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Becoming a dominant misinterpreted source: The case of Ferdinand de Saussure in cultural sociology

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Abstract

Cultural analysts in sociology typically cite the work of Ferdinand de Saussure to motivate a narrow theory of meaning. In so doing, sociologists incorrectly attribute to Saussure (1) the postulate that meaning is arbitrary; (2) the idea that signs gain meaning only through relations of opposition to other signs; (3) the view that there is an isomorphic correspondence between linguistic signs and all cultural units of analysis, ergo culture is fundamentally arbitrary; and finally (4) the idea that he offers a Durkheimian theory of culture (i.e. Saussure was a follower of Durkheim). Saussure's project, rather, was specific to linguistics, and mainly one of theoretical and methodological clarification regarding phonology. Saussure never intended his analytical model of phonology to apply to the real operation of meaning in general, as done by contemporary interpreters and, furthermore, never argued that meaning is arbitrary.

Keywords

Arbitrary, cultural sociology, Durkheim, linguistics, meaning, Saussure

Sociologists often cite Ferdinand de Saussure to assert that the meaning of cultural elements is fundamentally arbitrary and that signs gain meaning only through relations of opposition to other signs.[1] That is, rather than interpreting Saussure as primarily contributing to the *philosophy of linguistics* (i.e. how language is to be studied as a science), sociologists read his work as foremost an intervention in the *philosophy of language* (i.e. how language refers to reality). This reading is often presented as a fundamentally Durkheimian theory of culture, because, it is assumed, Saussure was a follower of Durkheim. This received intellectual history, however, is flawed. First, there is no evidence that Durkheim influenced (the institutionally older) Saussure. Second, Saussure

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never intended his analytical model of phonology to apply to the operation of meaning in general. Finally, and most importantly, Saussure never claimed that linguistic meaning is arbitrary or that signs gain meaning only through relations of opposition to other signs.

Reviewing 167 articles and book chapters written by sociologists (from 1969 to 2018) which refer to the lecture notes collected in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (*Cours*), I find the most common citation is highly ritualistic (in that only 35 even provide page numbers), and often used to evoke (approvingly or disapprovingly) the notion that languages, signs, or meaning, in general, is arbitrary. Among those offering page numbers, citations are confined to very few places and used to motivate two general arguments. For the first argument, sociologists cite sections on the "linguistic sign" (pp. 65–66) and the role of difference in producing "linguistic value" (pp. 114–120), to assert meaning is arbitrary and signs gain meaning through relations of opposition to other signs. Second, sociologists cite the section outlining the distinctions between *langage, langue*, and *parole* (p. 14) and defining the study of "semiology" (p. 16), to argue there is an isomorphic correspondence between linguistic signs and all cultural units of analysis (ergo culture is fundamentally arbitrary). This selective appropriation leaves out the vast majority of the *Cours*.[2]

Regarding the first claim, many credit Saussure for defining the linguistic sign in terms of a dualism between physical sound and physical object (i.e. both external to individuals). Saussure's key innovation, however, was putting forth a *psychological* dualism: between the "mental image" of the sound pattern and the mental "concept," both of which were entirely "interior," psychological phenomena. This allows for the bracketing of questions of linguistic meaning or "reference" (Dickens, 1990: 154), and with it, most of what is considered the core territory of the philosophy of language. In Saussure's words, regarding the "non-linguistic domains of pure thought . . . It is not for the linguist to determine exactly where the independence of the vocal sign can be said to begin, whether certain categories pre-exist and others post-exist the vocal sign" (Saussure, 2006: 26). To put it explicitly, in the *Cours, Saussure never claimed that meaning is arbitrary*. Rather, "Saussure's arbitrariness lies in the relation between signifier and signified, not in the relation between the concept signified and the world" (Elder-Vass, 2014: 257).

Second, sociologists often presume Saussure did not intend for his work to be "confined to linguistics alone" (Zerubavel, 2004: 185), he did, after all, coin the term "semiology" (Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 12).[3] However, in most ways, he did wish to confine his work to linguistics. "Saussure's whole effort, ignored by his borrowers, was to emphasize the *singularity* of language, everything that separates it from other social practices or forms" (Anderson, 2016: 43, original emphasis). In Saussure's words, "Whitney said 'language is a human *institution*' . . . but, by its very nature, any unfortunate analogy with any other human institution, *except writing*, can only misrepresent its real essence" (Saussure, 2006: 146–147, original emphasis). Although Whitney – the eminent American linguist – argues that language is both arbitrary and a human institution, Saussure argues, "he failed to see that this arbitrary character fundamentally distinguishes languages from all other institutions" (Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 88, see also pp 32, 37–38, 96–98, 102). Some may argue Saussure at least presumed "semiological systems" operated as language, and yet again he warns against such a presumption.[4] As the "units" of language, according to the Saussurean model, are not the perceptible phenomena of speech (but rather their mental impressions), this "distinguishes languages from

all other semiological institutions" (Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 130). In addition, while Saussure knew that language is not entirely unmotivated (e.g. Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 80, 157), Saussure believed it was the most arbitrary of semiological institutions and therefore an entirely unique kind of phenomena.

In this article, I demonstrate that mapping Saussure's model of phonology – as a system of values produced by oppositions – onto the operation of meaning in general misunderstands his contribution to linguistics. I begin with an intellectual biography of Saussure which allows us to see the sort of phonological phenomena toward which he was oriented. This is followed by a consideration of the possibility that Durkheim influenced Saussure, a common, yet dubious, claim by sociologists. Following this, I engage in an exegetical discussion of Saussure's work by outlining the basic components of his model, noting the most common misinterpretations by sociologists.

Prelude to the Saussurean model

Ferdinand de Saussure and nineteenth-century European philology

Early years in Geneva: Adolphe Pictet and Port-Royal. Saussure was born in Geneva in 1857 – the same year as Thorstein Veblen, a year after Sigmund Freud, and a year before Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, and Franz Boas – and began studying languages at an early age. He mastered elementary Greek by 11 and continued to study Greek through his middle school and secondary school at the Collège de Genève, before attending the preparatory school, Gymnase de Geneve. During his adolescent and teenage years, Saussure was inspired by the Swiss linguist and distant relative, Adolphe Pictet, who introduced Saussure to the theoretical study of the "Indo-European" languages, first as his neighbor circa 1870, and a few years later when Saussure read *Indo-European Origins of the Primitive Aryans* (Bouissac, 2010: 38–9).

Motivated by this book, the young Saussure wrote the "Essay for reducing the words of Greek, Latin and German to a few roots," which he sent to Pictet in the fall of 1874 (almost a year before the latter passed away). "This piece of juvenilia," as Saussure would describe it later, "consisted of a proof that all goes back, in all possible languages, to radicals immediately constituted of 3 consonants (more anciently still of 2 consonants)" (Joseph, 2012b: 154). It was his first attempt at a general theory of language (completed when he was 17, it was published posthumously in 1960).

In addition, an important, if unacknowledged,[5] influence on the young Saussure was his philosophy and psychology teacher at the Gymnase, Antoine Verchère, as well as André Oltramare who was the director of the Collège, and later his teacher at the Gymnase and Université de Genève. The Saussure scholar, John Joseph (2012b: 80–82), notes that Verchère and Oltramare's pedagogical approach to teaching grammar and logic was directly linked to the philosophy of "Port-Royal," associated with the heretical Catholic "Jansenist" monastery in Port-Royal-des-Champs, France. Most famously, this intellectual movement was associated with Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole's *Port-Royal Logic*, a tome first completed in 1662, with the fourth and final in 1683, and the most influential text on the subject prior to the nineteenth century. However, they also produced one of the pioneering works on the philosophy of language and linguistics: *Port-Royal Grammar*.

Secondary schools in France had abandoned Port-Royal in the classroom, but not Geneva – primarily due to the enterprising work of Louis Longchamp, who successfully got his Latin grammars into the school curriculum during Oltramare and Verchère's formative years (Joseph, 2012a). According to Joseph (2012b), "Some of the principal ideas associated with Saussure's name" can be found in Verchère's course notes, for example, "the distinction of *langage, langue*, and *parole*, language as a collection of signs, value, conventional signs, language as a system of signs" (p. 144).

The encounter with Herodotus. No introduction to Saussure is complete without the following story (Bouissac, 2010: 40), which according to the man himself some 30 years later "remained as though photographed in my memory" (Joseph, 2012b: 133). At the College, prior to his acceptance into the more prestigious Gymnase, Saussure was first introduced to the existence of dialects in Greek. Previously he only studied the type of Greek spoken by the philosophers of Athens (the Attic dialect). While reading the work of the historian Herodotus, Saussure encountered a new variant (the Ionic dialect). Famously, and perhaps not without elements of folklore, during the 1872–1873 academic year, Saussure struck upon the intellectual kernel that would fuel his entire project thereafter.

The episode is often reduced to Herodotus's use of "*tetakhatai"* (they have been arrayed). Saussure had yet to read this word because in Attic Greek, rather than a single conjugated word, it is rendered as a phrase. What was curious to Saussure is that, by analogy to similarly conjugated words – which he described as "a flash of lightning that I received instantaneously" (Joseph, 2012b: 133) – the root *tetakh-* should take the ending form *-ntai*, which would form *tetagntai* (with the /kh/ "softening" to a /g/).

To oversimplify the 15-year-old's puzzle, how could the Greek consonant /n/ become the vowel /a/? His presumption was that pronouncing three consonants in a row is a difficult physiological feat. Attic Greek solved it by rendering it as a phrase (a syntactic solution), while Ionic Greek solved it by altering the sounds in the word (a phonological solution). Saussure's solution was to posit the existence of a kind of sound, one that could either be a vowel or consonant depending on the adjacent sounds, in the *ancestral language* from which Greek emerged.

Linguistics in the nineteenth century was dominated by "comparative and historical linguistics," more properly the study of historical texts (i.e. philology). The "holy grail" of the study of language during that time was the reconstruction of a hypothetical *ancestral language* that could explain similarities between geographically dispersed language communities (Sanskrit, Greek, Persian, Armenian, and various other European groups) through a kind of evolutionary theorizing. Indeed, many philologists took it for granted that this hypothetical language (referred to as "Proto-Indo-European" or "PIE") was a "perfect" language – building upon millennia of tropes of Adam and Eve speaking such a language with God in the Garden of Eden (Eco, 1995) – that had undergone subsequent decay.[6] In any case, the young Saussure – in his Greek revelation, and his ambitious essay for Pictet – was already attempting to make a contribution to this project.

The University of Leipzig and the Neogrammarians. Saussure studied the natural sciences for 1 year at the Université de Genève before moving to the University of Leipzig, the epicenter of Indo-European linguistics, in 1876 (Joseph, 2012b: 184). Upon arriving, he

found the younger faculty in the middle of an intellectual movement – referred to as the *Junggrammatiker* (Neogrammarians). Although some paint Saussure's work as a rejection of his contemporaries, his approach is mostly commensurate with them, the Neogrammarians in particular (Davies, 2004; Koerner, 2013). Among other things, this group of scholars sought to replace the then-dominant "Darwinian" framework, which presumed languages evolve like organisms (Koerner, 1983; Richards, 2002).

There were two prongs to the Neogrammarian approach to linguistic change: morphological/syntactic and phonological. Regarding the former – the ways words are inflected and arranged in sentences to perform different grammatical functions – they posited that change primarily occurred through analogy. Regarding the latter, which is more germane for our discussion, the central tenet was that sound changes are exceptionless. They transform unconsciously and according to definable sound laws. This stance was a generalization of "Grimm's Law," named after the folklorist who argued in 1819 that three sounds in Germanic languages (/f/, /th/, /h/) corresponded to distinct, but different, sounds in PIE (/p/, /t/, /k/, respectively), *regardless of the word*. For example, /p/ in PIE would change to an /f/ as in "pisk" (in PIE) and "fish" (in Germanic languages). Wherever one would expect a /p/ from the PIE word, one would find an /f/ in the Germanic languages. Considering Saussure's prior proclivities, it is unsurprising that he was encouraged by the Neogrammarians position regarding phonology, and their general vision of linguistics as a systematic science rather than a descriptive enterprise.

While studying Sanskrit for 1 year at the University of Berlin in 1878 – overlapping with Georg Simmel, a doctoral student in philosophy – Saussure wrote a 300-page book, the *Memoir on the Primitive Vowel System in Indo-European Languages*, and the following year he submitted his dissertation on the genitive case in Sanskrit. The former was written independently of his doctoral work in 1879, but it secured Saussure's reputation as an up-and-coming linguist. In fact, while visiting Leipzig for his doctoral defense, the renowned philologist Franz Delitzsch (intellectual great-great-great-grandfather of Noam Chomsky) asked the 21-year-old if he was related to "the famous de Saussure," the author of the *Memoir* (Joseph, 2012b: 258).

In the *Memoir*, Saussure theorized the existence of two additional sounds in PIE – hypotheses partially validated decades later by Hittite scholars (Koerner, 1985: 339) – using a method he pioneered now referred to as "internal reconstruction" (Davies, 2004: 22). One key peculiarity of this work which his contemporaries took exception to (and which non-linguists may see as splitting hairs) is that Saussure says nothing about the actual "acoustic" qualities of the theorized sound(s) (Davies, 2004: 21; Koerner, 1985: 331).[7] Indeed, this work reinforces characterizations of Saussure as standing heavily on the intuition that linguists should focus on the organization between sounds *in the mind*, rather than sounds themselves – demonstrating much continuity with the essay he wrote for Pictet as a teenager (Joseph, 2012a: 265).

A brief interlude with Durkheim

For sociologists familiar with Saussure, the omission of Durkheim may seem strange. In one of the earliest references to Saussure by a sociologist, Charles Lemert (1979) states, "It is almost certain that Saussure, who lectured in Paris at the *École des Hautes Etudes*

from 1881 to 1891, was influenced by Durkheim" (p. 933 fn 5, see also 2003: 303, 310, 311). In the same year, Anthony Giddens made the same assertion (see also Giddens, 1978: 7, 1979: 9). Likewise, Kronenfeld and Decker (1979) insinuate, "Saussure had taught in Paris (while Durkheim was elaborating his theory of society), and his student Meillet was a member of the *Annee sociologique group*" (p. 505). In an interview, Alexander goes much further by claiming, "there is strong evidence that Saussure attended Durkheim's lectures at the Sorbonne and drew directly upon some of these core ideas" (Cordero et al., 2008: 527). The claim of a direct Durkheim/Saussure connection is tenuous for three reasons. First, there is no evidence Saussure attended Durkheim's lectures. Second, Durkheim and Saussure's time in Paris overlapped by less than 2 years.[8] Third, Durkheim was still a student whose renown would not reach fruition until well into the twentieth century (Lukes, 1985). Saussure, on the contrary, was already well established by the 1880s.

Aside from the fact neither Saussure nor Durkheim ever reference one another,[9] much of the basic seeds of Saussure's approach to language were planted during his teenage years. While he certainly refined them throughout his life, the rudiments of his approach were well-developed by the time he completed his dissertation in 1880. Durkheim, on the contrary, was just beginning his academic journey in 1879 at the École Normale Supérieure.

Just prior to completing his doctorate, Saussure moved to Paris in December 1880. By November the following year, at 23, Saussure became a lecturer at the École des Hautes Etudes, teaching Gothic, Old High German, and later Indo-European philology. Michel Bréal, a founder of linguistics in France, chose Saussure to take over his lectureship in comparative grammar, and in support of this recommendation, Léon Renier wrote, "Mr de Saussure, although still young, [is] already very famous and highly esteemed in the scholarly world" (Joseph, 2012b: 280). During this same period, Durkheim was working toward his *agrégation* while battling "serious illness" (Lukes, 1985: 64). Saussure, on the contrary, was very busy hobnobbing with Parisian linguists and his family's Genevese social circle in Paris, as well as attending courses in linguistics, the weekly meetings of the Société de Linguistique, and editing his dissertation for publication (Joseph, 2012b: 274–279).

Following Durkheim's completion of the *agrégation* in 1882, roughly a year after Saussure began lecturing, Durkheim left Paris in October to teach philosophy at several provincial lycees in France until 1887 (Calhoun, 2012: 196). During the 1885–1886 academic year, he took a hiatus to visit German universities on a fellowship from the Ministry of Education (Clark, 1968: 44; Lukes, 1985: 85), while also completing a draft of his first major work and dissertation, *The Division of Labor in Society*. In 1887, upon completing his doctorate, Durkheim accepted a position on pedagogy at the Université de Bordeaux in the south of France, where he founded France's first sociology department in 1895, and *L'Année Sociologique* in 1896. He remained far from Paris until becoming the chair of education at the Sorbonne in 1902, *11 years after Saussure returned to Geneva*. Taken together, we can dismiss claims "that Saussure attended Durkheim's lectures at the Sorbonne" (Cordero et al., 2008: 527).[10]

Aside from claims of direct interaction, there is also conjecture that Saussure's approach to language is indirectly "Durkheimian" in some substantive way. Specifically,

scholars draw attention to the resemblance between the terminology deployed by Saussure and Durkheim (Brown, 1978: 149–151; Emirbayer, 2004: 8; Firth, 1950: 4; Gane, 1983: 70; Maryanski and Turner, 1991: 109–110; Wiley, 1988: 257–258). For example, Saussure does emphasize the "social" and "conventional" nature of language. However, we can return to Meillet who wrote in a letter to the Russian linguist, Nikolai Trubetzkoy: "I was very surprised when I saw F. de Saussure assert the social character of language: I had come to this idea by myself and under other influences . . ."[11] Second, Saussure references Whitney numerous times to motivate this view of language as conventional (as opposed to "natural") (Koerner, 1991: 59).[12]

The Durkheim/Saussure connection is perhaps most explicit in the work of Alexander. For example, he contends that "Saussure depended . . . on a number of key concepts that were identical with the controversial and widely discussed terms of the Durkheim school," and supports this assertion with "[m]ost linguistic historians . . . have interpreted these resemblances as evidence of Durkheim's very significant influence on Saussure" (Alexander, 1988: 4–5, see also 2011: 99).[13] Who are these linguistic historians? Alexander cites the Polish linguist Witold Doroszewski (specifically 1933: 89–90) and the British social anthropologist Edwin Ardener. Ardener (1971), in turn, only suggests the connection in passing and also relies on Doroszewski (1933: 90–91), "who clearly demonstrates the Durkheimian nature of Saussure's *langue*" (p. xxxii–xiv).

More generally, the common French structuralist story, at least in sociology, includes some pathway back through Lévi-Strauss to Durkheim, and places Saussure in the middle (e.g. Giddens, 1979: 9; Lemert, 2003). For instance, Maryanski and Turner (1991: 109–110), in reviewing the two "structuralisms" that emerged out of functionalism, argue that Lévi-Strauss "ignore[d] the Durkheimian tendency of Saussure" (see also Turner, 1987: 21 fn 4). In support of their assertion, Saussure "probably saw himself as a Durkheimian" (Maryanski and Turner, 1991: 109–110), they again cite Doroszewski (as does Jameson, 1974: 27; Meštrović, 1987: 580; Rawls, 1996: 473; Sahlins, 1976: 111).

Witold Doroszewski and the myth of the Durkheim/Saussure connection

Doroszewski's article was first presented at the Second International Congress of Linguists in Geneva (held 20–25 August 1931) and published in the French *Journal de Psychologie* in 1933.[14] In it, he references the debates between Durkheim and Gabriel Tarde that took place shortly after Durkheim's return to Paris, at the École des Hautes Etudes Sociales in 1903 (Tarde, 2010: 136–140), and in various journals. Doroszewski claims that Durkheim was the direct inspiration for Saussure's concept of *langue*, while Tarde was the inspiration for the concept of *parole*. This is clearly articulated in the following passage from the conclusion:

> F. de Saussure – I know from a certain source (*je le sais de source certaine)* – followed the philosophical debate between Durkheim and Tarde with deep interest. If one takes into consideration not only the idea, essential to Saussure, of "langue," but also the complementary idea of "parole," the whole of the Saussurean doctrine then appears as a curious attempt, by a linguist of genius, to reconcile the opposing doctrines of Durkheim and Tarde. In the opposition of "langue" to "speech" one sees the opposition of the Durkheimian notion to that of Tarde's.[15]

Interestingly, Doroszewski never claims Saussure and Durkheim had direct interaction while both in Paris in the 1880s. Rather, he claims the influence was from the Durkheim–Tarde debate. Second, he leaves the basis of the rumor unspecified. Presumably pressed on the matter, Doroszewski later claimed that this "certain source" was the former student of Saussure at Geneva, Louis Caille (Doroszewski, 1957: 544, n3, cited in Koerner, 2013; see also Koerner, 1987: 20).

While Washabaugh (1974) authored the first essay in English debunking the Durkheim/Saussure connection (see footnote 13), the most sustained critic is the linguistic historian Koerner. Specifically regarding Doroszewski's article, Koerner references Antoine Meillet – perhaps the most important French linguist of the first half of the twentieth century, and Saussure's student and friend of 20 years (Joseph, 2000). After Saussure returned to Geneva permanently in 1891, Meillet took over his course on comparative linguistics, and as Meillet was also acquainted with Durkheim,[16] he is an indispensable judge for such a claim. In the discussion with the audience following Doroszewski's 1931 presentation, Meillet rejected his conclusion outright (Koerner, 1971: 48).[17]

Koerner concludes that, while not impossible that Saussure knew of Durkheim, as it stands, there is no "convincing concrete, textual, evidence that Saussure incorporated Durkheimian sociological concepts in his theoretical argument" (Koerner 1987: 22; see also Joseph, 2012b; Washabaugh 1974: 28: 508). Furthermore, the high status Durkheim occupies in recent sociological theory is anachronistically superimposed onto the European academia of his day (i.e. a presentist reading). However, as Connell (1997: 1513) reminds us, Durkheim's contemporaries did not see him as the "giant" in the way we do today (see also Giddens and Pierson, 1998: 40).

The writings of and about Saussure

The Cours de Linguistique Générale

Despite being a prolific writer, Saussure published very little during his lifetime, and mostly reviews of others' work. This was the result of perpetual self-doubt, frustration with the abysmal state of general linguistic theory, and by his own admission, he was disorganized and a procrastinator. Although there is evidence that as early as 1891 and as late as 1911 he was working on a book on general "theoretical" linguistics (Saussure, 2006: xvi), he was most influential as a teacher. Specifically, through the posthumously published collection of lecture notes taken during three courses in Geneva between 1906 and 1911.

Compiled by Saussure's students Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, the *Cours* was published in French in 1916, 3 years after Saussure's death. The specific note-takers were Albert Riedlinger (for the first course in 1906–1907), Riedlinger and Charles Patois (for the second course in 1908–1909), and Emile Constantin (for the third course in 1910–1911). It is widely known by Saussure scholars (e.g. Engler, 2004) that Bally and Sechehaye took many liberties when organizing the student's notes, by relying mostly on Constanin's notes, reordering the topics, and coloring Saussure as much more settled on difficult issues.

Beginning with Robert Godel's 1957 work (*Les Sources manuscrites du Cours de linguistique générale de Ferdinand de Saussure*), subsequent scholars have critically appraised the original *Cours* by returning to the student's notes, along with Saussure's own notes, which now includes documents outlining a book discovered in 1996 in Saussure's family's orangery (referred to as the *Orangery Manuscripts*). In particular, these "original manuscripts reveal a Saussurean thought which is much less categorical than in the *Cours* since it often admits his doubts on important points and even uses them heuristically" (Saussure, 2006: xv). The *Cours* was first translated into English in 1959 by Wade Baskin, and remains the translation most often cited by sociologists, although the translation by Roy Harris is considered superior (e.g. Culler, 1986: 151).

The Saussurean model: Components and pitfalls

It is outside the scope of this article to sketch the complex diffusion of Saussurean ideas throughout the various academic disciplines, but it is safe to say his linguistics was largely ignored by his home field in both the United States and France (Dosse, 1997: 45; Falk, 2004: 122–123).[18] By the time linguists and historians of linguistics began a "return to Saussure" in the 1960s and 1970s, it was unavoidably "mediated by 'general structuralism'" (Puech, 2004: 127). Furthermore, as Saussure diffused first to the east (Russia and Prague), then north (Copenhagen), then west (New York) – primarily through the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson (Falk, 2004: 114; Johnson, 2003: 172) – before finally reemerging in France, the components of the Saussurean model were "dismembered" in piecemeal attempts to overcome epistemological and rhetorical obstacles (Angenot, 1984). This dismembering led to a few key misunderstandings.

First, Saussure argued that signifier and signified were both psychological and not, as is commonly assumed, synonyms of sign and referent, respectively. Second, and related, Saussure argued that signifier and signified were arbitrarily associated, but he did not claim that signs are arbitrarily associated with referents. Furthermore, neither of these two arguments were particularly novel for the time. Rather, Saussure's real contribution was in conceptualizing language as a system of value. The final misunderstanding being that "value" is simply another word for "meaning," but, on the contrary, Saussure argued that linguistic value was distinct from linguistic meaning. In the following, I explore each of these misunderstandings in more depth.

The components of the Saussurean model

In Table 1, I offer definitions of technical terms found in the *Cours*. Before examining the core aspects of the Saussurean model – sign, arbitrariness, and system of value – it is important to consider a few peripheral terms (see Figure 1). First is the tripartite distinction between *langage, langue*, and *parole.*[19] Saussure considered *langage* as language broadly conceived – encompassing psychology, physiology, pragmatics, articulation, acoustics, morphology, semantics, syntax, and speech. Both *parole* and *langue*, on the contrary, are linked to a specific community of speakers, where "the sounds of speech" (*les sons de la parole*) were associated with *parole*, while the psychological "acoustic impressions" (*impressions acoutiques*) were associated with *langue. Parole* was observable and material,

Table 1. Key texts by, and about, Saussure.

Year	Title	Description
1879	*Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes*	The only major work Saussure published during his lifetime. The first English translation, Lehman 1967
1916	*Cours de linguistique générale*	Compiled by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye from notes on lectures between 1906 and 1911 (2nd edition 1922)
1957	*Les Sources manuscrites du "Cours de linguistique generale" de F. de Saussure*	Robert Godel, the first exegetical text, presented the sources used by Bally and Sechehaye in parallel with their interpretations
1959	*Course in General Linguistics*	First English translation by Wade Baskin
1968	*Cours de linguistique générale: Edition Critique*	Rudolf Engler's critical recompilation of the original lecture notes
1983	*Course in General Linguistics*	Second English translation by Roy Harris
2002	*Ecrits de linguistique générale*	Simon Bouquet and Rudolf Engler's compilation of the *Orangery Manuscripts*, the "lost" notes in Saussure's handwriting, discovered in 1996, detailing a book on general linguistics
2006	*Writings in General Linguistics*	Carol Sanders and Matthew Pires' English translation of Bouquet and Engler (2002)

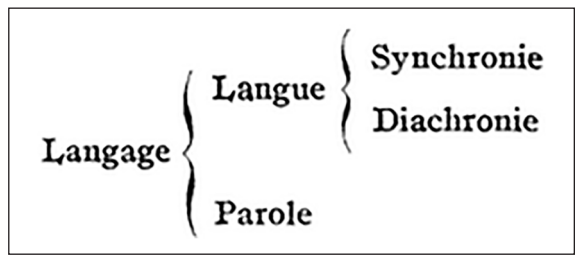

Figure 1. According to Saussure (1916: 143), this table shows the "rational form" that linguistic studies should take (*Le tableau suivant indique la forme rationnelle que doit prendre l'étude linguistique*).

while *langue* was only material as a psychological entity resulting from the mental impressions of sound (and their associated mental concepts). In other words, *langue* is "the whole set of linguistic habits which allow an individual to understand and to be understood" (Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 77). However, Saussure realizes that linguists, as scientific observers, must abstract from *langue* in the mind of individuals to *langue* as the social collection among those in a speech community. Importantly, Saussure considers *langue* – not *parole* or *langage* – to be the proper subject matter of the science of linguistics. But, Saussure considers this a methodological move and therefore sees no need to reify *langue* (Jameson, 1974: 15; Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 107).

A second pair of terms, *syntagmatic* and *paradigmatic*, both denote two different classes of relations in *langue* based on how phonological units are grouped together in

Table 2. Definition of Saussure's terms and distinctions.

Term	Definition
Langage	A general category, encompassing all aspects of speech
Langue	A particular language of a community of speakers
Parole	A linguistic performance (i.e. utterances)
Syntagmatic	Denotes the relationship between two or more linguistic units used sequentially to make an utterance
Paradigmatic	Denotes the association between linguistic units through semantic or phonological similarity
Synchronic	How a language (*langue*) exists at one point in time
Diachronic	How a language (*langue*) changes through time

the mind of a speaker. The first relates to the linear unfolding of natural speech, which "applies not only to words, but to groups of words, and to complex units of every size and kind" (Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 148). The second Saussure labels "associative relations," and refers to the nonlinear ways words (or other phonological units) are associated in the mind. This can be either a semantic association (such that they may be more or less substitutable) or "similarity in their sound patterns" (Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 150). While both are the consequence of *parole, syntagmatic* and *paradigmatic* refer only to the organization of *langue*.[20]

Finally, from Saussure, we derive *synchronic* and *diachronic* analysis.[21] The first, also referred to as static linguistics, is the study of a particular *langue* as if frozen in time. The analytical concept of a "linguistic system" is derived from the synchronic analysis of a *langue*, and for Saussure, it is an entirely phonological construct. The second, also referred to as evolutionary linguistics, is the study of sound changes in *langue* over time and across space. Contrary to some interpretations (Giddens, 1979: 13; Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 86; for example, Emirbayer and Maynard, 2011: 229), both static and evolutionary approaches relate only to *langue* (Edie, 1971), but Saussure did suggest that evolution always begins with *parole* (Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 40, 121). Furthermore, although Saussure is often characterized as privileging the synchronic (static) over the diachronic (evolutionary), it was rather that he struggled to reconcile the two in any concise and satisfying manner (Joseph, 2012b: 544–555; Saussure, 2006: 80–82) (Table 2).[22]

Linguistic signs. A common slippage in semiotic analysis in sociology is to presume that the "signified" of the Saussurean sign is some object in the world – commonly called a "referent" in the philosophy of language. However, Saussurean linguistics is fundamentally psychological,[23] which is why he states that the "linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image" (Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 6). The linguistic "sign" is a wholly mental entity comprising two components, the signifier and the signified, which function together to form the sign.[24] In his words, "the two elements involved in the linguistic sign are both psychological and are connected in the brain by an associative link" (Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 76).

The first element, the signifier, is equivalent to the mental imprint of vocalizations – which is sometimes translated as "sound-image" or "word-image" or "vocal figure"

Table 3. The linguistic sign.

Signifier (in French "*signifiant*")	Mental impression of phonic qualities, the "sound-image," or "acoustic impression" of a linguistic unit
Signified (in French "*signifié*")	Meaning, concept, or ideational component, to which a linguistic unit is fused

or "acoustic impression" or "sound pattern" – but not the sonic qualities of utterances, nor the physiological requirements of articulation. As Saussure emphasizes (2009 [1986]: 12), the "word-image stands apart from the sound itself and . . . it is just as psychological as the concept which is associated with it." The second, signified, Saussure described variously as "ideas," "mental images," or "concepts," and is the semantic side of *langue* (Table 3).[25]

Later commentators often regarded Saussure's model of the linguistic sign as incomplete. Some argued that Saussure implied physical sound (e.g. Jakobson, 1964) or implied the object in the world toward which the sign was directed (i.e. the referent) (Benveniste, 1971; Harris, 2001; Joseph, 2004: 75; Ogden and Richards, 1923: 69–70). That is, there must be four components: two psychological and two physical. An alternative interpretation of his apparent neglect of the physical, however, was that it was outside the scope of general linguistics (Joseph, 2012b: 290). Furthermore, Saussure was primarily concerned not with the whole psychological entity, but rather only the sound-image (contra Emirbayer, 1997: 300), the totality of such acoustic impressions being linguistic structure, and which he called the "margin" between sound and idea (Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 136).

Arbitrariness. Saussure is widely credited with the notion that sounds associate with concepts *arbitrarily.*[26] In the *Cours*, he states, "it [the signifier] is unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified" (Saussure, 2009[1986]: 69). As Joseph notes (2012a: 265), this was not novel, because "in the Geneva of Saussure's youth, this is what everyone was saying" (see also Dosse, 1997: 46). Furthermore, given Saussure's classical education, the terms of the debate regarding whether language was, in essence, "natural" as opposed to "conventional" was already set by the Greek philosophers. For example, the Latin word "onomatopoeia" is derived from the Greek word "onomatopoiia," referring to the stance taken by the "naturalists" who argued the original language emerged from imitating entities in the world. In the young Saussure's (2009 [1986]) essay to Pictet, he quickly dismisses this as a "childish theory" – recall the *Cours* boldly claiming "no one disputes the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign" (p. 68).

Now, however, it is disputed. Many researchers find a much greater degree of motivation (sometimes called "iconicity" or "sound symbolism") in language and other "semiotic systems" (for example, Abramova and Fernández, 2016; Dingemanse et al., 2015; Nänny and Fischer, 1999; Perniss et al., 2010; Simone, 1995; Thompson et al., 2012). In fact, later researchers find some sub-word sound groupings pairing with meanings with such remarkable persistence – for example, in English /gl-/ often occurs in words relating to light or vision, such as glare, gleam, glisten, glow or /fl-/ occurs in words relating to moving or turning quickly, such as flop, flutter, flee – that they have their own name: phonesthemes.

Saussure did, however, concede that some aspects of *langue* were motivated. For example, sounds could be semantically motivated by other words: "For *dix–neuf* evokes the words of which it is composed, *dix* ('ten') and *neuf* ('nine')" (Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 157). Sounds could also be motivated by their referents, but contrary to contemporary linguists, Saussure (2009 [1986]) concludes such "words are rather marginal phenomena" (p. 80). His confidence on this point is, at least partly, because he is standing on the shoulder of a giant, Whitney, the American linguist. For example, see this passage from *The Life and Growth of Language*, first published in 1875:

> The essential difference, which separates man's means of communication in kind as well as degree from that of the other animals, is that, while the latter is instinctive, the former is, in all its parts, arbitrary and conventional . . . Even where the onomatopoeic or imitative element is most conspicuous – as in *cuckoo* and *pewee*, in *crack* and *whiz* – there is no tie of necessity, but only of convenience: if there were necessity, it would extend equally to other animals and other noises; and also to all tongues; while in fact these conceptions have elsewhere wholly other names.
>
> (Whitney, 1875: 282)

Saussure makes a slight modification to Whitney's principle of arbitrariness: he moves it from a relation between sign and referent (e.g. the physical sound of the word "tree" and an actual tree) to a relation between the *psychological complement*s of the sign and the referent (e.g. the mental impression of the sound of the word "tree" and the mental concept of "tree"). In so doing, Saussure sidesteps the problem of reference. In his words,

> The idea of "sister" is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds s-ö-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-ö-f/ on one side of the border and /o-k-s/ on the other.
>
> (Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 126)

Here, both speakers have the same signified for this thing in the world (i.e. an ox) to which they attach two different signifiers (/b-ö-f/ and /o-k-s/) (Benveniste, 1971: 44). Arbitrariness, for Saussure, stands between the mental impression of sounds and ideas, allowing him to treat the former as analytically autonomous.

Language as a system of values. Isolating the signifier for linguistic analysis, Saussure arrives at his primary innovation (Dosse, 1997: 46): "system of values."[27] Saussure argued the *value* of a linguistic unit, but not the *meaning*, emerged from phonological differences alone – and importantly *not degrees* of differences (Joseph, 2012b: 300). Saussure, therefore, suggests studying the "*état de langue"* – the state of a system of linguistic values, taken as a whole, at one point in time.

Saussure's argument that linguistic units gain their "value" by their distinction from other units in a system of *langue* is cited (approvingly or disapprovingly) as evidence that Saussure originated the notion that all *meaning* is internally constituted (Jones, 1996: 300; Rochberg-Halton, 1982: 458, 1986: 54; for example, Emirbayer, 1997: 300;

Mohr, 2005: 350; Tavory and Swidler, 2009: 172). This interpretation, however, incorporates two assumptions that Saussure did not make.

The first problematic assumption is that the logic by which signifiers gain "value" is the very same logic by which signifieds gain "meaning." In other words, the principle of arbitrariness applies not only to the relation between signifiers and signifieds but also the relation between the sign and the world. This is closely associated with the second assumption: when Saussure uses the term "values," this is synonymous to his use of the term "meaning" – indeed this misunderstanding is found in both Saussurean proponents and critics (Lash, 2014: 22; Smith, 2011: 154–155; Wiley, 2006: 27). By making these two assumptions, scholars can propose the following: signifieds have no "meaning" on their own, they only gain "meaning" by their relationship to other signifieds in a system.

Saussure, in contrast, did not consider value to be synonymous with meaning (Godel, 1957: 69). In fact, Reidlinger, in his notebook for the second course, writes explicitly "*La valeur, ce n'est pas la signification*" (Saussure, 1989: 248). Rather linguistic value referred to features of phonology (Joseph, 2004: 65–67). This is especially clear in the following statement from the *Cours*: "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" (Saussure, 2009 [1986]: 120).[28]

Saussure also did not presume *signifieds* were equivalent to, or entirely dictated by, the logic of the system of s*ignifiers*. Saussure uses a variety of analogies to approximate his argument that phonological units demarcated areas in a pure space of value: that is, "*langue* is a form and not a substance."[29] Linguistic value, for Saussure, was much more akin to mathematical value, such as the infinitesimal calculus undergirding the neoclassical revolution in economics (McCloskey, 1998: 28–31). In arguing that linguistics deals with value even more "pure" than economics, Saussure (2009 [1986]: 103) states,

> . . . a language [*langue*] is a system of pure values, determined by nothing else apart from the temporary state of its constituent elements. Insofar as a value, in one of its aspects, is founded upon natural connexions between things (as, for example, in economics the value of a piece of land depends on the income derivable from it), it is possible up to a point to trace this value through time, bearing in mind that it depends at any one time upon the relevant system of contemporary values. However, its connexion with things inevitably supplies it with a natural basis, and hence any assessment of it is never entirely arbitrary. There are limits upon the range of variability. But, as we have already seen, in linguistics these natural connexions have no place.

Conclusion

Cultural sociologists attribute to Saussure (1) the postulate that *meaning is arbitrary*; (2) the idea that signs gain meaning only through *relations of opposition* to other signs; (3) the view that there is an isomorphic correspondence between linguistic signs and all cultural units of analysis, ergo culture is fundamentally arbitrary; and finally (4) the idea that he presents a Durkheimian theory of culture because he was a follower of Durkheim. I have demonstrated, in contrast, that there is no evidence that Durkheim influenced (the institutionally older) Saussure, nor did he claim that linguistic meaning is arbitrary or that signs gain meaning only through relations of opposition to other signs. Finally,

Saussure never intended his analytical model of phonology to apply to the operation of meaning in general. Rather, Saussure's project was specific to linguistics, and mainly one of theoretical and methodological clarification regarding phonology.

It is not unreasonable to see language as central to human culture, or even the privileged model for the operation of culture in general. However, we should be mindful of the ways Saussure is used to shut down lines of inquiry while also erasing a century of advances in linguistics. Critically examining the use of Saussurean notions in contemporary cultural sociology has several implications for future analysis (Lizardo et al., 2020). First, the arbitrariness of meaning enjoys such a central place in the backdrop of our disciplinary understanding of structuralism and post-structuralism that it may have led contemporary analysts to misread other scholars in this tradition – for example, consider a recent analysis of the role of motivation and pragmatics in Umberto Eco's work (Cossu, 2017). Second, alongside appeals to the authority of Saussure, scholars often assert that, if meaning is not arbitrary, it must be fixed or otherwise not "conventional," and therefore ahistorical. But this need not be the case. Following Peirce (1974), for example, there can be a continuum of arbitrariness and motivation, and to say that meaning is motivated is not to say it is determined. Objects may have a range of motivated meanings from which a few are selected. Even though this range of meanings is probabilistically constrained, the selection is nevertheless conventional. Smoke may mean fire, but also food or danger. In short, it might make our task more difficult, but it is both empirically and theoretically fruitful to challenge the assumption that meaning is necessarily arbitrary.

Some scholars will continue to justify the arbitrariness of meaning by pointing to Derrida's (1981) claim that "every signified is also in the position of a signifier" (p. 20). This may be considered an anthropological constant, which humanity cannot escape – that is, the so-called "prison-house of language" (Jameson, 1974) – with affinities to "strong" social constructionism (Burr, 2015: 58–61; Smith, 2011: 119–206). Or, following the Frankfurt school essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," scholars might make an historical argument that sign systems achieve self-referential status as a result of the peculiarities of late-modern societies (see Baudrillard, 1981, in particular). Regardless of why one wishes to argue meaning is arbitrary, citing Saussure to justify such claims – as an appeal to authority – is to misinterpret his core contributions to linguistics.

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Notes

1. For examples, see Alexander (1988: 4–5, 2006: 566, 2013: 33, 174); Alexander and Smith (1993: 157, 202); Emirbayer (1997: 300); Kane (1991: 56); Knight and Reed (2019: 241); Reed and Alexander (2009: 387); Wuthnow (1989: 39); Zerubavel (1987: 347–348).
2. Entirely omitted are Saussure's discussion of grammar, principles of phonology and articulation, diachronic (i.e. evolutionary) linguistics, geographic linguistics, and retrospective (or historical/anthropological) linguistics.
3. Named after the Greek word sēmḗïon, which means "sign" or "mark." Original passage in French (Saussure 1916),

   > On peut donc concevoir *une science qui étudie la vie des signes au sein de la vie sociale*; elle formerait une partie de la psychologie sociale, et par conséquent de la psychologie générale; nous la nommerons s*émiologie* (du grec *semeîon*, "signe").
   >
   > (pp. 33–34, original emphasis)

   English translation (Saussure, 2009 [1986]),

   > It is therefore possible to conceive of a science *which studies the role of signs as part of social life*; it would form a part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it *semiology* (from the Greek *semeîon*, "sign").
   >
   > (p. 38, original emphasis)
4. This is also the fallacy of linguistic analogy (Gottdiener, 1985): "since all languages are made up of words and all words are signs, all things made up of signs are languages" (Krampen, 2013 [1979]: 308).
5. Foucault (2012: 67, 286) briefly notes Saussure "rediscovered" the Port-Royal approach to language (see also Descombes, 2016).
6. Some scholars were far more explicit regarding the link to the evolution of the "human races" (Eco, 1995). For example, Pictet's work was used as evidence that the "Aryan race" was superior, specifically, to the "Semitic races" (see Joseph, 2012b: 150–152).
7. Saussure refers to these as "sonant coefficients" or "*coefficients sonantiques*," and, while the latter are now referred to as "resonants," it is still debated whether Saussure actually thought of his hypothesized sounds as vowels or resonants.
8. Saussure was given military leave from Geneva at the end of November and is recorded as attending his first meeting of the *Société de Linguistique* on 4 December 1880 (Joseph, 2012b: 274). He remained in Paris until 3 August, where he returned to military training until 1 October, after which he returned to Paris (Joseph, 2012b: 278–9).
9. Furthermore, Steven Lukes, known for writing the definitive intellectual history of the life and work of Durkheim, can recall no evidence of Durkheim's interaction with Saussure (personal communication).
10. According to his biographer upon leaving for Geneva at the end of 1891, "He would pass through the French capital again, often on his way to visit Albertine [his younger sister] in

England. But he never stayed long. The city held too many ghosts of dreams and projects unrealized" (Joseph, 2012b: 371).

11. "J'ai été bien étonné quand j'ai vu F. de Saussure affirmer le caractère social du langage: j'étais venu à cette idée par moi-même et sous d'autres influences . . ." dated 25 December 1930; Hagège, 1967: 117; cited in Koerner, 1987: 20).
12. Saussure met Whitney in Berlin while the latter was meeting with Sanskrit specialists and looking at proofs of the German translation of his book Sanskrit Grammar. Not only did Saussure write of his admiration of Whitney, but we also know that Whitney read Saussure's Memoir and even offered notes given their mutual interest.
13. Note the resemblance to Washabaugh (1974: 27): "Most linguistic historians (Doroszewski 1933; Ardener, 1971; Robins 1967; Mounin 1968) have interpreted these resemblances as evidence of Durkheim's influence over Saussure. However, a careful reading of Durkheim will show that these resemblances are only terminological."
14. This 10-page article relies mostly on Durkheim's essay "*Représentations individuelles et représentations collectives*," published in *Sociologie et Philosophie* (Durkheim, 1924, see also the English translation 1974), citing it nine times, and *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* just four times.
15. "F. de Saussure – je le sais de source certaine – suivait avec un profond intérêt le débat philosophique engagé entre Durkheim et Tarde. Si l'on prend en considération non seulement l'idée, essentielle pour Saussure, de la "langue," mais aussi celle, complémentaire, de la "parole," l'ensemble de la doctrine saussurienne apparaît alors comme une curieuse tentative, entreprise par un linguiste de génie, pour concilier les doctrines opposées de Durkheim et de Tarde. Dans l'opposition de la "langue" à la "parole" on entrevoit l'opposition de l'idée durkheimienne à celle de Tarde" (Doroszewski, 1933: 91).
16. For example, Meillet (1904) published "Comment les mots changent de sens" [How words change meaning] in Durkheim's L'*Annee sociologique*. In this article, Meillet considers the nature of semantic change and suggests that more effort is needed in isolating the *social* causes of language change.
17. Koerner cites page 147 of the *Actes du Deuxième Congrès International de Linguistes*, Geneva, 25–29 August 1931.
18. The most influential linguists of the time who knew Saussure the best, Meillet (in France), Hjelmsev (in Denmark), and Bloomfield and Jakobson (both in the States), took pieces of the Cours, but were each anti-Saussurean in their own ways. Hjelmsev, however, considered his "glossomastics" to be the proper heir to the Saussurean project despite important differences.
19. Most treatments of Saussure only consider the distinction between *langue* and *parole*. According to Descombes (2016: 80), this bipartite distinction enters the English-speaking community through Alan Gardiner's (1932) *The Theory of Speech and Language*.
20. A subtle point often misrepresented by later scholars (e.g. Giddens 1979: 13).
21. This distinction likely entered American academia through Leonard Bloomfield who reviewed the second edition of the *Cours* in the mid-1920s and found little else in it that Whitney had not already suggested (Falk, 2004: 108–111). In passing, Saussure also referred to idiosynchronic and panchronic analysis, but considered them ultimately futile.
22. Saussure went so far as to argue that a *langue* does not change, but rather becomes an altogether new *langue* with any phonological shift. In his own words, "terms brought together in a diachronic view do not fall within the same language" (Joseph, 2012b: 544). That is, *langue* is a kind of Markov chain in which a system at time T evolves into an entirely different system at time T + 1. This is because, in Saussure's mind, a change in the value of one signifier necessitates the change of the values (but not meanings) of all signifiers in the system. This does not, however, require the claim that there is no diachronic change.

23. According to Bally (1952), "Une linguistique inspirée par les idées saussuriennes doit–nous l'avons vu–tout ramener à la conscience intérieure que nous avons de la langue" (p. 156).
24. Many citations to Saussure in sociology are in the context of promoting Peirce's "superior" approach to the study of signs (Bartmanski, 2017; Rochberg-Halton, 1982). It is important to note, however, that the component that most interested Saussure – the "sound-image" – is embedded in Peirce's *interpretant*, defined as the effect that a sign has on the mind of an interpreter, and therefore Saussure could not conduct the sort of linguistic analysis he describes in a Peircean framework.
25. In the same way he did not assume that the linguistic unit could be equated to a word or a morpheme or even a single sound, Saussure did not argue that each signifier was tied to exactly one signified – contra some interpretations (Denzin 1987: 3).
26. What Saussure meant by this term is discussed in Benveniste (1971) and Jakobson and Waugh (2002).
27. This is sometimes depicted as a "radical break" with the philologists and comparativists which were dominant during Saussure's time and under which he studied at Leipzig. And yet, there remains much continuity between Saussure's thought and his predecessors and contemporaries. As Jameson (1974) describes it,

    > one can well understand how in the face of all tables of sound changes Saussure found himself little by little evolving a distinction between causes that are external to a phenomenon and causes which are somehow intrinsic to it, and this distinction may stand as the definition of the idea of system itself.
    >
    > (pp. 7–8)

28. "La preuve en est que la valeur d'un terme peut être modifiée sans qu'on touche ni à son sens ni à ses sons, mais seulement par le fait que tel autre terme voisin aura subi une modification" (Saussure, 1916: 173).
29. "La langue est une forme, non une substance" (Saussure, 1916: 169).

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