Article

Saussure's Theory of Sign

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Abstract

Ferdinand de Saussure insists that a *langue* is in an individual's brain but not perfect in any individual. An individual performs *parole* using this *langue*, which is comprised of *signes*. A *signe* is a combination of a *signifié* (concept) and a *signifiant* (acoustic image), and emerges after a *langue* divides the masses of both concept and sound simultaneously. *Valeurs* between *signes* are realized by syntagmatic and associative relations. Then, how can polysemous words and homonyms be explained by Saussure's theory of sign?

Key Words: *langue*, *parole*, *signe*, *signifiant*, *signifié*, *valeur*, syntagmatic relation, polysemous word, homonym

Introduction

According to Ferdinand de Saussure, we can derive a homogenous *langue* from a heterogeneous *langage*. A *langue* is a *fait social* (social fact) in the sense that it is perfect only in a society although it is located in an individual's brain in an imperfect state. An individual performs linguistic activities called *parole* using a *langue*. A *langue* is comprised of *signes*, which are combinations of *signifié* (concept) and *signifiant* (acoustic image), and relations of them are arbitrary. *Signes* emerge after a *langue* divides the masses of both concept and sound at the same time. *Valeurs* between *signes* are realized by syntagmatic and associative relations. Then, how can polysemous words and homonyms be explained by Saussure's theory of sign?

1. *Langue*

First of all, Ferdinand de Saussure derives *langue* from a heterogeneous *langage*:

Language [*langage*] is a field which is complex, protean and heterogeneous in its various facets. One consequence of this is that it cannot be classified, when taken as a whole, with other human facts. It straddles various domains (physical domain, mental, or again: individual domain, social). One is at a loss to find any unity in it. […] In the language [*langue*] we can see something that introduces a general unity into the phenomenon of language [*langage*].

(Saussure 1993: 66a–67a)

This *langue* is a social product in that it exists in a society because the *langue* is in every individual's brain but it is not perfect in any individual:

[…] it [the *langue*] is a 'social product'; […] what is potentially in the brains of a set of individuals (belonging to one and the same community) […] doubtless this hoard [*langue*], in any individual case, will never turn out to be absolutely complete.

(Saussure 1993: 7a)

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An individual performs his or her linguistic activities using a *langue*, which Saussure calls *parole*:

It [*parole*] is the sum total of what the people say to one another; that is

a) individual combinations, sentences, depending on the will of the individual and reflecting his individual thought,

b) acts of phonation, which are the execution of these combinations, likewise voluntary.

(Saussure 1993: 91a)

2. *Signe*

Then, what is a *langue* that is derived from *langage* like?

[…] it is the combination of the idea with a vocal sign which suffices to constitute the whole language [*langue*]. […] The acoustic image linked to an idea—that is what is essential to the language [*langue*].

(Saussure 1993: 7a)

What is a vocal sign or an acoustic image that constitutes a *langue*?

[…] the linguistic sign is based on an association made by the mind between two very different things, but which are both mental and in the subject: an acoustic image is associated with a concept. The acoustic image is not the material sound but the mental imprint of the sound. (Saussure 1993: 74a)

Saussure introduces three new terms: *signifiant*, *signifié*, and *signe*. A *signifiant* is an *image acoustique* (acoustic image); a *signifié* is a *concept* linked to an *image acoustique*; and a *signe* is a *signe linguistique* (linguistic sign) that is an association of a *signifiant* with a *signifié*. The relation of a *signifiant* to a *signifié* is arbitrary:

The sign is arbitrary, that is to say that the concept 'sister [*sœur*]', for example, is not connected by any internal relation to the sound sequence *s+ö+r* which forms the corresponding acoustic image. This concept could just as well be represented by any other sequence of sounds. (Saussure 1993: 76a)

Furthermore, a *signifié* and a *signifiant* are inseparable in a *signe*, so if a *signifié* is separated from a *signe*, then it is an object of psychology, and if a *signifiant*, then phonetics:

The first condition to be satisfied for identifying a linguistic entity is that the association between the two elements [*signifiant* and *signifié*] should be present and maintained. If we unwittingly take only one of the elements, one of the parts, we have straight away created a spurious linguistic unit. We have made an abstraction and it is no longer the concrete object that we have before us. One must not dissociate what is associated in the linguistic sign.

(Saussure 1993: 79a)

3. *Signifié* and *Signifiant*

Then, how do *signes* emerge that constitute a *langue*? Does anything like "pure concepts" or "pure phonemes" exist before *signes* come into being? If "pure concepts" were to exist before *signes* emerge, what would happen?

If words had the job of representing concepts fixed in advance, one would be able to find exact equivalents for them as between one language and another. But this is not the case. French uses the same verb *louer* ('hire, rent') both for granting and for taking a lease, whereas German has two separate verbs, *mieten* and *vermieten*: so there is no exact correspondence between the values in question. The German verbs *schätzen* ('to value') and *urteilen* ('to judge') have meanings which answer roughly to those of the French verbs *estimer* and *juger*: but in various respects there is no one-to-one correspondence.

(Saussure 1983: 114–115)

If Saussure is right, the common "pure concepts" in languages cannot be found anywhere before *signes* do appear. In other words, this leads to the conclusion that the mass of concept, which is part of *signe*, are not divided at all before *signes* do emerge.

Psychologically, what are our ideas, apart from our language [*langue*]? They probably do not exist. Or in a form that may be described as amorphous. We

should probably be unable according to philosophers and linguists to distinguish two ideas clearly without the help of a language [*langue*] (internal language [*langue*] naturally).

Consequently, in itself, the purely conceptual mass of our ideas, the mass separated from the language [*langue*], is like a kind of shapeless nebula, in which it is impossible to distinguish anything initially. The same goes, then, for the language [*langue*]: the different ideas represent nothing pre-existing. There are no: a) ideas already established and quite distinct from one another, b) signs for these ideas. But there is nothing at all distinct in thought before the linguistic sign. This is the main thing.

<div align="right">(Saussure 1993: 137a–138a)</div>

If the mass of concept is not divided in advance, then what of the mass of sound?

On the other hand, it is also worth asking if, beside this entirely indistinct realm of ideas, the realm of sound offers in advance quite distinct ideas (taken in itself apart from the idea).

There are no distinct units of sound either, delimited in advance. (Saussure 1993: 138a)

If something like "pure phonemes" were to exist in advance before *signes* appear, what would happen? Phonemes across all languages would probably correspond to one another, even if in part. But they actually don't. For example, Pirahã, one of the Brazilian languages, has only 10 phonemes, while! Xũ, one of the African languages, has as many as 141 phonemes. Moreover, in English a phoneme /p/ can be pronounced [p^h] or [p] as an allophone. But Mandarin Chinese has two different words pronounced [$p^h\bar{a}$] and [pā] respectively. These two sounds [p^h] and [p] belong to two clearly different phonemes /p^h/ and /p/. So phonemes of these two words are /$p^h\bar{a}$/ and /pā/ (the diacritic is a tone mark). (Trask 1999: 232–233). This means that one phoneme /p/ in English is treated as two phonemes /p^h/ and /p/ in Mandarin Chinese.

4. Emerging of *Signes*

As we have seen, if any unit is not divided both in

concept and in sound in advance of a *langue*, then how do *signes*, which are inseparable combinations of *signifié* and *signifiant*, emerge before us?

The characteristic role of a language in relation to thought is not to supply the material phonetic means by which ideas may be expressed. It is to act as intermediary between thought and sound, in such a way that the combination of both necessarily produces a mutually complementary delimitation of units. Thought, chaotic by nature, is made precise by this process of segmentation. But what happens is neither a transformation of thoughts into matter, nor a transformation of sounds into ideas. What takes place, is a somewhat mysterious process by which 'thought-sound' evolves divisions, and a language takes shape with its linguistic units in between those two amorphous masses. (Saussure 1983: 110–111)

Saussure explains that *signes* appear when the masses of both sound and concept are divided at the same time. This process is certainly very mysterious and compared to the waves:

One might think of it [this mysterious process] as being like air in contact with water: change in atmospheric pressure break up the surface of the water into series of divisions, i.e. waves. The correlation between thought and sound, and the union of the two, is like that. (Saussure 1983: 111)

Thus *signes* emerge after both concept and sound, which are not delimited in advance, are divided at the same time. These *signes* are in an arbitrary relation to other *signes* and *valeur* is born between them:

Every word in the language [*langue*] turns out to be related to other words, or rather does not exist except in relation to the others and in virtue of what there is adjacent to it. […] The value of a word at any given moment exists only in relation to other similar units. (Saussure 1993: 128a)

If *signes* were not to be in an arbitrary relation to one another, then *signes* across languages would be in the same relation to each other. But that is not the case:

The French word *mouton* may have the same meaning as the English word *sheep*; but it does not have the same value. There are various reasons for this, but in particular the fact that the English word for the meat of this animal, as prepared and served for a meal, is not *sheep* but *mutton*. The difference in value between *sheep* and *mouton* hinges on the fact that in English there is also another word *mutton* for the meat, whereas *mouton* in French covers both.

(Saussure 1983: 114)

Furthermore, the arbitrary relation between *signes* lead to arbitrariness between *signifiés* and *signifiants* in *signes* as explained above:

If we go back now to the diagram representing the signified and signifying elements [*signifié* and *signifiant*] together we see that it is doubtless justified but is only a secondary product of value. The signified element [*signifié*] alone is nothing, it blurs into a shapeless mass. Likewise the signifying element [*signifiant*]. (Saussure 1993: 139a)

The opposition between *signes* is caused by combination of differences of *signifiés* with differences of *signifiants*:

So the whole language system can be envisaged as sound differences combined with differences between ideas.

There are no positive ideas given, and there are no determinate acoustic signs that are independent of ideas. Thanks to the fact that the differences are mutually dependent, we shall get something looking like positive terms through the matching of a certain difference of ideas with a certain difference in signs. We shall then be able to speak of the opposition of terms and so not claim that there are only differences because of this positive element in the combination.

(Saussure 1993: 142a)

These oppositions or values between *signes* are realized by two ways:

The relation and the difference between words has its basis in two dimensions, two quite separate domains: each of these generates a certain kind of value and the contrast between the two itself throws light on each. We are dealing with two domains or two ways of connecting words with one another.

(Saussure 1993: 128a)

One way is a "syntagmatic relation," which is an explicit combination of *signes* that causes a certain specific relation:

This combination giving rise to certain relations may be called a *syntagma*. It is the combination of two or several units, all present and consecutive. […] several consecutive units with a connexion between them or with the whole form a syntagma. […] The contrasting terms are spatially opposed to one another and the connexion established between them is based on this spatial principle.

The space I refer to is of course a space in time.

What coexists syntagmatically coexists extensionally, like the parts of a machine (but here we have one dimension only). (Saussure 1993: 129a)

Another way is an "associative relation," which is mental and evoked unconsciously in the brain based on being in association with *signifiés*, *signifiants*, and a part of *signes*:

By mental association with other terms existing in the language [*langue*].

E.g. a word like *enseignement* will unconsciously evoke in the mind the idea in particular of a host of other words which in one way or another have something in common with it. This may be in very different respects. For example, *enseignement* will find itself in an associative series which includes:

enseignement ['teaching']
enseigner ['to teach']
enseignons ['(we) teach']
enseigne ['teaches'], etc.

There is something in common in the idea represented and something in common in the acoustic image. The signifying and signified elements [*signifiant* and *signifié*] together form this associative series.

Similarly: *enseignement* ['teaching']
         armement ['arming']
         rendement ['rendering'].

Another associative series also based on relation between signifying and signified elements [*signifiant* and *signifié*], but in another part of the word.

Associative series based on the signified element [*signifié*]:

ensignment ['teaching']
instruction ['instruction']
apprentissage ['apprenticeship']
éducation ['education']

[…] Hence series of inevitable associations, sometimes based on double conformity of meaning and form, sometimes solely on the form or meaning. These correlations may be considered as existing in the brain along with the words themselves. Any word immediately evokes by association everything that may resemble it.   (Saussure 1993: 129a–130a)

5. Polysemous Words and Homonyms

As we have seen above, Saussure says that every *signe* has its own *signifié* and *signifiant*. If he is right, then how can polysemous words be explained? Polysemous words have more than one meaning. For example, a French word *sens* is used as follows:

1) *au sens étroit* (in the narrow meaning)
2) *cinq sens* (five senses)
3) *rue à sens unique* (one-way street).

According to Saussure, the French word *sens* should have only one *signifié* and only one *signifiant*. Nonetheless, does this word have more than one *signifié*? Maruyama says:

A French word *sens* is a *signifiant* /sɑ̃:s/ and a *signifié* "*sens*" at the same time. The *siginifié* "*sens*" is *valeur* as a potential, which is realized as *significations* corresponding to Japanese words "meaning," "senses," and "direction," depending on contexts where it is used. [my translation]   (Maruyama 1983: 211)

Maruyama's explanation can be interpreted as the following Figure 1 shows:

French	*sens*		
Japanese	meaning	senses	direction

Figure 1

As we have seen above, there is no guarantee that one word in one language corresponds to another word in another language because the way languages divide both sound and concept varies from one language to another. In this case, Japanese words "meaning," "senses," and "direction" correspond to one French word *sens*. In other words, three different Japanese words are equivalent to one and the same French word. According to Maruyama, one French word corresponds to the three Japanese words, depending on the context where it appears.

The same is true of the relation between an English word "brother" and two Japanese words *ani* "elder brother" and *otouto* "younger brother" as shown in Figure 2:

English	brother	
Japanese	elder brother	younger brother

Figure 2

"Brother" corresponds to both elder brother and younger brother in Japanese, but doesn't have "values" of them. The "value" of "brother" is something like "a male relative with the same parents (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 128)." So it is thought that "brother" means "elder brother" or "younger brother," depending on the context where it is used. That is to say, a *signe* "brother" has one *signifié* and one *signifiant*. Therefore, it is a matter of Japanese not English whether "brother" in English means "elder brother" or "younger brother" in Japanese. Similarly, it is a matter of Japanese not French whether *sens* in French means "meaning," "senses," or "direction" in Japanese.

As we have seen above, it seems that the problem of polysemous words has been solved. Then, how can "homonyms" be treated? Homonyms are words that are spelled the same and sound the same as another word but have a different meaning (Macmillan English Dictionary, 726).

Son violon a le même son.

(His/Her violin has the same sound.)

In the sentence above, the first *son* means "his" or "her" and the second, "sound." According to Saussure, a *signe son* should have one *signifiant* and one *signifié*. Nonetheless, does the *signe son* have more than one *signifié*? Maruyama explains the *signe son* as follows:

This is different from a polysemous word *"sens"* mentioned before. These two *sons* are each distinct *signes*. Then, why can they have distinct *signifiés* while they have the same *signifiant* /sɔ̃/? Does this contradict the unity of *signifié* and *signifiant* we have considered so far? [my translation]   (Maruyama 1983: 213)

So, if Maruyama is right, we have two distinct *sons* as follows:

French	*son*	*son*
English	his/her	sound

Figure 3

Maruyama goes on to say further:

Two words, which have the same sound, hold distinct values because their *valence* is different, which enables words to be connected in the dimension of syntagma. This can realize the differentiation of *son* on the plane of syntagma. [my translation]

(Maruyama 1983: 213)

Here *valence* means "the possibility that a word is combined with another word [my translation] (Maruyama 1983: 214)." In this case, the *son*, which means "his" or "her," has *valence* that enables it to be connected with a noun *violon* while the *son*, which means "sound," has *valence* that enables it to be connected with an adjective *même*. So *valence* of these two *sons* is different and "this can realize the differentiation of *son* on the plane of syntagma [my translation] (Maruyama 1983: 213)."

6. Saussure's Theory of Sign

What we have considered, however, doesn't mean that the problem of polysemous words and homonyms has been solved completely. Polysemous words and homonyms are explained based on their relation to other words, that is to say, a syntagmatic relation such as "context" or *"valence."* Then, how can they be interpreted when used without any other words? How can they be explained without a syntagmatic relation such as "context" or *"valence"*? Suppose someone says, "Water!" Does he or she mean cold water or hot water? The English word "water" corresponds to two Japanese words *mizu* "cold water" and *oyu* "hot water" as shown in Figure 4:

English	water	
Japanese	cold water	hot water

Figure 4

So it may not matter to native speakers of English whether "water" means cold water or hot water. But except the case where "cold water" or "hot water" doesn't matter to him or her, the speaker is requesting either "cold water" or "hot water" by saying "Water!" In other words, we can ask someone to bring "cold water" or "hot water" by one and the same word "water." This means that native speakers of English can distinguish "hot water" from "cold water" independently of the fact that "water" has the value of "hot water" and "cold water." So we human beings can perceive the world independently of Saussure's *langue*. We don't divide and understand the world only through language. Needless to say, they can say, "Hot water!" or "Cold water!" to make clear what they want. The same is true of the word "brother":

I went to China with my brother.

If a person, who has more than one brother, says the sentence above, he or she means that he or she went to China with his or her specific brother. The word "brother" doesn't prevent the speaker from distinguishing "younger brother" from "elder brother." The very expressions "younger brother" and "elder brother" prove that. The words "younger" and "elder" don't realize "the *valeur* as potential" of the word "brother."

The same is true of homonyms. The French word *son* has the meanings of "bran" and "sound." But even if it is uttered by itself, *son* can signify "bran" or "sound" without being connected with any other

words. So we have two distinct words, which are the same in sound but are different in meaning.

7. Conclusion

According to Saussure, there is a system of *langue* and then it divides the masses of both sound and concept at the same time. That is how *signes* come into being. Therefore, one *signifiant* comes to correspond to one *signifié*. This is a one-to-one relation. If it is true, polysemous words and homonyms are explained only by syntagmatic relation. But such an explanation is not plausible when polysemous words and homonyms are used without any other words because there is no syntagmatic relation whatever. This means not only that we have some *signes*, which have the same *signifiant* but the *signifiés* of which are different from one another, but also that *signes* do not come into being after the *langue* divides the masses of both sound and concept at the same time. Or might an associative relation be able to solve the problem of polysemous words and homonyms?

In any case, a *langue* might be thought to have developed little by little although this is not compatible with Saussure's theory of *langue*. This speculation enables an idea to be plausible that every time we have a new concept (*signifié*), it is connected with a sound (*signifiant*). In some cases, the same sound (*signifiant*) may have had the different concept (*signifié*). As the number of phonemes is limited in every language, it is likely to happen that some words, which are combina-tions of phonemes, have the same sound (*signifiant*) as others. This is just a matter of probability. This may be how polysemous words and homonyms have come into being. So the true picture of language may not be what Saussure has thought it to be. Palmer says:

Multiplicity of meaning is a very general charac-teristic of language.　　　　(Palmer 1981: 108)

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