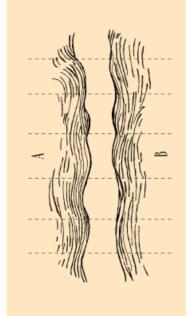# TRAVAUX DES COLLOQUES

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Reinier SALVERDA, « "Montrer au linguiste *ce qu'il fait*" Revisiting Saussure from an experimental perspective on language play »

Pour consulter le programme complet de la session de Gabriel Bergounioux,

La linguistique à partir du CLG : empirie et théorie

CERCLE
FERDINAND
DE SAUSSURE

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"Montrer au linguiste *ce qu'il fait*"
Revisiting Saussure from an experimental perspective on language play[1]

> "….. quiconque pose le pied sur le terrain de la langue peut se dire qu'il est abandonné par toutes les analogies du ciel et de la \<terre\>. C'est précisément pourquoi on a pu faire sur la langue d'aussi fantaisistes constructions…"
>
> [Saussure, in: Godel 1954, 64].

1.   *Saussure as epistemologist of linguistics*

Our point of departure is Saussure's well-known dissatisfaction with the historical-comparative linguistics of his time – of which he was a prominent and path-breaking practitioner, who, however, simultaneously held that language is an object *sui generis* which has no analogue. No comparison, no metaphor will therefore suffice; and no analogy will manage to capture what language really is.

The way forward which Saussure explored in order to overcome this predicament, was to engage in what he described as "montrer au linguiste *ce qu'il fait*" (*CLG* 1972, 355), i.e. critical scrutiny both of the terms, concepts, methods and theories we operate with, and of the validity of the analogies, metaphors and conceptions which we pursue in linguistics. That such metalinguistic scrutiny of linguistics was a necessary endeavour within linguistics, he made explicit with the third programmatic task he set for our discipline, viz."de se délimiter et de se définir elle-même" (*CLG* 1972, 20; cf. Salverda 1985, 20).

At the time, Saussure was by no means the only linguist pursuing such epistemological issues. Colleagues such as Victor Henry in his *Antinomies linguistiques* (1896), Antoine Meillet in his inaugural lecture, *L'état actuel des études de linguistique générale* (1906), and Albert Dauzat in his *Essai de Méthodologie linguistique* (1906) and his *Philosophie du langage* (1912) - were actively developing this dimension of the discipline too, and as experienced linguists they all took their Archimedean point in the key properties of language, as the ground from which to build up the new discipline of general linguistics (Jäger 2003, 203, 205 and 210).

Thus, with Simone (1974 & 2006), we see Saussure as an epistemologist of linguistics - a linguist´s linguist, whose critical reflections in *CLG* 1916, on the conceptual foundations of our discipline, and on the distinctions necessary for the study of language, have had a revolutionary impact in shaping the discipline of linguistics in the 20th century, giving it a strong new focus on the signs of language, the language system, its internal structure, and the priority of synchrony over diachrony.

In what follows I will now, first, review the most salient points of Saussure´s metalinguistic reflections; then, take a closer look at a phenomenon – language play - that could not be accommodated within his framework; and secondly, following the lead of Kirby (2008), Esper (1973) and Moro (2008), adopt an experimental approach and explore, with Calvet (2010), how the findings of language play research matter to Saussure's conceptual framework and its tenets. Overall, my aim is to explore what relevance and what perspectives Saussure today - a century after the publication of *CLG* 1916 – still has to offer to our discipline.

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[1] A first version of this contribution was presented at the International Colloquium *"Le Cours de Linguistique Générale 1916-2016: Le devenir",* 15-17 June 2016 at the Sorbonne.

2. *On Saussure's metalinguistic reflections*

Saussure's *CLG* 1916 marks the beginning of modern scientific linguistics in that it brought to our field a new focus of analysis on the crucial properties of language, i.e. the sound shape of language together with its meaning, the two inseparably tied to each other within the linguistic sign and held together by their mutual relations, in complex cohesion within the system of language – a system which, by the arbitrariness of the sound-meaning connection as well as its infinity of associations and combinations, is not logical in character or structure, yet still has an internal order entirely of its own, which we as linguists are set to analyse and elucidate. Beyond this, there is Saussure´s epistemology, the main thrust of which can be explicated in the following five key points.

The first and central principle of saussurean linguistics, "le point de vue qui crée l´objet" (*CLG* 1972, 23), is the notion of the *sign*. As Saussure commented, in his 'profession de foi en matière linguistique': "Ce qui est opposable au son matériel, c'est le groupe *son-idée*, mais absolument pas l'idée" (Godel 1954, 59). With this, he dismissed the *Junggrammatiker* view of language-as-sound, and launched a new approach which starts from the connection, within language, of sound-with-meaning. Doubleness is of the essence here: "Une *identité linguistique* a cela d'absolument particulier qu'elle implique l'association de deux éléments hétérogènes" (Saussure 2002, 18). That is, in language we have to do with a phenomenon that is inherently heterogeneous - a composite unit of intimately connected elements, where, for all the differences which may exist between them, it is their connection (arbitrary, illogical, conventional, traditional, symbolic, iconic, as the case may be) which is necessary to constitute the *sign*. For the study of those signs, their structure and functioning, their constitution and transformations, Saussure proposed the new discipline of *Sémiologie*, and – as we now know - saw the signs of language as complex, many-faceted entities, involving as they do at least seven different subdisciplines, all indissolubly connected to one another within language, as witness the following diagram:

"(Sémiologie = morphologie, grammaire,
          syntaxe, synonymie, rhétorique,
              stylistique, lexicologie, etc…..
<u>le tout étant inséparable</u>)   (Saussure 2002, 45).

My second point concerns the conceptual framework which Saussure developed for the study of those many-faceted signs, and in particular his well-known distinctions of *langue/parole, syntagmatique/ paradigmatique, synchronie/ diachronie* etc. Very early on, in 1917, these were criticised by Schuchardt, who objected to the way they had been presented in *CLG* 1916. To Schuchardt, the dichotomies in *CLG* were no more than the working assumptions of a "Systembilder" which, however, lacked a basis in the realities of language and so could only lead us into an impasse. Today, thanks to saussurean philology (cf. Depecker 2012), we know that Schuchardt was right in sensing a false note here, and that the conceptual distinctions which occupied Saussure were actually quite a bit more open-ended in character than *CLG* 1916 would have it. In fact, as Gordon (2004) has pointed out, the terms involved in Saussure's conceptual distinctions are not in logical opposition. They are not a matter of *either-or* but of *both-and*, so it would be more appropiate to speak, not of Saussure´s dichotomies, but of his *complementarities* (Gordon 2004, 76-77). That is: the *langue* is not the exclusive object presented in the *CLG´*s closing sentence, totally separate and detached from *parole*. Likewise, a synchronic state of language usually includes lots of diachrony and dynamism as well. And in particular, there is the fundamentally indeterminate and unordered character of the *rapports associatifs* (*CLG* 1972, 174; cf. Gordon 1979), one of the two core mechanisms of the *langue* (the other was the *rapports syntagmatiques*, belonging to the domain of linearity and *discours*, cf. Godel 1974, 82). Here, Saussure went on to reflect, in a fragment later published by Godel: "… nous possédons différents groupes d'association où se trouvent rangés λεγό- et -μεθα: (…) dans un nuage, au-dessus et au-dessous, nous avons d'instant en instant des familles, suivant que nous faisons varier λεγό- et -μεθα" (Godel 1969, 177).

A *nuage* of associations – it is a striking image indeed: associations swirling all around language, over it, under it, forming a multidimensional cloud, at the disposal of language users, and

linked with language in many different ways. Striking also, because it is directly at odds with the central tenet of the *CLG* - and of subsequent structural linguistics (De Palo 2003, 254) – viz. that the *langue* is a completely differentially structured system.

Thirdly, beyond the critical clarifications above, there are the analogies and metaphors which Saussure explored in his metalinguistic reflections, and in particular his method of critical scrutiny of basic concepts, often clarifying them, but often also rejecting one after the other (cf. Salverda 1998). The most illuminating analogy for *langue* in *CLG* 1916 is Saussure's famous chess metaphor, which he explored to its limits (cf. Toutain 2013, 216, 236, 242 and 267). In his own words, "Mais de toutes les comparaisons qu'on pourrait imaginer, la plus démonstrative est celle qu'on établirait entre le jeu de la langue et une partie d'échecs. […]. Une partie d'échecs est comme une réalisation artificielle de ce que la langue nous présente sous une forme naturelle" (*CLG* 1972, 125).

The chess comparison has been most productive, especially within structural linguistics. But when we see how Wunderli (1981) has identified well over fifty different applications of this comparison in 20th-century philosophy of language, one can understand why its validity has been severely questioned - and ultimately rejected. Harris, for example, has argued that the chess game analogy is suspect, in "that the kind of systematicity we encounter in language is not the kind of systematicity guaranteed in games by *la règle du jeu* at all" (Harris 1993, 231). And Greenberg long ago concluded: "… language is not like a chess game. In a chess game we know the rules. Only on this assumption could the curious bystander be in as good a position as someone who viewed the entire game up to that point. But language is more like a game in which we are trying to deduce the rules by watching the games. Hence, the more of the game we see and the more different games we see, the better off we are." (Greenberg 1971, 344).

My fourth point concerns Saussure's never-ending quest, throughout his critical scrutiny of these and other analogies, for a new focus of inquiry for linguistics. Here, another posthumous fragment merits our attention, his very short *Note concernant le 'discours'*. Saussure´s opening question here concerns the distinction (as well as the link) between *langue* and *discours*: "La langue n'est créée qu´en vue du discours, mais qu´est-ce qui sépare le discours de la langue, ou qu´est-ce qui, à un certain moment, permet de dire que la langue *entre en action comme discours*?". Then, next, he formulates the research question which strikes at the heart of the matter: "À quel moment ou en vertu de quelle opération, de quel *jeu* qui s'établit entre eux, de quelles conditions, ces concepts formeront-ils le DISCOURS ?" (Amacker 1989, 94).

What we witness here, is how Saussure´s reflections, driven forward by critical questioning, were actually moving on, and up, and well beyond the chess metaphor, to the more general and abstract notion of *jeu* as the proper analogy for language: *Quel jeu?* - that is the question. No longer the particular game of chess, but rather: *quelle opération, quel mécanisme, quelles conditions?* In other words: what are the mechanisms and processes that link and bind together, within the *jeu de langage*, not only *langue* and *discours*, but also *associations* and *linéarité, syntagmatique* and *paradigmatique, synchronie* and *diachronie, signifiant* and *signifié*? This, eventually, became the central question of 20th-century linguistics - for Jakobson (1978, 3) no less than for Chomsky (1965, 16) and many others: What exactly do we know of this game that is human language, what are its rules and principles, and what can we actually say of the manifold ways in which sound and meaning are (and can be) related to each other in language?

My fifth and final point here is that Saussure's critical metalinguistic reflections on linguistics as a discipline, its conceptual foundations and basic notions, and the central research question resulting from all this, do actually constitute a necessary, valid and productive part of our discipline. But if that were all, *CLG* 1916 on its own would never have had the great succes and impact which it did achieve throughout the 20th century. That is: Saussure's reflections and conceptualisations were necessary, but not sufficient – because a fully-fledged science of language also requires an empirical research cycle and cannot do without concrete investigations of language and languages, as a material basis of data and analysis, and as a ground for testing and finding proof for or against the validity of our conceptions and hypotheses.

3.   *On language play and experimental linguistics*

3.1.   *On language play* - When we now turn to a discussion of language play, the first thing to note is that this is an obvious and pervasive phenomenon, witness such everyday examples as *Ne me tweete pas* on a poster in Paris, *Me myself and why* and *Oh what a wonderful word* in Waterstone's bookshop in Piccadilly, or *Brakadabar* (< Abracadabar), the name of a bar in Paris. Yet, in mainstream 20th-century linguistics it has mostly been absent, left as it was to its practitioners, to psychologists and anthropologists (Hymes 1964, 291).

Here, most linguists have followed the example of *CLG* 1916, which contains just a single remark about *jeu de mots*, mentioned alongside popular etymologies, "des mots empruntés à une langue étrangère, les jeux de mots, les coq-à-l'âne" - all dismissed as "bizarres", "erreur", "déformé", "mots maltraités" (*CLG* 1972, 60, 238-240). Thus, even if Saussure himself did at times engage in playful activities like the production of cod Latin to explain the broken Sanskrit spoken by the medium Hélène Smith (Joseph 2012, 434-435; cf. Salverda 2013), language play as a linguistic phenomenon was too marginal and irrational to merit much discussion. It didn´t help that the intuition he formulated in his *Note sur le discours*, that language itself might be seen as a *jeu*, never made it into the conceptual framework of *CLG* 1916.

Today, in contrast, we have the massive empirical data on language play, produced since DaDa, Surrealism and Recreational Linguistics, and ranging from OULIPO (Mathews & Brotchie 2005) via Augarde´s *Word Games* (1995) to Eckler's *Word Play* (2000) and far beyond. As it is, language play has been studied as a core mechanism in a wide range of domains: in the ethnography of speaking (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1976); in child language (Opie and Opie 1959); in foreign language learning (Cook 2000); in language contact and in colonial borrowings (Hobson-Jobson); in historical slang (Partridge 1948); in nonsense poetry, puns and humour studies (Redfern 1984, Lecercle 1994, Goatly 2012); and in studies from a variety of perspectives: anthropological (Hymes 1964), functionalist (Jakobson & Waugh 1979), structuralist (Foucault 1988) and Lacanian (Lecercle 1994).

Today, we also have the stimulating introductions by Guiraud (1976), Yaguello (1981) and Crystal (1998). Crystal sees language play and the ludic dimension as a universal feature of language, which "should be at the heart of any thinking we do about linguistic issues"(Crystal 1998: 1). Guiraud notes that "Les jeux de mots constituent pour le linguiste un problème fort sérieux, fondamental même, dans la mesure où il l'invite à une spéculation sur les formes et les fonctions du langage" …(...)... "sans parler des questions qu'ils posent au psychologue, au psychanalyste, au sociologue, au critique littéraire" (Guiraud 1976: 5). And Yaguello, in her discussion of the invention of new, ludic languages, notes that people engage in language play "pour le simple bonheur de jouer avec les mots, de créer un code secret", and to produce "langues construites sans autre finalité que le plaisir de créer" (Yaguello 2005: 365).

Taken as a whole, the above development can be seen as a valuable empirical contribution to a '*linguistique de la parole*' as had been envisaged by Saussure.

3.2.   *Experimenting with language* - A further interesting development has been the rise over the past century of experimental linguistics (cf. Levelt 2013), which merits a closer look, not only for its role in ensuring that the empirical evidence we gather is subject to testing and (dis)confirmation, but in particular also because of its use of language play and nonsense for investigative purposes. In this respect, the following three experiments with nonsense merit our special attention here.

Our first case is that of Kirby et al. (2008) who conducted a fascinating laboratory experiment, where participants, with the help of pictures of objects, had to learn a series of randomly constructed nonsense words, which they then had to pass on to a new group or 'generation' of people, and so on. The outcome: within ten 'generations', a new language had come into being, with rules for form, meaning and usage of the elements concerned – rules that were made up and produced through the learning and transmission activities of the successive generations, who thus transformed an un-ordered collection of random and intransparent letters, sounds and visual material into a regularly structured language system. Altogether, this project produced a most interesting experimental demonstration of the productive capabilities of subjects in **making** language, structure, system and meaning.

The second case is that of Esper's investigation of associations and analogy in language through experiments using nonsense, which established "the difference in speed of learning (…..) between subjects who learned nonsense words conforming to English speech habits and those who learned words which did not so conform". Specifically, the outcome was "that a system which is perfectly regular, structurally and semantically, can be quickly learned and readily extended analogically, with few contaminations; whereas a system whose structure violates the speech habits of speakers tends strongly to become "regularized" and thus induces many contaminations and, in advance of such regularization, permits hardly any analogical extensions" (Esper 1973: 155).

These results cast an interesting light on the findings of Kirby et al. (2008), in two respects. The first thing for which Esper established empirical confirmation concerns what we know from Polivanov (1931), viz. the role of the previously acquired language system which participants brought into the experiment, and the influence this may have had on its outcomes. Secondly, Esper´s experiments provide a means for distinguishing between different kinds of variation produced by the participants. That is, depending on the distance and degree of difference between the linguistic systems involved, the closer the system to be acquired is to the participants' own speech habits, the easier it is to master and play with it, and to produce new variants through analogical extension; while, conversely, the more different the two systems involved, the less likely participants are to achieve mastery and the ability to play with it, and the more frequent their assimilation of the alien system to their own, through increasing numbers of contaminations and other garbling processes.

In such acquisition processes, it appears, we are not just operating *in vacuo* but in a situation of language contact; and not only mastering and making structure, but equally producing variation, change, and unmaking structure. This raises interesting questions about what is possible, and what are the inbuilt potentialities of language, and of our handling of language.

Here, in our third case – an experimental investigation of morphosyntactic error recognition, using native speakers inside a PET-scanner, to see which parts of their cortex were activated while they were discriminating between well-formed and impossible sentence structures - Moro (2008) has demonstrated the great heuristic value of using nonsense words and sentences such as the pseudo-English *The gulk that ganfed the brals* (Moro 2008: 147), directly comparable to the gibberish rhymes and nonsense words like *brillig, slithy, chortle* and *galumph* in Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*. The more general point he added was that a closer look at imaginary languages is "often useful for understanding the boundaries within which natural languages are constrained" (Moro 2008: 202 n12).

As we can see, these linguists all three engaged in experimental investigation aiming to make discoveries about language. However: different experiments, different findings – with Kirby´s participants making structure out of nonsense; Esper´s participants caught between two systems, in processes of language contact that impact on their learning achievements; and Moro´s participants discriminating sense from nonsense as indication of what is possible in language, and what not. Their common point, equally, is that language play, with its great potential for experiment, turns out to be a most valuable resource for research into language.

3.3.   *Implications for linguistic theory*   - But now the question is: How does all this relate to Saussure´s thinking and to the conceptual framework which he left for linguistics? The question matters, since there is no direct connection either way between the three experiments involving language play above and Saussure´s general linguistic theory.

Here, an interesting way forward is provided by Calvet in his essay *Le jeu du signe* (2010), in the following three steps. First: taking Saussure´s conceptual framework as an empirically testable theory, Calvet investigates a range of common, everyday language play phenomena - ranging from speech errors and mispronunciations, through tongue twisters, *jeux de mots*, *calembours* (puns), rhymes and ambiguities in poetry and *chansons*, to mental leaps (*coq-à-l'âne*), metaphors and folk etymologies – all of which have long been, and are still often, seen as marginal and falling outside the domain of linguistics, but which Calvet here treats as a kind of everyday, do-it-yourself language experiments by ordinary speakers. Then, secondly, taking these empirical findings (which point to the asymmetric dualism and the dissociability of the language sign as theorized by Karcevski (1929) and De Palo (2003)), Calvet feeds these back into a critical examination of *CLG*'s basic conceptions and key tenets (in particular regarding *signe, langue, linéarité* and *structure*), and demonstrates how and why the strict structuralist conception of the linguistic sign of *CLG* 1916, as a simple, linear, two-sided,

symmetric and parallel structure, a formally defined and determined object – as in the chess metaphor of high structuralism which we discussed in section 2 above -, is no longer tenable.

And so, thirdly, Calvet concludes to the necessity of a drastic revision and recalibration of Saussure's core notions of *langue* and *signe* - specifically: in order to be able to do justice to the intricacies of the everyday language play phenomena above that were studied by Calvet, what we need for linguistics is a sign concept which is much wider, more indeterminate, multidimensional, flexible, asymmetric, dialectic, complex and dynamic in structure than that offered in *CLG* 1916.

4.   *Outlook and perspectives*

On the strenght of the preceding discussion we may now draw the following conclusions. First, concerning the relevance today of Saussure´s ideas, we note that his metalinguistic reflections, his *montrer au linguiste*, and his third main task for linguistics offer us a valuable critical method. Applied to his own writings, the closer examination along this method which we have undertaken in section 2 above, has successively brought clarification, revision, rejection and also further development on five key points of his thought – specifically: on the centrality of the sign as first principle; on the character of the conceptual dichotomies he was grappling with (not oppositions but complementarities); on the *rapports associatifs* and their subversive consequences vis-à-vis the hard structuralist notion of the *langue*; on the value, but also the limits, of his influential chess metaphor; and on his search for the new central question for language research, *Quel jeu*? Read this way, what we have here is a Saussure 2.0, which in many ways is closer to the findings and conclusions of Calvet (2010) than to the tenets of orthodox hard structuralism in *CLG* 1916.

Secondly, with respect to section 3 above on language play, we note the value and the uses of this inexhaustible linguistic domain – which invites us off the beaten track, into studying poetry, *argot*, oral traditions, *lingua francas*, street language, nonsense, newspapers headings, *chansons* etcetera. Language play offers its users a mechanism for everyday experimentation with language, while at the same time it enables linguists to do experiments using nonsense as data and as a tracer element for heuristic purposes. And studying language play has led Calvet to a critical revision of Saussure´s central ideas in *CLG* 1916. Language play is a valuable resource indeed for linguistic research.

So the next step would be to move beyond *CLG* 1916 by bringing the domains of linguistic theory, language play and experimental research together in further experiments focusing squarely on the crucial question which Saussure posed, *Quel jeu*?, in order to find out what operations there are for linking sound and meaning in language play, and what these can tell us about our human language faculty and capacity for play. Taking Saussure´s cue and investigating language itself as *un jeu* opens the way towards a systematic linguistic study of language play phenomena and the potentialities of human language, as a clear window into the linguistic creativity of our species.

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