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Beiträge zur Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft

28.2 (2018)
Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal

How to apply the Principle of Charity when reading Saussure’s *Cours*

**Introduction:**

A summary of *Saussure and Sechehaye: Myth and Genius*

Since the posthumous publication of Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* in 1916, it has received contrasting reactions. While many have considered it revolutionary and mark it as the beginning of modern linguistics, others have been less enthusiastic. Among members of the second group, it is customary to argue against the claim of the first that Saussure innovated an unprecedented type of linguistics. Such a reservation, for example, was stated explicitly in Leonard Bloomfield’s (1923) concise review of the second edition of the *Cours* when he wrote the following:

> The value of the *Cours* lies in its clear and rigorous demonstration of fundamental principles. Most of what the author says has long been “in the air” and has been here and there fragmentarily expressed; the systematization is his own.

(Bloomfield: 317)

Seuren’s recent evaluation of the *Cours* goes somewhat further, when he concludes the following:

> The conclusion we must draw after our careful and detailed look at Saussure’s *Cours* is not cheerful. If one looks at it as just an academic publication, one has to conclude that it fails to meet the standards that are normally applied. If one takes


I wish to thank Pieter Seuren for reading drafts of this paper and for the collegial and productive dialogue we had about this paper.
1) We will return to this topic, and to the differences between Saussure and Sechehaye on this topic below.

2) For a detailed review of this debate, Elffers-van Ketel (1991) is still the standard. The main contribution of Seuren to this chapter in the history of linguistics is that he covers also some later developments in the 20th century, and also how the literature in this debate corresponds with more recent theoretical discussions.

3) This is also described often as the mental operations of predicating and judging and it was often transferred from the object of psychology to the object of linguistics. Moreover, it was often transferred from the object of psychology to the object of linguistics.
book in depth, and other important aspects of his book deserve further discussions. For our purposes, this book invites us to have a methodological discussion regarding what can be our reactions when encountering significant problems in the literature from the early periods of linguistics in general, and in Saussure’s book in particular. To what extent our responsibility is merely to point to these problems, or whether we should aim at solving them. In the case of the study of Saussure, I would suggest specific steps that can be recommended if we are interested in understanding Saussure — the person. This is not Seuren’s approach, since his discussions revolve around the *Cours* — the book.

I would like to take a different approach than Seuren and suggest that although one can agree with Seuren’s claim that the *Cours*, as is, does not deserve the praise it has received, it is more beneficial, or at least interesting, to my taste, to try to understand what led to the contradictions in this text. Obviously, this is not a criticism of Seuren’s endeavor, but a call for an alternative attitude, as I take his observations concerning the problems in this text as a starting point for a different route. Ironically, in many ways, I follow Sechehaye’s own approach when he reflected about the *Cours* 24 years after its publication (Sechehaye 1940) and attempted to solve some of the contradictions which were exposed by its early readers. This approach, I would argue, may lead us to uncovering interesting ideas in Saussure’s writings, and to the revelations of intellectual roads that have not been developed further, and to reflect about their validity.

Due to the nature of this paper, I limit myself to condensed comments, and each of the following brief discussions should be developed further in other venues. I start with some thoughts and observations concerning the topic that is one of Seuren’s criticisms of Saussure as known from the *Cours*: the non-inclusion of syntax in his treatment of languages. This issue, however, seems to be of special significance, as it puts Saussure in contrast to Sechehaye who concentrates on this topic and also it is related to issues that stand at the heart of Chapters 5–6 of Seuren’s book. This discussion provides a good opportunity to reflect on how to read the *Cours*. After focusing on this topic, I elaborate a little further on two dichotomies often associated with Saussure, *langue-parole* and *synchrony-diachrony*, and point to what I believe stands behind some of the misunderstanding of Saussure’s thoughts.

I must emphasize that the following discussion deals with syntax in our contemporary use of the term. This is not the way Saussure himself used the term (see Seuren p. 60 for a more elaborated clarification on the use of the term syntax in the history of linguistics.)

Why did Saussure not include propositions as independent linguistic/cognitive entities?

Seuren repeatedly returns throughout the book to the fact that Saussure had no clear vision on how syntactic inquiries should or can be carried out (see for example, pp. 60–69), and I believe that he is right in pressing this issue. Seuren is spot-on in identifying this omission as one of the most significant failures of Saussure and in that the ramifications of this failure were acute to his life-long project, as it reveals the lack of clear methodology for synchronic linguistics in Saussure’s linguistic approach. While, generally speaking, Saussure followed the neo-grammarians’ tradition in historical linguistics, he never made clear what should be expected from someone who does synchronic linguistics in a scientific manner beyond providing descriptive grammars. In this context, it is worth mentioning that Saussure himself never ceased from being active only in historical linguistics, and one cannot point to a single paper written by him that follows a methodology of synchronic linguistics.

Again, as noted by Seuren, with regard to syntax, Saussure is similar to most of his contemporaries who did not study this sub-discipline of linguistics (in the sense that the term “syntax” is used today). The question is, therefore: why?

One possible answer would be that he simply did not want to explore this area, but as will become clear below, this is simply not true. I would like, therefore, to suggest two reasons that may explain the absence of this domain in Saussure’s linguistic framework and how his decision to not include syntactic entities as part of his linguistic ontology reflects fundamental aspects in his scientific approach:

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4) As mentioned, this issue is among other points of criticism raised by Seuren, such as its intellectual isolation, its silence regarding the great subject-predicate debate, its deficient definition of ‘sign’ and its failure to take into account the things referred to in the analysis of the speech circuit.

6) This puzzle about the gap between Saussure’s practice and theory led various interpreters to make clear what should be expected from someone who does synchronic linguistics in a scientific manner beyond providing descriptive grammars. In this context, it is worth mentioning that Saussure himself never ceased from being active only in historical linguistics, and one cannot point to a single paper written by him that follows a methodology of synchronic linguistics.

8) I deliberately speak in terms of ontology, since as demonstrated in Bar-Asher Siegal (2017: 263–265), Saussure has a realistic approach, which requires a natural object to stand at the heart of a discipline. This is an issue that sets Saussure and Sechehaye apart, and it is interesting to compare how each of them determines what is the basic linguistic unit. Sechehaye (1908: 138–140) speaks about identifying the cells (see also p. 72 concerning this biological term), but
1. Lack of conceptual tools to perceive the notion of a proposition: for Saussure semantics is semiology. In other words, meaning has to do only with signification. Accordingly, linguistic events of speakers’ expressions are merely linearizations of linguistic signs with their double aspects: the signified (signifié) and the signifier (signifiant). Consequently, semantically speaking, nothing changes at the level of what logicians will treat as a representation of proposition in declarative sentences; this is merely an accumulation of a list of signs (cf. the quote from Paul on p. 64, which express similar ideas). As long as linguistic entities are defined by the correspondence between the forms and their meaning (which is obviously not a trivial assumption), if one wants to speak about sentences or propositions as a different type of linguistic entity, it is necessary to define their seman-

tics as having a different nature.

Since Plato (in the dialogue The Sophist) and Aristotle (in On Interpretation) and in the modern time in the work of Frege, the semantics of sentences has to do with truth-values (truth conditions), which is related to the act of judgement or to proposition as a mental act. In Frege’s terms a proposition, which reflects a predication, has the predicate as a function that takes the references (Bedeutung) as arguments and provides truth values as outputs; the latter is the reference of the sentence. As will become clear, for Saussure and many other linguists of his period, speaking in such terms meant transgressing the boundaries of linguistics.\footnote{This is the context in which Saussure introduced “the linear character of the language” in the first course (CLG-I, p. 78).}

As a conse-

he does not seem to be bothered by ontology, as his discussion stays at the rational level (although some ontological claims are found in this book, see for example the note on p. 24). This difference between the two is missing from the discussions in Seuren’s book and deserves a future study. It may explain the choice of the editors to prefer Saussure’s 3rd course, over the first two, as this was the course in which Saussure used less ontological terminology (see Joseph 2000) for some preliminary discussion about the differences between the first two courses and the last).

\footnote{A topic that requires a longer discussion is to what extent Saussure was concerned about the autonomy of linguistics and about drawing clear boundaries between linguistics and other fields (psychology, philosophy, sociology, etc.). It is a well-known fact that the last sentences of the Cours, “Linguistics has for its unique and true object language, taken by itself and for itself”, was phrased by the editors and was never documented as expressed by Saussure himself (e.g. Seshetayhe 1908: 15), and it is still uncertain to what extent he would have accepted it. Overall, it is very clear that Saussure cared less about the boundaries between disciplines, as he explicitly wrote: “Little by little psychology will take practical charge of our science, because it will realize, not that langue is one of its branches, but that it is the very basis of its own activity” (WGL, p. 73) — for some literature on Saussure’s approach to psychology, see Godel (1957: 182-183), Amacker (1994), Bergounioux (1995), Fehr (1995), Joseph (2000: 322-327) and Swarska (2015: 135-136). What seems to be the case is that Saussure wanted to define the “object of study” in a very limited way — that it would include only entities that are related to the language faculty, and for him, this faculty is reflected in the linguistic sign located in the brain. One place where Saussure discussed this issue in some detail was, towards the end of his life, in the 3rd course on April 25th, 1911 (CLG-III, pp. 66–69). Accordingly, unlike Seuren’s description (pp. 44-46; 125-126), Sechehaye was not that distant from Saussure with respect to the question of the autonomy of language, although it seems that, as Seuren emphasizes correctly, Sechehaye went further in the inclusion of the logical categories within the realm of the linguistic inquiry (Sechehaye 1908: 112-113), while for Saussure (as seen in the quote hereafter) these categories are part of the “thought” and not of the “language”.

2. An epistemological problem with the ability to analyze the linguistic realization of propositions. As mentioned by Seuren (p. 25), Saussure in his own writings briefly noted on why, for him, Subject and Predicate are not linguistic terms. Seuren, however, refers only to the first part of Saussure’s discussion, and as will become evident, it is crucial to consider the broader contexts where Saussure speaks about this issue, as in the following passages:

In the sentence the most notable thing is that while it is made up of at least two logical (ideal) terms, it can be reduced to a single linguistic term, without the word being reducible in such a way as to elude the conclusion. Thus *fiat*! or *sunt*. Or probably ‘Who says this?’ — ‘God’. The limits of ellipsis (the famous ellipsis) only occur when articulated sound stops, and when language gives way to pure thought …

The very word *ellipsis* has a meaning which should give pause for thought. Such a term suggests that we know at the outset how many terms a sentence should be made up of, and that by comparing the actual terms, it contains we work out the shortfall. But if a term is infinitely extendable in its meaning, the calcula-

we are trying to establish using *n* ideas and *n* terms is clearly quite ridiculous, and moreover perfectly arbitrary. And if we put aside the specific sentence and reflect more generally, we are likely to reach the rapid conclusion that *there is no ellipsis*, simply because signs of language are always sufficient for what they express, if we recognize that a given word or phrase expresses more than we thought. Similarly not a single meaning-bearing word is without ellipsis, but then why *ellipsis* (as does Brea?) as if there was some sort of norm below which words are elliptical. Every one is elliptical, and there can be no interruption or precise evaluation of the. . . . Ellipsis is simply surplus value …

(WGL, p. 67; emphasis is mine).

Similar ideas are expressed in another place:
Besides drawing the lines between what belongs to the “thought” and what is part of the “signs of languages”, which seems to be of importance to Saussure (a topic that was briefly mentioned earlier and in footnotede10), we encounter here a deeper criticism: assuming that each sentence has a subject and a predicate entails ascribing these features to elements which are not phonetically expressed (as he demonstrates with case in vocatives or replies).

A reasonable interpretation of these passages suggests that Saussure claims something stronger than merely noting why this syntactic division is missing from his approach. He seems to criticize the scientific methodology which relies on hypothetical categories without empirical evidence. This line of argumentation seems to be consistent with Saussure’s somewhat positivist approach to the sciences, according to which theories must rely, at least initially, on positive data (see Bar-Asher 2008 and 2017). Consequently, Saussure did not participate in the “Great Subject-Predicate Debate” due to some fundamental creeds concerning what the criteria are for a scientific analysis.

It is beyond the scope of the current discussion to elaborate on the ramifications of these observations at length. I would like, however, to use these remarks as an opportunity to portray an alternative approach for how to study Saussure when encountering problems in his discussions, different than the one exhibited in Seuren’s book.

While I believe that most linguists nowadays do not follow Saussure’s purist positivist approach, I think that when acting as historians of the discipline it is less compelling to criticize someone from a century ago, whatever his reputation is, and it is advisable to attempt to understand his motivations and his underlying epistemological assumptions and to examine whether they could lead to the problems we encounter in these texts.

I must admit at the outset that the difference between Seuren’s approach and mine derives from the fact that he refrains to refer to “real Saussure”, as reflected in Saussure’s own writings and in the students’ notes who attended the three courses, from which the *Cours* was composed, while I believe that these sources are often the key to solving problems in the *Cours*. Seuren’s justification for this approach is the following:

even if it were to be found that the *Cours*, as published in 1916, differs substantially from what Saussure actually taught, it is still that book, the ‘vulgate’, not the supposed actual teaching, that forms the textual basis of the aura of genius that has arisen around Saussure’s person: the search for the ‘real’ Saussure came too late to have had any influence on the course of linguistic theory over the past century.

Although in principle this is true, it is still insightful to see how these sources often guide us in how to read the *Cours* and lead us to charitable interpretations. I turn now to demonstrate briefly in other topics as well how the sources for the “real Saussure” can shed some light on topics that were discussed in Seuren’s book. This leads us to the question of how we can apply the Principle of Charity when we read the *Cours*. The Principle of Charity is a methodological presumption, which should govern the interpretation of the beliefs and utterances of others. It urges charitable interpretation, by instructing to seek to maximize the truth or rationality of what others think and say. For example, when a contradiction is exposed one has to seek for ways in which apparently contradicting opinions expressed by the same person can be reconciled.

While Seuren is right that in various topics it is difficult to offer charitable interpretations to the contradictions and to the undeveloped ideas of the *Cours* as a book, but I will argue that we can still read it with some charity if we read it against the history of this book and the way it was composed, in other words, if we are interested in Saussure — the person. This is by no means a non-critical reading of Saussure, it is merely an attempt to provide a consistent and developed approach — which can, and should be later examined in a critical way. Admittedly, arguing that the *Cours* does not represent the actual thoughts of Saussure leads to an unchallenged assessment of the editing work by Sechehaye and Bally, but in fact this is justifiable by demonstrating the rational that stands behind their choices.

**Langue—Parole**

Seuren concludes his discussion on the topic of the relationship between *langue—parole* with the following statement:

Given the lack of further information, the most realistic reading of the events suggests that both Saussure and Sechehaye plucked it from the academic air, where this distinction had been circulating for some time, but that Sechehaye was the first

14) Others have already commented on the role of the editors in this topic; see, for example, Bou-
12) This is partially a quote from Sechehaye (1917: 11), mentioned on p. 56.

Concerning the synchronic-diachronic dichotomy, Seuren notes about the his-
tory of the distinction, and justifiably indicates that this distinction cannot be attributed to Saussure, and he criticizes him for not being part of the discus-
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g
While one must admit that it is possible to identify various changes in Saussure’s thoughts on this topic throughout his life, this is not the main reason for the lack of consistency in the *Cours*. As I have discussed at length elsewhere (Bar-Asher Siegal 2017), a big part of the confusion in understanding the *Cours* on this issue is related to the fact that the editors ignored a crucial aspect of the distinction that Saussure made in his writings and classes.

According to Saussure, the distinction between the study of historical changes (diachronic linguistics) and the study of the conscious state (synchronic linguistics) also relates to the scope of what is being studied in each class:

**the former deals with sounds and the latter with morphemes.** While this claim might be surprising for readers of the *Cours*, this is Saussure’s description of the various types of linguistics in his manuscript *On the Dual Essence of Language*:

I. Point of view of the *état de langue* itself,
— not different from the instantaneous point of view,
— not different from the semiotic point of view (or that of the sign-idea),
— not different from the point of view of the individual will outside history,
— not different from the morphological or grammatical point of view,
— not different from the point of view of combined elements.

(The units in this domain are fixed by the relationship between meaning and sign, or by the relationship between the signs, which is no different.)

II. Point of view of transversal units,
— not different from the diachronic point of view,
— not different from the phonetic point of view (or from that of the vocal figure detached from the idea and detached from the function of a sign, which comes back to the same thing as in I),
— also not different from the point of view of isolated elements. (WGL, 6)

I will briefly summarize Saussure’s division between these two frameworks:

Synchronic linguistics covers signs (i.e. morphemes). It is the study of the relationship between signs, which is another way to describe associations (which are reflected via analogies). In diachronic linguistics, only forms are studied (i.e. the sounds). Forms are “isolated” because the sounds from different stages of a language are compared in diachronic linguistics, and the meaning of the words in which they appear is irrelevant.

These are ideas that Saussure kept for the rest of his life, or at least until the second course he gave on general linguistics where he discussed this issue at length (CLG–II, p. 67–68).

Grasping these differences changes our perspectives on the division between the two frameworks in which linguistics can be studied, and the hierarchy between them. This whole aspect of the way Saussure perceived the differences between the two “points of view” is missing from the *Cours*, and it is reasonable to assume that this lack of representation of Saussure’s ideas probably has to do with the editors’ inclination to make him sound similar to his contemporaries.

In Bar-Asher Siegal (2017), I explained what motivated his distinction and also demonstrated how the editors’ inattention to this distinction corrupted his thoughts in the published *Cours*, since synchronic elements (e.g. morphemes) were inserted into the historical parts of the *Cours* and vice versa. In a nutshell: a diachronic analysis can stand independently of any synchronic fact, according to Saussure, when sound shifts are studied, but questions like “what is part of an analysis” and “which facts become part of linguistic knowledge” depend on synchronic facts. Accordingly, the relationship between synchrony and diachrony is both hierarchical and independent.

I am by no means trying to justify Saussure’s division, but I wish to argue that it seems problematic to praise Seshehaye and to criticize Saussure, when Seshehaye who as one of the co-editors, composed the *Cours* out of quotes from the actual courses, is probably part of the reason behind the contradictions in Saussure’s published *Cours*.

**Final remarks**

In this short discussion, I have attempted to demonstrate how reading the *Cours* attributed to Saussure alongside the publications of his younger colleague Albert Sechehaye can lead to a more charitable interpretation of the posthumous publication, especially when it is compared with what is known to us about “real Saussure”. It does not, however, justify the myth about Saussure, which is justifiably criticized by Seuren.

Throughout this paper I have given only three short illustrations, and I believe that similar observations could be made for other parts of Seuren’s book. For example, in his discussions on the notion of arbitrariness (p. 80–87) or on the claim that “there are only differences in the Language System” (p. 92–94), one could have benefited from understanding why Saussure’s take on these issues are crucial for his ontology about the existence of languages and how they are important for his epistemological assumptions concerning linguistic knowledge. Such inquiries, as I have attempted to exhibit elsewhere (Bar–Asher Siegal 2017), can demonstrate which philosophy of sciences is reflected in Saussure’s thoughts — and it can provide some significant, not anecdotal, contribution to the discussion in Chapter 6 of Seuren’s book about the scientific aspirations of the discipline of linguistics.
Works by Ferdinand de Saussure


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As I made it clear earlier, this is not a criticism of Seuren’s book, as we have different goals in our studies. I must be grateful for the observations in his book, which, from my point of view, are invitations to seek for more insights from the “real Saussure”. These discussions did not aim at arguing against Seuren’s criticism of the Saussurean myth. In fact, they share with Seuren the desire to provide an accurate portrayal of the history of linguistics and to avoid myths that are probably inevitable parts of the history of academic disciplines.

References


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