HOW AN EMPIRICIST FOUNDS A NEW SCIENCE :

AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL INQUIRY
IN FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE'S LINGUISTIC THEORY [1]

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INTRODUCTION

In his groundbreaking article, Godel (1966) argued that Saussure's approach to language is "a philosophical one". However, subsequently other scholars have convincingly expressed doubt towards the philosophical inclinations of Saussure [2]. In this same article Godel more specifically compared Saussure's work to the Cartesian inquiry. In the following discussion I would like to challenge Godel's correlation between Saussure and Descartes. I believe that while there might be some external similarities, Saussure's speculation is very different in respect to its methodology and aspirations. Unlike Descartes, the rationalist, Saussure took upon himself an empiricist's task of establishing an empirical, *almost* purely data-based, science.

I should first clarify the context of the current inquiry. In many descriptions of Saussure's revolution and especially when portrayed as the founder of the Structuralist movement, his theory is presented as a rationalist way of thinking. The question at hand is whether this is indeed an appropriate description of his life's project. Although we will have to admit that there are good reasons to read Saussure as a rationalist, nevertheless, to my understanding, a careful reading will

1 I wish to thank Els Elffers and Roy Harris for reading an earlier version of this paper and for their very productive comments.

2 See for example the interesting observation by Stancati (2004 : 196-202) who examined the way Saussure used the term "Philosophy" or the adjective "philosophical." Prosdocimi (1984) expressed an extreme opinion that Saussure had no philosophical education. For a survey of the different opinions regarding this question see Stancati (2004: 185-190).

indicate the opposite [3]. In order to accomplish my goal of seeing Saussure in light of an empiricist agenda, there are two tasks that should still be completed :

1. To reconsider the data that invoked the view of Saussure as a rationalist (§ 2).

2. To demonstrate that many of the details in Saussure's theory can be better understood when assuming an empiricist approach (§ 3).

It should be emphasized that this discussion is not theoretical *per se*. As mentioned in the opening remark, it is quite clear that Saussure himself did not worry about such "pure" philosophical inquiries. But the type of discussion that I am about to conduct can still shed some light on the entire project to which Saussure devoted the two last decades of his life, on the way he attempted to establish a new science. As I will demonstrate, in his personal writings and throughout his three courses [4], Saussure was very often perplexed with many questions with philosophical relevancy, and in fact he repeatedly raised many epistemological and even ontological questions, and tried to take a position in many of these issues. I believe that paying close attention to such questions will reveal some major aspects in his entire project, not recognized enough in the literature about the work of this important figure in the history of linguistics.

1. EMPIRICISM *VS.* RATIONALISM

The major dispute between empiricists and rationalists involves the epistemological question of the source of true knowledge. It starts with the question of the origin of our knowledge and it ends with the debate over the appropriate methodology by which science should be executed. In general, according to empiricism the only source of our knowledge is the experience and, therefore, everything we know can be traced to the perceptions of our senses. Consistent with this assumption, is the further understanding that all of our ideas and concepts are derived from our experiences and, hence, are *a posteriori*. Although this trend has its origin in Greek philosophy, empiricism immediately calls to mind British philosophers such as Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Mill. Although all empiricists, they

3 The idea of seeing Saussure in light of the empiricist agenda was mentioned in the literature, especially in the context of comparing him to Chomsky (see for example Graham [1992], following Chomsky [1965 : 47]). However a full account of this approach, as far as I know, was never presented.

4 This paper is about Ferdinand de Saussure's project, and therefore I will focus merely on his own writings (ELG-S) and on the protocols of his classes (CLG-C, CLG-E and CLG-RP). I will refer to the *courses* (CLG) edited by Bally and Sechehaye only in reference to previous scholarship about his work, which dealt with this book.

differed among themselves as to the question of how much knowledge can be based solely on our perceptions.

Rationalism, which is usually associated with Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibnitz, stresses the power of an *a priori* reason to grasp substantial truths about the world. In terms of the epistemology, the criterion for truth is not sensory, but reason, and only through intellectual procedure can we have true and justified knowledge. Since ideas are not based on our experience, a rationalist like Descartes had to argue that they are innate.

From these fundamental distinctions derive the differences in their notion of science and scientific method as well. According to Descartes, a scientific inquiry, striving to achieve true knowledge, should be based on an analytic procedure, which uses a deductive system consisting of axioms and their theorems. In contrast, an empiricist would establish his knowledge based on an inductive procedure, but individual empiricist's would differ on the precise method for the enlargement of knowledge and its validation.

This is in fact a too strong dichotomy between the two, as both groups conducted, in fact, similar sciences, despite their theoretical differences, and the distinctions between the two approaches were more a matter of emphasis. Thus, the core of the debate was about what should be the foundations of each science (how much of can or should be speculative); and which elements of our knowledge are innate : the ideas themselves (rationalism) or merely the mental apparatus necessary for any acquiring of knowledge (empiricism).

In addition, this 17th century dichotomy was, of course, less relevant after the introduction of Kant's philosophy in the 18th century, and an attempt to classify Saussure's theory according to these philosophical streams might seem somehow anachronistic. However, I will be using this typology only instrumentally, in order to characterize major epistemological aspects of Saussure's theory, as the real goal of this paper is not to randomly label Saussure according to some positions in a debate from the history of philosophy, but rather to identify his epistemological concerns and viewpoints.

2. SAUSSURE AS A RATIONALIST

Based on the general presentation portrayed in § 1, it is not surprising to find interpreters of Saussure arguing like Godel (1966) that he followed a rationalist line, both in terms of his epistemology and his scientific methods. In a few places, Saussure indeed used a rationalist mode to describe knowledge about *the language.* For example, in a note entitled, "Reflections on the procedures of the linguist," he

asserted the following:

> We differ from the very outset from the theorists who think it is enough to describe the phenomena of language, and from that rarer breed who would define the work of the linguist as being within these phenomena. *We consider the same kind of definition of a term is a prerequisite to any knowledge of a phenomenon or of a mental operation*; not the chance definition that one can always give of one relative term in the context of another relative term, and which produces an endless vicious circle, but a substantial definition which has at some point a basis of some kind… (ELG- S : 17-18, emphasize is mine). [5]

It is also well known that, according to Saussure, the object of the inquiry – the language – is not given to us and, therefore, the object of linguistics is a product of our reason. Harris (1988: 126) describes this view of Saussure's:

> A science of language, as far as Saussure was concerned, had to deal with linguistic *realia,* not metalinguistic fictions. And yet, as he was forced to admit, linguistics – unlike other sciences – had no object of study 'given in advance' : in linguistics 'it is the viewpoint adopted which creates the object' (CLG: 23). It is the tension between this admission and the claim of scientific status which is felt constantly throughout the *cours.*

According to this "rationalist" point of view, the final object of linguistics, *the language*, is an object that is created by a theoretical abstraction and reflection [6].

In addition, in terms of Saussure's scientific methodology one could argue that he followed the deductive procedure depicted by Descartes, starting with axioms and following with theorems. The prime example of this methodology can be found in the third course in which Saussure spoke about the two principles of the arbitrariness of the linguistic signs and the linearity of the speech, which he described as the "primary truths" (CLG-C: 76-77) [7]. These principles were conceived by scholars [8], not without reason [9], as sort of axioms on which the entire theory is based.

We can add to these principles other presuppositions of Saussurian

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5 Similar things were written in the notes that Saussure prepared for his never published article on the work of Whitney, ELG-S: 143.

6 See Norris (2004: 228).

7 See also ELG-S: 8 where the idea that everything is just a point of view is highlighted.

8 *Inter alia* Harris (2001 : 18).

9 This understanding has to do with the way it is presented in the *courses*: "Le *signe* linguistique ainsi défini possède deux caractères primordiaux. En les énonçant nous poserons les principes même de toute étude de cet ordre" (CLG: 100). However, examining the source in CLG-E: 151 will reveal that the sentence "En les énonçant nous poserons les principes même de toute étude de cet ordre" has no attestation in any of the notebooks from this class, and this is probably the editors' addition.

theory such as the semiological fact of an association between "the concept" and "the acoustic image" as a self-evident fact (CLG-C : 78).

According to this description, Saussure's discussion largely centers on the scientific study of the language and, accordingly, his theory reflects the scientific work of the linguist. It has nothing to do with the "faculty of the language" *per se*, as it is not about the cognitive abilities of the individual to acquire the language or to master it and, clearly, it has nothing to do with the ontological questions concerning the existence of the language.

In a sense, this is a reasonable conclusion gained from a reading of the *courses*, however, reading Saussure's own notes and scrutinizing the protocols of his classes reveals a significantly different picture. It can be demonstrated that, following a weak version of empiricism (see § 3.2.1), Saussure did not simply believe that *the language* is a fiction in the mind of the linguist. Rather, to the extent that every individual produces a similar "fiction" in his mind, Saussure emphasized that *the language* has a real existence (§ 3.2.1). Regarding the scientific methodology, a cautious examination demonstrates that the arbitrariness of the sign is not taken as a self-evident fact; hence, this is not a real axiom. As it will be shown later (§ 3.2.2), this primary principle in Saussure's own work is a result of research and, as such, even Saussure extended it only so far as could be proven. Therefore, these principles are not the beginning of the scientific process, but rather its final stage, or to be more accurate, somewhere in the middle – since following these conclusions Saussure developed his theory even further.

3. SAUSSURE AS AN EMPIRICIST

§ 3.1 - Saussure's predecessors, the *neogrammarians*, held an extreme empiricist opinion of positivism. In this respect, they followed the view of the linguist Wilhelm Scherer that our scientific knowledge should contain only positive experiences [10]. If Saussure was indeed such a rationalist, then his revolution and separation from the *neogrammarian* tradition was not only in content, but much more fundamentally, based on completely different epistemological framework. Therefore, let us reexamine what was at the heart of Saussure's rebellion against the *neogrammarians* or, to be more accurate, what was the conceptual catalyst that triggered his separation from the common linguistic theory of the time.

The standard view considers the distinction between synchronic

10 See Amsterdamska (1987: 101-102). Regarding Wilhelm Scherer and his positivist agenda, see Le Gouis (1997: 59-108).

and diachronic linguistics as the core of the debate. Although, as it is today well known, Saussure was not the first to distinguish between the diachronic and the synchronic analyses of a language, this differentiation is still crucial to understand his unique perspective on this issue. For our purpose, it is important to recognize his motivations for this distinction and in this light to perceive the way in which Saussure's shift of interest caused a revolution in the field of linguistics and redefined its scientific nature. A full account of this is beyond the scope of the current discussion, and here I will only focus on Saussure's own account for the differences between him and his *neogrammarian* professors in Leipzig.

Contrary to our expectations, Saussure's lack of affiliation with the *neogrammarians* did not often manifest itself in overt criticism. In fact, I do not think that he maintained a fundamental criticism against them beyond their limited scope of interest. However, when qualifying their achievements he wrote :

> It would have done more good if they [=the *neogrammarians*] had been familiar with the natural sciences, <or sciences other than philology> (CLG-RP: 92)

The focus of his critic was their lack of familiarity with natural sciences, however it is not completely clear from this context what exactly the problem that Saussure had with their approach in this respect [11]. I would like to suggest that it had to do with the question of what make the linguistic inquiry scientific, and that in their respective answers lies the essential difference between Saussure and the *neogrammarians*. While the latter believed that it is sufficient to formulate laws in order to consider linguistics as a science [12], the former was not satisfied by this procedure. He believed that, like most sciences, a scientific approach should start with something more fundamental: with a recognition of the basic entity within this field of research [13]. This idea can be demonstrated, for example, in the introduction to his book's manuscript :

> We believe that in the last analysis one must always come back to the issue of what in the essence of language constitutes a *linguistic entity* (ELG-S: 3)

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11 In ELG-S: 7 Saussure says about some of linguists before him: "there is certainly very often a complete absence of reflection on the part of these authors."

12 For a general discussion on this topic see for example Christy (1983).

13 See Godel (1957: 189) and Godel (1966: 481-482) who noticed the importance of the discussion about the linguistic unit as the starting point of the entire theory. However, he took it to the direction of a philosophical discussion regarding the question of the identity. He did not emphasize, though, the importance of this discussion to Saussure scientific agenda.

Similarly, in the third course he emphasized that a scientific inquiry of the language should begin with the question: "What are the concrete entities compromising the language?" and following this statement he clarified :

> *Entities*: essence, what constitutes a being (that is a dictionary definition). (CLG-C: 17-18) [14]

This is a scientific procedure that desires to establish knowledge in an inductive way, i.e. to begin with the smallest unit and to construct our knowledge on such foundations [15]. Although this seems to support an empiricist approach, nevertheless it is not a decisive evidence, first since it depends on the procedure of finding this smallest unit, second it depends on the relation between this unit and the rest of the linguistic knowledge, whether it will be established in an inductive or deductive way.

Considering the procedure of finding the *linguistic unit*, at first glance, Saussure seems to epitomize the rationalist approach, since in the search for the minimal unit he realized that scientists do not attain it by any sensory means. However, the fact that Saussure considered this as a problem reveals his empiricist inclinations, as he sought for a direct experience as the starting point for the knowledge. The crucial question is, therefore, what Saussure's reaction to this problem was : did it made him convert and change a conceptual paradigm, as some interpreters understood him; or did he only have to make some adjustments to his empiricist beliefs, and maybe adopt a weaker version of empiricism?

Before characterizing Saussure's approach, we should first clarify in what sense the language is or is not given to us. As noted earlier, the *neogrammarians* held an extreme positivist approach, and, therefore, based all of their knowledge of the language on its external appearance and especially on its vocal form. Why couldn't Saussure also consider these sounds as the foundations for our knowledge? His demonstration of the lack of direct evidence for the linguistic entities illustrates the answer:

> In the language as we encounter it directly, without any intermediaries, there are neither given units nor given entities. An effort is necessary to grasp what it is that forms the different entities contained in the language, or to avoid taking as linguistic entities which are entities of another order. We are not dealing with organized beings or with material things. Where the language is concerned, we are in a very poor position to see the real

14 See also CLG-RP: 78.

15 As a matter of fact Saussure himself was aware of the fact that this is not such a trivial requirement. See, for example, CLG-RP: 18.

entities, since the language phenomenon is internal and fundamentally complex. It presupposes the association of two things: the concept and the acoustic image. That is why one can say that it needs a positive effort and careful attention to discern the entities within the mass formed by the language (CLG-C: 78) [16]

From the last sentence we have a definite answer that Saussure did not give up on the empiricist agenda, but rather realized that "it needs a positive effort and careful attention".

Since this quotation contains many of the essential elements of the Saussurian linguistic theory, which are important to understand his perception of the linguistic science and are crucial for the rest of our discussion, I will briefly note on some of them.

According to Saussure, the reason behind the lack of direct experience of these entities has to do with two connected features of the linguistic entity: "[it] is [1.] internal and [2.] fundamentally complex." The idea that we are dealing with an internal phenomenon is related to his *realistic mentalist* view, which he repeatedly phrased:

Only what exists in the mind can be said to exist (ELG-S: 29)

This is what stands in the background of the figurative descriptions of the linguistic unit as a "living entity in the mental storehouse" (ELG-S: 81), and the ontological claim:

The language is located only in the brain (CLG-C: 69) [17]

In light of this, we are given a clear understanding of what Saussure believed to be the goal for the scientific field of linguistics. It is not only to portray a scientific approach to the language itself, but it has a much larger scope :

… we are led, when we wish to approach the sign in more depth, to study its mechanism in the individual, to analyze the mental and the physical operations which we can seize in the individual (CLG-RP: 11)

The second cause for the problem of the sensory givenness of the linguistic entity was the complexity of the linguistic entity. Here, Saussure is clearly referring to the semiotic nature of this entity: the association of the acoustic image with the concept. Obviously, one should ask about the origin of this assumption concerning the nature of the linguistic entity. A full answer for this question would require a separate paper, but for our purposes it is enough to say that Saussure was relying on the fact that the ability to recognize these units is at our disposal, and therefore it is a given to the linguist, being at the same

16 For similar ideas see his notes in ELG-S: 136-137. In addition in the second course CLG-RP: 18-19.

17 See also p. 17.

time both the scientist's and the subject of the inquiry itself.[18]

§ 3.2.1 - So far, I have only demonstrated that the starting point of Saussre's theory is compatible, or even better understood, with the assumption that he held an empiricist approach. Let us now reconsider the data in the body of his theory that invoked the view of Saussure as a rationalist (mentioned in § 2).

According to the rationalist reading of Saussure, the object of the linguistic phenomenon is created by the viewpoint of the linguists, since there is no sensory data. As a matter of fact, it is hard to deny that at times Saussure appears to evince a similar theory, but, as we will see, it was always connected to his realistic mentalist approach, and not a justification for a rationalist epistemology.

It is true that in following a semiotic point of view of the language, Saussure could not hold a strict positivist theory. He had to adopt a less naïve approach, and to admit that not everything in our knowledge is directly given to us. As a matter of fact, in most sciences the smallest units are not given, but are theory-dependent. (Taking chemistry as an example, no one has ever seen an atom directly or any of its smaller components. Our acquaintance with them is only through other phenomena to which we have direct access, and through a theory that requires their existence.)

To avoid confusion, the ontological status of these kinds of units is a totally different question, and it is not necessarily connected to the epistemological one. Can we strongly claim that they exist even without directly experiencing them? This question can and should be asked within the empiricist framework. It goes back to Locke's and Berkeley's discussions about secondary qualities, and to Hume's inquiry about causation. In the same way, the language is given to us only by means of its expressions, either in a vocalic way, by its written form, or by any other representative instruments. These are not linguistic signs, but since they could not serve as semiotic tools without being representatives of the internal signs, these external expressions help us grasp and identify the real entities, the linguistic signs, which dwell in the human brain. As I said, the ontological question is independent from the epistemological one, and, indeed, for a long time Saussure could not give a definite answer as to what sense we believe that they exist: whether they have a real existence in our mental organ, the brain; or whether they are only part of the way we perceive the world, as if they exist there:

> In linguistics one wonders if the viewpoint from which the thing is approached is in fact the whole thing. This begs the question of whether

18 See for example CLG-C: 127.

linguistics has ever had any solid anchorage, or whether it comes down to a never-ending multiplication of viewpoints (ELG-S : 44) [19]

In various places Saussure dealt with this doubt, especially in his personal writings and less so in his lectures. However, in all of these places he merely mentioned his dilemma, without trying to philosophize about how to choose between the two options. It seems, however, that generally speaking, in his lectures, he inclined more toward the realistic point of view.

§ 3.2.2 - The other argument, which was mentioned earlier (§ 2), for seeing Saussure as a rationalist had to do with his scientific methodology – the fact that he held to a foundationalist way of establishing a science from axioms and their logical derivations. As I already noted, careful examination will reveal that it was never presented in his work as a group of axioms, but rather as a result of an empirical research.

If we take, for example, the principle of arbitrariness, the scope and content of which deserve a separate discussion, it is clear that it is not presented as an axiom. Saussure proved it from the fact that different languages have different forms [20], and from the fact that languages change throughout history [21]. Therefore, this "principle" should not be considered as a deductive result, but rather as a stage in the process of finding the reality through an empirical process of supporting theories.

After rejecting the various motivations to see Saussure as a rationalist we can finally demonstrate that different aspects of his theory can be better understood in light of an empiricist framework. Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that this is by no means an exhaustive discussion.

4. THE ORIGIN OF THE LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE

As mentioned earlier (§ 3.1), Saussure repeatedly employed the metaphor of a storehouse to describe the situation of the language in the brain. Accordingly, each individual is familiar with all the units of the language, and owns them for his uses. A careful reading of Saussure will show that this knowlede of the units is not at all simply an ability to master this linguistic ability or to generate new sentences (although even Saussure agreed that this is an important component of the faculty of the language), but rather it is a knowledge of the right

19 The viewpoints to which Saussure is referring to have to do with the justification of distinguishing between the synchronic and the diachronic point of views.
20 CLG-C: 139.
21 *Inter alia* ELG-S: 162.

combinations of the *concepts* and the *acoustic images*. A human being has the ability to learn this treasury of signs, but he is by no means born with it. As a matter of fact, every person, like the linguist, is only exposed to its phonetic aspect and through his psychological abilities he creates his own storage.

This is an explicitly empiricist theory of the origin of our knowledge [22]. The source of the knowledge is a sensory experience of hearing (or seeing) and it is expanded through a psychological process. In the rest of the paper I will show how this picture is generated from Saussure's work, and will concentrate on the issues of the non-innate ideas and the psychological process of creating the linguistic storehouse.

The idea that Saussure denied the existence of innate ideas is well known. This is the content of the rejection of the *nomencalture* tradition, and I would like to emphasize that this is the context of Saussure's famous motto:

> In the language (that is a language state) there are only differences. Difference implies to our mind to positive terms between which the difference is established... In the language, there are only differences, without positive terms (CLG-C: 141).

While this opinion fits well in respect to the signifying part of the language, we should not trivialize its relevance to the signified element of the linguistic sign. I will leave the full account of the Saussurian theory to another discussion, but for our purposes it will be sufficient to say, that there is no perfect symmetry between the two parts of the linguistic sign in regards to this topic. As it is revealed in different places, the focus of the argument that in language there are only differences has to do with the fact that it is not innate, as Saussure demonstrates:

> The science of language appears to be in a different situation whereby the objects it must deal with never have any *innate* reality, are never *distinct* from other objects of inquiry. There is nothing underlying their existence other than *their difference*, or DIFFERENCES of whatever kind that the mind manages to attach to *the* fundamental *difference*... (ELG-S: 42)

Another part of Saussure's theory that is important to what I believe to be his empiricist inclination is connected to the way the linguistic units get their meaning. In the second course following the statement that "Everything comes down to differences, to grouping," (CLG-RP: 51) Saussure made his famous distinction between the two relations that constitute these grouping: the *syntagamtic* and the

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22 This is the context in which the debate with Chomsky (1965) is taken place (see above n. 3).

associative relations. For our discussion the second one is more significant, especially since it has often been misinterpreted. Just to demonstrate a common understanding of this part of Saussure's theory, let me quote Culler's (1977: 44-45) presentation of this topic:

> In studying a language, then, the linguist is concerned with relationship: identities and differences. And he discovers, Saussure argues, two major type of relationship. On the one hand, there are...oppositions which produce distinct and alternative terms... On the other hand, there are the relations between units which combine to form sequences. In a linguistic sequence, a term's value depends not only on the contrast between it and the others which might have been chosen in its stead but also on its relations with the terms which precede and follow it in sequence. The former, which Saussure calls *associative* relations, are now generally called *paradigmatic* relations. The latter are called *syntagmatic* relations. Syntagmatic relations define combinatory possibilities: the relations between elements which might be combined in a sequence. Paradigmatic relations are the oppositions between elements which can replace one another.

According to Culler this part of the theory is related to the process of "studying a language" and in a sense is a sort of calculus performed in order to find the structure of the language under investigation. A cautious reading of Saussure will show that, although this description might be in some ways relevant to his theory, it misses much of Saussure's main point. As a matter of fact, a lot can be understood from one of Culler's remarks, repeated by many others: "[that] which Saussure calls *associative* relations, are now generally called *paradigmatic* relations." The term "*paradigmatic* relations" is taken from Hjelmslev (*inter alia* Hjelmslev [1963: 59]), and the question that should be asked is whether it is just a terminological matter – what the one calls *associative* the other calls *paradigmatic* – or maybe there is something deeper behind this terminological difference [23].

A full account of the differences between Saussure and Hjelmslev should be presented in another context. For our discussion I will simply argue that Saussure on this matter was unjustifiably understood in light of Hjelmslev. While the latter believed that there is no place for ontological questions in order to establish a scientific approach to the study of the language, as noted earlier, the former strongly believed the opposite. Following Saussure's belief that the language exists in the brain, he thought that we should explain the psychological mechanism that occurs there. Precisely for this point the discussion about the *associative* relation is relevant.

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23 Harris (2001: 90-91) mentions a number of scholars who wrote, similarly to Culler, regarding the difference between the terminologies, and in contrast, Harris argues for differences between the two theoreticians.

Saussure is not using the term *association* by accident. This term is a psychological action through which the mind is connecting (or "grouping" if we want to stick to Saussure's own words) the elements with which it works.

In an earlier discussion, Saussure was not certain on which level he wanted to describe this phenomenon. He suggested two different ways to describe it, as can be seen in the following quote:

> A group of elements created and associated in the mind, or the system within which an element has an abstract existence among other potential elements (ELG-S: 39)

Later in the last two courses the picture becomes clearer as Saussure delineates the way in which language is organized in the mental sphere of the individual. Saussure spoke not about *relations*, but about two *activities*: *association* and *grouping*, and he clearly argued that this is a "purely mental" (CLG-RP: 53) mechanism that is taking place in the brain (CLG-RP: 54). As he puts it on one occasion:

> Two functions which are also active in us, in respect to language (CLG-RP: 52)

Despite the fact that he repeatedly describes the association as something "in absentia," this is true only in respect to its material aspect. However, this does not mean that it does not really happen, as he unequivocally describes it:

> These correlations may be considered as existing in the brain along with the words themselves (CLG-C : 130).

Without going into the details of how exactly this mechanism is functioning, for Saussure this was clearly the core of the faculty of the language. Therefore, when describing the individual part in the linguistic circle, he names this part "the associative center:"

> In the associative center, purely mental, a verbal concept and a verbal image are brought into contact (CLG-C : 67).

Here, the creation of the linguistic sign, the act of joining the signifier element with its signified element, is also described as an act of association.

The use of this psychological ability is directly relevant to our discussion. In the empiricist tradition this is the most important mental ability, since it creates the knowledge from our sensory experience. According to all of the empiricists the association was the mechanism by which ideas were formed from the sensory input [24]. Thus, regarding the way in which the linguistic knowledge is formed,

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24 An interesting book about the role of association in the history of philosophy is Warren (1921).

Saussure once again followed the empiricist tradition [25].

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I tried to demonstrate that the appropriate way in which to consider both Saussure's epistemology and scientific method is in light of an empiricist agenda. As I emphasized throughout the paper the goal of this inquiry was not the theoretical speculation *per se*. This was not an attempt to represent Saussure as a hidden philosopher, but to examine his own epistemological considerations, and to find whether we can decipher a systematic methodology in Saussure's attempt to establish a new science.

As I hinted throughout the paper, this is only the beginning of a systematic analysis of Saussure's methodological concerns. Following the conclusions of this paper, a variety of topics in his theory, methodology, and goals should be reconsidered and presented in a significantly different way – which to a large extent has an empiricist characterization. This is a project which I am currently undertaking and hope to complete soon.

ABBREVIATIONS AND REFERENCES

1. Works by Ferdinand de Saussure

CLG   *Cours de linguistique générale* (published by C. Bally and A. Sechehaye in collaboration with A. Riedlinger), Lausanne and Paris, Payot, 1916 and 1922.

CLG-C   *Troisième cours de de linguistique générale, d'après les cahiers d'Emile Constantin* (edited and translated by E. Komatsu and R. Harris), Oxford, New York, Seoul, Tokyo, Pergamon Press, 1993.

CLG-E   *Cours de linguistique générale* (critical edition by R. Engler) 3 vols, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1967-1968.

CLG-RP   *Deuxième cours de linguistique générale, d'après les cahiers d'Albert Riedlinger et Charles Patois* (edited and translated by E. Komatsu and G. Wolf), Oxford, New York, Tokyo, Pergamon Press, 1997.

ELG-S   *Writing in General Linguistics* (translated by C. Sanders and M. Pires), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.

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25 It should be noted that it is possible that in this matter he followed Kruszewski, as association is playing an important role in his theory. See Williams (1993: 69, 80-87).

2. References

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