linguistics, instead, claims to adopt the attitude of taking into account the speaker's (although it is an *ideal* speaker) knowledge, and even states that every biological individual as such has language in her mind.

In spite of this (almost) unquestioned opinion, a close reading of Saussure's texts shows hints of a clear focus on the linguistic knowledge and conscience of the speaker. Namely, the notion of *sentiment de la langue*, which can be found widely throughout Saussure's works and notes, represents a form of very weak conscience. Closely related to this notion, it is also possible to find some occurrences of *instinct,* or rather of *instinctivement* ("instinctively"). Using these words, Saussure refers to linguistic (semi-)automatic activity, which is not, indeed, operated by native mechanisms, but works just like native instincts.

This shows how Saussure, just as Chomsky, considers (semi-)automatic mechanisms which guide linguistic behavior as a pivotal object for linguistics; but, unlike Chomsky, he thinks that this kind of linguistic mechanism is not related to a native device. This kind of conception opens a new perspective about language, where "natural" fades into "cultural", and vice versa.

KEYWORDS Chomsky, Saussure, Conscience, Instinct, Morphology

John Joseph's study on Saussure's readings by Bloomfield and Chomsky opens with a claim that every historian of linguistic thought should adopt as a peculiar form of *gnòthi seautòn*, namely:

> The history of linguistics is largely a history of misreadings, of failed communication between authors and readers, exacerbated by the illusion that communication has successfully occurred. (…)
> Whether semi-intentional or genuinely accidental, these misreadings are rarely neutral. Texts are not processed by empty brains, but by minds already stocked with set ideas, *a priori* categories, prototypes — and, perhaps most importantly, agenda. In other words, misreadings are usually ideologically determined.
> This is not a slur against the field of linguistics or its history.
> (Joseph 2002: 133)

In this paper, I would like to avoid (as far possible) these kinds of misreading. In my attempt to do justice to Saussure, I will not present his views as a form of Cognitivism *avant la lettre*, but rather as a theory where the focus on linguistic systems in their independency from individual speakers does not involve neglecting the speaking subject, whose consciousness and skills are the only *raison d'être* of language as a system.

In order to show this, I will first take an overview of Chomsky's positioning in relation to Saussure (and its changing trough time), and then focus on some Saussurean terms and notions (with a clear psychological taste) which are usually neglected, namely: sentiment, consciousness (*conscience*), will, and instinct. The latter of these notions (which should be out of place in a Saussurean frame, as it is usually presented) will be my starting point for developing some conclusive remarks in a semiotic fashion.

1. A look backwards: a quasi-Saussurean Chomsky?

The risk of misreading Joseph signalled is particularly dangerous when we approach the issue of the relation between Saussure and Chomsky. On one side, Saussure (or rather the *CGL*) has become a flag[1] waved by an army whose gathering together he could not forecast (nor discuss or oppose); on the other, Chomsky's positioning within the linguistic community in the early stages of his career was somewhat fluctuating. As Joseph clearly shows, Chomsky was guided by his agenda in his choice of enemies and ancestors, and his *pars destruens* and *pars construens* changed accordingly.

If we take Joseph's article as our guide, we can individuate four phases (Joseph 2002: 147 ff.), which he names (maybe a little be roughly, but substantially righteously):

1. 1963: The Saussurean
2. 1962-64: Reaching further back (Humboldt & Descartes)
3. 1965-79: The Anti-saussurean
4. 1986-1990: the Neo-saussurean?

I will just say some words on the first of these phases, but first I would like to add a phase 0. In the account Cognitivists use to give of their history, Chomsky's review of *Verbal behaviour* is considered as the actual birth of Cognitivism, raising on the ashes of Behaviourism and restoring the rights of the Human Mind. Chomsky's arguments are well known[2], and one of them is the following:

> The fact that all normal children acquire essentially comparable grammars of great complexity with remarkable rapidity suggests that human beings are somehow specially designed to do this, with data-handling or 'hypothesis-formulating' ability of unknown character and complexity.
> (Chomsky 1959: 57)

[1] I speak of a flag, because the weapons are often different (e.g. Jakobsonian, Hjelmslevian, or Greimasian).

[2] Or they are supposed to be so: see Joseph (2002: 179 ff.).

In these words, we find the embryo of the (so-called) "Plato's problem" (see Chomsky 1986, 1988, 2000). At this stage, however, Chomsky is just reproaching Skinner for the fact that the empirical data he is basing his theory on are not collected by experiments *on human beings.* As to Chomsky, human beings show faculties and skills that are clearly absent in other animals, and *that is what needs to be explained*.

At that time, the anti-behaviourist fight meets Saussure's proposals (or some of them), so that "the agenda behind Chomsky (1963) is to highlight every possible correlation between the *CLG* and Chomsky's own work." (Joseph 2002: 148).

Namely, Chomsky comes across some Saussurean terms and issues which are out of the focus of mainstream Structuralism[3], and which help him to shape "the speaker's linguistic intuition, his knowledge of the language" (Chomsky 1963: 329), so that Saussure is seen in an anti-bloomfieldian (and anti-behaviorist) fashion. Even, at least once, Chomsky explicitly refers to Saussure's notion of consciousness, namely in 1964's edition of *Current Issues*:

> In evaluating a particular generative grammar, we ask whether the information that it gives us about a language is correct, that is, whether it describes correctly the linguistic intuition of the speaker (Saussure's "conscience des sujets parlants", which to him, as to Sapir, provides the ultimate test of adequacy for a linguistic description).
> (Chomsky 1964: 26)

This is consistent with what he says in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax,* where he explains "intuitive knowledge" as lack of awareness by the speaker about the rules, or a lack of accuracy in describing them. Yet, the reference to Saussure disappears.

> By a generative grammar I mean simply a system of rules that in some explicit and well-defined way assigns structural descriptions to sentences. Obviously, every speaker of a language has mastered and internalized a generative grammar that expresses his knowledge of his language. This is not to say that he is aware of the rules of the grammar or even that he can become aware of them, or that his statements about his intuitive knowledge of the language are necessarily accurate.
> (Chomsky 1965: 8).

In this phase, we still do not find the focus on nativism that we will find later (see Chomsky 1988, 2000, 2002; Pinker 1994), and Chomsky focuses on the *pars destruens*, i.e. the very idea of the speaker's intuitive knowledge. I will not follow the other phases, but I will add some elements to fill the frame of a Saussurean account of the speaking subject as the source of *langue* (not to be seen in a simplistic nativist fashion).

2. Saussure's notion of '*sentiment de la langue*'

[3] Although they are not completely neglected by Saussurean philologists: see Godel (1957: 157, 186, 210 *et passim* - though neither 'conscience' nor 'sentiment' appear as items in the "*Lexique de la terminologie"*), Engler (1968, *ad voces*).

The first notion we have to approach is the *sentiment de la langue*[4]. The main sources we have to understand Saussure's notion o are three:

- Note on morphology (Godel 1957 N 7: 40 ff.; *ELG*: 180 ff. = Engl. trans.: 122 ff.)
- First Course of General linguistics (1907/1996)
- (Half-)course in Latin & Greek morphology (1910, unpublished)

The best way to present the notion is probably to start from the third one[5]. We don't have access to Saussure's autograph notes, but the three testimonies we have (Riedlinger, Constantin, Patois)[6] are rather concordant. Godel quotes Riedlinger's version as early as 1957.

> Nous n'avons pas l'intention de définir la morphologie, ni de parcourir le champ qu'elle occupe. Nous ne voulons fixer notre attention qu'à une opération qu'on fait en morphologie, qui est d'analyser le mot, de le décomposer en plusieurs parties. [...] Mais il faut se demander dans quel cas cette analyse est légitime, juste ou non. Eh bien il n'y a pas d'autre mesure que celle-ci: si elle coïncide avec le sentiment des sujets parlants. Dans la mesure où (je ne dis pas consciemment, instinctivement) les sujets parlants ressentiront des unités de la langue, nous aurons une raison pour les établir.
> (Riedlinger: Saussure 1910, Ms. 1986/15; quoted in Godel 1957: 210)

> Sans définir ce que c'est la morphologie, je me bornerai à un point, à une opération qu'on fait en morphologie. Nous étudions l'analyse morphologique des mots au point de vue du principe. [...] Il faut se demander dans quels cas cette division est légitime. On le reconnaîtra à ce qu'elle coïncide ou pas avec le sentiment des sujets parlants eux-mêmes. Dans la mesure où l'on peut affirmer non pas consciemment mais instinctivement dans les autres faits de langue dans la même mesure on aura une justification.
> (Constantin: Saussure 1910, Ms. 3972, 25)

> Analyser le mot en plusieurs parties est un but de la morphologie. [...] à quoi reconnaîtra-on qu'une analyse est juste ou non ? A ce qu'elle coïncide ou non avec le sentiment des sujets parlants. Dans la mesure ou on peut affirmer qu'au moins instinctivement ils ressentiront des idées différentes.
> (Patois: Saussure 1910, Ms 3972, C1)

We can summarise the common content of these quotes in these four points:

1. to define Morphology, we must turn to its basic mechanism: the *division* of words
2. the only way to prove this division is correct, is to remark the coincidence with the division made by the speaking subjects
3. The speaking subjects make this division referring to their *sentiment*
4. *sentiment* is a weak, instinct-like form of consciousness

[4] I will always refer to this notion in French, in order to preserve the peculiar ambiguity (the speaker's sentiment about her language *vs.* the sentiment whose subject is the language itself) it shows (see Fadda 2013: § 5, 59 ff. 2017b: 14 ff.).
[5] But the most important text is N7. Unfortunately, its dating is uncertain.
[6] The 1910 Course in Latin and Greek Grammar starts with *Phonétique.* After some months, Saussure joins a Morphological part, teaching the two in different days of the week. The Phonetical part (or rather, Riedlinger's notebooks) has been presented and discussed by Marie-José Beguelin (1981).

Someone could think that we are facing some technical problems concerning the reconstruction of ancient languages, which do not affect the core of linguistic theory. Actually, to base such a judgment on the *current* use of 'morphology' would be deceptive, since for Saussure Morphology is substantially equivalent to Synchronic Linguistics[7]. So, *this* consciousness (i.e. the *sentiment de la langue*) is the one Chomsky referred to as the pivot of Linguistic research.

2.1.1. Sentiment as conscience

As Godel[8] and Engler already remarked, Saussure uses 'sentiment' as a quasi-synonym of 'conscience'. Indeed, it is a synonymy whose contours have to be carefully traced, as they involve a relation of mutual defining with other terms.

Engler (1968), in particular, gives no meaning for the entry 'sentiment' in his lexicon, but he merely refers to other items, namely 'concret', 'conscience', 'réalité'. As to those terms, we can remark that:

- *conscience* occurs considerably more often
- *sentiment* is relatively more frequent when the subject is morphology
- *concret* and *réalité* refer to the fact that the s*entiment* of the speaking subject is to be seen as the *immediate datum* for the linguist (which is not performance/parole)

This bond linking sentiment, conscience, and linguistic reality is particularly evident in a fundamental passage belonging to N7.

> *Critérium :* Ce qui est réel, c'est ce dont les sujets parlants ont conscience à un degré quelconque ; tout ce dont ils ont conscience et rien que *ce* dont ils peuvent avoir conscience."
> (N7 = *ELG*: 183; Engl. trans.: 125)

Here, the very word of 'criterium' shows the affinity with Chomsky's perspective. The immediate problem Saussure is facing is obviously different: Saussure needs to find the actual decomposing of a word at a given point of time (i.e. not an anachronical one)[9]. But the solution is the same: the judgment of the speaking subject (and therefore her consciousness, however inexplicit it may be) is the one and only lighting guide for the linguist.

2.2. Degrees of consciousness and degrees of will

In the second 1891 inaugural conference, Saussure distinguishes two degrees (or rather three) of linguistic consciousness.

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[7] See e.g. Saussure (*ELG*: 21 ff. ; Engl. trans.: 6 ff.). At § 6b, Saussure distinguishes a "strict sense" of morphology (whereas the broad sense is supposed to be Synchronic Linguistics).

[8] As to Godel, I found his use of an affective or emotional lexicon in referring to linguistic sentiment particularly interesting: see Godel (1957: 42 "secret"; 157 "intime").

[9] This concept is easy to explain by an example: no contemporary Italian speaker would imagine one could split *però* in *per* + *hoc*, or *ancora* in *hanc* + *horam*, as a Latin (or a cultivated man in XIIIth century) did.

> Il y a d'une part le changement *phonétique* et d'autre part le changement appelé de divers noms, dont aucun n'est excellent, mais dont le plus usité est le changement *analogique.* Nous verrons immédiatement pourquoi. On peut opposer sous beaucoup de points de vue différents ces deux grands facteurs de renouvèlement linguistique, en disant par exemple que le premier représente le côté physiologique et physique de la parole tandis que le second répond au côté psychologique et mental du même acte -, que le premier est inconscient, tandis que le second est conscient, toujours en se rappelant que la notion de conscience est éminemment relative, de sorte qu'il ne s'agit que de deux degrés de conscience dont le plus élevé est encore de l'inconscience pure comparé au degré de réflexion qui accompagne la plupart de nos actes.
> (Saussure 1891(I) = *ELG*: 159; Engl. trans.: 106)

If we go back to the distinction introduced by Ernst Tugendhat (1979), we should remark that Self-consciousness (*Selbstbewusstein*), here, is not separable from self-determination (*Selbstbestimmung*), the two being the facets of a same phenomenon. Linguistic will, as linguistic consciousness, is substantially unconscious.

> Les faits linguistiques peuvent-ils passer pour être le résultat d'actes de notre volonté? Telle est donc la question. La science du langage, actuelle, y répond affirmativement. Seulement il faut ajouter aussitôt qu'il y a beaucoup de degrés connus, comme nous savons, dans la volonté consciente ou inconsciente ; or, de tous les actes qu'on pourrait mettre en parallèle, l'acte linguistique, si je puis le nommer ainsi, a ce caractère [d'être] le moins réfléchi, le moins prémédité, en même temps que le plus impersonnel de tous. Il y a là une différence de degré, qui va si loin qu'elle a longtemps donné l'illusion d'une différence essentielle, mais qui n'est en réalité qu'une différence de degrés.
> (Saussure 1891(II) = *ELG*: 150; Engl. trans.: 99)

This "paradox of the will" (a kind of free will problem in a linguistic fashion) brings us to the heart of the issue. What Saussure calls instinct is just this: consciousness escaping from consciousness, and will escaping from will.

3. Saussure's notion of instinct

Once reconstructed (at least partially: we may add the *psychic*/*psychological* couple. See Fadda 2018b: § 2.3) the constellation of Saussurean terms concerning the relation between language knowledge and linguistic activity, we are ready to approach our specific subject: the role of *instinct.* In Saussure's text, the word seems to have two main significations:

1. It is a way of denoting the *Faculté du langage.*
2. It is a way of referring to semi-automatic operations related with epilinguistic knowledge.

In the first case, 'instinct' is sometimes associated with a call to *nature*; in the second, we often find the adverb ("instinctivement") rather that the noun. Let's see some examples. I will present three for the first signification (numbered by lowercase letters) and five for the second (numbered by capital letters).

The examples for instinct/1 are drawn from the introductive part of *CGL* and from the beginning of the first Geneva conference in 1891. In both cases (even if separated by many years), it is a matter of determining the place of linguistics among sciences, and the place of *langue* (or *langues*) within the vast complex of linguistic phenomena.

> (a) La langue, au contraire, est un tout en soi et un principe de classification. Dès que nous lui donnons la première place parmi les faits de langage, nous introduisons un ordre naturel dans un ensemble qui ne se prête à aucune autre classification. A ce principe de classification on pourrait objecter que l'exercice du langage repose sur une faculté que nous tenons de la nature, tandis que la langue est une chose acquise et conventionnelle, qui devrait être subordonnée à l'instinct naturel au lieu d'avoir le pas sur lui.
> (*CGL*: 25; Engl. trans.: 9)

> (b) Je vous dirai, Messieurs, qu'on a tout refusé à notre pauvre espèce humaine comme caractère distinctif vis-à-vis des autres espèces animales, tout, et absolument tout, y compris l'instinct d'industrie, y compris la religiosité, la moralité, le jugement et la raison, tout, excepté le langage.
> (Saussure 1891(1) = *ELG*: 145; Engl. trans. : 95)

> (c) Mais, réciproquement, l'étude de ces langues existantes se condamnerait à rester presque stérile, à rester en tout cas dépourvue à la fois de méthode et de tout principe directeur, si elle ne tendait constamment à venir illustrer le problème général du langage, si elle ne cherchait à dégager de chaque fait particulier qu'elle observe le sens et le profit net qui en résultent pour notre connaissance des opérations possibles de l'instinct humain appliqué à la langue.
> (Saussure 1891(1) = *ELG*: 146 Engl. trans.: 96)

In the first case, in the very act of posing *langue* as the pivotal object for linguistics, Saussure admits that no *langue* could rise out of the exercise of the faculty of language. In the second, he defends the role of language (in the same "Cartesian" fashion as Chomsky does) as the ultimate mark for humanity. In the third, he remarks that the study of general aspects of language and the study of particular (i.e. specific to each *langue*) ones are complementary to one another and mutually necessary.

Now, let's see the quotes for instinct/2. They are drawn from *CGL*, and from other texts concerning morphology and analogy. Only the scholars who deal with the *CGL* as if it was a treatise in Epistemology (where Linguistics is but a pretext) will not see the continuity among these texts. Actually, for Saussure, Linguistics *is* its "technical" aspects. Every example pertaining to every single language is – so to say – charged with theory.

> (A) A la suite de cette altération du mot, la position de l'accent n'a plus été la même vis-à-vis de l'ensemble ; dès lors les sujets parlants, conscients de ce nouveau rapport, ont mis instinctivement l'accent sur la dernière syllabe, même dans les mots d'emprunt transmis par l'écriture *(facile, consul, ticket, burgrave*, etc.).
> (CLG: 123; Engl. trans.: 86)

> (B) *Wetter* est instinctivement rapproché de *Wittern*, parce qu'on est habitué à voir *e* alterner avec *i.* À plus forte raison, dès que les sujets parlants sentent qu'une opposition phonique est réglée par une loi générale, cette correspondance habituelle s'impose à leur attention et contribue à resserrer le lien grammatical plutôt qu'à le relâcher.

(CLG: 220; Engl. trans.: 160)

(C) Apres avoir constaté que deux idiomes diffèrent, on est amené instinctivement à y découvrir des analogies. C'est là une tendance naturelle des sujets parlants.
(CLG: 262; Engl. trans.: 192)

(D) Quand des formes nouvelles surgissent, tout se passe, nous venons de le voir, par décomposition des formes existantes et recomposition d'autres formes au moyen de matériaux fournis par les premières. On décompose instinctivement Belessi en Bel-essi et on applique le résultat à composer Qeressi.
(N7 = *ELG*: 191; Engl. trans.: 131)

(E) Il est merveilleux de voir comment, de quelque façon que les évènements diachroniques viennent troubler, l'instinct linguistique s'arrange à en tirer le meilleur parti pour une [ ].
(*ELG*: 266; Engl. trans.: 191)

If we have a closer look at these quotes, we find that, while (A), (B) and (D) can be ascribed to instinct/2, in (C) and (E) it is just impossible to draw a sharp line between the two significations: actually, they are both present. In (C) we find "natural trend", in (E) "linguistic instinct". Instinct/1 (instinct as faculty) is then shown to be the aptitude or disposition to use instinct/2 (instinct as epilinguistic consciousness), without any possibility (if not in a formal sense) to draw a line dividing an acquired component from a native one. The "language instinct" is *all* of that, and it is the only possible starting point.

4. Some conclusions (in a semiotic frame)

The overlapping between instinct/1 and instinct/2 is not just explicable with the (correct) remark that the latter is not conceivable without the former. We must also add that Saussure, unlike Chomsky and others, see consciousness as a *continuum*, where it is difficult to draw sharp lines of demarcation. So, the interaction between *Faculté du langage* and the learning and mastering of a given *langue* gives rise to different kind and degrees of consciousness, from *sentiment* (epilinguistic morphological knowledge)[10] to wholly mechanical reactions.

From a Saussurean point of view, drawing a sharp line between native and acquired features of language is not the first goal for linguistic to reach. This kind of view, founded on a double paradox – an unconscious consciousness that also is an unwilling will – opens a general perspective on human nature.

Whereas Chomskian notions (LAD, UG, e-language) are designed to dig (and progressively deepen) a ditch between language (or rather its core or kernel) and the rest of human cognitive and practical skills, the Saussurean view is susceptible to enlargement within a vast semiotic perspective. Regarding this, it is worth noting that also Peirce and Wittgenstein employ a notion of instinct that clash with Cognitivist views (where 'instinctive' means 'native', as opposed to 'acquired' or 'learned by experience'). Indeed, Peirce, Saussure and Wittgenstein use the term in the same way: 'instinct' is all that *works as an instinct*, i.e. the reaction taking place in certain cases,

[10] Related to analogical change in the second inaugural conference. See *ELG*: 159 f.; Engl. trans.: 106.

triggered in a semi-automatic, immediate way, and without any reflection – whatever its origin[11].

This faculty/necessity of arbitrary habits and rules (in Peirce's and Wittgenstein's sense) is not limited to language, but is a general character of our access to the human community. Together with language *stricto sensu* (wether we see it as e-language or as *langue*), we can find other human behavioural universals, both embodied and arbitrary (i.e. submitted to a judgment which is both immediate and irrevocable: right or wrong, within or without), like posture and proxemics, and so on. All these forms of life (to use a Wittgensteinian term) show cognitive immediacy and normative immediacy.

I call 'cognitive immediacy' the fact to know surely, but without reasons, where even the simple possibility of doubt is excluded. Under this category, we can place the grammatical competence (or epilinguistic knowledge) next to social cognition (or at least to a large part of it): I *know* that "people behave like that", and expect from others from my group to know it. I call 'normative immediacy' the fact to constantly behave in some ways (acknowledged within the group) in certain situations, *without thinking* and following a *rule* that is also a *duty*.

What I called above "instinct/2" is the core of this area. We could maybe say that it is the more natural of cultural human skills. But this definition actually has no sense in a (post-)saussurean semiotic framing, where the completion of nature is culture, and the completion of culture is nature.

[11] I discussed some reasons for this comparison in Fadda (2017b, chap. 3).

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