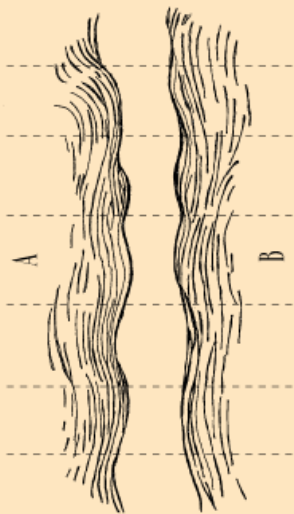


Le Cours de Linguistique Générale 1916-2016

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**CERCLE
FERDINAND
DE SAUSSURE**

A comparison of the figure representing the “fait linguistique” in the *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) and its sources

KLAAS WILLEMS

Ghent University, Linguistics Department
Blandijnberg 2, B-9000 Gent (Belgium)
klaas.willems@ugent.be

Abstract

This article compares the figure representing the “fait linguistique” in Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) edited by C. Bally and A. Sechehaye with its sources in the student transcripts. The diagram is among the frequently reproduced figures of the *CLG*, yet many of its features are due to editorial interventions which testify to a particular interpretation of the source diagram and the accompanying verbal text. The article addresses the following questions: i/ What are the differences and similarities between the figure in the *CLG* and the sources and what might be the motives for the changes introduced by the editors? ii/ How does the diagram relate to Saussure’s global account of the “fait linguistique” as well as his theory of the linguistic sign as they can be reconstructed from the sources? It is argued that the figure in the *CLG* aligns with the edited text but it is in several respects inconsistent with the original diagram and the explanations in the student transcripts and other notes by Saussure. The editors’ interpretation may furthermore explain why they saw no contradiction between the account of the “fait linguistique” and the profoundly un-Saussurean diagram of the “signe linguistique” containing the image of a tree, which they provide in the *CLG* along with two other diagrams.

“un signe/sa signification, ne formant qu’un seul tout pour l’esprit”
F. de Saussure (*SDL*: 154)

1. Introduction

The illustration representing the “fait linguistique” in the 1916 version of Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* (Fig. 1) finds its origin in the third course on general linguistics which Saussure delivered in the winter semester 1910–1911. It is among the most often reproduced figures of the *CLG* in introductions to Saussure in linguistic textbooks and course materials. Its aim is to visualize the relationship between thought (A) and sounds (B) with regard to a central notion in Saussure’s theory of language, viz. “la valeur”. It is also this illustration which the convenors of the international conference “Le Cours de Linguistique Générale, 1916-2016. Le Devenir” in Paris (15–17 June 2016) chose to figure prominently on the conference website and information leaflets — a clear indication of its unabated prominence even in current Saussure scholarship.

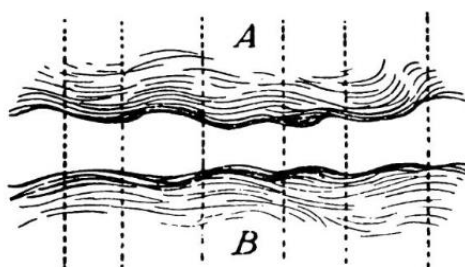


Fig. 1: Representation of the “fait linguistique” in the CLG (1922 [1916]: 156)

The differences between Fig. 1 in the *CLG* and the corresponding diagrams in the student transcripts that are its immediate source have not attracted much attention, despite a number of striking differences, nor has there been a systematic account of the diagram against the background of the accompanying verbal text. The similarities and differences between Fig. 1 and the diagrams of the “fait linguistique” found in the source materials as well as their relation with the explanations provided in the texts are the subject matter of this article.

2. Research questions

This article sets out to provide answers to the following questions:

- (1) What are the differences and similarities between the figure representing the “fait linguistique” in the *CLG* and the corresponding diagrams in the sources and what might be the motives for the changes introduced by the editors?
- (2) How does the diagram relate to Saussure’s global account of the “fait linguistique” and his concomitant theory of the linguistic sign as they can be reconstructed from the source materials (student and manuscript notes)?

Given that Fig. 1 and a number of related figures visualize what essentially is an abstract train of thought, analysing the differences in visualisation in the available material is particularly challenging (cf. Kim 2008, Joseph 2017). The figure representing the “fait linguistique” is not self-explanatory but it can only be adequately understood against the backdrop of the accompanying explanations in the available texts. As well as showing that the editors altered the illustration in the sources in important respects, I will argue that the changes they introduced shed an illuminating side-light on their interpretation of Saussure’s radically new theory of the “fait linguistique”. I will furthermore maintain that Saussure’s account of the “fait linguistique” and his related definition of the “signe linguistique” are closely linked and should be regarded as complementary perspectives in Saussure’s theory of language.

I concur with current Saussure scholars who emphasize that there is no such thing as one authentic way of interpreting Saussure. Saussure’s thought has come down to us in many forms – the *CLG*, student transcripts, notes and manuscripts from his own hand –, it is a “text” which most probably will always be open to multiple readings (cf. Trabant 2005, De Mauro 2006, Joseph 2017, among others). Moreover, it is well-known that substantial changes can be observed in the way Saussure defined central concepts of his theory of language over the years, which testifies to the fact that his thought was still evolving when he delivered his courses in general linguistics. It is thus one thing to base one’s interpretation on source materials and compare them with the *CLG*, but it is another thing to claim that such an interpretation represents the ‘true’ intentions of Saussure (just as the ‘true’ intentions of the editors of the *CLG* too are bound to remain a matter of discussion). However, the passages dealing with the “fait linguistique” in the sources have always struck me for their cogency and overall clarity. One of the main reasons for pursuing a comparison of the figures in the material we currently have at our disposal is precisely that these virtues of Saussure’s reasoning occasionally seem to be lacking in Bally and Sechehaye’s edition of the *CLG*.

3. The sources

The following publications are particularly important for the ensuing comparison:

- R. Engler’s “Édition critique” of the *Cours de linguistique générale*, published in 1968 (henceforth: *CLG/E*),
- R. Godel’s *Sources manuscrites*, published in 1957 (Godel *SM*),
- Emile Constantin’s particularly transcript of Saussure’s third course on general linguistics, published as Constantin (2005) and previously by E. Komatsu in 1993 (*3^e Cours*).

Two series of notes by Saussure himself, both dating back to the 1890s, also include many valuable observations:

- the manuscript notes “De la double essence du langage” discovered in Geneva in 1996 (ca. 1891, cf. Birk, Buss & Jäger 2003: 57), first edited by S. Bouquet and R. Engler as part of *Écrits de linguistique générale* in 2002 (*ELG*); the critical edition by R. Amacker was published as *Science du langage. De la double essence du langage* in 2011 (*SDL*);
- Saussure’s “Notes item” (from ca. 1896-1897, cf. Godel *SM*: 37, Linda 2001: 93), edited by R. Engler and published in 1974 as part N 15 of the “Appendice” to the *CLG/E* (“Notes item”).

The representations of the “fait linguistique”, in the sources, which correspond to Fig. 1 in the *CLG* are provided below. On the left are shown the diagrams in Engler’s critical edition (*CLG/E*: 252 [1827]) on the basis of the transcripts by G. Dégallier, M. Sechehaye and E. Constantin. On the right are the facsimiles from the manuscripts.¹

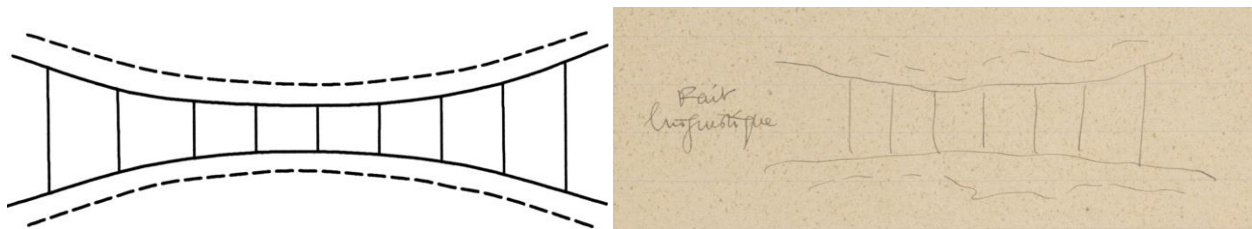


Fig. 2.1: Dégallier (D 276); *Bibliothèque de Genève, Cours univ. 434/1, p. 276*

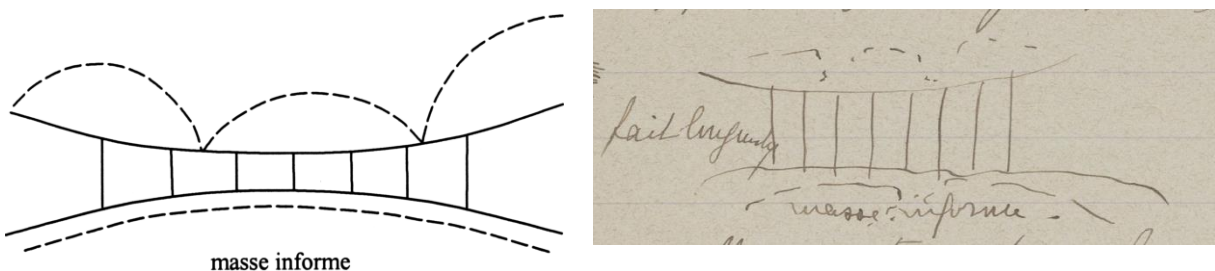


Fig. 2.2: Marguerite Sechehaye (S 2.42); *Bibliothèque de Genève, Cours univ. 846/4, f. 42*

¹ The Manuscript Department of the Bibliothèque de Genève has kindly granted permission to reproduce the facsimiles of the figures. I thank Estanislao Sofia (Leuven) for providing me with the digital images of the original illustrations.

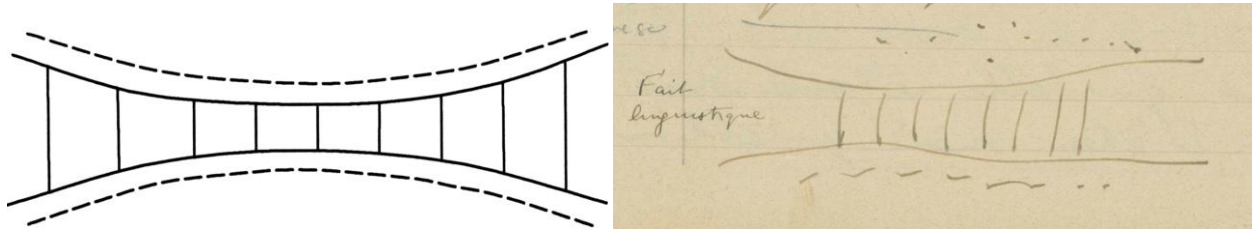


Fig. 2.3: Constantin (C 398); Bibliothèque de Genève, Ms. fr. 3972/17, f. 10

Godel (1957) provides the following diagram:

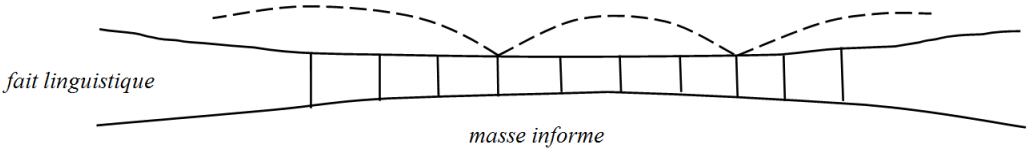


Fig. 2.4: Godel (SM: 214, footnote 284, D 276 S)

In Komatsu’s edition of Constantin’s notes of the 3^e Cours (1993), the horizontal dashed lines are absent, which is not consistent with the manuscript:

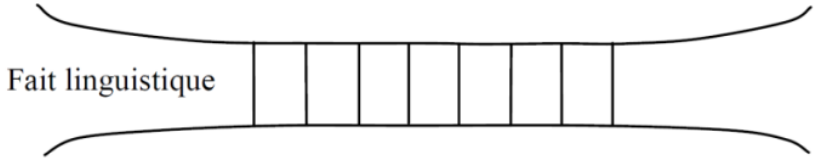


Fig. 2.5: 3^e Cours (1993: 138)

In the 2005 edition of Constantin’s notes, two different kinds of dashed lines are used (for which there is some evidence in the original diagram, cf. Fig. 2.3):

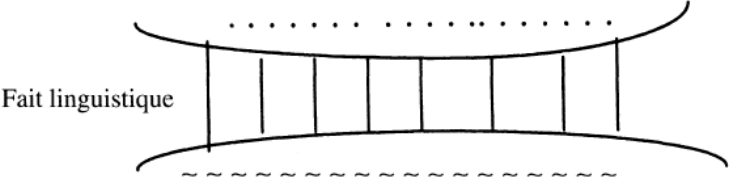


Fig. 2.6: Constantin (2005: 285)

I have provided facsimiles of the original illustrations in the students’ notes along with their reproductions in the *CLG/E* in order to draw attention to the fact that substantial differences not only exist between the *CLG* and the student transcripts which Bally and Sechehaye had at their disposal (i.e., those of G. Dégallier, F. Joseph and Marguerite Sechehaye, but not yet E. Constantin’s transcript, which came to light only in 1958, cf. Saussure 3^e Cours: viii) but that

there are also notable dissimilarities between the transcripts and the *CLG/E*.² The differences between the original illustrations in the students' notes are restricted to the dashed lines in the upper and lower section of the diagram. The rendering of the dashed lines in the *CLG/E* is probably partly due to printing requirements but it is noteworthy that their relative austerity in the *CLG/E* contrasts with the more disorderly arrangement of dashes and dots that evoke the "floating realms" of thought and sounds in the students' notes. Interestingly, thanks to the recent edition of the *Collation Sechehaye* (ed. by E. Sofia, 2016), we now know that the diagram in Albert Sechehaye's original transcript of the *CLG* was much more similar to the illustration in the students' notes than to Fig. 1 which got published in the *CLG*:

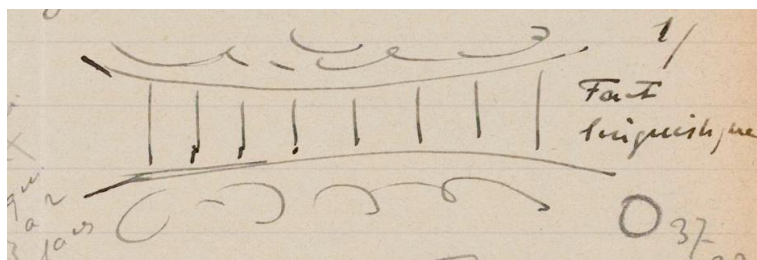


Fig. 2.7: *Bibliothèque de Genève, Cours univ. 433, p. 451 (Sofia, ed. 2015: 451)*

It is unclear what led the editors to choose for Fig. 1 instead of Fig. 2.7. Yet the changes that eventually resulted in Fig. 1 are significant. They bear on three facets of the diagram: i/ the additional denomination of the realms of thought and sounds by means of the letters A and B, ii/ the depiction of the realms of thought and sounds (note that the more generously drawn curls in Fig. 2.7 seem to anticipate the appearance of the top and bottom layer in Fig. 1) and the elimination of the two full horizontal lines delimiting the individual cells in the middle section of the diagram, and iii/ the form and size of the vertical lines, with dotted rather than solid lines which moreover extend into the realms of thought and sounds. I will examine these features in turn in the next section.

4. Discussion of the similarities and differences

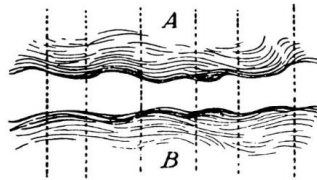
Let me start with quoting in full the passage of the *CLG* in which Fig. 1 appears:

[...] Prise en elle-même, la pensée est comme une nébuleuse où rien n'est nécessairement délimité. Il n'y a pas d'idées préétablies, et rien n'est distinct avant l'apparition de la langue.

En face de ce royaume flottant, les sons offriraient-ils par eux-mêmes des entités circonscrites d'avance? Pas davantage. La substance phonique n'est pas plus fixe ni plus rigide; ce n'est pas un moule dont la pensée doit nécessairement épouser les formes, mais une matière plastique qui se divise à son tour en parties distinctes pour fournir les signifiants dont la pensée a besoin. Nous pouvons donc représenter le fait linguistique dans son ensemble, c'est-à-dire la langue, comme une

² I adopt the following abbreviations from the *CLG/E* to refer to the transcripts: C = E. Constantin, D. = G. Dégallier, S = Marguerite Sechehaye, G = L. Gautier, R = A. Riedlinger, B = F. Bouchardy, J = F. Joseph.

série de subdivisions contiguës dessinées à la fois sur le plan indéfini des idées confuses (A) et sur celui non moins indéterminé des sons (B); c'est ce qu'on peut figurer très approximativement par le schéma:



Le rôle caractéristique de la langue vis-à-vis de la pensée n'est pas de créer un moyen phonique matériel pour l'expression des idées, mais de servir d'intermédiaire entre la pensée et le son, dans des conditions telles que leur union aboutit nécessairement à des délimitations réciproques d'unités. La pensée, chaotique de sa nature, est forcée de se préciser en se décomposant. Il n'y a donc ni matérialisation des pensées, ni spiritualisation des sons, mais il s'agit de ce fait en quelque sorte mystérieux, que la "pensée-son" implique des divisions et que la langue élabore ses unités en se constituant entre deux masses amorphes (*CLG*: 155-156).

4.1 Similarities

Fig. 1 resembles the illustrations in the sources in a number of respects. First of all, there are two dominant layers in all the diagrams: a top layer which represents the realm of thought ("idées") and a bottom layer representing the realm of sounds ("sons"). These layers are identified as A and B in the *CLG*, but not in the sources.

Secondly, in all figures we find a series of vertical lines. In the sources, these are invariably full lines, whereas in the *CLG* they are replaced by dotted lines. In all figures the vertical lines apparently serve a dual purpose: they represent a delimitation along with a combination. The delimitation concerns what Saussure calls "articulation": "Le terrain linguistique, c'est celui de l'articulation, des *articuli*, des petits membres où la pensée prend valeur par un son" (*CLG/E*: 253, II C 32 [1832]). The combination relates to the two central properties of the linguistic sign in Saussure's account, arbitrariness and bilaterality: the vertical lines establish a connection between the layers of thought and sound which themselves are not yet in any way delimited but amorphous (*CLG/E*: 252).

There is no indication in the sources that the figure is also meant to represent yet another important aspect of Saussure's theory, viz. the linearity of the linguistic sign, which in Saussure's account straddles the distinction between "langue" and "parole" (cf. Joseph 2017: 162). As we will see in section 5, this is something to bear in mind with regard to Saussure's account of how the "fait linguistique" and the "signe linguistique" relate to one another.

4.2 Differences

Apart from the two main similarities, a comparison also reveals a number of significant differences.

4.2.1 The letters A and B

The capital letters A and B were added by the editors of the *CLG*. If we go by the sources, Saussure occasionally reverted to using the letters “A” and “B” in his account of the “*signe linguistique*” (e.g., in *CLG/E*: 271 and also in earlier notes) but there is no indication that he also used letters to designate the two layers of thought and sounds in his account of the “*fait linguistique*”. This is not without interest because A and B might suggest a hierarchy, with A preceding B, which Saussure actually explains and justifies with regard to the linguistic sign, as will be discussed in section 5. However, on the basis of the source texts there is no reason to assume such a hierarchy with regard to the “*fait linguistique*”. On the contrary, both layers are on a par in Saussure’s explanations, they are not contrasted on a hierarchical basis.

The use of letters to designate the realms of thought and sounds in Fig. 1 lends support to an interpretation which risks to obscure the view Saussure actually develops. The editors write:

La linguistique travaille donc sur le terrain limitrophe où les éléments des deux ordres se combinent; *cette combinaison produit une forme, non une substance* (*CLG*: 157; italics in the original).

This famous passage has no basis in the sources. To be sure, “*Leur combinaison produit une forme*” is found in Riedlinger’s notes (*CLG/E*: 254, II R 38 [1837]), yet as a conclusion to a comparison Saussure draws between language and a wave which is formed at the intersection of water and air. According to this comparison, there are two amorphous masses, water and air (or, more precisely, water and atmospheric pressure). Whenever the pressure changes, a new ‘entity’ comes into being, viz. a wave. The fact that the editors designate thought with the letter A and the sounds with the letter B is not consistent with this comparison, as water and air are not in a hierarchical relationship in Saussure’s comparison either. The letters suggest that the editors regard thought in some non-trivial sense as prior to the sounds in Saussure’s account – as if sounds are assigned the function to “form” meaning and, hence, as if language is a grid which combines thought and sounds by assigning a phonetic form to a pre-existent meaning.

4.2.2 The horizontal lines and the layers of thought (“*idées*”) and sounds (“*sons*”)

A comparison of the diagrams immediately reveals that the amorphous (“*amorphe*”), chaotic (“*confus, chaotique*”, *CLG/E*: 252) masses are rendered differently. In the *CLG*, the two layers are represented by two broad sets of undulating lines which apparently serve to evoke two “floating realms”. By contrast, the source figures are more minimalistic on this point, we only find single dashed lines on both sides, albeit with some variation (cf. the Figures 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 in section 3). The editors’ choice to represent the two amorphous masses in a visually ornamented way seems to tie in with their overall interpretation of Saussure’s account. Before elaborating this point, two observations are in order.

It is possible that the representation of the layers of thought and sounds in the form of wave-like entities was at least partly triggered by Saussure’s aforementioned comparison of the “*fait linguistique*” with a wave (*CLG/E*: 253 [1831]). Obviously, a wave is not only a form but indeed a substance with a form. The comparison with a wave is therefore not particularly well-suited to endorse the editors’ addition that the combination of thought and sounds yield a form

but not a substance (“*une forme, non une substance*”). The form and position of the vertical lines in Fig. 1 seem to be conceived in such a way as to represent the idea that two layers of substances are formed by language through the “fait linguistique”. This would construe language as a means to delimit and partition something that is conceived of as already given in advance, namely thought and sounds. As I will spell out in more detail in section 5, this is exactly the view Saussure argues against.

No less important is that there is a significant difference in the way the two layers are represented vis-à-vis each other. In Fig. 1, the undulating border lines of the two floating realms A and B face each other directly, with a blank space between them. Dotted vertical lines extend from the diagram’s top to its bottom and into both realms. This is in stark contrast to Fig. 2.1 – 2.3 in the sources: not only is each realm represented by a simple dashed line but the vertical lines are moreover confined to the blank space in-between. Furthermore, full horizontal lines which like the dashed lines have a curved shape delimit the vertical lines above and below. The full horizontal lines thus constitute part and parcel of a single figure arranged between the layers of thought and sounds in all source diagrams. As it stands, the complex figure of full vertical and horizontal lines in the intermediate space of the diagram is independent from the two layers.

Although they retained Saussure’s emphasis on the fact that the “fait linguistique” acts as an intermediary between thought and sounds, the editors reduced the text accompanying the diagram in important respects. In the *CLG* we read:

Le rôle caractéristique de la langue vis-à-vis de la pensée n’est pas de créer un moyen phonique matériel pour l’expression des idées, mais de servir d’intermédiaire entre la pensée et le son, dans des conditions telles que leur union aboutit nécessairement à des délimitations réciproques d’unités (*CLG*: 156).

In the sources, e.g. Gautier’s notes, the corresponding passage reads as follows:

Le rôle caractéristique du langage vis-à-vis de la pensée, ce n’est pas d’être un moyen phonique, mais c’est de créer un milieu intermédiaire entre la pensée et le son, des unités d’une espèce particulière (*CLG/E*: 253 G 1.9a [1828]).

Two editorial interventions are particularly noteworthy. First, the relation between the union of thought and sounds, on the one hand, and the reciprocal delimitation of unities, on the other, is reversed. According to the *CLG*, there is a union of thought and sounds which leads to the delimitation of unities, thought and sounds are said to be united in such a way that the combination results in the delimitation of unities. In none of the students’ notes is the delimitation of linguistic unities said to be the outcome of the direct union of thought and sounds. At the same time, the editors omit any reference to linguistic unities as ‘unities of a special nature’, but in the source texts the “combination” of thought and sound is invariably conceived against the backdrop of the creation of such unities. Moreover, instead of “union” we find in the sources the word “compromis” (in Bouchardy’s notes also “alliance”, *CLG/E*: 253, B 24):

c'est de créer un milieu intermédiaire de telle nature que le compromis entre la pensée et le son aboutit d'une façon inévitable à des unités particulières (*CLG/E*: 253 II R 37 [1828]).

Second, whereas the *CLG* maintains that “la langue” assumes the role of intermediary between thought and sounds, in the student transcripts this role is accorded to “le langage” (compare e.g. the quote from Gautier’s notes above). On close examination these two editorial changes in the verbal text match the modifications the editors made with regard to the diagram in Fig. 1.

4.2.3 *The vertical lines*

A further striking feature of Fig. 1 which has no counterpart in the sources is that in the *CLG* the vertical lines are dotted lines which moreover crosscut the two horizontal layers that face each other. It is as if they partition the realms of thought and sounds by extending beyond the borders of the two layers. In the source figures, the vertical lines are solid and situated between the two layers. The vertical lines are moreover limited by full horizontal lines which mirror each other. It seems, then, that in the source materials we get the representation of a continuous figure of cells, delimited by full vertical lines and two continuous full horizontal lines. By contrast, in the *CLG*, the essential part of the diagram are the two realms A and B and the dotted vertical lines represent the delimitation and combination of the top and bottom layer. The editors are explicit about this focus in the accompanying text, there is a “série de subdivisions contiguës dessinées à la fois sur le plan indéfini des idées confuses (A) et sur celui non moins indéterminé des sons (B)” (*CLG*: 155-156). This sentence is an editorial insertion with no basis in the sources, and the same applies to the editors’ comparison of “la substance phonique” with “une matière plastique” (155).

The extension of the vertical lines into – or rather onto – the realms of thought and sounds points to a particular interpretation of Saussure’s claim that the “fait linguistique” involves a “compromise” between thought and sounds. It would seem that the editors’ version of the diagram is conceived to illustrate the view that the “fait linguistique” entails the following concept of “articulation”: articulation entails that two amorphous, indistinct masses (of thought and sounds) are both being partitioned into articulated bits once they are combined through language which functions as a grid that is able to partition and, in doing so, transform the formerly unarticulated realms of thought and sounds into distinct parts.

All figures in the sources (Fig. 2.1 – 2.3) show that the vertical lines do not extend beyond the borders of the two layers of thought and sounds. The vertical lines are, on the contrary, drawn between the two layers. Considering that the full horizontal lines in the source figures represent the limits of the cells rather than the border lines of the realms of thought and sounds, the conclusion seems warranted that the vertical lines in the source figures delimit entities produced on the basis of the “fait linguistique” which themselves relate the levels of thought and sounds to one another, not the other way round. Given that the vertical lines are neither intended to be projected onto nor to crosscut the realms of thought and sounds, the continuous figure in the middle visualizing the “fait linguistique” cannot be said to represent anything else than an intermediary layer between the layers of thought and sounds – or, alternatively, at their ‘frontier’,

as we can read in Gautier's notes: "La linguistique a pour domaine ces phénomènes de frontière" (*CLG/E*: 254, G 1.9b [1837]).

5. Putting the pieces together

Now that I have considered the major similarities and differences between the diagram in the *CLG* and the sources and indicated revealing reference points in the source texts, it is possible to piece together the various findings.

It is significant that the editors of the *CLG* have chosen the following title for the first section of Chapter IV on "La valeur linguistique": "§1.– La langue comme pensée organisée dans la matière phonique" (*CLG*: 155). We saw in section 4 that the editors maintained Saussure's reference to the intermediary role of language vis-à-vis thought and sounds, thus rejecting the substantialist view, typical of 19th century language psychology, that language amounts to "un moyen phonique matériel pour l'expression des idées" (*CLG*: 156). Nevertheless, the section title supports the idea of a "pensée organisée dans la matière phonique". This contradiction indicates that the editors had difficulties appreciating Saussure's explanation to its full extent, in particular his refutation of the view according to which two layers of substances are somehow transformed into forms by means of language.

Saussure's opposition to this view can be dated back well before the courses in general linguistics he delivered in Geneva from 1907 onwards. Already in earlier notes, Saussure had been preoccupied with the question whether one can establish an external, material basis, or – as Saussure calls it – a substrate to both sides of the linguistic sign, the "signifié" and the "signifiant". His answer is unequivocal. Consider the following passages in the "Notes item" (dated to the late 1890s, cf. Godel *SM*: 37, Linda 2001: 93):

S'il est une vérité *a priori*, et ne demandant rien d'autre que le bon sens pour s'établir, c'est que s'il y a des réalités psychologiques, et s'il y a des réalités phonologiques, aucune des deux séries séparées ne serait capable de donner un instant naissance au moindre fait linguistique. – Pourquoi'il y ait fait linguistique, il faut l'union des deux séries, mais une union d'un genre particulier [...] ("Notes item": 36 [3310.6]).

Il n'y a aucun substratum quelconque aux <entités> linguistiques; <elles> ont la propriété d'exister de par leur différence ("Notes item": 47 [3342.2]).

In the notes "De la double essence du langage" (ca. 1891) we read:

or il semble que la science du langage soit placée à part: en ce que les objets qu'elle a devant elle n'ont jamais de réalité en soi, ou à part des autres objets à considérer; n'ont absolument aucun substratum à leur existence hors de leur différence ou DES différences de toute espèce que l'esprit trouve moyen d'attacher à LA différence fondamentale (mais que leur différence réciproque fait toute leur existence à chacun); mais sans que l'on sorte nulle part de cette donnée fondamentalement et à tout jamais

négative de la DIFFÉRENCE de deux termes et non des propriétés d'un terme (*SDL*: 106-107; *ELG*: 65; cf. also *SDL*: 138, *ELG*: 36).

In the course on general linguistics, Saussure stresses that the “unities” which make up natural language are different from the “entities” one finds in the world. They are “des entités d'un autre ordre [...] le phénomène de la langue est intérieur et fondamentalement complexe” (*CLG/E*: 235, III C 285 [1710]).

The upshot of these considerations is that there can be no unmediated articulation of the “amorphous and indistinct” masses of thought and sounds themselves on the basis of the “fait linguistique”. The “compromise” between thought and sounds presupposes the creation of bilateral signs, not the other way round. In the student transcripts we find an even clearer assertion, not retained by the editors, which stresses that the linguistic sign resulting from the “fait linguistique” is not the outcome of an operation performed directly on thoughts and sounds. Rather than resulting from a combination of thoughts and sounds, linguistic units are the prerequisite for such a combination:

Le son-pensée implique des divisions, c'est ce qui est intéressant. Les deux ne peuvent pas se combiner sans ses divisions (*CLG/E*: 253, II C 31).

No less important is the finding mentioned above that it is not “la langue” (*CLG*: 156) which creates an intermediate stratum between thought and sounds, but “le langage”:

Le rôle caractéristique du langage vis-à-vis de la pensée, ce n'est pas d'être un moyen phonique, mais c'est de créer un milieu intermédiaire entre la pensée et le son, des unités d'une espèce particulière (*CLG/E*: 253 G 1.9a [1828]).

Saussure here uses “langage” in the sense of “faculté significatrice” (Engler 1968: 30, cf. *CLG/E*: 31, II R 5 [155]), i.e., the creative language potential which enables human beings to create bilateral signs characterized by their genuine association of a specific content (“signifié”) with a specific formal representation (“signifiant”) in order to combine thought and sounds:

Ce n'est pas la matérialisation de ces pensées par un son qui est un phénomène utile, c'est le fait mystérieux que la pensée-son implique des divisions qui sont les unités finales de la linguistiques. Son et pensée ne peuvent se combiner que par ces unités. (*CLG/E*: 253, B 24 [1830]; cf. II R 37 [1830])

It is inconceivable that “la langue” could create such unities, “la langue” can only be the product of the creative activity engendered by “le langage” which gives rise to the unities in the first place (cf. Wunderli 1981a: 57-63 and Willems 2005: 253-255). The “fait linguistique”, rendered possible by virtue of “le langage” understood as “faculté significatrice”, gives rise to the articulation of inseparable unities of “signifiés” and “signifiants” which form an intermediary layer connecting the layers of thought and sounds with each other. Moreover, each entity which

consists of a “signifié” and a “signifiant” is an inseparable unity as a linguistic unit, both sides are separable only by a posterior act of analysis (Jäger 1978, Willems 2005).³

The source texts and notes allow us to conclude that for Saussure the “fait linguistique” is a genuine, irreducible semiological phenomenon which links “signifiés” and a “signifiants” in order to combine thought and sound. Rather than transforming amorphous thought and sounds into distinct linguistic forms, the bilateral linguistic signs – “les unités finales de la linguistique”, as two students (Riedlinger and Bouchardy) note – are themselves the prerequisites for combining thought and sounds. It is therefore crucial to properly understand what is meant when we read in Constantin’s notes that the “fait linguistique” takes place *between* “idées” and “sons”:

Il n’y a pas: a) des idées qui seraient toutes établies et toutes distinctes les unes en face des autres, b) des signes pour ces idées. Mais il n’y a rien du tout de distinct dans la pensée avant le signe linguistique. Ceci est le principal. D’un autre côté, il vaut aussi la peine de se demander si en face de ce royaume des idées tout à fait confus le royaume du son offrirait d’avance des idées bien distinctes, <unités,> (pris en lui-même en dehors de l’idée).

Il n’y a pas non plus dans le son des entités bien distinctes, circonscrites d’avance. C’est entre deux que le fait linguistique se passe (Constantin 2005: 285; *CLG/E*: 252, III C 397-398 [1824-1827]; *3^e Cours*: 138; cf. Godel 1957: 214).

The view that the “fait linguistique” is an operation that gives rise to articulated signs which relate thought and sounds seems adequately represented in the figures in the sources, which are very similar across the students’ transcripts, but it is marred by the many modifications made by the editors in the famous and much better-known Fig. 1 in the *CLG*. Thought does not precede the sounds in any meaningful way from the perspective of the “fait linguistique”. Nor do sounds precede thought, for that matter.⁴ Thought and sounds are on an equal footing: they are both objects of the “fait linguistique”, not its substrates.

Considered from this angle, it is probably no coincidence that the editors dropped the designation “fait linguistique” from their Fig. 1, although it clearly appears in all source diagrams on the left-hand side of the intermediate layer of cells (and on the right-hand side in Sechehaye’s original diagram). At the same time, it is telling that they extended the vertical lines into the substances representing the layers of thought and sounds and replaced the invariably solid vertical lines in the sources by dotted lines, as if the “articulation” brought about by the “fait linguistique” has to be represented by means of permeable delimitations. The dotted lines from top to bottom in Fig. 1 suggests that a form is cast over two substrate-like substances which by

³ This interpretation ties in with Saussure’s intriguing discussion of the relationship between *sème* and *some*, *contresôme* and *parasôme* in the “Notes item” (40 [3320.1–3]); this discussion has left a trace in Saussure’s reference to waves, the body of which the editors of the *CLG* have left out (*CLG*: 156, but compare *CLG/E*: 253 [1831]). The account in the “Notes item” is discussed at length in Jäger (1986); cf. also Jäger (1978) and Bergounioux (2005).

⁴ On a side note let me add that L. Hjelmslev, in his *Prolegomena* (1961 [1943]) takes issue with precisely this part of the *CLG*. Had Hjelmslev known the original sources, he could have convinced himself that Saussure does not claim that “content-substance (thought) or expression-substance (sound-chain) precede language in time or hierarchical order, or *vice versa*” (Hjelmslev 1961 [1943]: 31). Saussure does not make any claim regarding the independent existence of thought or sounds, but it is suggested by the changes introduced by the editors.

this very act are transformed into articulated signs with a form and a meaning. Full vertical lines, themselves delimited by full horizontal lines and resulting in a continuous series of interrelated cells that are restricted to the intermediate space between the layers of thought and sounds, arguably do not lend themselves as easily to such a reasoning.

There is however one illustration in the student transcripts that seems halfway compatible with Fig. 1 with regard to the vertical lines. The figure is from Dégallier’s and Constantin’s notes of Saussure’s third course (cf. Constantin 2005: 287, *3^e Cours*: 140; unfortunately not accurately reproduced in *CLG/E*: 264, III C 401 [1900]). It has two vertical lines that do not stop at the horizontal lines but extend beyond them. The accompanying text reads as follows:

Ce sera une certaine combinaison d’une certaine quantité de concepts avec une certaine quantité de sons.

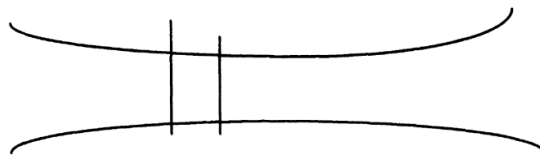
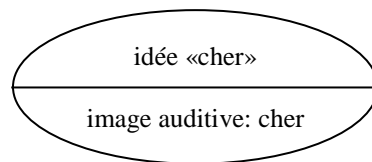


Fig. 3: Representation of the “combinaison” of sound and concept (Constantin 2005: 287)

Fig. 3 does not show up in the notes as part of Saussure’s discussion of the “fait linguistique” but in the subsequent section in which Saussure focuses on a particular “signe linguistique”. More specifically, the diagram is proposed as an illustration of the French word *cher* in the discussion of what constitutes “la valeur” of this particular linguistic sign:

Nous voyons qu’il n’y a pas avant la langue quelque chose qui soit la notion *cher* en soi. Donc nous voyons que cette représentation:



tout en pouvant avoir son usage n’est qu’une façon d’exprimer qu’il y a en français une <certaine> valeur *cher* <circonscrite dans système français> par opposition à d’autres termes. <Ce sera une certaine combinaison d’une certaine quantité de concepts avec une certaine quantité de sons> (Constantin 2005: 286-287, *CLG/E*: 263-264, III C 401 [1898-1899]; *3^e Cours*: 139-140).

There is no contradiction between the figure of the “fait linguistique” in general and Fig. 3 representing a particular “signe linguistique”, as long as one recognizes that the focus of both figures is different. A particular linguistic *sign* is defined by Saussure as a bilateral unity of a “signifié” and a “signifiant” conceived as the outcome of the linguistic *fact*. A word such as *cher* can be said to “combine” a concept (or a number of concepts, depending on how one defines ‘concept’) with sounds (or a single sound, as the case may be) when it is considered from the

angle of an individual sign with its capacity to be put to use in discourse like the myriad of other signs which constitute “la langue”:

Mais le signifiant et le signifié contractent un lien en vertu des valeurs déterminées qui sont nées de la combinaison de tant et tant de signes acoustiques avec tant et tant de <coupures> qu’on peut faire dans la masse (Constantin 2005: 286; *CLG/E*: 256, III C 399-400 [1846]; *3^e Cours*: 139).

It is thus possible to conceive the relationship of form and meaning of a particular “*signe linguistique*”, e.g. a word, in terms of an *intermediate* unity of ‘form’ and ‘substance’ in addition to the account of the “*fait linguistique*” as the basic *intermediary* phenomenon which is capable to arbitrarily relate thought and sounds. It is therefore instructive that Fig. 3, to the extent that it serves as a diagram of an individual word very much resembles one section of the source figure depicting the “*fait linguistique*”.

The complementarity in Saussure’s account of the perspective on the “*fait linguistique*” and the “*signe linguistique*” is also reflected in Saussure’s observations on the dual nature of the notion of “*valeur*”. On the basis of a careful reconstruction of Saussure’s successive explanations and remarks, Sofía (2017) reaches the conclusion that Saussure’s account of “*valeur*” vacillates between a focus on the sign-internal relation between “*signifié*” and “*signifiant*” and a focus on the sign-external, purely differential relation between signs (“*termes*”). Accordingly, Saussure drew two different diagrams on the blackboard:

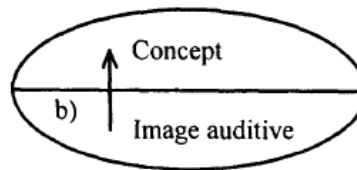


Fig. 4: The “*signe linguistique*” (Constantin 2005: 282; *CLG/E*: 258, III C 392 [1858]; *3^e Cours*: 135)

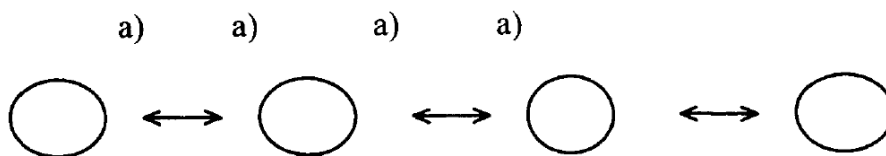


Fig. 5: The system of “*termes*” (Constantin 2005: 283; *CLG/E*: 259, III C 392 [1864]; *3^e Cours*: 135)

Fig. 4 is a diagram (“*schéma*”) representing an individual sign with its sign-internal, bilateral and arbitrary relation – indicated by the letter b) – between “*signifié*” (“*concept*”) and “*signifiant*” (“*image auditive*”), e.g. Fr. *cher*. By contrast, Fig. 5 depicts the “*system*” of signs, with the letters a) representing the differential, “*external*” oppositions between different signs delimiting each other in the “*langue*” (Sofía 2017: 181; cf. also Engler 1973: 39-46 and Stawarska 2015: 55-56). Crucially, one cannot be said to logically precede the other.

The issue of logical precedence is however different with regard to the internal relation between the “signifiant” (“image auditive”) and “signifié” (“concept”) in Fig. 4. The unidirectional arrow in this figure is attested in several students’ notes. It suggests that meaning has precedence over form if one considers the single bilateral sign. This squares with an observation in one of Saussure’s notes that if one compares a system of “valeurs” composed by linguistic signs with a system of “valeurs” that has some basis in the external world (“ayant une racine dans les choses”), then it is justified to regard thought as having a certain prior existence: “Si l’un des deux côtés du signe linguistique pouvait passer pour avoir une existence en soi, ce serait le côté conceptuel, l’idée comme base du signe” (*CLG/E*: 178, N 23.6 [1329]).

Two remarks are in order. First, although it is plausible to consider thought to some extent as basic from the perspective of a single bilateral sign, Saussure’s account clearly indicates that no such logical precedence can be established from the point of view of the “fait linguistique”. Second, even with regard to the individual sign (understood as a form-meaning pairing), the priority of meaning over form does not hold without qualification, as Saussure himself is keen to point out. In the notes “De la double essence du langage” (*SDL*: 191-192 [105], *ELG*: 77), Saussure distinguishes words whose external basis seem to qualify them as part of nomenclatures (“des noms d’objets matériels et d’objets tout à fait rares”), e.g. *aluminium* and *eucalyptus*, from more elementary natural language words such as Fr. *fer* (‘iron’) and *cheval* (‘horse’). Whereas the former are unequivocal, the latter encompass a large range of “ideas” (“idées contenues dans un mot”), according to Saussure. A similar observation is found in the “Notes item”:

Dès qu’il est question quelque part de la langue, on voit arriver le *mot* et le *sens* (ou le *signe* et le *sens*) comme si c’était ce qui résume tout, mais en outre toujours des exemples comme *arbre*, *pierre*, *vache*, <comme Adam donnant des []>, c’est à dire ce qu’il y a de plus grossier dans la sémiologie: le cas où elle est (par le hasard des objets <qu’on choisit pour être> désignés) une simple onymique (“Notes item”: 36 [3312.1]) (compare also *CLG/E*: 148 [Note 12, 1088-1091] and *ELG*: 230).

This is further proof that the hierarchy suggested by the letters A and B in Fig. 1 is not consistent with Saussure’s line of reasoning in the sources. As pointed out in section 4.2.1, Saussure occasionally used the letters “A” and “B” in his account of the “signe linguistique”, with A referring to the idea (“idée”) and B to the sound (“son”) of a word (*CLG/E*: 271 [1942]). However, when in “De la double essence du langage” (*SDL*: 148-150 [77], *ELG*: 42) Saussure refers to the common conception of a sign (“vue habituelle”), he explicitly adds the letters A and B only to reject the conception as fundamentally ill-conceived:

Vue habituelle:

A	Signification
B	Forme

Fig. 6: The traditional conception of a sign (*SDL*: 148-150 [77], *ELG*: 42)⁵

⁵ Note that these notes were not known to Bally and Sechehaye at the time when they edited the *CLG*.

The alternative view Saussure proposes instead involves four factors on an equal footing between which three equally constitutive relations obtain: the sign-internal relation between form and meaning, the relation of the form with respect to at least one differing form and the relation of the meaning with respect to at least one differing meaning. This is what Saussure terms, in the notes (*SDL*: 154 [79], *ELG*: 39), le “QUATERNION FINAL” of his theory of the linguistic sign (cf. Toutain 2017: 156).

In hindsight, it seems that we are here not so much confronted with a vacillating account of “valeur” itself but with two alternative yet complementary perspectives on one and the same object of enquiry, viz. “valeur”. Fig. 5 focuses on the relationship between linguistic signs, which necessarily entails considering signs from the point of view of the “fait linguistique”. Conversely, Fig. 4 zooms in on a single “signe linguistique” from the vantage point of its bilateral and arbitrary combination of a “signifié” and a “signifiant”, which is different from but presupposes the “fait linguistique” with regard to the system of signs. It is therefore revealing that in Constantin’s notes (as in Dégallier’s, cf. *CLG/E*: 259, D 271 [1864]), Fig. 5 is immediately followed by Fig. 7 below which clarifies how “la signification comme contrepartie de l’image et la signification comme contrepartie des termes coexistants se confondent”:⁶

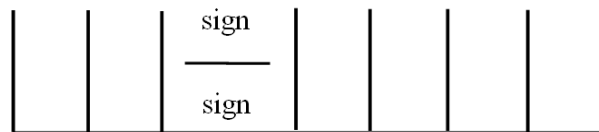


Fig.7: The “signification” relation within a sign and between signs (Constantin 2005: 283)⁷

Fig. 7 is a kind of synthesis of Fig. 4 and Fig. 2.1/2.3, with the former schematically incorporating the latter as one of its parts, in line with Saussure’s aforementioned discussion of the “quaternion final” regarding “la valeur” of a sign. This not only shows that the sequence of vertical lines does not refer to Saussure’s notion of linearity (cf. section 4.1), it is also additional evidence that both the figures of the “signe linguistique” and the “fait linguistique” converge toward the same object but from different points of view. This way, the emphasis on bilaterality and arbitrariness as genuine properties of linguistic *signs* is firmly grounded in Saussure’s account of the linguistic *fact* (“fait linguistique”) and not in alleged substrates in the realms of thought and sounds which are linked by means of linguistic signs. Saussure is adamant in insisting that those alleged substrates are the result of abstractions whereas linguistic signs are concrete (Constantin 2005: 224; *CLG/E*: 231-233, III C 287-289 [1690-1699]; *3^e Cours*: 79-80; cf. Joseph 2004: 64-65). Fig. 6 thus substantiates the observation made above that both the “signifié” and “signifiant” are part of a genuine linguistic kind of unity which cannot be reduced

⁶ For insightful discussions of the ways Saussure uses the term “signification” in relation to “signifié”, cf. in particular Wunderli (1981b) and Linda (2001: 93-96).

⁷ The twofold use of the abbreviation “sign” in Constantin’s notes is properly disambiguated in *CLG/E*: 259, III C 392 [1864] and *3^e Cours*: 135 (cf. also *CLG/E*: 259, D 271) as:

signifié
 signifiant

to anything else. That is to say, they are not the product of matching thought with sounds by a transformation process that produces forms on the basis of substrates. Rather, the combination of thought and sounds is possible by virtue of bilateral and arbitrary linguistic units, which come about on the basis of the “fait linguistique”.

6. The asymmetry of the horizontal dashed lines

Before wrapping up with some conclusions, I briefly turn to a final point of difference which I have not yet mentioned in the previous sections. In Engler’s critical edition (*CLG/E*: 252) the diagram is entirely symmetrical in Dégallier’s and Constantin’s notes, with two series of dashed lines in the top and bottom layer that mirror each other. By contrast, the diagram is asymmetrical in Marguerite Sechehaye’s notes (*CLG/E*: 252, S 2.42 [1827]) and in Godel *SM* (1957: 214, footnote 284): the shape of the upper dashed line is different, it has three curves instead of being continuous. In addition, the words “masse informe” are added at the bottom (cf. Fig. 2.2 and 2.4 in section 3).

The question arises whether these differences mean anything. Like most features of the figure, the dashed lines, too, are left unexplained. It is plausible to assume that the dashed lines represent the amorphous, diffuse nature of thought and sounds before the “fait linguistique” comes into play. Saussure’s already mentioned comparison with a wave, found in all student transcripts (*CLG/E*: 253 [1831]), can also be read along these lines. According to the notes of Riedlinger and Gautier, Saussure insists that the wave itself is a form, although it arguably depends on the presence of water as a substance to manifest itself; but the wave is a new “unity”, not reducible to any prior substance. In the “Notes Item”, a similar idea is developed on the basis of a comparison between a linguistic sign and a balloon in the air, but with additional, complex terminology (“Notes item”: 40 [3320.1-4]).

One could further speculate whether the curved dashed lines restricted to the top layer might represent “zones of meaning” which in different languages can correspond to different values and hence different “signifiés” (cf. Willems 2005). Saussure developed his theory of “valeurs” with regard to the “signifiés” of a language by emphasizing contrasts between signs that are semantically related, including contrastive examples, e.g.:

- French *chien* vs. *loup*
- French *craindre* and *redouter*
- English *sheep* and *mutton* vs. French *mouton*
- German *lieb* and *teuer* vs. French *cher*
- the plural and dual in Sanskrit vs. the plural in German
- future tense in French vs. Hebrew and Old Germanic
- perfective and imperfective aspect in Slavic languages (*CLG/E*: 261-262).

In this context, one can also refer to Saussure’s early discussion of lexical polysemy in “De la double essence du langage” where he points out that different words with different general language-specific meanings may be used to refer to the same thing (“une seule et même chose”), e.g. Fr. *maison* and semantically related words such as *construction*, *bâtiment*, *édifice*, *monument*, *immeuble*, *habitation*, *residence* (*SDL*: 204; *ELG*: 76). However, the conjecture that a clustering of related meanings made it into the illustration of the “fait linguistique” is not endorsed by the

sources if one consults the facsimiles of the original diagrams in the students' notes (see section 3) and compares them with the illustrations in the *CLG/E*. There are no significant differences in the rendering of the top layer of thought and the bottom layer of sounds. This is also clear from Albert Sechehaye's original version of the diagram (Fig. 2.7), where the two "floating realms" are entirely isomorphic. In the same vein, the addition "masse informe" in Marguerite Sechehaye's notes is most likely applicable to both realms.

7. Conclusions

The first aim of this article was to chart the differences and similarities between the figure representing the "fait linguistique" in the *CLG* and the corresponding diagrams in the sources and to explore the motivations for the changes introduced by the editors. The second aim was to relate the visual representation to Saussure's global account of the "fait linguistique" and his theory of the linguistic sign as they can be reconstructed from the sources. The analysis has shown that the two objectives – one more philological, the other more theoretical – are closely related. Not only are the changes introduced by the editors significant but they can also be linked to the editors' particular reading of Saussure's account of the "fait linguistique" and its relation with the "floating realms" of thought and sounds. The figure representing the "fait linguistique" in the *CLG* and the accompanying verbal text both testify to an interpretation of Saussure that is still indebted to a 19th-century substantialist understanding of the relation between thought and sounds in language to which Saussure was clearly opposed.

At the beginning of the chapter "Nature du signe linguistique" (*CLG*: 99), three figures representing the linguistic sign are famously provided, on an equal par, as an introduction to Saussure's observations on arbitrariness and linearity.

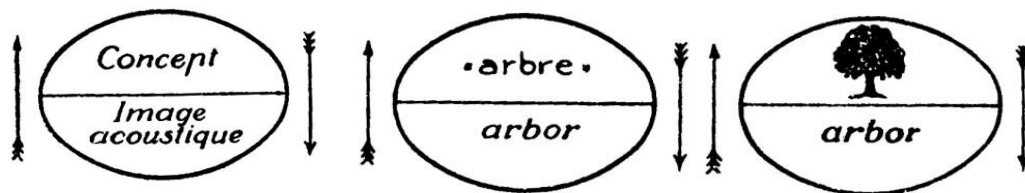


Fig. 8: "Le signe linguistique" (*CLG*: 99)

As De Mauro noted decades ago in his comments on the *CLG* (De Mauro [1995] 1967, note 132), the third diagram representing the content side of the "signifiant" *arbor* as the schematic image of a tree is about as diametrically opposed to Saussure's doctrine as can be. Moreover, the sources reveal that Saussure, when referring to the image of a tree (Constantin 2005: 220, *CLG/E*: 147, III C 287 [1087], *3^e Cours*: 74)⁸, does so in order to reject the view that the content of a sign is similar to an object that can be visualized because natural language is not a nomenclature (cf. Engler 1973: 44). The representations in the student transcripts are accordingly non-depictive, as e.g. in Constantin's notes:

⁸ Note that with regard to the image of a tree (and the accompanying image of a horse), too, the illustration in the *CLG* is much more developed than what one finds in the sources (compare, e.g., Constantin 1985: 220).

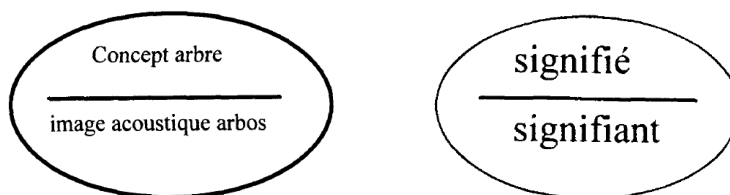
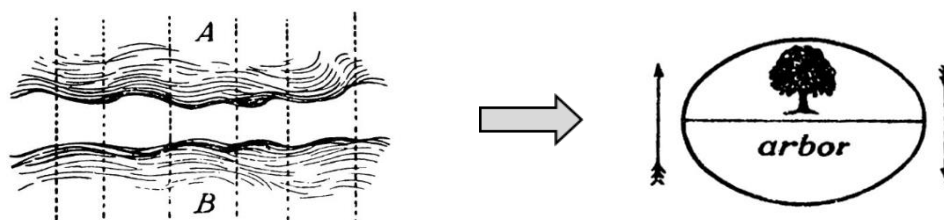


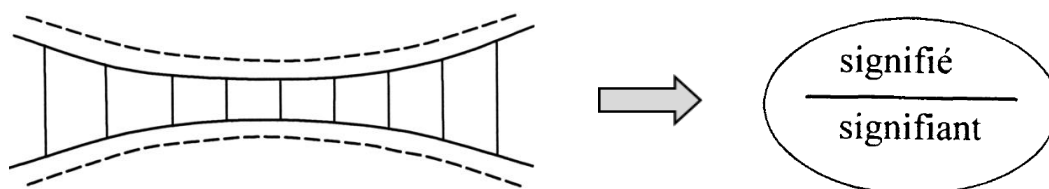
Fig. 9: “Le signe linguistique” (Constantin 2005: 220 & 238; CLG/E: 148, III C 279 [1094] & 151, III C 310 [1119]; 3^e Cours: 75 & 93)

It is therefore particularly embarrassing that the diagram showcasing the image of a tree has been reproduced over and over again until recently as one of the best-known diagrams representing Saussure’s concept of an arbitrary bilateral linguistic sign (cf. Willems 2011).

I would like to conclude this article by suggesting that the editors’ reading of the source materials which led to the un-Saussurean tree diagram is similar to their interpretation that gave rise to Fig. 1. This particular diagram of the linguistic sign is like a natural extension of some of the views the editors read into Saussure account of the “fait linguistique”:



Both diagrams testify to a substantialist interpretation of Saussure’s account which is however refuted by the available source materials. Given that the infelicitous tree diagram has long been discredited in Saussure scholarship (and hopefully scholars who still appeal to it to acknowledge their debt to Saussure will soon follow suit), one would wish that the figure of the “fait linguistique” in the *CLG* meets the same fate in the future and is abandoned in favour of one of the more adequate original figures which in turn are compatible with the original diagram of the “signe linguistique”:



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