2 Saussure's Theory of Language

Saussure was unhappy with linguistics as he knew it because he thought that his predecessors had failed to think seriously or perceptively about what they were doing. Linguistics, he wrote,[1] 'never attempted to determine the nature of the object it was studying, and without this elementary operation a science cannot develop an appropriate method' (*Course*, 3; *Cours*, 16).

This operation is all the more necessary because human language is an extremely complex and heterogeneous phenomenon. Even a single speech act involves an extraordinary range of factors and could be considered from many different, even conflicting points of view. One could study the way sounds are produced by the mouth, vocal cords, and tongue; one could investigate the sound waves which are emitted and the way they affect the hearing mechanism. One could consider the signifying intention of the speaker, the aspects of the world to which his utterance refers, the immediate circumstances of the communicative context which might have led him to produce a particular series of noises. One might try to analyse the conventions which enable speaker and listeners to understand one another, working out the grammatical and semantic rules which they must have assimilated if they are to communicate in this way. Or again, one could trace the history of the language which makes available these particular forms at this time.

Confronted with all these phenomena and these different perspectives from which one might approach them, the linguist must ask himself what he is trying to describe. What in particular is he looking at? What is he looking for? What, in short, is language?

Saussure's answer to this question is unexceptionable but

extremely important, since it serves to direct attention to essentials. Language is a system of signs. Noises count as language only when they serve to express or communicate ideas; otherwise they are just noise. And to communicate ideas they must be part of a system of conventions, part of a system of signs. The sign is the union of a form which signifies, which Saussure calls the *signifiant* or signifier, and an idea signified, the *signifié* or signified. Though we may speak of signifier and signified as if they were separate entities, they exist only as components of the sign. The sign is the central fact of language, and therefore in trying to separate what is essential from what is secondary or incidental we must start from the nature of the sign itself.

THE ARBITRARY NATURE OF THE SIGN

The first principle of Saussure's theory of language concerns the essential quality of the sign. The linguistic sign is arbitrary. A particular combination of signifier and signified is an arbitrary entity. This is a central fact of language and linguistic method. 'No one', he writes,

> contests the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign, but it is often easier to discover a truth than to assign it its rightful place. The above principle dominates the whole of linguistic analysis of a language. Its consequences are innumerable, though they are not all, it is true, equally evident straight away. It is after many detours that one discovers them, and with them the fundamental importance of this principle (*Course*, 68; *Cours*, 100).

What does Saussure mean by the arbitrary nature of the sign? In one sense the answer is quite simple. There is no natural or inevitable link between the signifier and the signified. Since I speak English I may use the signifier represented by *dog* to talk about an animal of a particular species, but this sequence of sounds is no better suited to that purpose than another sequence. *Lod*, *tet*, or *bloop* would serve equally well if they were accepted by members of my speech community. There is no intrinsic reason why

shades of a single colour are in Russian two distinct primary colours. Each language articulates or organizes the world differently. Languages do not simply name existing categories, they articulate their own.

Moreover, if language were a set of names applied to independently-existing concepts, then in the historical evolution of a language the concepts should remain stable. Signifiers could evolve; the particular sequence of sounds associated with a given concept might be modified; and a given sequence of sounds could even be attached to a different concept. Occasionally, of course, a new sign would have to be introduced for a new concept which had been produced by changes in the world. But the concepts themselves, as language-independent entities, would not be subject to linguistic evolution.

In fact, though, the history of languages is full of examples of concepts shifting, changing their boundaries. The English word *cattle*, for example, at one point meant property in general, then gradually came to be restricted to four-footed property only (a new category), and finally attained its modern sense of domesticated bovines. Or again, a 'silly' person was once happy, blessed, and pious. Gradually this particular concept altered; the old concept of 'silliness' transformed itself, and by the beginning of the sixteenth century a silly person was innocent, helpless, even deserving of pity. The alteration of the concept continued until eventually a silly person was simple, foolish, perhaps even stupid.

If language were a nomenclature we should be obliged to say that there exist a number of distinct concepts and that the signifier *silly* was attached first to one and then to another. But clearly this is not what happened: the concept attached to the signifier *silly* was continually shifting its boundaries, gradually changing its semantic shape, articulating the world in different ways from one period to the next. And, incidentally, the signifier also evolved, undergoing a modification of its central vowel.

What is the significance of this? What does it have to do with the arbitrary nature of the sign? Language is not a

nomenclature and therefore its signifieds are not pre-existing concepts but changeable and contingent concepts which vary from one state of a language to another. And since the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary, since there is no necessary reason for one concept rather than another to be attached to a given signifier, there is therefore no defining property which the concept must retain in order to count as the signified of that signifier. The signified associated with a signifier can take any form; there is no essential core of meaning that it must retain in order to count as the proper signified for that signifier. The fact that the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary means, then, that since there are no fixed universal concepts or fixed universal signifiers, the signified itself is arbitrary, and so is the signifier. We then must ask, as Saussure does, what defines a signifier or a signified, and the answer leads us to a very important principle: both signifier and signified are purely relational or differential entities. Because they are arbitrary they are relational. This is a principle which requires explanation.

THE NATURE OF LINGUISTIC UNITS

Saussure attaches great importance – more so than it would appear from the published *Course* – to the fact that language is not a nomenclature, for unless we grasp this we cannot understand the full ramifications of the arbitrary nature of the sign. A language does not simply assign arbitrary names to a set of independently existing concepts. It sets up an arbitrary relation between signifiers of its own choosing on the one hand, and signifieds of its own choosing on the other. Not only does each language produce a different set of signifiers, articulating and dividing the continuum of sound in a distinctive way; each language produces a different set of signifieds; it has a distinctive and thus 'arbitrary' way of organizing the world into concepts or categories.

It is obvious that the sound sequences of *fleuve* and

one of these signifiers rather than another should be linked with the concept of a 'dog'.*

Are there no exceptions to this basic principle? Certainly. There are two ways in which linguistic signs may be motivated, that is to say, made less arbitrary. First, there are cases of onomatopœia, where the sound of the signifier seems in some way mimetic or imitative, as in the English *bow-wow* or *arf-arf* (cf. French *ouâ-ouâ*, German *wau-wau*, Italian *bau-bau*). But there are few such cases, and the fact that we identify them as a separate class and special case only emphasizes more strongly that ordinary signs are arbitrary.

However, within a particular language signs may be partially motivated in a different way. The machine on which I am writing is called a *typewriter*. There is no intrinsic reason why it should not be called a *grue* or a *blimmel*, but within English *typewriter* is motivated because the meanings of the two sound sequences which compose its signifier, *type* and *writer*, are related to its signified, to the notion of a 'typewriter'. We might call this 'secondary motivation'. Notice, for example, that only in English is the relation between sound-sequence and concept motivated. If the French were to use the same form to speak of this machine, that would be a wholly arbitrary sign, since the primary constituent, *writer* is not a sign in the French language. Moreover, for Saussure, as we shall see later, the process of combining *type* and *writer* to create a new motivated sign is fundamentally similar to the way in which we combine words to form phrases (whose meaning is related to the combined meanings of individual words). We can say, therefore, that all languages have as their basic elements arbitrary signs. They then have various processes for combining these signs, but that does not alter the essential nature of language and its elementary constituents.

The sign is arbitrary in that there is no intrinsic link between signifier and signified. This is how Saussure's principle is usually interpreted, but in this form it is a

*Note that here, as throughout, I use italics to cite linguistic forms (e.g. *dog*, *tod*) and quotation marks to designate meanings (e.g. 'dog').

wholly traditional notion, a rather obvious fact about language. Interpreted in this limited way, it does not have the momentous consequences which, according to the students' notes, Saussure repeatedly claimed for it: 'the hierarchical place of this truth is at the very summit. It is only little by little that one recognizes how many different facts are but ramifications, hidden consequences of this truth' (Engler, 153). There is more to the arbitrary nature of the sign than the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified. We must push further.

From what I have said so far about signifier and signified, one might be tempted to think of language as a nomenclature: a series of names arbitrarily selected and attached to a set of objects or concepts. It is, Saussure says, all too easy to think of language as a set of names and to make the biblical story of Adam naming the beasts an account of the very nature of language. If one says that the concept 'dog' is rendered or expressed by *dog* in English, *chien* in French and *Hund* in German, one implies that each language has an arbitrary name for a concept which exists prior to and independently of any language.

If language were simply a nomenclature for a set of universal concepts, it would be easy to translate from one language to another. One would simply replace the French name for a concept with the English name. If language were like this the task of learning a new language would also be much easier than it is. But anyone who has attempted either of these tasks has acquired, alas, a vast amount of direct proof that languages are not nomenclatures, that the concepts or signifieds of one language may differ radically from those of another. The French 'aimer' does not go directly into English; one must choose between 'to like' and 'to love'. 'Démarrer' includes in a single idea the English signifieds of 'moving off' and 'accelerating'. English 'to know' covers the area of two French signifieds, 'connaître' and 'savoir'. The English concepts of a 'wicked' man or of a 'pet' have no real counterparts in French. Or again, what English calls 'light blue' and 'dark blue' and treats as two

rivière are signifiers of French but not of English, whereas *river* and *stream* are English but not French. Less obviously but more significantly, the organization of the conceptual plane is also different in English and French. The signified 'river' is opposed to 'stream' solely in terms of size, whereas a 'fleuve' differs from a 'rivière' not because it is necessarily larger but because it flows into the sea, while a 'rivière' does not. In short, 'fleuve' and 'rivière' are not signifieds or concepts of English. They represent a different articulation of the conceptual plane.

The fact that these two languages operate perfectly well with different conceptual articulations or distinctions indicates that these divisions are not natural, inevitable, or necessary, but, in an important sense, arbitrary. Obviously it is important that a language has ways of talking about flowing bodies of water, but it can make its conceptual distinctions in this area in any of a wide variety of ways (size, swiftness of flow, straightness or sinuosity, direction of flow, depth, navigability, etc.). Not only can a language arbitrarily choose its signifiers; it can divide up a spectrum of conceptual possibilities in any way it likes.

Moreover, and here we come to an important point, the fact that these concepts or signifieds are arbitrary divisions of a continuum means that they are not autonomous entities, each of which is defined by some kind of essence. They are members of a system and are defined by their relations to the other members of that system. If I am to explain to someone the meaning of *stream* I must tell him about the difference between a stream and a river, a stream and a rivulet, etc. And similarly, I cannot explain the French concept of a 'rivière' without describing the distinction between 'rivière' and 'fleuve' on the one hand and 'rivière' and 'ruisseau' on the other.

Colour terms are a particularly good example of this characteristic of the sign. Suppose we wish to teach a foreigner about colours in English. Let us suppose also that he is a rather slow learner from a non-European culture, so that we must work out an efficient teaching strategy. It

might occur to us that the best way to proceed would be to take one colour at a time: to begin, for example, with brown and not go on to another colour until we were certain that he had mastered brown. So we begin by showing him brown objects and telling him that they are brown. Since we want to be thorough, we have assembled a collection of a hundred brown objects of various kinds. And then, after having bored him and ourselves for several hours, we take him into another room and, to test his knowledge of 'brown', ask him to pick out all the brown objects. He sets to work but seems to be having difficulty deciding what to select, so in despair we decide we haven't been thorough enough and propose to start again the next day with five hundred brown objects.

Fortunately, most of us would not adopt this desperate solution and would recognize what had gone wrong. However many brown objects we may show him, our pupil will not know the meaning of *brown*, and will not be able to pass our test, until we have taught him to distinguish between brown and red, brown and tan, brown and grey, brown and yellow, brown and black. It is only when he has grasped the relation between brown and other colours that he will begin to understand what brown is. And the reason for this is that brown is not an independent concept defined by some essential properties but one term in a system of colour terms, defined by its relations with the other terms which delimit it.

Indeed, this painful teaching experience would bring us to understand that because the sign is arbitrary, because it is the result of dividing a continuum in ways peculiar to the language to which it belongs, we cannot treat the sign as an autonomous entity but must see it as part of a system. It is not just that in order to know the meaning of *brown* one must understand *red*, *tan*, *grey*, *black*, etc. Rather, one could say that the signifieds of colour terms are nothing but the product or result of a system of distinctions. Each language, in dividing the spectrum and distinguishing categories which it calls colours, produces a different system

of signifieds: units whose value depends on their relations with one another. As Saussure says, generalizing the point,

> in all cases, then, we discover not *ideas* given in advance but *values* emanating from the system. When we say that these values correspond to concepts, it is understood that these concepts are purely differential, not positively defined by their content but negatively defined by their relations with other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is that they are what the others are not (*Course*, 117; *Cours*, 162).

Brown is what is not red, black, grey, yellow, etc., and the same holds for each of the other signifieds.

This is a major though paradoxical consequence of the arbitrary nature of the sign, and we shall return to it shortly. But perhaps the easiest way to grasp this notion of the purely relational nature of linguistic units is to approach it from another angle.

Consider the problem of identity in linguistics: the question of when two utterances or portions of an utterance count as examples of a single linguistic unit. Suppose someone tells me, 'I bought a bed today', and I reply, 'What sort of bed?' What do we mean when we say that the same sign has been employed twice in this brief conversation? What is the basis on which we can claim that two examples or instances of the same linguistic unit have appeared in our dialogue? Note that we have already begged the question in transcribing a portion of the noises that each of us made as *bed*. In fact, the actual noises which were produced will have been measurably different – different from a purely physical and acoustic point of view. Voices vary; after a very few words we can recognize a friend's voice on the telephone because the actual physical signals she emits are different from those of our other acquaintances.

My interlocutor and I produced different noises, yet we want to say that we have produced the same signifier, used the same sign. The signifier, then, is not the same thing as the noises that either she or I produced. It is an abstract unit of some kind, not to be confused with the actual sequence of sounds. But what sort of unit is it? Of what does the unit

consist? We might approach this question by asking how far the actual noises produced could vary and still count as versions of the same signifier. This, of course, is similar to the question we implicitly asked earlier about the signified: how far can a colour vary and still count as brown? And the answer for the signifier is very similar to the answer for the signified. The noises made can vary considerably (there is no essential property which they must possess) so long as they do not become confused with those of contrasting signifiers. We have considerable latitude in the way we utter *bed*, so long as what we say is not confused with *bad, bud, bid, bode; bread, bled, dead, fed, head, led, red, said, wed; beck, bell, bet.*

In other words, it is the distinctions which are important, and it is for this reason that linguistic units have a purely relational identity. The principle is not easy to grasp, but Saussure offers a concrete analogy. We are willing to grant that in an important sense the 8:25 Geneva-to-Paris Express is the same train each day, even though the coaches, locomotive, and personnel change from one day to the next. What gives the train its identity is its place in the system of trains, as indicated by the timetable. And note that this relational identity is indeed the determining factor: the train remains the same train even if it leaves half an hour late. Indeed, it might always leave late without ceasing to be the 8:25 Geneva-to-Paris Express. What is important is that it be distinguished from, say, the 10:25 Geneva-to-Paris Express, the 8:40 Geneva-to-Dijon local, etc.

Another analogy which Saussure uses to illustrate the notion of relational identity is the comparison between language and chess. The basic units of chess are obviously king, queen, rook, knight, bishop, and pawn. The actual physical shape of the pieces and the material from which they are made is of no importance. The king may be of any size and shape, as long as there are ways of distinguishing it from other pieces. Moreover, the two rooks need not be of identical size and shape, so long as they can be distinguished from other pieces. Thus, as Saussure points out, if

a piece is lost from a chess set we can replace it with any other sort of object, provided always that this object will not be confused with the objects representing pieces of a different value (*Course*, 110; *Cours*, 153-4). The actual physical properties of pieces are of no importance, so long as there are differences of some kind – any kind will do – between pieces which have a different value.

Thus one can say that the units of the game of chess have no material identity: there are no physical properties necessary to a king, etc. Identity is wholly a function of differences within a system. If we now apply the analogy to language we shall be in a position to understand Saussure's paradoxical claim that in the system of a language 'there are only differences, with no positive terms' (*Course*, 120; *Cours*, 166). Normally when we think of differences we presuppose two things which differ, but Saussure's point is that signifier and signified are not things in this sense. Just as we can't say anything about what a pawn must look like, except that it will be different from knight, rook, etc., so the signifier which we represent as *bed* is not defined by any particular noises used in uttering it. Not only do the actual noises differ from one case to another, but English could be arranged so that noises now used to express the signifier *pet* were used for the signifier *bed*, and vice versa. If these changes were made the units of the language would be expressed differently, but they would still be fundamentally the same units (the same differences remain, both on the level of the signifier and on the level of the signified), and the language would still be English. Indeed, English would remain, in an important sense, the same language if the units of the signifier were never expressed in sound but only in visual symbols of some kind.

In saying this we are obviously making a distinction between units of the linguistic system on the one hand and their actual physical manifestations or realizations on the other. Before discussing this very important distinction in greater detail, it may be useful to recapitulate the line of reasoning that led us to it. We began by noting that there

was no natural link between signifier and signified, and then, trying to explain the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, we saw that both signifier and signified were arbitrary divisions or delimitations of a continuum (a sound spectrum on the one hand and a conceptual field on the other). This led us to infer that both signifier and signified must be defined in terms of their relations with other signifiers and signifieds, and thus we reached the conclusion that if we are to define the units of a language we must distinguish between these purely relational and abstract units and their physical realizations. The actual sounds we produce in speaking are not in themselves units of the linguistic system, nor is the physical colour which we designate in calling a book 'brown' the same thing as the linguistic unit (the signified or concept) 'brown'. In both cases, and this is a point on which Saussure rightly insists, the linguistic unit is form rather than substance, defined by the relations which set it off from other units.

'LANGUE' AND 'PAROLE'

Here, in the distinction between the linguistic system and its actual manifestations, we have reached the crucial opposition between *langue* and *parole*. *La langue* is the system of a language, the language as a system of forms, whereas *parole* is actual speech, the speech acts which are made possible by the language. *La langue* is what the individual assimilates when he learns a language, a set of forms or 'hoard deposited by the practice of speech in speakers who belong to the same community, a grammatical system which, to all intents and purposes, exists in the mind of each speaker' (*Course*, 13-14; *Cours*, 30). 'It is the social product whose existence permits the individual to exercise his linguistic faculty' (Engler, 31). *Parole*, on the other hand, is the 'executive side of language' and for Saussure involves both 'the combinations by which the speaker uses the code of the linguistic system in order to express his own thoughts' and 'the psycho-physical mechanisms which permit him to