

**Course in General Linguistics
Ferdinand de Saussure**

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**Translated, with an introduction
and notes by Wade Baskin**

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PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION

phonetic changes, for example, includes things that have been said before, and perhaps more definitively; but, aside from the fact that this part contains many valuable and original details, even a superficial reading will show to what extent its omission would detract from an understanding of the principles upon which F. de Saussure erects his system of static linguistics.

We are aware of our responsibility to our critics. We are also aware of our responsibility to the author, who probably would not have authorized the publication of these pages.

This responsibility we accept wholly, and we would willingly bear it alone. Will the critics be able to distinguish between the teacher and his interpreters? We would be grateful to them if they would direct toward us the blows which it would be unjust to heap upon one whose memory is dear to us.

Geneva, July 1915.

Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The second edition is essentially the same as the first. The editors have made some slight changes designed to facilitate reading and clarify certain points.

Ch. B. Alb. S.

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

With the exception of a few minute corrections, this edition is the **same as** the preceding.

Ch. B. Alb. S.

INTRODUCTION

Chapter I

A GLANCE AT THE HISTORY OF LINGUISTICS

The science that has been developed around the facts of language passed through three stages before finding its true and unique object.

First something called "grammar" was studied. This study, initiated by the Greeks and continued mainly by the French, was based on logic. It lacked a scientific approach and was detached from language itself. Its only aim was to give rules for distinguishing between correct and incorrect forms; it was a normative discipline, far removed from actual observation, and its scope was limited.

Next appeared philology. A "philological" school had existed much earlier in Alexandria, but this name is more often applied to the scientific movement which was started by Friedrich August Wolf in 1777 and which continues to this day. Language is not its sole object. The early philologists sought especially to correct, interpret and comment upon written texts. Their studies also led to an interest in literary history, customs, institutions, etc.¹ They applied the methods of criticism for their own purposes. When they dealt with linguistic questions, it was for the express purpose of comparing texts of different periods, determining the language peculiar to each author, or deciphering and explaining inscriptions made in an archaic or obscure language. Doubtless these investigations broke the ground for historical linguistics. Ritschl's studies of Plautus are actually linguistic. But philological criticism is still deficient on one point: it follows the written language too slavishly

ⁱ At the risk of offending some readers, certain stylistic characteristics of the original French are retained. [Tr.] (The bracketed abbreviations *S.*, *Ed.* and *Tr.* indicate whether footnotes are to be attributed to De Saussure, to the editors of the *Cours de linguistique generate*, or to the translator.)

and neglects the living language. Moreover, it is concerned with little except Greek and Latin antiquity.

The third stage began when scholars discovered that languages can be compared with one another. This discovery was the origin of "comparative philology." In 1816, in a work entitled *(Iber das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache*, Franz Bopp compared Sanskrit with German, Greek, Latin, etc. Bopp was not the first to record their similarities and state that all these languages belong to a single family. That had been done before him, notably by the English orientalist W. Jones (died in 1794) ; but Jones' few isolated statements do not prove that the significance and importance of comparison had been generally understood before 1816. While Bopp cannot be credited with the discovery that Sanskrit is related to certain languages of Europe and Asia, he did realize that the comparison of related languages could become the subject matter of an independent science. To illuminate one language by means of another, to explain the forms of one through the forms of the other, that is what no one had done before him.

Whether Bopp could have created his science-so quickly at least-without the prior discovery of Sanskrit is doubtful. With Sanskrit as a third witness beside Latin and Greek, Bopp had a larger and firmer basis for his studies. Fortunately, Sanskrit was exceptionally well-fitted to the role of illuminating the comparison.

For example, a comparison of the paradigms of Latin *genus* (*genus, generic, genere, genera, generum, etc.*) and Greek (*g&nos, geneos, genei, genea, genoon, etc.*) reveals nothing. But the picture changes as soon as we add the corresponding Sanskrit series (*danas, anasas, lanasi, anasu, anasam, etc.*). A glance reveals the similarity between the Greek forms and the Latin forms. If we accept tentatively the hypothesis that *sanal* represents the primitive state-and this step facilitates explanation-then we conclude that *s* must have fallen in Greek forms wherever it occurred between two vowels. Next we conclude that *s* became *r* in Latin under the same conditions. Grammatically, then, the Sanskrit paradigm exemplifies the concept of radical, a unit (*fans*) that is quite definite and stable. Latin and Greek had the same forms as Sanskrit only in their earlier stages. Here Sanskrit is instructive precisely because it has preserved all the Indo-European *s*'s. Of course

Sanskrit failed in other respects to preserve the features of the prototype; for instance, it had completely revolutionized the vocalic system. But in general the original elements that Sanskrit has preserved are remarkably helpful in research-and fate decreed that it was to clarify many points in the study of other languages.

Other distinguished linguists soon added to the contribution of Bopp: Jacob Grimm, the founder of Germanic studies (his *Deutsche Grammatik* was published from 1822 to 1836) ; Pott, whose etymological studies made a considerable amount of material available to linguists; Kuhn, whose works dealt with both linguistics and comparative mythology; the Indic scholars Benfey and Aufrecht, etc.

Finally, among the last representatives of the school, Max Müller, G. Curtius, and August Schleicher deserve special attention. In different ways, all three did much to advance comparative studies.. Max Müller popularized them in his brilliant discussions (*Lessons in the Science of Language*, 1861) ; but his failing was a certain lack of conscientiousness. Curtius, a distinguished philologist known especially for his *Grundzüge der griechischen Etymologie* (1879), was one of the first to reconcile comparative philology with classical philology. The latter had watched the progress of the new science suspiciously, and each school had mistrusted the other. Schleicher was the first to try to codify the results of piecemeal investigations. His *Compendium der vergleichenden Grammatik der indogermanischen Sprachen* (1861-62) is more or less a systemization of the science founded by Bopp. His book, with its long record of service, recalls better than any other the broad outlines of the comparative school, which is the first chapter in the history of Indo-European linguistics.

But the comparative school, which had the indisputable merit of opening up a new and fruitful field, did not succeed in setting up the true science of linguistics. It failed to seek out the nature of its object of study. Obviously, without this elementary step, no science can develop a method.

The first mistake of the comparative philologists was also the source of all their other mistakes. In their investigations (which embraced only the Indo-European languages), they never asked themselves the meaning of their comparisons or the significance of the

relations that they discovered. Their method was exclusively comparative, not historical. Of course comparison is required for any historical reconstruction, but by itself it cannot be conclusive. And the conclusion was **all** the more elusive whenever the comparative philologists looked upon the development of two languages as a naturalist might look upon the growth of two plants. For example Schleicher, who always invites us to start from Proto-Indo-European and thus seems in a sense to be a confirmed historian, has no hesitancy in saying that Greek e and o are two grades (*Stufen*) of the vocalic system. This is because Sanskrit has a system of vocalic alternations that suggests the notion of grades. Schleicher supposed that each language has to pass through those grades separately and in exactly the same way, just as plants of the same species pass through the same developmental stages independently of one another, and saw a reinforced grade of e in Greek o and a reinforced grade of d in Sanskrit a. The fact is that a Proto-Indo-European alternation was reflected differently in Greek and in Sanskrit without there being any necessary equivalence between the grammatical effects produced in either language (see pp. 158 ff.).

The exclusively comparative method brought in a set of false notions. Having no basis in reality, these notions simply could not reflect the facts of speech. Language was considered a specific sphere, a fourth natural kingdom; this led to methods of reasoning which would have caused astonishment in other sciences. Today one cannot read a dozen lines written at that time without being struck by absurdities of reasoning and by the terminology used to justify these absurdities.

But from the viewpoint of methodology, the mistakes of the comparative philologists are not without value; the mistakes of **an** infant science give a magnified picture of those made by anyone in the first stages of scientific research, and I shall have occasion to point out several of them in the course of this exposition.

Not until around 1870 did scholars begin to seek out the principles that govern the life of languages. Then they began to see that similarities between languages are only one side of the linguistic phenomenon, that comparison is only a means or method of reconstructing the facts.

Linguistics proper, which puts comparative studies in their

proper place, owes its origin to the study of the Romance and Germanic languages. Romance studies, begun by Diez-his *Grammatik der romanischen Sprachen* dates from 1836-38-were instrumental in bringing linguistics nearer to its true object. For Romance scholars enjoyed privileged conditions that were unknown to Indo-European scholars. They had direct access to Latin, the prototype of the Romance languages, and an abundance of texts allowed them to trace in detail the evolution of the different dialects; these two circumstances narrowed the field of conjecture and provided a remarkably solid frame for all their research. Germanic scholars were in a similar situation. Though they could not study the prototype directly, numerous texts enabled them to trace the history of the languages derived from Proto-Germanic through the course of many centuries. The Germanic scholars, coming to closer grips with reality than had the first Indo-European scholars, reached different conclusions.

A first impetus was given by the American scholar Whitney, the author of *Life and Growth of Language* (1875). Shortly afterwards a new school was formed by the neogrammarians (*Junggrammatiker*), whose leaders were all Germans: K. Brugmann and H. Osthoff; the Germanic scholars W. Braune, E. Sievers, H. Paul; the Slavic scholar Leskien, etc. Their contribution was in placing the results of comparative studies in their historical perspective and thus linking the facts in their natural order. Thanks to them, language is no longer looked upon as an organism that develops independently but as a product of the collective mind of linguistic groups. At the same time scholars realized how erroneous and insufficient were the notions of philology and comparative philology.¹ Still, in spite of the services that they rendered, the neogrammarians did not illuminate the whole question, and the fundamental problems of general linguistics still await solution.

² The new school, using a more realistic approach than had its predecessor, fought the terminology of the comparative school, and especially the illogical metaphors that it used. One no longer dared to say, "Language does this or that," or "life of language," etc. since language is not an entity and exists only within speakers. One must not go too far, however, and a compromise is in order. Certain metaphors are indispensable. To require that only words that correspond to the facts of speech be used is to pretend that these facts no longer perplex us. This is by no means true, and in some instances I shall not hesitate to use one of the expressions condemned at that time. [S.]

Chapter II

SUBJECT MATTER AND SCOPE OF LINGUISTICS; ITS RELATIONS WITH OTHER SCIENCES

The subject matter of linguistics comprises all manifestations of human speech, whether that of savages or civilized nations, or of archaic, classical or decadent periods. In each period the linguist must consider not only correct speech and flowery language, but all other forms of expression as well. And that is not all: since he is often unable to observe speech directly, he must consider written texts, for only through them can he reach idioms that are remote in time or space.

The scope of linguistics should be:

- a) to describe and trace the history of all observable languages, which amounts to tracing the history of families of languages and reconstructing as far as possible the mother language of each family;
- b) to determine the forces that are permanently and universally at work in all languages, and to deduce the general laws to which all specific historical phenomena can be reduced; and
- c) to delimit and define itself.

Linguistics is very closely related to other sciences that sometimes borrow from its data, sometimes supply it with data. The lines of demarcation do not always show up clearly. For instance, linguistics must be carefully distinguished from ethnography and prehistory, where language is used merely to document. It must also be set apart from anthropology, which studies man solely from the viewpoint of his species, for language is a social fact. But must linguistics then be combined with sociology? What are the relationships between linguistics and social psychology? Everything in language is basically psychological, including its material and mechanical manifestations, such as sound changes; and since linguistics provides social psychology with such valuable data, is it

not part and parcel of this discipline? Here I shall raise many similar questions; later I shall treat them at greater length.

The ties between linguistics and the physiology of sounds are less difficult to untangle. The relation is unilateral in the sense that the study of languages exacts clarifications from the science of the physiology of sounds but furnishes none in return. In any event, the two disciplines cannot be confused. The thing that constitutes language is, as I shall show later, unrelated to the phonic character of the linguistic sign.

As for philology, we have already drawn the line: it is distinct from linguistics despite points of contact between the two sciences and mutual services that they render.

Finally, of what use is linguistics? Very few people have clear ideas on this point, and this is not the place to specify them. But it is evident, for instance, that linguistic questions interest all who work with texts-historians, philologists, etc. Still more obvious is the importance of linguistics to general culture: in the lives of individuals and societies, speech is more important than anything else. That linguistics should continue to be the prerogative of a few specialists would be unthinkable-everyone is concerned with it in one way or another. But-and this is a paradoxical consequence of the interest that is fixed on linguistics-there is no other field in which so many absurd notions, prejudices, mirages, and fictions have sprung up. From the psychological viewpoint these errors are of interest, but the task of the linguist is, above all else, to condemn them and to dispel them as best he can.

Chapter III

THE OBJECT OF LINGUISTICS

1. Definition of Language

What is both the integral and concrete object of linguistics? The question is especially difficult; later we shall see why; here I wish merely to point up the difficulty.

Other sciences work with objects that are given in advance and that can then be considered from different viewpoints; but not linguistics. Someone pronounces the French word *nu* 'bare': a superficial observer would be tempted to call the word a concrete linguistic object; but a more careful examination would reveal successively three or four quite different things, depending on whether the word is considered as a sound, as the expression of an idea, as the equivalent of Latin *nudum*, etc. Far from it being the object that antedates the viewpoint, it would seem that it is the viewpoint that creates the object; besides, nothing tells us in advance that one way of considering the fact in question takes precedence over the others or is in any way superior to them.

Moreover, regardless of the viewpoint that we adopt, the linguistic phenomenon always has two related sides, each deriving its values from the other. For example:

1) Articulated syllables are acoustical impressions perceived by the ear, but the sounds would not exist without the vocal organs; an *n*, for example, exists only by virtue of the relation between the two sides. We simply cannot reduce language to sound or detach sound from oral articulation; reciprocally, we cannot define the movements of the vocal organs without taking into account the acoustical impression (see pp. 38 ff.).

2) But suppose that sound were a simple thing: would it constitute speech? No, it is only the instrument of thought; by itself, it has no existence. At this point a new and redoubtable relationship arises: a sound, a complex acoustical-vocal unit, combines in turn with an idea to form a complex physiological-psychological unit. But that is still not the complete picture.

3) Speech has both an individual and a social side, and we cannot conceive of one without the other. Besides:

4) Speech always implies both an established system and an evolution; at every moment it is an existing institution and a product of the past. To distinguish between the system and its history, between what it is and what it was, seems very simple at first glance; actually the two things are so closely related that we can scarcely keep them apart. Would we simplify the question by studying the linguistic phenomenon in its earliest stages-if we

began, for example, by studying the speech of children? No, for in dealing with speech, it is completely misleading to assume that the problem of early characteristics differs from the problem of permanent characteristics. We are left inside the vicious circle.

From whatever direction we approach the question, nowhere do we find the integral object of linguistics. Everywhere we are confronted with a dilemma: if we fix our attention on only one side of each problem, we run the risk of failing to perceive the dualities pointed out above; on the other hand, if we study speech from several viewpoints simultaneously, the object of linguistics appears to us as a confused mass of heterogeneous and unrelated things. Either procedure opens the door to several sciences-psychology, anthropology, normative grammar, philology, etc. which are distinct from linguistics, but which might claim speech, in view of the faulty method of linguistics, as one of their objects.

As I see it there is only one solution to all the foregoing difficulties: **from the very outset we must put both feet on the ground of language and use language as the norm of all other manifestations of speech.** Actually, among so many dualities, language alone seems to lend itself to independent definition and provide a fulcrum that satisfies the mind.

But what is language [*langue*]? It is not to be confused with human speech [*langage*], of which it is only a definite part, though certainly an essential one. It is both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty. Taken as a whole, speech is many-sided and heterogeneous; straddling several areas simultaneously-physical, physiological, and psychological-it belongs both to the individual and to society; we cannot put it into any category of human facts, for we cannot discover its unity.

Language, on the contrary, is a self-contained whole and a principle of classification. As soon as we give language first place among the facts of speech, we introduce a natural order into a mass that lends itself to no other classification.

One might object to that principle of classification on the ground that since the use of speech is based on a natural faculty whereas

language is something acquired and conventional, language should not take first place but should be subordinated to the natural instinct.

That objection is easily refuted.

First, no one has proved that speech, as it manifests itself when we speak, is entirely natural, i.e. that our vocal apparatus was designed for speaking just as our legs were designed for walking. Linguists are far from agreement on this point. For instance Whitney, to whom language is one of several social institutions, thinks that we use the vocal apparatus as the instrument of language purely through luck, for the sake of convenience: men might just as well have chosen gestures and used visual symbols instead of acoustical symbols. Doubtless his thesis is too dogmatic; language is not similar in all respects to other social institutions (see p. 73 f. and p. 75 f.); moreover, Whitney goes too far in saying that our choice happened to fall on the vocal organs; the choice was more or less imposed by nature. But on the essential point the American linguist is right: language is a convention, and the nature of the sign that is agreed upon does not matter. The question of the vocal apparatus obviously takes a secondary place in the problem of speech.

One definition of *articulated speech* might confirm that conclusion. In Latin, *articulue* means a member, part, or subdivision of a sequence; applied to speech, articulation designates either the subdivision of a spoken chain into syllables or the subdivision of the chain of meanings into significant units; *gegliederte Sprache* is used in the second sense in German. Using the second definition, we can say that what is natural to mankind is not oral speech but the faculty of constructing a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas.

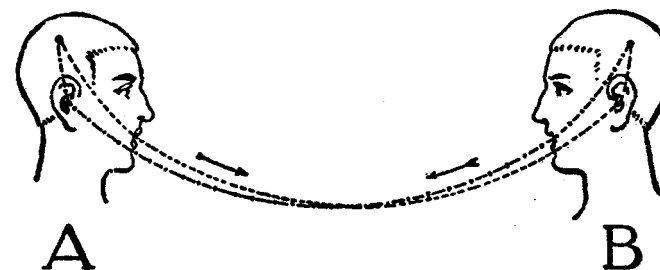
Broca discovered that the faculty of speech is localized in the third left frontal convolution; his discovery has been used to substantiate the attribution of a natural quality to speech. But we know that the same part of the brain is the center of *everything* that has to do with speech, including writing. The preceding statements, together with observations that have been made in different cases of aphasia resulting from lesion of the centers of localization, seem to indicate: (1) that the various disorders of oral speech are bound

up in a hundred ways with those of written speech; and (2) that what is lost in all cases of aphasia or agraphia is less the faculty of producing a given sound or writing a given sign than the ability to evoke by means of an instrument, regardless of what it is, the signs of a regular system of speech. The obvious implication is that beyond the functioning of the various organs there exists a more general faculty which governs signs and which would be the linguistic faculty proper. And this brings us to the same conclusion as above.

To give language first place in the study of speech, we can advance a final argument: the faculty of articulating words—whether it is natural or not—is exercised only with the help of the instrument created by a collectivity and provided for its use; therefore, to say that language gives unity to speech is not fanciful.

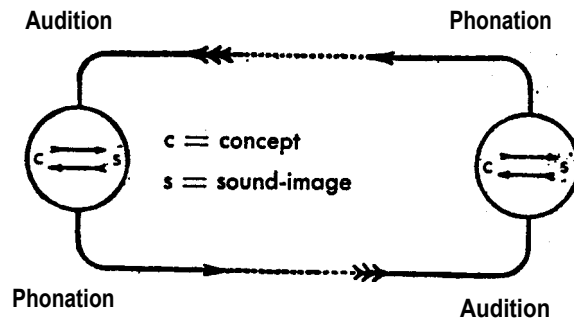
2. Place of Language in the Facts of Speech

In order to separate from the whole of speech the part that belongs to language, we must examine the individual act from which the speaking-circuit can be reconstructed. The act requires the presence of at least two persons; that is the minimum number necessary to complete the circuit. Suppose that two people, A and B, are conversing with each other:



Suppose that the opening of the circuit is in A's brain, where mental facts (concepts) are associated with representations of the linguistic sounds (sound-images) that are used for their expression. A given concept unlocks a corresponding sound-image in the brain; this purely *psychological* phenomenon is followed in turn by a *physiological* process: the brain transmits an impulse corresponding

to the image to the organs used in producing sounds. Then the sound waves travel from the mouth of A to the ear of B: a purely *physical* process. Next, the circuit continues in B, but the order is reversed: from the ear to the brain, the physiological transmission of the sound-image; in the brain, the psychological association of the image with the corresponding concept. If B then speaks, the new act will follow—from his brain to A's—exactly the same course as the first act and pass through the same successive phases, which I shall diagram as follows:



The preceding analysis does not purport to be complete. We might also single out the pure acoustical sensation, the identification of that sensation with the latent sound-image, the muscular image of phonation, etc. I have included only the elements thought to be essential, but the drawing brings out at a glance the distinction between the physical (sound waves), physiological (phonation and audition), and psychological parts (word-images and concepts). Indeed, we should not fail to note that the word-image stands apart from the sound itself and that it is just as psychological as the concept which is associated with it.

The circuit that I have outlined can be further divided into:

a) an outer part that includes the vibrations of the sounds which travel from the mouth to the ear, and an inner part that includes everything else;

b) a psychological and a nonpsychological part, the second including the physiological productions of the vocal organs as well as the physical facts that are outside the individual;

c) an active and a passive part: everything that goes from the associative center of the speaker to the ear of the listener is active, and everything that goes from the ear of the listener to his associative center is passive;

d) finally, everything that is active in the psychological part of the circuit is executive ($c \rightarrow s$), and everything that is passive is receptive ($s \rightarrow c$).

We should also add the associative and co-ordinating faculty that we find as soon as we leave isolated signs; this faculty plays the dominant role in the organization of language as a system (see pp. 122 ff.).

But to understand clearly the role of the associative and co-ordinating faculty, we must leave the, individual act, which is only the embryo of speech, and approach the social fact.

Among all the individuals that are linked together by speech, some sort of average will be set up: all will reproduce—not exactly of course, but approximately—the same signs united with the same concepts.

How does the social crystallization of language come about? Which parts of the circuit are involved? For all parts probably do not participate equally in it.

The nonpsychological part can be rejected from the outset. When we hear people speaking a language that we do not know, we perceive the sounds but remain outside the social fact because we do not understand them.

Neither is the psychological part of the circuit wholly responsible: the executive side is missing, for execution is never-carried out by the collectivity. Execution is always individual, and the individual is always its master: I shall call the executive side *speaking [parole]*.

Through the functioning of the receptive and co-ordinating faculties, impressions that are perceptibly the same for all are made on the minds of speakers. How can that social product be pictured in such a way that language will stand apart from everything else? If we could embrace the sum of word-images stored in the minds of all individuals, we could identify the social bond that constitutes language. It is a storehouse filled by the members of a given community through their active use of speaking, a grammatical

system that has a potential existence in each brain, or, more specifically, in the brains of a group of individuals. For language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity.

In separating language from speaking we are at the same time separating: (1) what is social from what is individual; and (2) what is essential from what is accessory and more or less accidental.

Language is not a function of the speaker; it is a product that is passively assimilated by the individual. It never requires premeditation, and reflection enters in only for the purpose of classification, which we shall take up later (pp. 122 ff.).

Speaking, on the contrary, is an individual act. It is wilful and intellectual. Within the act, we should distinguish between: (1) the combinations by which the speaker uses the language code for expressing his own thought; and (2) the psychophysical mechanism that allows him to exteriorize those combinations.

Note that I have defined things rather than words; these definitions are not endangered by certain ambiguous words that do not have identical meanings in different languages. For instance, German *Sprache* means both "language" and "speech"; *Rede* almost corresponds to "speaking" but adds the special connotation of "discourse." Latin *sermo* designates both "speech" and "speaking," while *lingua* means "language," etc. No word corresponds exactly to any of the notions specified above; that is why all definitions of words are made in vain; starting from words in defining things is a bad procedure.

To summarize, these are the characteristics of language:

1) Language is a well-defined object in the heterogeneous mass of speech facts. It can be localized in the limited segment of the speaking-circuit where an auditory image becomes associated with a concept. It is the social side of speech, outside the individual who can never create nor modify it by himself; it exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of a community. Moreover, the individual must always serve an apprenticeship in order to learn the functioning of language; a child assimilates it only gradually. It is such a distinct thing that a man deprived of the use of speaking retains it provided that he understands the vocal signs that he hears.

2) Language, unlike speaking, is something that we can study separately. Although dead languages are no longer spoken, we can easily assimilate their linguistic organisms. We can dispense with the other elements of speech; indeed, the science of language is possible only if the other elements are excluded.

3) Whereas speech is heterogeneous, language, as defined, is homogeneous. It is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound-images, and in which both parts of the sign are psychological.

4) Language is concrete, no less so than speaking; and this is a help in our study of it. Linguistic signs, though basically psychological, are not abstractions; associations which bear the stamp of collective approval-and which added together constitute language-are realities that have their seat in the brain. Besides, linguistic signs are tangible; it is possible to reduce them to conventional written symbols, whereas it would be impossible to provide detailed photographs of acts of speaking [*actes de parole*]; the pronunciation of even the smallest word represents an infinite number of muscular movements that could be identified and put into graphic form only with great difficulty. In language, on the contrary, there is only the sound-image, and the latter can be translated into a fixed visual image. For if we disregard the vast number of movements necessary for the realization of sound-images in speaking, we see that each sound-image is nothing more than the sum of a limited number of elements or phonemes that can in turn be called up by a corresponding number of written symbols (see pp. 61 ff.). The very possibility of putting the things that relate to language into graphic form allows dictionaries and grammars to represent it accurately, for language is a storehouse of sound-images, and writing is the tangible form of those images.

3. *Place of Language in Human Facts: Semiology*

The foregoing characteristics of language reveal an even more important characteristic. Language, once its boundaries have been marked off within the speech data, can be classified among human phenomena, whereas speech cannot.

We have just seen that language is a social institution; but several features set it apart from other political, legal, etc. institutions.

We must call in a new type of facts in order to illuminate the special nature of language.

Language is a system of signs that express ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of all these systems.

*A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it 'semiology' (from Greek *semefon* 'sign'). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts.*

To determine the exact place of semiology is the task of the psychologist! The task of the linguist is to find out what makes language a special system within the mass of semiological data. This issue will be taken up again later; here I wish merely to call attention to one thing: if I have succeeded in assigning linguistics a place among the sciences, it is because I have related it to semiology.

Why has semiology not yet been recognized as an independent science with its own object like all the other sciences? Linguists have been going around in circles: language, better than anything else, offers a basis for understanding the semiological problem; but language must, to put it correctly, be studied in itself; heretofore language has almost always been studied in connection with something else, from other viewpoints.

There is first of all the superficial notion of the general public people see nothing more than a name-giving system in language (see p. 65), thereby prohibiting any research into its true nature.

¹ *Semiology* should not be confused with *semantics*, which studies changes in meaning, and which De Saussure did not treat methodically; the fundamental principle of semantics is formulated on page 75. [Ed.]

⁴ Of. A. Naville, *Classification des Sciences*, (2nd. ed.), p. 104. [Ed.] The scope of semiology (or semiotics) is treated at length in Charles Morris' *Signs, Language and Behavior* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1946). [Tr.]

Then there is the viewpoint of the psychologist, who studies the sign-mechanism in the individual; this is the easiest method, but it does not lead beyond individual execution and does not reach the sign, which is social.

Or even when signs are studied from a social viewpoint, only the traits that attach language to the other social institutions—those that are more or less voluntary—are emphasized; as a result, the goal is by-passed and the specific characteristics of semiological systems in general and of language in particular are completely ignored. For the distinguishing characteristic of the sign—but the one that is least apparent at first sight—is that in some way it always eludes the individual or social will.

In short, the characteristic that distinguishes semiological systems from all other institutions shows up clearly only in language where it manifests itself in the things which are studied least, and the necessity or specific value of a semiological science is therefore not clearly recognized. But to me the language problem is mainly semiological, and all developments derive their significance from that important fact. If we are to discover the true nature of language we must learn what it has in common with all other semiological systems; linguistic forces that seem very important at first glance (e.g., the role of the vocal apparatus) will receive only secondary consideration if they serve only to set language apart from the other systems. This procedure will do more than to clarify the linguistic problem. By studying rites, customs, [etc. as](#) signs, I believe that we shall throw new light on the facts and point up the need for including them in a science of semiology and explaining them by its laws.

Chapter IV

LINGUISTICS OF LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS OF SPEAKING

In setting up the science of language within the overall study of speech, I have also outlined the whole of linguistics. All other ele-

ments of speech—those that constitute speaking—freely subordinate themselves to the first science, and it is by virtue of this subordination that the parts of linguistics find their natural place.

Consider, for example, the production of sounds necessary for speaking. The vocal organs are as external to language as are the electrical devices used in transmitting the Morse code to the code itself; and phonation, i.e., the execution of sound-images, in no way affects the system itself. Language is comparable to a symphony in that what the symphony actually is stands completely apart from how it is performed; the mistakes that musicians make in playing the symphony do not compromise this fact.

An argument against separating phonation from language might be phonetic changes, the alterations of the sounds which occur in speaking and which exert such a profound influence on the future of language itself. Do we really have the right to pretend that language exists independently of phonetic changes? Yes, for they affect only the material substance of words. If they attack language as a system of signs, it is only indirectly, through subsequent changes of interpretation; there is nothing phonetic in the phenomenon (see p. 84). Determining the causes of phonetic changes may be of interest, and the study of sounds will be helpful on this point; but none of this is essential: in the science of language, all we need do is to observe the transformations of sounds and to calculate their effects.

What I have said about phonation applies to all other parts of speaking. The activity of the speaker should be studied in a number of disciplines which have no place in linguistics except through their relation to language.

The study of speech is then twofold: its basic part—having as its object language, which is purely social and independent of the individual—is exclusively psychological; its secondary part—which has as its object the individual side of speech, i.e. speaking, including phonation—is psychophysical.

Doubtless the two objects are closely connected, each depending on the other: language is necessary if speaking is to be intelligible and produce all its effects; but speaking is necessary for the establishment of language, and historically its actuality always comes first. How would a speaker take it upon himself to associate an idea

with a word-image if he had not first come across the association in an act of speaking? Moreover, we learn our mother language by listening to others; only after countless experiences is it deposited in our brain. Finally, speaking is what causes language to evolve: impressions gathered from listening to others modify our linguistic habits. Language and speaking are then interdependent; the former is both the instrument and the product of the latter. But their interdependence does not prevent their being two absolutely distinct things.

Language exists in the form of a sum of impressions deposited in the brain of each member of a community, almost like a dictionary of which identical copies have been distributed to each individual (see p. 13). Language exists in each individual, yet is common to all. Nor is it affected by the will of the depositaries. Its mode of existence is expressed by the formula:

$$1 + 1 + 1 + 1 \dots = I \text{ (collective pattern)}$$

What part does speaking play in the same community? It is the sum of what people say and includes: (a) individual combinations that depend on the will of speakers, and (b) equally wilful phonational acts that are necessary for the execution of these combinations.

Speaking is thus not a collective instrument; its manifestations are individual and momentary. In speaking there is only the sum of particular acts, as in the formula:

$$(1 + 1' - 1'' + 1''' \dots)$$

For all the foregoing reasons, to consider language and speaking from the same viewpoint would be fanciful. Taken as a whole, speech cannot be studied, for it is not homogeneous; but the distinction and subordination proposed here clarify the whole issue.

Such is the first bifurcation that we find in trying to formulate the theory of speech. We must choose between two routes that cannot be followed simultaneously; they must be followed separately.

One might if really necessary apply the term linguistics to each of the two disciplines and speak of a linguistics of speaking. But

that science must not be confused with linguistics proper, whose sole object is language.

I shall deal only with linguistics of language, and if I subsequently use material belonging to speaking to illustrate a point, I shall try never to erase the boundaries that separate the two domains.

Chapter V

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ELEMENTS OF LANGUAGE

My definition of language presupposes the exclusion of everything that is outside its organism or system—in a word, of everything known as "external linguistics." But external linguistics deals with many important things—the very ones that we think of when we begin the study of speech.

First and foremost come all the points where linguistics borders on ethnology, all the relations that link the history of a language and the history of a race or civilization. The close interaction of language and ethnography brings to mind the bonds that join linguistic phenomena proper (see pp. 7 f.). The culture of a nation exerts an influence on its language, and the language, on the other hand, is largely responsible for the nation.

Second come the relations between language and political history. Great historical events like the Roman conquest have an incalculable influence on a host of linguistic facts. Colonization, which is only one form that conquest may take, brings about changes in an idiom by transporting it into different surroundings. All kinds of facts could be cited as substantiating evidence. For instance, Norway adopted Danish when she united politically with Denmark; the Norwegians are trying today to throw off that linguistic influence. The internal politics of states is no less important to the life of languages; certain governments (like the Swiss) allow the coexistence of several idioms; others (like the French) strive for linguistic unity. An advanced state of civilization

favors the development of special languages (juridical language, scientific terminology, etc.).

Here we come to a third point: the relations between language and all sorts of institutions (the Church, the school, etc.). All these institutions in turn are closely tied to the literary development of a language, a general phenomenon that is all the more inseparable from political history. At every point the literary language oversteps the boundaries that literature apparently marks off; we need only consider the influence of *salons*, the court, and national academies. Moreover, the literary language raises the important question of conflicts between it and local dialects (see pp. 195 ff.); the linguist must also examine the reciprocal relations of book language and the vernacular; for every literary language, being the product of the culture, finally breaks away from its natural sphere, the spoken language.

Finally, everything that relates to the geographical spreading of languages and dialectal splitting belongs to external linguistics. Doubtless the distinction between internal and external linguistics seems most paradoxical here, since the geographical phenomenon is so closely linked to the existence of any language; but geographical spreading and dialectal splitting do not actually affect the inner organism of an idiom.

Some have maintained that the foregoing issues simply cannot be separated from the study of language proper. The viewpoint has been prevalent especially since the placing of so much emphasis on "Realia."⁵ Just as the inner organism of a plant is modified by alien forces (terrain, climate, etc.) does not the grammatical organism depend constantly on the external forces of linguistic change? It seems that we can scarcely give a satisfactory explanation of the technical terms and loan-words that abound in language without considering their development. Is it possible to distinguish the natural, organic growth of an idiom from its artificial forms, such as the literary language, which are due to external, and therefore inorganic forces? Common languages are always developing alongside local dialects.

⁵ *Realien* is used in German to refer to all material facts of life, the shape, dimensions, and the like of objects, things, etc. Cf. the numerous works in German entitled *Reallexicon*. [Tr.]

I believe that the study of external linguistic phenomena is most fruitful; but to say that we cannot understand the internal linguistic organism without studying external phenomena is wrong. Take as an example the borrowing of foreign words. We observe from the outset that borrowing is not a constant force in the life of a language. In certain isolated valleys there are dialects that have never taken a single artificial term from the outside. Should we say that such idioms are outside the conditions of normal speech and that they require "teratological" study inasmuch as they have never suffered admixture? More important still, a loan-word no longer counts as such whenever it is studied within a system; it exists only through its relation with, and opposition to, words associated with it, just like any other genuine sign. Knowledge of the circumstances that contributed to the development of a language, generally speaking, is never indispensable. For certain languages-e.g. Zend and Old Slavic-even the identity of the original speakers is unknown, but lack of such information in no way hinders us in studying these languages internally and learning about the transformations that they have undergone. In any case, separation of the two viewpoints is mandatory, and the more rigidly they are kept apart, the better it will be.

The best proof of the need for separating the two viewpoints is that each creates a distinct method. External linguistics can add detail to detail without being caught in the vise of a system. Each writer, for instance, will group as he sees fit facts about the spreading of a language beyond its territory. If he looks for the forces that created a literary language beside local dialects, he can always use simple enumeration. If he arranges the facts more or less systematically, he will do this solely for the sake of clarity.

In internal linguistics the picture differs completely. Just any arrangement will not do. Language is a system that has its own arrangement. Comparison with chess will bring out the point. In chess, what is external can be separated relatively easily from what is internal. The fact that the game passed from Persia to Europe is external; against that, everything having to do with its system and rules is internal. If I use ivory chessmen instead of wooden ones, the change has no effect on the system, but if I decrease or

"Pertaining to the study of monsters," see p. 54, footnote. [Tr.]

increase the number of chessmen, this change has a profound effect on the "grammar" of the game. One must always distinguish between what is internal and what is external. In each instance one can determine the nature of the phenomenon by applying this rule: everything that changes the system in any way is internal.

Chapter VI

GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF LANGUAGE

1. *Need for Studying the Subject*

The concrete object of linguistic science is the social product deposited in the brain of each individual, i.e. language. But the product differs with linguistic groups: we have to work with languages. The linguist is obliged to acquaint himself with the greatest possible number of languages in order to determine what is universal in them by observing and comparing them.

But we generally learn about languages only through writing. Even in studying our native language, we constantly make use of written texts. The necessity of using written evidence increases when dealing with remote idioms, and all the more when studying idioms that no longer exist. We would have direct texts at our disposal in every instance only if people had always done what is now being done in Paris and Vienna. There, samples of all languages are being recorded. Even so, recorded specimens could be made available to others only through writing.

Writing, though unrelated to its inner system, is used continually to represent language. We cannot simply disregard it. We must be acquainted with its usefulness, shortcomings, and dangers.

2. *Influence of Writing; Reasons for Its Ascendance over the Spoken Form*

Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first. The linguistic object is not both the written and the spoken forms of

words; the spoken forms alone constitute the object. But the spoken word is so intimately bound to its written image that the latter manages to usurp the main role. People attach even more importance to the written image of a vocal sign than to the sign itself. A similar mistake would be in thinking that more can be learned about someone by looking at his photograph than by viewing him directly.

This illusion, which has always existed, is reflected in many of the notions that are currently bandied about on the subject of language. Take the notion that an idiom changes more rapidly when writing does not exist. Nothing could be further from the truth. Writing may retard the process of change under certain conditions, but its absence in no way jeopardizes the preservation of language. The oldest written texts of Lithuanian, which is still spoken in eastern Prussia and in a part of Russia, date from 1540; but the language of even that late period offers a more faithful picture of Proto-Indo-European than does Latin of 300 B.c. This one example is enough to show the extent to which languages are independent of writing.

Certain very slight linguistic facts have been preserved without the help of any notation. During the whole Old High German period, people wrote *toten*, *fuolen*, *stozen*; near the end of the twelfth century the forms *toten*, *fuolen* appeared, but *stozen* subsisted. How did the difference originate? Wherever the umlaut occurred, there was a y in the following syllable. Proto-Germanic had **daupyan*, **folyan*, but **stautan*. At the very beginning of the literary period (about 800) the y became so weak that no trace of it appears in writing for three centuries; still, a slight trace had remained in the spoken form; that is how it miraculously reappeared as an umlaut around 1180! Without the help of writing, a slight difference in pronunciation was accurately transmitted.

Thus language does have a definite and stable oral tradition that is independent of writing, but the influence of the written form prevents our seeing this. The first linguists confused language and writing, just as the humanists had done before them. Even Bopp failed to distinguish clearly between letters and sounds. His works give the impression that a language and its alphabet are insepa-

table. His immediate successors fell into the same trap; the transcription *A* (for the fricative *b*) caused Grimm to think not only that *th* was a double sound but also that it was an aspirated occlusive, and he accordingly assigned it a specific place in his law of consonantal mutation or *Lautverschiebung* (see p. 144). Still today intelligent men confuse language and writing. To take but one example, Gaston Deschamps credited Berthelot with "preserving French from ruin" because he had opposed spelling reform.

But how is the influence of writing to be explained?

1) First, the graphic form of words strikes us as being something permanent and stable, better suited than sound to account for the unity of language throughout time. Though it creates a purely fictitious unity, the superficial bond of writing is much easier to grasp than the only true bond, the bond of sound.

2) Most people pay more attention to visual impressions simply because these are sharper and more lasting than aural impressions; that is why they show a preference for the former. The graphic form manages to force itself upon them at the expense of sound.

3) The literary language adds to the undeserved importance of writing. It has its dictionaries and grammars; in school, children are taught from and by means of books; language is apparently governed by a code; the code itself consists of a written set of strict rules of usage, orthography; and that is why writing acquires primary importance. The result is that people forget that they learn to speak before they learn to write, and the natural sequence is reversed.

4) Finally, when there is a disagreement between language and orthography, settlement of the dispute is difficult for everyone except the linguist; and since he is given no voice in the matter, the written form almost inevitably wins out, for any solution supported by it is easier; thus writing assumes undeserved importance.

3. *Systems of Writing*

There are only two systems of writing

1) In an ideographic system each word is represented by a single sign that is unrelated to the sounds of the word itself. Each written

sign stands for a whole word and, consequently, for the idea expressed by the word. The classic example of an ideographic system of writing is Chinese.

2) The system commonly known as "phonetic" tries to reproduce the succession of sounds that make up a word. Phonetic systems are sometimes syllabic, sometimes alphabetic, i.e., based on the irreducible elements used in speaking.

Moreover, ideographic systems freely become mixtures when certain ideograms lose their original value and become symbols of isolated sounds.

The statement that the written word tends to replace the spoken one in our minds is true of both systems of writing, but the tendency is stronger in the ideographic system. To a Chinese, an ideogram and a spoken word are both symbols of an idea; to him writing is a second language, and if two words that have the same sound are used in conversation, he may resort to writing in order to express his thought. But in Chinese the mental substitution of the written word for the spoken word does not have the annoying consequences that it has in a phonetic system, for the substitution is absolute; the same graphic symbol can stand for words from different Chinese dialects.

I shall limit discussion to the phonetic system, and especially to the one used today, the system that stems from the Greek alphabet.⁷

⁷ The correspondence between De Saussure's system of transcription and that recommended by the International Phonetic Association is roughly as follows:

DE SAUSSURE IPA			DE SAUSSURE IPA		
p	[p]	pin	l	[l]	let
b	[b]	bin	r	[r]	run
m	[m]	man	i	[i]	repeat
t	[t]	ten	u	[u]	boot
d	[d]	dig	ii	[y]	French pur
n	[n]	not	g,	[e]	pet
k	[k]	cat	i, 6	[e]	chaotic
g	[g]	get	s	[e]	French vin
h	[n]	thing	9	[o]	ought
f	[f]	fox	9	[o]	notation
v	[v]	vixen	6	[3]	French <i>bon</i>
b	[e]	<i>thin</i>	q	[m]	French <i>seul</i>
25	[25]	then	p	[e]	French crease
a	[s]	sing	8	[fe]	French un

When first devised a phonetic alphabet—unless borrowed and already marked by inconsistencies—gives a fairly rational representation of language. With respect to logic, Greek is especially noteworthy (see p. 64). But the harmonious relation between writing and pronunciation does not last. Why? This question must be examined.

4. Reasons for the Discrepancy between Writing and Pronunciation

Of the numerous causes of lack of agreement between writing and pronunciation, I shall recall only the more important ones.

First, language is constantly evolving, whereas writing tends to remain stable. The result is that a point is reached where writing no longer corresponds to what it is supposed to record. A transcription that is accurate at a particular moment will be absurd a century later. For a time people may change their graphic symbols to conform with changes in pronunciation, then relinquish the effort. This happened in French in the case of *oi*:

Pronunciation		Written Forms
Eleventh Century	1 <i>rei, lei</i>	<i>rei, lei</i>
Thirteenth Century	2 <i>roi, loi</i>	<i>roi, lai</i>
Fourteenth Century	3 <i>roe, log</i>	<i>roi, hri</i>
Nineteenth Century	4 <i>rwa, lwa</i>	<i>roi, loi</i>

Up until period 2 changes in pronunciation were recorded; each step in the history of the language was matched by a corresponding step in the history of writing. But after the fourteenth century the written form of the words remained unchanged while the evolution of the language continued; from that moment the discrepancy between the language and its orthography increased progressively. Finally, the practice of joining discordant terms had its repercussion on the graphic system itself: the combination of acquired a value that was unrelated to either o or i.

z	[z]	zero	a	[a]	father
b	[ʒ]	sure		[n]	French <i>blanc</i>
	L3	azure	w	[w]	wait
x'	[c]	German <i>ich</i>	a	[]	yes
X	[X]	German <i>doch</i>			above

See especially pages 46-49. [Tr.]

Such examples could be multiplied indefinitely. For instance, why should the French write *mais* 'but' and *fait* 'fact' when the words are pronounced *me* and *fe*? Why does *c* often have the value of *ʒ*? The answer is that French has retained outmoded spellings.

Spelling always lags behind pronunciation. The *l* in French is today changing to *y*; speakers say *eveyer*, *mouyer*, just as they say *essuyer* 'wipe,' *nettoyer* 'clean'; but the written forms of these words are still *eveiller* 'awaken,' *mouiller* 'soak.'

Another reason for discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation is this: if an alphabet is borrowed from another language, its resources may not be appropriate for their new function; expedients will have to be found (e.g. the use of two letters to designate a single sound). Take the voiceless dental fricative *f* of the Germanic languages. Since Latin had no sign for this sound, *th* was used. The Merovingian king Chilperic tried to add a special symbol for this sound to the Latin alphabet, but his attempt was unsuccessful and *th* won acceptance. During the Middle Ages English had a closed *e* (e.g. *sed*) and an open *e* (e.g. *led*); since the alphabet failed to provide distinct symbols for the two sounds, the spellings *seed* and *lead* were devised. French uses the double symbol *ch* to stand for hushing *e*, etc.

The influence of etymology also helps to widen the gap between spelling and pronunciation. It has been especially strong during certain periods (e.g. the Renaissance). Even a false etymology often forces itself into the spelling of a word: *d* was inserted in French *poids* 'weight' as if the word were derived from Latin *pondus*; *poids* actually comes from *pensum*^s. Whether the application of the principle is correct matters little; the fallacy is in spelling words according to their etymology.

Other reasons for the discrepancy are not so obvious; some absurdities cannot be excused even on etymological grounds. Why was *thun* used instead of *tun* in German? The *h* was said to represent the aspiration that followed the initial consonant; but it would have to be inserted wherever aspiration occurs, and many similar words were never written with *h* (*Tugend*, *Tisch*, etc.).

^s Cf. **English** *island*, derived from *ig* 'island' and *land* 'land' but influenced by *isle*, and *doubt*, derived from Old French *douter* but later changed to conform with Latin *dubitare*. [Tr.]

5. Results of the Discrepancy

To classify the inconsistencies of writing would take too long. One salient disadvantage is the multiplicity of symbols that stand for the same sound. For *i* French uses *j*, *g*, *ge* (*joli* 'pretty,' *geler* 'freeze,' *geai* 'jay'); for *z*, both *z* and *s*; for *s*, *c*, *ç* and *t* (*nation* 'nation'), *sc* (*acquiescer* 'acquiesce'), *sg* (*acquiescant* 'acquiescent'), *x* (*dix* 'ten'); and for *k* it uses *c*, *qu*, *k*, *ch*, *cc*, *cqu* (*acquérir* 'acquire'). Conversely, a single symbol stands for several values: *t* stands for *tors*, *gforgori*, etc.

"Indirect spellings" also merit our attention. There is no double consonant in *Zettel*, *Teller*, etc.; German uses *tt*, *ü*, etc. for the sole purpose of indicating that the preceding vowel is open and short. Through a similar aberration English adds a final silent *e* to lengthen the preceding vowel: *mad*, *made*. The *e*, which actually affects only the preceding syllable, creates a second syllable for the eye.

These irrational spellings still stand for something in language; but others have neither rime nor reason. French has no double consonants except the old futures *mourrai* '(I) shall die,' *courrai* '(I) shall run,' etc.; yet illegitimate double consonants abound in the orthography of the language (*bourru* 'surly,' *sottise* 'foolishness,' *souffrir* 'suffer,' etc.).

Being unstable and striving always for regularity, writing may vacillate at times; the result is fluctuating orthographies that stem from efforts to record sounds at different periods. Take *ertha*, *erdha*, *erda*, or *thri*, *dhri*, *dri* in Old High German: *th*, *dh*, *d* stand for the same phonic element. But which element? Writing does not provide the answer. The complication that arises is this: confronted with two spellings for the same word, we cannot always decide whether two pronunciations are actually represented. Suppose that texts of neighboring dialects show the spelling *asca* for a word in one of the dialects and *ascha* for the same word in the other; if the sound is the same, the transcriptions point to an orthographic fluctuation; if not, the difference is phonological and dialectal, as in the Greek forms *pa'izo*, *palzdo*, *pafddo*. Or two successive periods may be

^s The discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation is of course more striking in English than in French: two perfectly riming sounds are written *fight* and *bite*; *c* stands for the same sound as both *s* and *k*; etc. [Tr.]

involved. The English forms *hwat*, *hweel*, etc. were later replaced by *what*, *wheel*, etc. Does this point to a graphic change or to a phonetic change?

The preceding discussion boils down to this: writing obscures language; it is not a guise for language but a disguise. That fact is clearly illustrated by the spelling of French *oiseau* 'bird.' Not one spoken sound (*waz9*) is indicated by its own symbol. Here writing fails to record any part of the picture of language.

Another result is that the less writing represents what it is supposed to represent, the stronger the tendency to use it as a basis becomes. Grammarians never fail to draw attention to the written form. Psychologically, the tendency is easily explained, but its consequences are annoying. Free use of the words "pronounce" and "pronunciation" sanctions the abuse and reverses the real, legitimate relationship between writing and language. Whoever says that a certain letter must be pronounced a certain way is mistaking the written image of a sound for the sound itself. For French *of* to be pronounced *wa*, this spelling would have to exist independently; actually *wa* is written *oi*. To attribute the oddity to an exceptional pronunciation of *o* and *i* is also misleading, for this implies that language depends on its written form and that certain liberties may be taken in writing, as if the graphic symbols were the norm.

False notions about the relationship between sound and graphic symbols appear even in grammatical rules, as in the case of French *h*. Some words that begin with an unaspirated vowel are written with *h* through remembrance of their Latin forms: *homme* 'man' (formerly *ome*) because of Latin *homo*. But in words of Germanic origin, initial *h* was actually pronounced: *hache* 'hatchet,' *hareng* 'herring,' *honte* 'shame,' etc. As long as aspiration was used, words of Germanic origin obeyed the laws governing initial consonants: speakers said *deu hache8* 'two hatchets,' *le hereng* 'the herring'; other words obeyed the laws governing initial vowels; speakers said *deu-z-ommes* 'two men,' *l'omme* 'the man.' For that period the rule, "Liaison and elision do not occur before aspirated *h*," was correct. But nowadays the formula is meaningless. Aspirated *h* no longer exists unless the label is applied to something which-i not

a sound but which prevents liaison and elision. Again we are involved in a vicious circle, and *h is* but a fictitious offspring of writing.

The pronunciation of a word is determined, not by its spelling, but by its history. The form of a word at a particular moment stands for a moment in its enforced evolution. Precise laws govern its evolution. Each step is determined by the preceding step. The only thing to consider is the one most often forgotten: the evolution of the word, its etymology.

The name of the town of *Auch is og* in phonetic transcription. That is the only French word in which final *ch* stands for 9. But we explain nothing by saying, "Final *ch* is pronounced 9 only in *Auch*." The only question that concerns us is this: How could Latin *Auscii* have changed to 99? Orthography is unimportant.

Should French *gageure* 'wager' be pronounced with *o* or *u*? Some speakers say: *galor*; for *heure* 'hour' is pronounced *or*. Others say: No, it is *ga r*; *forge* is equivalent c£, as in *geOle* 'jail.' The argument is pointless. The real issue is etymological: *gageure* was formed from *gager* 'earn' just as *tournure* 'figure' was formed from *tourner* 'turn'; only *ga*ur is* justifiable; *gafor is* due solely to the equivocal nature of writing.

But the tyranny of writing goes even further. By imposing itself upon the masses, spelling influences and modifies language. This happens only in highly literate languages where written texts play an important role. Then visual images lead to wrong pronunciations; such mistakes are really pathological.¹⁰ Spelling practices cause mistakes in the pronunciation of many French words. For

instance, there were two spellings for the surname Lefevre (from Latin *faber*), one popular and simple, the other learned and etymological: *Lefevre* and *Lefebvre*. Because *v* and *u* were not kept apart in the old system of writing, *Lefebvre* was read as *Lefdbure*, with a *b* that had never really existed and a *u* that was the result of ambiguity. Now, the latter form is actually pronounced.

Mispronunciations due to spelling will probably appear more frequently as time goes on, and the number of letters pronounced

¹⁰*Pathology* was given currency in French by Littré. It was used subsequently by Gilliéron and Darmesteter as well as by De Saussure. See note 6. [Tr.]

by speakers will probably increase. Some Parisians already pronounce the *t* in *sept femmes* 'seven women'; Darmesteter foresees the day when even the last two letters of *vingt* 'twenty' will be pronounced—truly an orthographic monstrosity.

Such phonic deformations belong to language but do not stem from its natural functioning. They are due to an external influence. Linguistics should put them into a special compartment for observation: they are teratological cases.[§]

Chapter VII

PHONOLOGY"

1. Definition

Whoever consciously deprives himself of the perceptible image of the written word runs the risk of perceiving only a shapeless and unmanageable mass. Taking away the written form is like depriving a beginning swimmer of his life belt.

To substitute immediately what is natural for what is artificial would be desirable; but this is impossible without first studying the sounds of language; apart from their graphic symbols, sounds are only vague notions, and the prop provided by writing, though deceptive, is still preferable. The first linguists, who knew nothing about the physiology of articulated sounds, were constantly falling into a trap; to me, it means a first step in the direction of truth, for the study of sounds themselves furnishes the desired prop. Modern

¹¹ The pronunciation [se] is now obsolescent. Cf. the trend toward pronouncing the *i* in *often*. [Tr.]

¹² De Saussure's terminology is reminiscent of the biological parlance of Gilliéron (e.g. in *Pathologie et thérapeutique verbales*, Paris, 1921). [Tr.]

¹³ De Saussure later modifies and expands his definition of phonology (see especially pp. 34, 42 ff., 117 ff. and 131). Only M. Grammont has followed De Saussure's practice. English and American linguists often use phonology to indicate the historical study of sounds or the study of the functioning of sounds in a particular language, phonetics for the study of the modalities of sounds used in speaking, and phonemics (corresponding to French *phonologie* and German *Phonologie*) for the study of the distinctive sounds of language. [Tr.]

linguists have finally seen the light; pursuing for their own ends investigations started by others (physiologists, theoreticians of singing, etc.), they have given linguistics an auxiliary science that has freed it from the written word.

The physiology of sounds (German *Laut-* or *Sprachphysiologie*) is often called phonetics (French *phonétique*, German *Phonetik*). To me this name seems inappropriate. Instead, I shall use *phonology*. For phonetics first designated—and should continue to designate the study of the evolutions of sounds. Two absolutely distinct disciplines should not be lumped together under the same name. Phonetics is a historical science; it analyzes events and changes, and moves through time. Phonology is outside time, for the articulatory mechanism never changes.

The two studies are distinct but not opposites. Phonetics is a basic part of the science of language; phonology—this bears repeating—is only an auxiliary discipline and belongs exclusively to speaking (see pp. 17 ff.). Just what phonational movements could accomplish if language did not exist is not clear; but they do not constitute language, and even after we have explained all the movements of the vocal apparatus necessary for the production of each auditory impression, we have in no way illuminated the problem of language. It is a system based on the mental opposition of auditory impressions, just as a tapestry is a work of art produced by the visual oppositions of threads of different colors; the important thing in analysis is the role of the oppositions, not the process through which the colors were obtained.

An outline of the phonological system is given in the Appendix; here I am trying merely to determine the extent to which phonology can help linguistics to escape the delusions of writing.

2. Phonological Writing

The linguist needs above all else a means of transcribing articulated sounds that will rule out all ambiguity. Actually, countless graphic systems have been proposed.

What are the requirements for a truly phonological system of writing? First, there should be one symbol for each element of the spoken chain. This requirement is not always considered. Thus English phonologists, concerned with classification rather than

again pronounced *hd#1*. The quality of the *l* is responsible for the difference between the pronunciation of the German word and French *aigle* 'eagle': *Hagel* has a closing *l* while the French word has an opening *l* followed by a mute *e* (eila).

PART ONE

General Principles

Chapter I

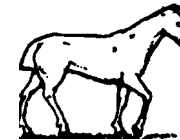
NATURE OF THE LINGUISTIC SIGN

1. *Sign, Signified, Signifier*

Some people regard language, when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only—a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names. For example:



ARBOR



EQUOS

etc.

etc.

This conception is open to criticism at several points. It assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words (on this point, see below, p. 111); it does not tell us whether a name is vocal or psychological in nature (*arbor*, for instance, can be considered from either viewpoint); finally, it lets us assume that the linking of a name and a thing is a very simple operation—an assumption that is anything but true. But this rather naive approach can bring us near the truth by showing us that the linguistic unit is a double entity, one formed by the associating of two terms.

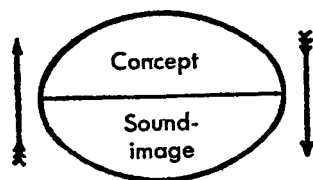
We have seen in considering the speaking-circuit (p. 11) that both terms involved in the linguistic sign are psychological and are

united in the brain by an associative bond. This point must be emphasized.

The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image.' The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses. The sound-image is sensory, and if I happen to call it "material," it is only in that sense, and by way of opposing it to the other term of the association, the concept, which is generally more abstract.

The psychological character of our sound-images becomes apparent when we observe our own speech. Without moving our lips or tongue, we can talk to ourselves or recite mentally a selection of verse. Because we regard the words of our language as sound-images, we must avoid speaking of the "phonemes" that make up the words. This term, which suggests vocal activity, is applicable to the spoken word only, to the realization of the inner image in discourse. We can avoid that misunderstanding by speaking of the *sounds* and *syllables* of a word provided we remember that the names refer to the sound-image.

The linguistic sign is then a two-sided psychological entity that can be represented by the drawing:

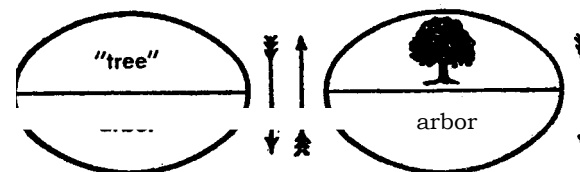


The two elements are intimately united, and each recalls the other. Whether we try to find the meaning of the Latin word *arbor* or the word that Latin uses to designate the concept "tree," it is

¹ The term sound-image may seem to be too restricted inasmuch as beside the representation of the sounds of a word there is also that of its articulation, the muscular image of the phonational act. But for F. de Saussure language is essentially a depository, a thing received from without (see p. 13). The sound-image is par excellence the natural representation of the word as a fact of potential language, outside any actual use of it in speaking. The motor side is thus implied or, in any event, occupies only a subordinate role with respect to the sound-image. [Ed.]

clear that only the associations sanctioned by that language appear to us to conform to reality, and we disregard whatever others might be imagined.

Our definition of the linguistic sign poses an important question of terminology. I call the combination of a concept and a sound-image a *sign*, but in current usage the term generally designates only a sound-image, a word, for example (*arbor*, etc.). One tends to forget that *arbor* is called a sign only because it carries the concept "tree," with the result that the idea of the sensory part implies the idea of the whole.



Ambiguity would disappear if the three notions involved here were designated by three names, each suggesting and opposing the others. I propose to retain the word *sign* [*signe*] to designate the whole and to replace *concept* and *sound-image* respectively by *signified* [*signifié*] and *signifier* [*signifiant*]; the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts. As regards *sign*, if I am satisfied with it, this is simply because I do not know of any word to replace it, the ordinary language suggesting no other.

The linguistic sign, as defined, has two primordial characteristics. In enunciating them I am also positing the basic principles of any study of this type.

2. Principle I: The Arbitrary Nature of the Sign

The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Since I mean by sign the whole that results from the associating of the signifier with the signified, I can simply say: *the linguistic sign is arbitrary*.

The idea of "sister" is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds *s-b-r* which serves as its signifier in French;

that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among languages and by the very existence of different languages: the signified "ox" has as its signifier *b-o-f* on one side of the border and *o-k-s* (*Ochs*) on the other.

No one disputes the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign, but it is often easier to discover a truth than to assign to it its proper place. Principle I dominates all the linguistics of language; its consequences are numberless. It is true that not all of them are equally obvious at first glance; only after many detours does one discover them, and with them the primordial importance of the principle.

One remark in passing: when semiology becomes organized as a science, the question will arise whether or not it properly includes modes of expression based on completely natural signs, such as pantomime. Supposing that the new science welcomes them, its main concern will still be the whole group of systems grounded on the arbitrariness of the sign. In fact, every means of expression used in society is based, in principle, on collective behavior or what amounts to the same thing—on convention. Polite formulas, for instance, though often imbued with a certain natural expressiveness (as in the case of a Chinese who greets his emperor by bowing down to the ground nine times), are nonetheless fixed by rule; it is this rule and not the intrinsic value of the gestures that obliges one to use them. Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process; that is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also the most characteristic; in this sense linguistics can become the master-pattern for **all** branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system.

The word *symbol* has been used to designate the linguistic sign, or more specifically, what is here called the signifier. Principle I in particular weighs against the use of this term. One characteristic of the symbol is that it is never wholly arbitrary; it is not empty, for there is the rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and the signified. The symbol of justice, a pair of scales, could not be replaced by just any other symbol, such as a chariot.

The word *arbitrary* also calls for comment. The term should not

imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker (we shall see below that the individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community); I mean that it is unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified.

In concluding let us consider two objections that might be raised to the establishment of Principle I:

1) *Onomatopoeia* might be used to prove that the choice of the signifier is not always arbitrary. But onomatopoeic formations are never organic elements of a linguistic system. Besides, their number is much smaller than is generally supposed. Words like French *fouet* 'whip' or *glas* 'knell' may strike certain ears with suggestive sonority, but to see that they have not always had this property we need only examine their Latin forms (*fo* is derived from *fagus* 'beech-tree,' *glas* from *classicum* 'sound of trumpet'). The quality of their present sounds, or rather the quality that is attributed to them, is a fortuitous result of phonetic evolution.

As for authentic onomatopoeic words (e.g. *glug-glug*, *tick-cock*, etc.), not only are they limited in number, but also they are chosen somewhat arbitrarily, for they are only approximate and more or less conventional imitations of certain sounds (cf. English *bow-wow* and French *ouaoua*). In addition, once these words have been introduced into the language, they are to a certain extent subjected to the same evolution—phonetic, morphological, etc.—that other words undergo (cf. *pigeon*, ultimately from Vulgar Latin *pipio*, derived in turn from an onomatopoeic formation): obvious proof that they lose something of their original character in order to assume that of the linguistic sign in general, which is unmotivated.

2) *Interjections*, closely related to onomatopoeia, can be attacked on the same grounds and come no closer to refuting our thesis. One is tempted to see in them spontaneous expressions of reality dictated, so to speak, by natural forces. But for most interjections we can show that there is no fixed bond between their signified and their signifier. We need only compare two languages on this point to see how much such expressions differ from one language to the next (e.g. the English equivalent of French *aie!* "ouch!"). We know, moreover, that many interjections were once

words with specific meanings (cf. French *diable!* 'darn!' *mordieu!* 'golly!' from *mort Dieu* 'God's death,' etc.)'

Onomatopoeic formations and interjections are of secondary importance, and their symbolic origin is in part open to dispute.

3. *Principle II: The Linear Nature of the Signifier*

The signifier, being auditory, is unfolded solely in time from which it gets the following characteristics: (a) it represents a span, and (b) the span is measurable in a single dimension; it is a line.

While Principle II is obvious, apparently linguists have always neglected to state it, doubtless because they found it too simple; nevertheless, it is fundamental, and its consequences are incalculable. Its importance equals that of Principle I; the whole mechanism of language depends upon it (see p. 122 f.). In contrast to visual signifiers (nautical signals, etc.) which can offer simultaneous groupings in several dimensions, auditory signifiers have at their command only the dimension of time. Their elements are presented in succession; they form a chain. This feature becomes readily apparent when they are represented in writing and the spatial line of graphic marks is substituted for succession in time.

Sometimes the linear nature of the signifier is not obvious. When I accent a syllable, for instance, it seems that I am concentrating more than one significant element on the same point. But this is an illusion; the syllable and its accent constitute only one phonational act. There is no duality within the act but only different oppositions to what precedes and what follows (on this subject, see p. 131).

* Cf. English *goodness!* and *zunds!* (from *God's wounds*). [Tr.]

Chapter II

IMMUTABILITY AND MUTABILITY OF THE SIGN

1. *Immutability*

The signifier, though to a appearances freely chosen with respect to the idea that it represents, is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it. The masses have no voice in the matter, and the signifier chosen by language could be replaced by no other. This fact, which seems to embody a contradiction, might be called colloquially "the stacked deck." We say to language: "Choose!" but we add: "It must be this sign and no other." No individual, even if he willed it, could modify in any way at all the choice that has been made; and what is more, the community itself cannot control so much as a single word; it is bound to the existing language.

No longer can language be identified with a contract pure and simple, and it is precisely from this viewpoint that the linguistic sign is a particularly interesting object of study; for language furnishes the best proof that a law accepted by a community is a thing that is tolerated and not a rule to which all freely consent.

Let us first see why we cannot control the linguistic sign and then draw together the important consequences that issue from the phenomenon.

No matter what period we choose or how far back we go, language always appears as a heritage of the preceding period. We might conceive of an act by which, at a given moment, names were assigned to things and a contract was formed between concepts and sound-images; but such an act has never been recorded. The notion that things might have happened like that was prompted by our acute awareness of the arbitrary nature of the sign.

No society, in fact, knows or has ever known language other than as a product inherited from preceding generations, and one to be accepted as such. That is why the question of the origin of speech

is not so important as it is generally assumed to be. The question is not even worth asking; the only real object of linguistics is the normal, regular life of an existing idiom. A particular language-state is always the product of historical forces, and these forces explain why the sign is unchangeable, i.e. why it resists any arbitrary substitution.

Nothing is explained by saying that language is something inherited and leaving it at that. Can not existing and inherited laws be modified from one moment to the next?

To meet that objection, we must put language into its social setting and frame the question just as we would for any other social institution. How are other social institutions transmitted? This more general question includes the question of immutability. We must first determine the greater or lesser amounts of freedom that the other institutions enjoy; in each instance it will be seen that a different proportion exists between fixed tradition and the free action of society. The next step is to discover why in a given category, the forces of the first type carry more weight or less weight than those of the second. Finally, coming back to language, we must ask why the historical factor of transmission dominates it entirely and prohibits any sudden widespread change.

There are many possible answers to the question. For example, one might point to the fact that succeeding generations are not superimposed on one another like the drawers of a piece of furniture, but fuse and interpenetrate, each generation embracing individuals of all ages-with the result that modifications of language are not tied to the succession of generations. One might also recall the sum of the efforts required for learning the mother language and conclude that a general change would be impossible. Again, it might be added that reflection does not enter into the active use of an idiom-speakers are largely unconscious of the laws of language; and if they are unaware of them, how could they modify them? Even if they were aware of these laws, we may be sure that their awareness would seldom lead to criticism, for people are generally satisfied with the language they have received.

The foregoing considerations are important but not topical. The following are more basic and direct, and all the others depend on them.

1) *The arbitrary nature of the sign.* Above, we had to accept the theoretical possibility of change; further reflection suggests that the arbitrary nature of the sign is really what protects language from any attempt to modify it. Even if people were more conscious of language than they are, they would still not know how to discuss it. The reason is simply that any subject in order to be discussed must have a reasonable basis. It is possible, for instance, to discuss whether the monogamous form of marriage is more reasonable than the polygamous form and to advance arguments to support either side. One could also argue about a system of symbols, for the symbol has a rational relationship with the thing signified (see p. 68); but language is a system of arbitrary signs and lacks the necessary basis, the solid ground for discussion. There is no reason for preferring *soeur* to *sister*, *Ochs* to *boeuf*, etc.

2) *The multiplicity of signs necessary to form any language.* Another important deterrent to linguistic change is the great number of signs that must go into the making of any language. A system of writing comprising twenty to forty letters can in case of need be replaced by another system. The same would be true of language if it contained a limited number of elements; but linguistic signs are numberless.

3) *The over-complexity of the system.* A language constitutes a system. In this one respect (as we shall see later) language is not completely arbitrary but is ruled to some extent by logic; it is here also, however, that the inability of the masses to transform it becomes apparent. The system is a complex mechanism that can be grasped only through reflection; the very ones who use it daily are ignorant of it. We can conceive of a change only through the intervention of specialists, grammarians, logicians, etc.; but experience shows us that all such meddlings have failed.

4) *Collective inertia toward innovation.* Language-and this consideration surpasses all the others-is at every moment everybody's concern; spread throughout society and manipulated by it, language is something used daily by all. Here we are unable to set up any comparison between it and other institutions. The prescriptions of codes, religious rites, nautical signals, etc., involve only a certain number of individuals simultaneously and then only

during a limited period of time; in language, on the contrary, everyone participates at all times, and that is why it is constantly being influenced by all. This capital fact suffices to show the impossibility of revolution. Of all social institutions, language is least amenable to initiative. It blends with the life of society, and the latter, inert by nature, is a prime conservative force.

But to say that language is a product of social forces does not suffice to show clearly that it is unfree; remembering that it is always the heritage of the preceding period, we must add that these social forces are linked with time. Language is checked not only by the weight of the collectivity but also by time. These two are inseparable. At every moment solidarity with the past checks freedom of choice. We say *man* and *dog*. This does not prevent the existence in the total phenomenon of a bond between the two antithetical forces-arbitrary convention by virtue of which choice is free and time which causes choice to be fixed. Because the sign is arbitrary, it follows no law other than that of tradition, and because it is based on tradition, it is arbitrary.

2. Mutability

Time, which insures the continuity of language, wields another influence apparently contradictory to the first: the more or less rapid change of linguistic signs. In a certain sense, therefore, we can speak of both the immutability and the mutability of the sign.'

In the last analysis, the two facts are interdependent: the sign is exposed to alteration because it perpetuates itself. What predominates in **all** change is the persistence of the old substance; disregard for the past is only relative. That is why the principle of change is based on the principle of continuity.

Change in time takes many forms, on any one of which an important chapter in linguistics might be written. Without entering into detail, let us **see** what things need to be delineated.

First, let there be no mistake about the meaning that we attach to the word change. One might think that it deals especially with

' It would be wrong to reproach F. de Saussure for being illogical or paradoxical in attributing two contradictory qualities to language. By opposing two striking terms, he wanted only to emphasize the fact that language changes in spite of the inability of speakers to change it. One can also say that it is intangible but not unchangeable. [Ed.]

phonetic changes undergone by the signifier, or perhaps changes in meaning which affect the signified concept. That view would be inadequate. Regardless of what the forces of change are, whether in isolation or in combination, they always result in *a shift in the relationship between the signified and the signifier*.

Here are some examples. Latin *necare* 'kill' became *noyer* 'drown' in French. Both the sound-image and the concept changed; but it is useless to separate the two parts of the phenomenon; it is sufficient to state with respect to the whole that the bond between the idea and the sign was loosened, and that there was a shift in their relationship. If instead of comparing Classical Latin *necare* with French *noyer*, we contrast the former term with *necare* of Vulgar Latin of the fourth or fifth century meaning 'drown' the case is a little different; but here again; although there is no appreciable change in the signifier, there is a shift in the relationship between the idea and the sign.'

Old German *dritleil* 'one-third' became *Drittel* in Modern German. Here, although the concept remained the same, the relationship was changed in two ways: the signifier was changed not only in its material aspect but also in its grammatical form; the idea of *Teil* 'part' is no longer implied; *Drittel* is a simple word. In one way or another there is always a shift in the relationship.

In Anglo-Saxon the preliterate form *jot* 'foot' remained while its plural "*foti* became *fet* (Modern English *feet*). Regardless of the other changes that are implied, one thing is certain: there was a shift in their relationship; other correspondences between the phonetic substance and the idea emerged.

Language is radically powerless to defend itself against the forces which from one moment to the next are shifting the relationship between the signified and the signifier. This is one of the consequences of the arbitrary nature of the sign.

Unlike language, other human institutions-customs, laws, etc. -are all based in varying degrees on the natural relations of things; **all** have of necessity adapted the means employed to the ends pursued. Even fashion in dress is not entirely arbitrary; we can deviate only slightly from the conditions dictated by the human

' From May to July of 1911, De Saussure used interchangeably the old terminology (*idea* and *sign*) and the new (*signified* and *signifier*). [Tr.]

body. Language is limited by nothing in the choice of means, for apparently nothing would prevent the associating of any idea whatsoever with just any sequence of sounds.

To emphasize the fact that language is a genuine institution, Whitney quite justly insisted upon the arbitrary nature of signs; and by so doing, he placed linguistics on its true axis. But he did not follow through and see that the arbitrariness of language radically separates it from all other institutions. This is apparent from the way in which language evolves. Nothing could be more complex. As it is a product of both the social force and time, no one can change anything in it, and on the other hand, the arbitrariness of its signs theoretically entails the freedom of establishing just any relationship between phonetic substance and ideas. The result is that each of the two elements united in the sign maintains its own life to a degree unknown elsewhere, and that language changes, or rather evolves, under the influence of all the forces which can affect either sounds or meanings. The evolution is inevitable; there is no example of a single language that resists it. After a certain period of time, some obvious shifts can always be recorded.

Mutability is so inescapable that it even holds true for artificial languages. Whoever creates a language controls it only so long as it is not in circulation; from the moment when it fulfills its mission and becomes the property of everyone, control is lost. Take Esperanto as an example; if it succeeds, will it escape the inexorable law? Once launched, it is quite likely that Esperanto will enter upon a fully semiological life; it will be transmitted according to laws which have nothing in common with those of its logical creation, and there will be no turning backwards. A man proposing a fixed language that posterity would have to accept for what it is would be like a hen hatching a duck's egg: the language created by him would be borne along, willy-nilly, by the current that engulfs all languages.

Signs are governed by a principle of general semiology: continuity in time is coupled to change in time; this is confirmed by orthographic systems, the speech of deaf-mutes, etc.

But what supports the necessity for change? I might be reproached for not having been as explicit on this point as on the principle of immutability. This is because I failed to distinguish

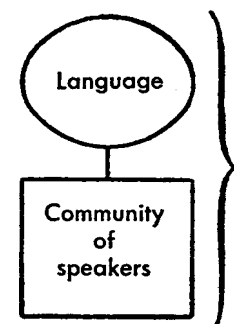
between the different forces of change. We must consider their great variety in order to understand the extent to which they are necessary.

The causes of continuity are *a priori* within the scope of the observer, but the causes of change in time are not. It is better not to attempt giving an exact account at this point, but to restrict discussion to the shifting of relationships in general. Time changes all things; there is no reason why language should escape this universal law.

Let us review the main points of our discussion and relate them to the principles set up in the Introduction.

1) Avoiding sterile word definitions, within the total phenomenon represented by speech we first singled out two parts: language and speaking. Language is speech less speaking. It is the whole set of linguistic habits which allow an individual to understand and to be understood.

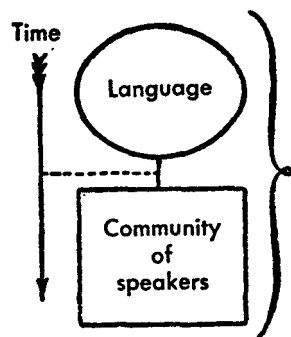
2) But this definition still leaves language outside its social context; it makes language something artificial since it includes only the individual part of reality; for the realization of language, a community of speakers [*masse parlante*] is necessary. Contrary to all appearances, language never exists apart from the social fact, for it is a semiological phenomenon. Its social nature is one of its inner characteristics. Its complete definition confronts us with two inseparable entities, as shown in this drawing:



But under the conditions described language is not living-it has only potential life; we have considered only the social, not the historical, fact.

3) The linguistic sign is arbitrary; language, as defined, would therefore seem to be a system which, because it depends solely on a rational principle, is free and can be organized at will. Its social nature, considered independently, does not definitely rule out this viewpoint. Doubtless it is not on a purely logical basis that group psychology operates; one must consider everything that deflects reason in actual contacts between individuals. But the thing which keeps language from being a simple convention that can be modified at the whim of interested parties is not its social nature; it is rather the action of -time combined with the social force. If time is left out, the linguistic facts are incomplete and no conclusion is possible.

If we considered language in time, without the community of speakers—imagine an isolated individual living for several centuries—we probably would notice no change; time would not influence language. Conversely, if we considered the community of speakers without considering time, we would not see the effect of the social forces that influence language. To represent the actual facts, we must then add to our first drawing a sign to indicate passage of time:



Language is no longer free, for time will allow the social forces at work on it to carry out their effects. This brings us back to the principle of continuity, which cancels freedom. But continuity necessarily implies change, varying degrees of shifts in the relationship between the signified and the signifier.

Chapter III

STATIC AND EVOLUTIONARY LINGUISTICS

1. *Inner Duality of All Sciences Concerned with Values*

Very few linguists suspect that the intervention of the factor of time creates difficulties peculiar to linguistics and opens to their science two completely divergent paths.

Most other sciences are unaffected by this radical duality; time produces no special effects in them. Astronomy has found that the stars undergo considerable changes but has not been obliged on this account to split itself into two disciplines. Geology is concerned with successions at almost every instant, but its study of strata does not thereby become a radically distinct discipline. Law has its descriptive science and its historical science; no one opposes one to the other. The political history of states is unfolded solely in time, but a historian depicting a particular period does not work apart from history. Conversely, the science of political institutions is essentially descriptive, but if the need arises it can easily deal with a historical question without disturbing its unity.

On the contrary, that duality is already forcing itself upon the economic sciences. Here, in contrast to the other sciences, political economy and economic history constitute two clearly separated disciplines within a single science; the works that have recently appeared on these subjects point up the distinction. Proceeding as they have, economists are—without being well aware of it—obeying an inner necessity. A similar necessity obliges us to divide linguistics into two parts, each with its own principle. Here as in political economy we are confronted with the notion of *value*; both sciences are concerned with a *system for equating things of different orders—labor and wages in one and a signified and signifier in the other.*

Certainly all sciences would profit by indicating more precisely the co-ordinates along which their subject matter is aligned. Every-

psychological relations that bind together coexisting terms and form a system in the collective mind of speakers.

Diachronic linguistics, on the contrary, will study relations that bind together successive terms not perceived by the collective mind but substituted for each other without forming a system.

PART TWO

Synchronic Linguistics

Chapter I

GENERALITIES

The aim of general synchronic linguistics is to set up the fundamental principles of any idiosynchronic system, the constituents of any language-state. Many of the items already explained in Part One belong rather to synchrony; for instance, the general properties of the sign are an integral part of synchrony although they were used to prove the necessity of separating the two linguistics.

To synchrony belongs everything called "general grammar," for it is only through language-states that the different relations which are the province of grammar are established. In the following chapters we shall consider only the basic principles necessary for approaching the more special problems of static linguistics or explaining in detail a language-state.

The study of static linguistics is generally much more difficult than the study of historical linguistics. Evolutionary facts are more concrete and striking; their observable relations tie together successive terms that are easily grasped; it is easy, often even amusing, to follow a series of changes. But the linguistics that penetrates values and coexisting relations presents much greater difficulties.

In practice a language-state is not a point but rather a certain span of time during which the sum of the modifications that have supervened is minimal. The span may cover ten years, a generation, a century, or even more. It is possible for a language to change hardly at all over a long span and then to undergo radical transformations within a few years. Of two languages that exist side by side during a given period, one may evolve drastically and the other practically not at all; study would have to be diachronic in the former instance, synchronic in the latter. An absolute state is defined by the absence of changes, and since language changes

somewhat in spite of everything, studying a language-state means in practice disregarding changes of little importance, just as mathematicians disregard infinitesimal quantities in certain calculations, such as logarithms.

Political history makes a distinction between *era*, a point in time, and *period*, which embraces a certain duration. Still, the historian speaks of the Antoninian Era, the Era of the Crusades, etc. when he considers a set of characteristics which remained constant during those times. One might also say that static linguistics deals with eras. But *state* is preferable. The beginning and the end of an era are generally characterized by some rather brusque revolution that tends to modify the existing state of affairs. The word *state* avoids giving the impression that anything similar occurs in language. Besides, precisely because it is borrowed from history, the term *era* makes one think less of language itself than of the circumstances that surround it and condition it; in short, it suggests rather the idea of what we called external linguistics (see p. 20).

Besides, delimitation in time is not the only difficulty that we encounter in defining a language-state: space presents the same problem. In short, a concept of a language-state can be only approximate. In static linguistics, as in most sciences, no course of reasoning is possible without the usual simplification of data.

Chapter II

THE CONCRETE ENTITIES OF LANGUAGE

1. Definition: Entity and Unit

The signs that make up language are not abstractions but real objects (see p. 15); signs and their relations are what linguistics studies; they are the *concrete entities* of our science.

Let us first recall two principles that dominate the whole issue:

1) The linguistic entity exists only through the associating of the signifier with the signified (see p. 66 ff.). Whenever only one ele-

ment is retained, the entity vanishes; instead of a concrete object we are faced with a mere abstraction. We constantly risk grasping only a part of the entity and thinking that we are embracing it in its totality; this would happen, for example, if we divided the spoken chain into syllables, for the syllable has no value except in phonology. A succession of sounds is linguistic only if it supports an idea. Considered independently, it is material for a physiological study, and nothing more than that.

The same is true of the signified as soon as it is separated from its signifier. Considered independently, concepts like "house," "white," "see," etc. belong to psychology. They become linguistic entities only when associated with sound-images; in language, a concept is a quality of its phonic substance just as a particular slice of sound is a quality of the concept.

The two-sided linguistic unit has often been compared with the human person, made up of the body and the soul. The comparison is hardly satisfactory. A better choice would be a chemical compound like water, a combination of hydrogen and oxygen; taken separately, neither element has any of the properties of water.

2) The linguistic entity is not accurately defined until it is *delimited*, i.e. separated from everything that surrounds it on the phonic chain. These delimited entities or units stand in opposition to each other in the mechanism of language.

One is at first tempted to liken linguistic signs to visual signs, which can exist in space without becoming confused, and to assume that separation of the significant elements can be accomplished in the same way, without recourse to any mental process. The word "form," which is often used to indicate them (cf. the expression "verbal form," "noun form") gives support to the mistake. But we know that the main characteristic of the sound-chain is that it is linear (see p. 70). Considered by itself, it is only a line, a continuous ribbon along which the ear perceives no self-sufficient and clear-cut division; to divide the chain, we must call in meanings. When we hear an unfamiliar language, we are at a loss to say how the succession of sounds should be analyzed, for analysis is impossible if only the phonic side of the linguistic phenomenon is considered. But when we know the meaning and function that must

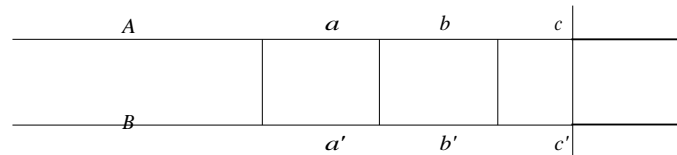
be attributed to each part of the chain, we see the parts detach themselves from each other and the shapeless ribbon break into segments. Yet there is nothing material in the analysis.

To summarize: language does not offer itself as a set of pre-delimited signs that need only be studied according to their meaning and arrangement; it is a confused mass, and only attentiveness and familiarization will reveal its particular elements. The unit has no special phonic character, and the only definition that we can give it is this: it is *a slice of sound which to the exclusion of everything that precedes and follows -it in the spoken chain is the signifier of a certain concept.*

2. Method of Delimitation

One who knows a language singles out its units by a very simple method-in theory, at any rate. His method consists of using speaking as the source material of language and picturing it as two parallel chains, one of concepts (A) and the other of sound-images (B)

In an accurate delimitation, the division along the chain of sound-images (*a, b, c*) will correspond to the division along the chain of concepts (*a', b', c'*)



Take French *si'lapra*. Can we cut the chain after *l* and make *siv* a unit? No, we need only consider the concepts to see that the division is wrong. Neither is the syllabic division *sii-la-pra* to be taken for granted as having linguistic value. The only possible divisions are these: (1) *si-cX-la-pra* (*si je la prends* 'if I take it') and (2) *si- l-apra* (*si je l'apprends* 'if I learn it'), and they are determined by the meaning that is attached to the words.'

To verify the result of the procedure and be assured that we are really dealing with a unit, we must be able in comparing a series of

' Cf. the sounds Uurmam] in English: "your mine" or "you're mine." [Tr.]

sentences in which the same unit occurs to separate the unit from the rest of the context and find in each instance that meaning justifies the delimitation. Take the two French phrases *lafgrsdiiavaa* (*la force du vent* 'the force of the wind'), and *abudfgrs* (*a bout de force* 'exhausted'; *literally*: 'at the end of one's force'). In each phrase the same concept coincides with the same phonic slice, *fgrs*; thus it is certainly a linguistic unit. But in *ilmafgrsaparle* (*il me force a parler* 'he forces me to talk') *f9rs* has an entirely different meaning: it is therefore another unit.

3. Practical Difficulties of Delimitation

The method outlined above is very simple ill theory, but is it easy to apply? We are tempted to think so if we start from the notion that the units to be isolated are words. For what is a sentence except a combination of words? And what can be grasped more readily than words? Going back to the example given above, we may say that the analysis of the spoken chain *sdlapra* resulted in the delimiting of four units, and that the units are words: *si-je-l-apprends*. But we are immediately put on the defensive on noting that there has been much disagreement about the nature of the word, and a little reflection shows that the usual meaning of the term is incompatible with the notion of concrete unit.

To be convinced, we need only think of French *cheval* 'horse' and its plural from *chevaux*. People readily say that they are two forms of the same word; but considered as wholes, they are certainly two distinct things with respect to both meaning and sound. In *mwa* (*mois*, as in *le mois de Septembre* 'the month of September') and *mwaz* (*mois*, in *un mois aprbs* 'a month later') there are also two forms of the same word, and there is no question of a concrete unit. The meaning is the same, but the slices of sound are different. As soon as we try to liken concrete units to words, we face a dilemma: we must either ignore the relation-which is nonetheless evident-that binds *cheval* and *chevaux*, the two sounds of *mwa* and *mwaz*, etc. and say that they are different words, or instead of concrete units be satisfied with the abstraction that links the different forms of the same word. The concrete unit must be sought, not in the word, but elsewhere. Besides, many words are

complex units, and we can easily single out their subunits (suffixes, prefixes, radicals). Derivatives like *pain-ful* and *delightful* can be divided into distinct parts, each having an obvious meaning and function. Conversely, some units are larger than words: compounds (French *porte-plume* 'penholder'), locutions (*S'il VOUS plait* 'please'), inflected forms (*il a eté* 'he has been'), etc. But these units resist delimitation as strongly as do words proper, making it extremely difficult to disentangle the interplay of units that are found in a sound-chain and to specify the concrete elements on which a language functions.

Doubtless speakers are unaware of the practical difficulties of delimiting units. Anything that is of even the slightest significance seems like a concrete element to them and they never fail to single it out in discourse. But it is one thing to feel the quick, delicate interplay of units and quite another to account for them through methodical analysis.

A rather widely held theory makes sentences the concrete units of language: we speak only in sentences and subsequently single out the words. But to what extent does the sentence belong to language (see p. 124)? If it belongs to speaking, the sentence cannot pass for the linguistic unit. But let us suppose that this difficulty is set aside. If we picture to ourselves in their totality the sentences that could be uttered, their most striking characteristic is that in no way do they resemble each other. We are at first tempted to liken the immense diversity of sentences to the equal diversity of the individuals that make up a zoological species. But this is an illusion: the characteristics that animals of the same species have in common are much more significant than the differences that separate them. In sentences, on the contrary, diversity is dominant, and when we look for the link that bridges their diversity, again we find, without having looked for it, the word with its grammatical characteristics and thus fall back into the same difficulties as before.

4. Conclusion

In most sciences the question of units never even arises: the units are delimited from the outset. In zoology, the animal immediately presents itself. Astronomy works with units that are separated in

space, the stars. The chemist can study the nature and composition of potassium bichromate without doubting for an instant that this is a well-defined object.

When a science has no concrete units that are immediately recognizable, it is because they are not necessary. In history, for example, is the unit the individual, the era, or the nation? We do not know. But what does it matter? We can study history without knowing the answer.

But just as the game of chess is entirely in the combination of the different chesspieces, language is characterized as a system based entirely on the opposition of its concrete units. We can neither dispense with becoming acquainted with them nor take a single step without coming back to them; and still, delimiting them is such a delicate problem that we may wonder at first whether they really exist.

Language then has the strange, striking characteristic of not having entities that are perceptible at the outset and yet of not permitting us to doubt that they exist and that their functioning constitutes it. Doubtless we have here a trait that distinguishes language from all other semiological institutions.

Chapter III

IDENTITIES, REALITIES, VALUES

The statement just made brings us squarely up against a problem that is all the more important because any basic notion in static linguistics depends directly on our conception of the unit and even blends with it. This is what I should like successively to demonstrate with respect to the notions of synchronic identity, reality, and value.

A. What is a synchronic *identity*? Here it is not a question of the identity that links the French negation *pas* 'not' to Latin *passum*, a diachronic identity that will be dealt with elsewhere (see p. 181), but rather of the equally interesting identity by virtue of which we

state that two sentences like *je ne sais pas* 'I don't know' and *ne dites pas cela* 'don't say that' contain the same element. An idle question, one might say; there is identity because the same slice of sound carries the same meaning in the two sentences. But that explanation is unsatisfactory, for if the correspondence of slices of sound and concepts is proof of identity (see above, p. 105, *la force du vent: a bout de force*), the reverse is not true. There can be identity without this correspondence. When *Gentlemen!* is repeated several times during a lecture, the listener has the feeling that the same expression is being used each time, and yet variations in utterance and intonation make for appreciable phonic differences in diverse contexts differences just as appreciable as those that elsewhere separate different words (cf. French *pomme* 'apple' and *paume* 'palm,' *goutte* 'drop' and *je goute* 'I taste,' *fuir* 'flee,' and *fouir* 'stuff,' etc.);² besides, the feeling of identity persists even though there is no absolute identity between one *Gentlemen!* and the next from a semantic viewpoint either. In the same vein, a word can express quite different ideas without compromising its identity (cf. French *adopter* une mode 'adopt a fashion' and *adopter* un enfant 'adopt a child,' *la fleur* du pommier 'the flower of the apple tree' and *la fleur* de la noblesse 'the flower of nobility,' etc.).

The linguistic mechanism is geared to differences and identities, the former being only the counterpart of the latter. Everywhere then, the problem of identities appears; moreover, it blends partially with the problem of entities and units and is only a complication-illuminating at some points-of the larger problem. This characteristic stands out if we draw some comparisons with facts taken from outside speech. For instance, we speak of the identity of two "8:25 p.m. Geneva-to-Paris" trains that leave at twenty-four hour intervals. We feel that it is the same train each day, yet everything-the locomotive, coaches, personnel-is probably different. Or if a street is demolished, then rebuilt, we say that it is the same street even though in a material sense, perhaps nothing of the old one remains. Why can a street be completely rebuilt and still be the same? Because it does not constitute a purely material entity; it is based on certain conditions that are distinct from the materials

² Cf. English *bought: boat, naught: note, far: for: four* (for many speakers). [Tr.]

that fit the conditions, e.g. its location with respect to other streets. Similarly, what makes the express is its hour of departure, its route, and in general every circumstance that sets it apart from other trains. Whenever the same conditions are fulfilled, the same entities are obtained. Still, the entities are not abstract since we cannot conceive of a street or train outside its material realization.

Let us contrast the preceding examples with the completely different case of a suit which has been stolen from me and which I find in the window of a second-hand store. Here we have a material entity that consists solely of the inert substance-the cloth, its lining, its trimmings, etc. Another suit would not be mine regardless of its similarity to it. But linguistic identity is not that of the garment; it is that of the train and the street. Each time I say the word *Gentlemen!* I renew its substance; each utterance is a new phonic act and a new psychological act. The bond between the two uses of the same word depends neither on material identity nor on sameness in meaning but on elements which must be sought after and which will point up the true nature of linguistic units.

B. What is a synchronic *reality*? To what concrete or abstract elements of language can the name be applied?

Take as an example the distinction between the parts of speech. What supports the classing of words as substantives, adjectives, etc.? Is it done in the name of a purely logical, extra-linguistic principle that is applied to grammar from without like the degrees of longitude and latitude on the globe? Or does it correspond to something that has its place in the system of language and is conditioned by it? In a word, is it a synchronic reality? The second supposition seems probable, but the first could also be defended. In the French sentence *ces gants sont bon marche* 'these gloves are cheap,' is *bon marche* an adjective? It is apparently an adjective from a logical viewpoint but not from the viewpoint of grammar, for *bon marche* fails to behave as an adjective (it is invariable, it never precedes its noun, etc.); in addition, it is composed of two words. Now the distinction between parts of speech is exactly what should serve to classify the words of language. How can a group of words be attributed to one of the "parts"? But to say that *bon* 'good' is an adjective and *marche* 'market' a substantive explains nothing. We are then dealing with a defective or incomplete clas-

sification; the division of words into substantives, verbs, adjectives, [etc. is](#) not an undeniable linguistic reality.'

Linguistics accordingly works continuously with concepts forged by grammarians without knowing whether or not the concepts actually correspond to the constituents of the system of language. But how can we find out? And if they are phantoms, what realities can we place in opposition to them?

To be rid of illusions we must first be convinced that the concrete entities of language are not directly accessible. If we try to grasp them, we come into contact with the true facts. Starting from there, we can set up all the classifications that linguistics needs for arranging all the facts at its disposal. On the other hand, to base the classifications on anything except concrete entities—to say, for example, that the parts of speech are the constituents of language simply because they correspond to categories of logic—is to forget that there are no linguistic facts apart from the phonic substance cut into significant elements.

C. Finally, not every idea touched upon in this chapter differs basically from what we have elsewhere called *values*. A new comparison with the set of chessmen will bring out this point (see pp. 88 ff.). Take a knight, for instance. By itself is it an element in the game? Certainly not, for by its material make-up—outside its square and the other conditions of the game—it means nothing to the player; it becomes a real, concrete element only when endowed with value and wedded to it. Suppose that the piece happens to be destroyed or lost during a game. Can it be replaced by an equivalent piece? Certainly. Not only another knight but even a figure shorn of any resemblance to a knight can be declared identical provided the same value is attributed to it. We see then that in semiological systems like language, where elements hold each other in equilibrium in accordance with fixed rules, the notion of identity blends with that of value and *vice versa*.

In a word, that is why the notion of value envelopes the notions of unit, concrete entity, and reality. But if there is no fundamental

¹ Form, function, and meaning combine to make the classing of the parts of speech even more difficult in English than in French. Cf. *ten foot: ten feet* in *a ten foot pole: the pole is ten feet long.* [Tr.]

difference between these diverse notions, it follows that the problem can be stated successively in several ways. Whether we try to define the unit, reality, concrete entity, or value, we always come back to the central question that dominates all of static linguistics.

It would be interesting from a practical viewpoint to begin with units, to determine what they are and to account for their diversity by classifying them. It would be necessary to search for the reason for dividing language into words—for in spite of the difficulty of defining it, the word is a unit that strikes the mind, something central in the mechanism of language—but that is a subject which by itself would fill a volume. Next we would have to classify the subunits, then the larger units, etc. By determining in this way the elements that it manipulates, synchronic linguistics would completely fulfill its task, for it would relate all synchronic phenomena to their fundamental principle. It cannot be said that this basic problem has ever been faced squarely or that its scope and difficulty have been understood; in the matter of language, people have always been satisfied with ill-defined units.

Still, in spite of their capital importance, it is better to approach the problem of units through the study of value, for in my opinion value is of prime importance.

Chapter IV

LINGUISTIC VALUE

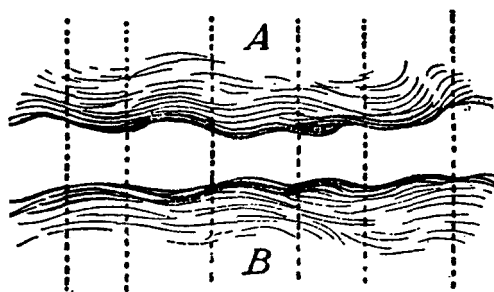
1. *Language as Organized Thought Coupled with Sound*

To prove that language is only a system of pure values, it is enough to consider the two elements involved in its functioning: ideas and sounds.

Psychologically our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction

between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language.

Against the floating realm of thought, would sounds by themselves yield predelimited entities? No more so than ideas. Phonic substance is neither more fixed nor more rigid than thought; it is not a mold into which thought must of necessity fit but a plastic substance divided in turn into distinct parts to furnish the signifiers needed by thought. The linguistic fact can therefore be pictured in its totality-i.e. language-as a series of contiguous subdivisions marked off on both the indefinite plane of jumbled ideas (A) and the equally vague plane of sounds (B). The following diagram gives a rough idea of it:



The characteristic role of language with respect to thought is not to create a material phonic means for expressing ideas but to serve as a link between thought and sound, under conditions that of necessity bring about the reciprocal delimitations of units. Thought, chaotic by nature, has to become ordered in the process of its decomposition. Neither are thoughts given material form nor are sounds transformed into mental entities; the somewhat mysterious fact is rather that "thought-sound" implies division, and that language works out its units while taking shape between two shapeless masses. Visualize the air in contact with a sheet of water; if the atmospheric pressure changes, the surface of the water will be broken up into a series of divisions, waves; the waves resemble the union or coupling of thought with phonic substance.

Language might be called the domain of articulations, using the

word as it was defined earlier (see p. 10). Each linguistic term is a member, an *articulus* in which an idea is fixed in a sound and a sound becomes the sign of an idea.

Language can also be compared with a sheet of paper: thought is the front and the sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language, one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound; the division could be accomplished only abstractedly, and the result would be either pure psychology or pure phonology.

Linguistics then works in the borderland where the elements of sound and thought combine; *their combination produces a form, not a substance.*

These views give a better understanding of what was said before (see pp. 67 ff.) about the arbitrariness of signs. Not only are the two domains that are linked by the linguistic fact shapeless and confused, but the choice of a given slice of sound to name a given idea is completely arbitrary. If this were not true, the notion of value would be compromised, for it would include an externally imposed element. But actually values remain entirely relative, and that is why the bond between the sound and the idea is radically arbitrary.

The arbitrary nature of the sign explains in turn why the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up; by himself the individual is incapable of fixing a single value.

In addition, the idea of value, as defined, shows that to consider a term as simply the union of a certain sound with a certain concept is grossly misleading. To define it in this way would isolate the term from its system; it would mean assuming that one can start from the terms and construct the system by adding them together when, on the contrary, it is from the interdependent whole that one must start and through analysis obtain its elements.

To develop this thesis, we shall study value successively from the viewpoint of the signified or concept (Section 2), the signifier (Section 3), and the complete sign (Section 4).

Being unable to seize the concrete entities or units of language directly, we shall work with words. While the word does not con-

form exactly to the definition of the linguistic unit (see p. 105), it at least bears a rough resemblance to the unit and has the advantage of being concrete; consequently, we shall use words as specimens equivalent to real terms in a synchronic system, and the principles that we evolve with respect to words will be valid for entities in general.

2. *Linguistic Value from a Conceptual Viewpoint*

When we speak of the value of a word, we generally think first of its property of standing for an idea, and this is in fact one side of linguistic value. But if this is true, how does *value* differ from *signification*? Might the two words be synonyms? I think not, although it is easy to confuse them, since the confusion results not so much from their similarity as from the subtlety of the distinction that they mark.

From a conceptual viewpoint, value is doubtless one element in signification, and it is difficult to see how signification can be dependent upon value and still be distinct from it. But we must clear up the issue or risk reducing language to a simple naming-process (see p. 65).

Let us first take signification as it is generally understood and as it was pictured on page 67. As the arrows in the drawing show, it is only the counterpart of the sound-image. Everything that occurs concerns only the sound-image and the concept when we look upon the word as independent and self-contained.



But here is the paradox: on the one hand the concept seems to be the counterpart of the sound-image, and on the other hand the sign itself is in turn the counterpart of the other signs of language.

Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others, as in the diagram:



How, then, can value be confused with signification, i.e. the counterpart of the sound-image? It seems impossible to liken the relations represented here by horizontal arrows to those represented above (p. 114) by vertical arrows. Putting it another way-and again taking up the example of the sheet of paper that is cut in two (see p. 113)-it is clear that the observable relation between the different pieces A, B, C, D, [etc. is](#) distinct from the relation between the front and back of the same piece as in A/A', **B/B'**, etc.

To resolve the issue, let us observe from the outset that even outside language all values are apparently governed by the same paradoxical principle. They are always composed:

- (1) of a *dissimilar* thing that can be *exchanged* for the thing of which the value is to be determined; and
- (2) of *similar* things that can be *compared* with the thing of which the value is to be determined.

Both factors are necessary for the existence of a value. To determine what a five-franc piece is worth one must therefore know: (1) that it can be exchanged for a fixed quantity of a different thing, e.g. bread; and (2) that it can be compared with a similar value of the same system, e.g. a one-franc piece, or with coins of another system (a dollar, etc.). In the same way a word can be exchanged for something disimilar, an idea; besides, it can be compared with something of the same nature, another word. Its value is therefore not fixed so long as one simply states that it can be "exchanged" for a given concept, i.e. that it has this or that signification: one must also compare it with similar values, with other words that stand in opposition to it. Its content is really fixed only by the concurrence of everything that exists outside it. Being part of a system, it is endowed not only with a signification but also and especially with a value, and this is something quite different.

A few examples will show clearly that this is true. Modern French *mouton* can have the same signification as English *sheep* but not the same value, and this for several reasons, particularly because in speaking of a piece of meat ready to be served on the

table, English uses *mutton* and not *sheep*. The difference in value between *sheep* and *mouton* is due to the fact that *sheep* has beside it a second term while the French word does not.

Within the same language, all words used to express related ideas limit each other reciprocally; synonyms like French *redouter* 'dread,' *craindre* 'fear,' and *avoir peur* 'be afraid' have value only through their opposition: if *redouter* did not exist, all its content would go to its competitors. Conversely, some words are enriched through contact with others: e.g. the new element introduced in *decrepit* (un vieillard *decrepit*, see p. 83) results from the co-existence of *decrepi* (un mur *decrepi*). The value of just any term is accordingly determined by its environment; it is impossible to fix even the value of the word signifying "sun" without first considering its surroundings: in some languages it is not possible to say "sit in the *sun*."

Everything said about words applies to any term of language, e.g. to grammatical entities. The value of a French plural does not coincide with that of a Sanskrit plural even though their signification is usually identical; Sanskrit has three numbers instead of two (*my eyes, my ears, my arms, my legs*, etc. are dual);⁴ it would be wrong to attribute the same value to the plural in Sanskrit and in French; its value clearly depends on what is outside and around it.

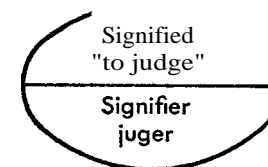
If words stood for pre-existing concepts, they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next; but this is not true. French uses *louer (une maison)* 'let (a house)' indifferently to mean both "pay for" and "receive payment for," whereas German uses two words, *mieten* and *vermieten*; there is obviously no exact correspondence of values. The German verbs *schätzen* and *urteilen* share a number of significations, but that correspondence does not hold at several points.

Inflection offers some particularly striking examples. Distinctions of time, which are so familiar to us, are unknown in certain languages. Hebrew does not recognize even the fundamental

⁴ The use of the comparative form for two and the superlative for more than two in English (e.g. *may the better boxer win: the best boxer in the world*) is probably a remnant of the old distinction between the dual and the plural number. [Tr.]

distinctions between the past, present, and future. Proto-Germanic has no special form for the future; to say that the future is expressed by the present is wrong, for the value of the present is not the same in Germanic as in languages that have a future along with the present. The Slavic languages regularly single out two aspects of the verb: the perfective represents action as a point, complete in its totality; the imperfective represents it as taking place, and on the line of time. The categories are difficult for a Frenchman to understand, for they are unknown in French; if they were pre-determined, this would not be true. Instead of pre-existing ideas then, we find in all the foregoing examples *values* emanating from the system. When they are said to correspond to concepts, it is understood that the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.

Now the real interpretation of the diagram of the signal becomes apparent. Thus



means that in French the concept "to judge" is linked to the sound-image *juger*; in short, it symbolizes signification. But it is quite clear that initially the concept is nothing, that is only a value determined by its relations with other similar values, and that without them the signification would not exist. If I state simply that a word signifies something when I have in mind the associating of a sound-image with a concept, I am making a statement that may suggest what actually happens, but by no means am I expressing the linguistic fact in its essence and fullness.

3. Linguistic Value from a Material Viewpoint

The conceptual side of value is made up solely of relations and differences with respect to the other terms of language, and the

same can be said of its material side. The important thing in the word is not the sound alone but the phonic differences that make it possible to distinguish this word from all others, for differences carry signification.

This may seem surprising, but how indeed could the reverse be possible? Since one vocal image is no better suited than the next for what it is commissioned to express, it is evident, even *a priori*, that a segment of language can never in the final analysis be based on anything except its noncoincidence with the rest. *Arbitrary* and *differential* are two correlative qualities.

The alteration of linguistic signs clearly illustrates this. It is precisely because the terms *a* and *b* as such are radically incapable of reaching the level of consciousness—one is always conscious of only the *a/b* difference—that each term is free to change according to laws that are unrelated to its signifying function. No positive sign characterizes the genitive plural in Czech *Len* (see p. 86); still the two forms *Lena: Len* function as well as the earlier forms *Lena: Lenb; Len* has value only because it is different.

Here is another example that shows even more clearly the systematic role of phonic differences: in Greek, *ephen* is an imperfect and *ester* an aorist although both words are formed in the same way; the first belongs to the system of the present indicative of *phemi* 'I say,' whereas there is no present **stemi*; now it is precisely the relation *phemi: ephen* that corresponds to the relation between the present and the imperfect (cf. *deiknumi: edeiknun*, etc.). Signs function, then, not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position.

In addition, it is impossible for sound alone, a material element, to belong to language. It is only a secondary thing, substance to be put to use. All our conventional values have the characteristic of not being confused with the tangible element which supports them. For instance, it is not the metal in a piece of money that fixes its value. A coin nominally worth five francs may contain less than half its worth of silver. Its value will vary according to the amount stamped upon it and according to its use inside or outside a political boundary. This is even more true of the linguistic signifier, which is not phonic but incorporeal—constituted not by its ma-

terial substance but by the differences that separate its sound-image from all others.

The foregoing principle is so basic that it applies to all the material elements of language, including phonemes. Every language forms its words on the basis of a system of sonorous elements, each element being a clearly delimited unit and one of a fixed number of units. Phonemes are characterized not, as one might think, by their own positive quality but simply by the fact that they are distinct. Phonemes are above all else opposing, relative, and negative entities.

Proof of this is the latitude that speakers have between points of convergence in the pronunciation of distinct sounds. In French, for instance, general use of a dorsal *r* does not prevent many speakers from using a tongue-tip trill; language is not in the least disturbed by it; language requires only that the sound be different and not, as one might imagine, that it have an invariable quality. I can even pronounce the French *r* like German *ch* in *Bach, dock*, etc., but in German I could not use *r* instead of *ch*, for German gives recognition to both elements and must keep them apart. Similarly, in Russian there is no latitude for *t* in the direction of *t'* (palatalized *t*), for the result would be the confusing of two sounds differentiated by the language (cf. *govorit* 'speak' and *goverit* 'he speaks'), but more freedom may be taken with respect to *th* (aspirated *t*) since this sound does not figure in the Russian system of phonemes.

Since an identical state of affairs is observable in writing, another system of signs, we shall use writing to draw some comparisons that will clarify the whole issue. In fact:

- 1) The signs used in writing are arbitrary; there is no connection, for example, between the letter *t* and the sound that it designates.
- 2) The value of letters is purely negative and differential. The same person can write *t*, for instance, in different ways:

The only requirement is that the sign for *t* not be confused in his script with the signs used for *l*, *d*, etc.

3) Values in writing function only through reciprocal opposition within a fixed system that consists of a set number of letters. This third characteristic, though not identical to the second, is closely related to it, for both depend on the first. Since the graphic sign is arbitrary, its form matters little or rather matters only within the limitations imposed by the system.

4) The means by which the sign is produced is completely unimportant, for it does not affect the system (this also follows from characteristic 1). Whether I make the letters in white or black, raised or engraved, with pen or chisel—all this is of no importance with respect to their signification.

4. *The Sign Considered in Its Totality*

Everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this: in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system. The idea or phonic substance that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs that surround it. Proof of this is that the value of a term may be modified without either its meaning or its sound being affected, solely because a neighboring term has been modified (see p. 115).

But the statement that everything in language is negative is true only if the signified and the signifier are considered separately; when we consider the sign in its totality, we have something that is positive in its own class. A linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas; but the pairing of a certain number of acoustical signs with as many cuts made from the mass of thought engenders a system of values; and this system serves as the effective link between the phonic and psychological elements within each sign. Although both the signified and the signifier are purely differential and negative when considered separately, their combination is a positive fact; it is

even the sole type of facts that language has, for maintaining the parallelism between the two classes of differences is the distinctive function of the linguistic institution.

Certain diachronic facts are typical in this respect. Take the countless instances where alteration of the signifier occasions a conceptual change and where it is obvious that the sum of the ideas distinguished corresponds in principle to the sum of the distinctive signs. When two words are confused through phonetic alteration (e.g. French *decrepit* from *decrepitus* and *decrepi* from *crispus*), the ideas that they express will also tend to become confused if only they have something in common. Or a word may have different forms (cf. *chaise* 'chair' and *chaire* 'desk'). Any nascent difference will tend invariably to become significant but without always succeeding or being successful on the first trial. Conversely, any conceptual difference perceived by the mind seeks to find expression through a distinct signifier, and two ideas that are no longer distinct in the mind tend to merge into the same signifier.

When we compare signs-positive terms—with each other, we can no longer speak of difference; the expression would not be fitting, for it applies only to the comparing of two sound-images, e.g. *father* and *mother*, or two ideas, e.g. the idea "father" and the idea "mother"; two signs, each having a signified and signifier, are not different but only distinct. Between them there is only *opposition*. The entire mechanism of language, with which we shall be concerned later, is based on oppositions of this kind and on the phonic and conceptual differences that they imply.

What is true of value is true also of the unit (see pp. 110 ff.). A unit is a segment of the spoken chain that corresponds to a certain concept; both are by nature purely differential.

Applied to units, the principle of differentiation can be stated in this way: *the characteristics of the unit blend with the unit itself*. In language, as in any semiological system, whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it. Difference makes character just as it makes value and the unit.

Another rather paradoxical consequence of the same principle is this: in the last analysis what is commonly referred to as a "grammatical fact" fits the definition of the unit, for it always expresses an opposition of terms; it differs only in that the opposition is

particularly significant (e.g. the formation of German plurals of the type *Nacht: Nelchte*). Each term present in the grammatical fact (the singular without umlaut or final *e* in opposition to the plural with umlaut and *-e*) consists of the interplay of a number of oppositions within the system. When isolated, neither *Nacht* nor *Ndchte* is anything: thus everything is opposition. Putting it another way, the *Nacht: Ndchte* relation can be expressed by an algebraic formula a/b in which *a* and *b* are not simple terms but result from a set of relations. Language, in a manner of speaking, is a type of algebra consisting solely of complex terms. Some of its oppositions are more significant than others; but units and grammatical facts are only different names for designating diverse aspects of the same general fact: the functioning of linguistic oppositions. This statement is so true that we might very well approach the problem of units by starting from grammatical facts. Taking an opposition like *Nacht: Nachte*, we might ask what are the units involved in it. Are they only the two words, the whole series of similar words, *a* and *d*, or all singulars and plurals, etc.?

Units and grammatical facts would not be confused if linguistic signs were made up of something besides differences. But language being what it is, we shall find nothing simple in it regardless of our approach; everywhere and always there is the same complex equilibrium of terms that mutually condition each other. Putting it another way, language is a form and not a substance (see p. 113). This truth could not be overstressed, for all the mistakes in our terminology, all our incorrect ways of naming things that pertain to language, stem from the involuntary supposition that the linguistic phenomenon must have substance.

Chapter V

SYNTAGMATIC AND ASSOCIATIVE RELATIONS

1. Definitions

In a language-state everything is based on relations. How do they function?

Relations and differences between linguistic terms fall into two distinct groups, each of which generates a certain class of values. The opposition between the two classes gives a better understanding of the nature of each class. They correspond to two forms of our mental activity, both indispensable to the life of language.

In discourse, on the one hand, words acquire relations based on the linear nature of language because they are chained together. This rules out the possibility of pronouncing two elements simultaneously (see p. 70). The elements are arranged in sequence on the chain of speaking. Combinations supported by linearity are *syntagms*⁵. The syntagm is always composed of two or more consecutive units (e.g. French *re-lire* 're-read,' *contre tous* 'against everyone,' *la vie humaine* 'human life,' *Dieu est bon* 'God is good,' *s'il fait beau temps, nous sortirons* 'if the weather is nice, we'll go out,' etc.). In the syntagm a term acquires its value only because it stands in opposition to everything that precedes or follows it, or to both.

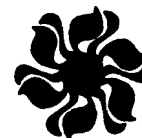
Outside discourse, on the other hand, words acquire relations of a different kind. Those that have something in common are associated in the memory, resulting in groups marked by diverse relations. For instance, the French word *enseignement* 'teaching' will unconsciously call to mind a host of other words (*enseigner* 'teach,' *renseigner* 'acquaint,' etc.; or *armement* 'armament,' *changement* 'amendment,' etc.; or *education* 'education,' *apprentissage* 'apprenticeship,' etc.). All those words are related in some way.

We see that the co-ordinations formed outside discourse differ strikingly from those formed inside discourse. Those formed outside discourse are not supported by linearity. Their seat is in the brain; they are a part of the inner storehouse that makes up the language of each speaker. They are *associative relations*.

The syntagmatic relation is *in praesentia*. It is based on two or more terms that occur in an effective series. Against this, the associative relation unites terms *in absentia* in a potential mnemonic series.

From the associative and syntagmatic viewpoint a linguistic

⁵ It is scarcely necessary to point out that the study of *syntagms* is not to be confused with syntax. Syntax is only one part of the study of syntagms (see pp. 134 ff.). [Ed.]



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