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Saussure's Legacy

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Abstract

Ferdinand de Saussure divides *langage* into *langue* and *parole*. Then he makes *langue* the subject matter of linguistics. On the other hand, Noam Chomsky claims that linguistics should deal with I-language, contrasting it with E-language. It seems that *langue* and I-language are very different concepts. But if we closely examine them, it turns out that they have a lot of things in common although there are a few differences between them.

Key Words: *langue*, *parole*, I-language, E-language

Introduction

Chomsky thinks that his I-language as the subject matter of linguistics is different from Saussure's *langue*. He criticizes Saussure's social concept of *langue*, questioning what "social" means. But his idea of I-language has some similarities to Saussure's notion of *langue*. It may be said that Chomsky unconsciously inherits Saussure's idea of *langue* as a legacy.

1. Saussure's *langue*

Saussure states that linguistic structure (*langue*) is the subject matter of linguistics after pointing out how difficult it is to define the object of linguistic study:

The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure [*langue*] as his primary concern, and relate all other manifestations of language [*langage*] to it.
(Saussure 1983: 9)

Here, "linguistic structure" is an English translation of *langue*. Saussure thinks that *langue* is the source of manifestations observed in linguistic activities (*langage*). This means that linguistic expressions, whether they are spoken or written, are realized from *langue*. As we shall see later, Chomsky's I-language has the same characteristic as Saussure's *langue* in that it generates E-language.

Next, Saussure asks what *langue* is and answers this question:

What, then, is linguistic structure [*langue*]? It is not, in our opinion, simply the same thing as language [*langage*]. Linguistic structure is only one part of language, even though it is an essential part. […] At the same time, it is also a body of necessary conventions […] to enable members of society to use their language faculty.
(Saussure 1983: 9–10)

According to Saussure, *langue* is not *langage* (linguistic activities) but an essential part of it. From another point of view, *langue* is a body of necessary conventions so that members of society can employ language. Also for Chomsky, I-language makes it possible that humans can generate E-language.

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Then, where is *langue* located? Saussure explains:

It [*langue*] is […] a grammatical system existing potentially in every brain,　　　(Saussure 1983: 13)

Here, Saussure's *langue* overlaps Chomsky's I-language because both linguists locate their object of study (*langue* and I-language) in the human brain. For Chomsky, I-language is not what humans can change because it is determined by parameter-settings of Universal Grammar, which is a biological endowment. In the same way, *langue*, for Saussure, is not what we can create or modify:

[…] the individual, who by himself is powerless either to create it [*langue*] or to modify it.
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Saussure 1983: 14)

For Chomsky, I-language exists as a perfect form in each individual, but for Saussure, *langue* exists perfectly in the brains of a group of individuals:

It [*langue*] is a fund accumulated by the members of the community through the practice of speech, a grammatical system existing potentially in every brain, or more exactly in the brains of a group of individuals; for the language is never complete in any single individual, but exists perfectly only in the collectivity.
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Saussure 1983: 13)

Moreover, Saussure insists that phonation is irrelevant to *langue* itself just as performance of a symphony to a symphony itself:

Take, for example, the production of sounds necessary to speech. The vocal organs are as external to the language system [*langue*] as the electrical apparatus which is used to tap out the Morse code is external to that code. Phonation, that is to say the execution of sound patterns, in no way affects the system itself. In this respect one may compare a language [*langue*] to a symphony. The symphony has a reality of its own, which is independent of the way in which it is performed. The mistakes which musicians may make in performance in no way compromise that reality.
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Saussure 1983: 18)

Chomsky (1986: 31) claims the same idea as this by saying that I-language is like a code, rules of chess or Articles of the Constitution. A code generates messages, rules of chess do moves of chess pieces, and Articles of the Constitution do a variety of laws. But what generates them is not affected at all by what is generated.

On the other hand, however, Saussure insists that there is an interdependence between *langue* and *parole*:

These two objects [*langue* and *parole*] of study are doubtless closely linked and each presupposes the other. A language [*langue*] is necessary in order that speech [*parole*] should be intelligible and produce all its effects. But speech [*parole*] also is necessary in order that a language [*langue*] may be established. Historically speech [*parole*] always takes precedence [over language [*langue*]]. How would we ever come to associate an idea with a verbal sound pattern, if we did not first of all grasp this association in an act of speech [*parole*]? Furthermore, it is by listening to others that we learn our native language [*langue*]. A language [*langue*] accumulates in our brain only as the result of countless experiences. Finally, it is speech [*parole*] which causes a language [*langue*] to evolve. The impressions received from listening to others modify our own linguistic habits. Thus there is an interdependence between the language [*langue*] itself and speech [*parole*]. The former is at the same time the instrument and the product of the latter. But none of this compromises the absolute nature of the distinction between the two.　　　　(Saussure 1983: 19)

What Saussure insists above can be translated in Chomsky's terminology as follows:

I-language and E-language are doubtless closely linked and each presupposes the other. I-language is necessary in order that E-language should be intelligible and produce all its effects. But E-language also is necessary in order that I-language may be established. Historically, E-language always takes precedence [over I-language]. How would we ever come to associate an idea with a verbal sound pattern, if we did not first of all grasp this association in an act of E-language? Fur-

thermore, it is by listening to others that we learn our native language [I-language]. I-language accumulates in our brain only as the result of countless experiences. Finally, it is E-language which causes I-language to evolve. The impressions received from listening to others modify our own linguistic habits. Thus there is an interdependence between I-language itself and E-language. The former is at the same time the instrument and the product of the latter. But none of this compromises the absolute nature of the distinction between the two.

According to Chomsky, we understand E-language by I-language but also I-language is acquired by E-language. We are born with a list of ideas and then find which sound pattern is associated with an idea, only listening to E-language. The parameters of Universal Grammar (UG), Chomsky insists, are set one way or another by listening to E-language of others. So it is thought that I-language changes because the parameters of UG are reset by listening to changes of E-language. In short, I-language generates E-language and in turn E-language sets the parameters of UG and determines I-language. But I-language and E-language are quite distinct from each other.

Also Saussure insists that a linguistic sign does not refer to a thing in the world but consists of two elements, a sound pattern (*signifiant*) and a concept (*signifié*):

For some people a language, reduced to its essentials, is a nomenclature: a list of terms corresponding to a list of things. […] This conception is open to a number of objections. […], it leads one to assume that the link between a name and a thing is something quite unproblematic, which is far from being the case. […] A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept (*signifié*) and a sound pattern (*signifiant*).   (Saussure 1983: 65–66)

Here Saussure denies what is called nomenclaturism.

Also, for Saussure *langue* is something perfect from the outset. Saussure does not think that the origin of language is worth discussing:

No society, in fact, knows or has ever known language other than as a product inherited from preceding generations, and one to be accepted as such. That is why the question of the origin of speech is not so important as it is generally assumed to be. The question is not even worth asking; (Saussure 1959: 71–72)

For Saussure the origin of language does not exist and this means that language has nothing to do with beginning and end:

If language, "which was not spoken the day before," does not exist, we have only one conclusion that—"the origin of language" does not exist. A passage from a student's lecture notebook, which we have seen at the outset—"The question of the origin of language does not have the importance we give. The question does not even exist. (Saussure 1997: 11–12)"—means the same thing as this. The statement that "the origin of language" does not exist means that language has nothing to do with "birth" and "death," that is to say, it has nothing to do with "beginning" and "end." (My translation)   (Tagai 2014: 376–377)

Saussure insists that language cannot be delimited in time. Saussure explains his idea using Latin and French:

It follows that on no given day could one have drawn up the death certificate of the Latin language, and similarly on no day could one have registered the birth of the French language. The people of France have never woken up and said *bonjour* in French, where they went to bed the previous evening saying 'good night' in Latin.   (Saussure 2006: 100)

After all, Saussure thinks that the origin of language is an infinite regress because it depends on when language came into being:

Looking at language and wondering at what precise moment such a thing 'started' is as intelligent as looking at the mountain stream and believing that by following it upstream you will reach the exact location of its spring. *Countless things will show* that at any moment the STREAM exists when one says that it

comes into being,　　　　　　(Saussure 2006: 63)

So, for Saussure, language does not have beginning. It exists from the outset as it is now.

2. Chomsky's I-language

Chomsky points out that what has been studied by structural and descriptive linguistics, is understood independently of the properties of the mind/brain and names it externalized language (E-language):

Let us refer to such technical concepts as instances of "externalized language" (E-language), in the sense that the construct is understood independently of the properties of the mind/brain.　　(Chomsky 1986: 20)

Saussure thinks that *langue* is an entity located in the brain. So his *langue* cannot be E-language, the actual or potential speech events, as Chomsky calls it. Then Chomsky proposes I-language in contrast to E-language:

Otto Jespersen, who held that there is some "notion of structure" in the mind of the speaker […] Let us refer to this "notion of structure" as an "internalized language" (I-language). The I-language, then, is some element of the mind of the person who knows the language, acquired by the learner, and used by the speaker-hearer.　　　　(Chomsky 1986: 21–22)

Saussure's *langue* can be found in the brain, and for Chomsky, the brain is synonymous with the mind. So, in this point *langue* can be interpreted as I-language. Chomsky definitely insists that I-language is attained and internally represented in the mind/brain, contrasting it with E-language:

The shift in focus was from the study of E-language to the study of I-language, from the study of language regarded as an externalized object to the study of the system of knowledge of language attained and internally represented in the mind/brain.

(Chomsky 1986: 24)

Chomsky repeatedly says the same thing as this, contrasting I-language with E-language:

I-language refers to "an individual phenomenon, a system represented in the mind/brain of a particular individual." E-language is "some kind of social phenomenon, a shared property of a community."

(Chomsky 1988: 36–37)

Also, Chomsky refers to I-language as "what makes sound and meaning relate to one another in a specific way":

But it seems that when we speak of a person as knowing a language, we do not mean that he or she knows an infinite set of sentences, or a set of acts or behaviors; rather, what we mean is that the person knows what makes sound and meaning relate to one another in a specific way, what makes them "hang together," a particular characterization of a function, perhaps.　　　　　　(Chomsky 1986: 27)

This is similar to Saussure's idea that sound patterns (*signifiants*) and concepts (*signifiés*) are associated with each other in *langue*.

Moreover, Chomsky does not think that words refer to things in the world just as Saussure denies nomenclaturism:

[…] a lexical item provides us with a certain range of perspectives for viewing what we take to be the things in the world, or what we conceive in other ways; these items are like filters or lenses, providing ways of looking at things and thinking about the products of our minds. The terms themselves do not refer, at least if the term *refer* is used in its natural-language sense; but people can use them to refer to things, viewing them from particular points of view—which are remote from the standpoint of the natural sciences, as noted.　　　　　　　(Chomsky 2000: 36)

Here Chomsky also denies nomenclaturism as Saussure does. The same thing as this is repeated as follows:

Referring is an action, and the internal symbols that are used to refer do not pick out mind-independent objects. On investigation, it turns out that what we understand to be a house, a river, a person, a tree,

water, and so on, is not a physical construct of some kind. Rather, these are creations of what seventeenth century investigators called our "cognoscitive powers," which provide us with rich means to interpret and refer to the outside world from certain perspectives. (Chomsky 2010: 57)

Furthermore, Chomsky interprets Saussure's *langue* as appropriate, saying that familiar characterizations of language as a code or a game point correctly toward I-language as we have seen before:

It should be noted that familiar characterizations of 'language' as a code or a game point correctly toward I-language, not the artificial construct E-language. A code is not a set of representations but rather a specific system of rules that assigns coded representations to message-representations. […] Similarly, a game is not a set of moves but rather the rule system that underlies them. The Saussurian concept of *langue,* although far too narrow in conception, might be interpreted as appropriate in this respect.
(Chomsky 1986: 31)

But Frederick J. Newmeyer points out the following two passages and says that "[…] it would appear, superficially at least, that Chomsky sandwiched a positive appraisal of Saussure [Chomsky 1986: 31] in between two negative appraisals [Chomsky 1986: 19, 32] (with respect to the same issue) in the same chapter of the same book." (Newmeyer 2016: 273):

In Saussurean structuralism, a language (*langue*) was taken to be a system of sounds and an associated system of concepts; the notion of sentence was left in a kind of limbo, perhaps to be accommodated within the study of language use. (Chomsky 1986: 19)

Perhaps the clearest account is Jespersen's in terms of the "notion of structure" that guides the speaker "in framing sentences of his own…," these being "free expressions." As we have seen, these ideas became the focus of attention in the study of generative grammar, although not without controversy. Saussurean structuralism had placed Jespersen's observation about "free expressions" outside of the

scope of the study of language structure, of Saussure's *langue*. (Chomsky 1986: 32)

Finally Newmeyer denies that Chomsky's I-language is the same thing as Saussure's *langue*:

In my view, Chomsky on page 31 of *Knowledge of language* does *not* attribute to Saussure the view that *langue* was an I-language-based system of rules. The key word in the quotation is 'interpreted'. The overall context of the citation, as well as Chomsky's prior rhetorical practice (see below, §5), indicates that what Chomsky really means is '*re*interpreted'. In other words, he is saying (in effect), 'Saussure's grammar was a version of E-language. However, if we want to be charitable, we can think of it as a model of I-language and take off from there'. (Newmeyer 2016: 277)

On the other hand, John E. Joseph interprets Chomsky (1986: 31) as follows:

Here [Chomsky 1986: 31], it is specifically the concern of *langue* not with a 'set' of elements but with 'the rule system that underlies them' that Chomsky appreciates, while lamenting the failure to include syntax within this system. (Joseph 1990: 64)

Unlike Newmeyer, Joseph finds a close affinity between Saussure's *langue* and Chomsky's I-language:

If Saussure functions as a minor precursor for the I-language concept, the major precursor is 'Otto Jespersen, […] In sum, Chomsky appears to accept one feature of Sassurean linguistics—
(1) the characterization of *langue* as an underlying system rather than as a set of elements
(Joseph 1990: 64–65)

So Joseph insists that *langue* and I-language are similar to each other although admitting that they are different in some respects. I agree with Joseph but I do not know if I agree with Newmeyer.
Similarly, according to Chomsky, "the rules of the language are rules that form or constitute the language":

The rules of the language are not rules of some infinite set of formal objects or potential actions but are rules that form or constitute the language, like Articles of the Constitution or rules of chess (not a set of moves, but a game, a particular rule system).

(Chomsky 1986: 28)

Another example, which shows that Saussure's *langue* and Chomsky's I-language are similar to each other, is the study of sound structure illustrated by Chomsky himself. Chomsky says:

Focusing on the I-language, however, the problem [of the study of sound structure] is a rather different one: to find the mental representations that underlie the production and perception of speech and the rules that relate these representations to the physical events of speech. (Chomsky 1986: 41)

Here, "the mental representations that underlie the production and perception of speech (and the rules that relate these representations to the physical events of speech)" can be interpreted to exist in Saussure's *langue*. Chomsky goes on to say:

The representations of column II [phonological representation] are essentially the mental representations of the lexicon, […] The phonetic representations of column III derive from these by straightforward rules, […] Applying these rules, we derive the phonetic forms (III) from lexical-phonological representations (II). The latter representations are not derived from the speech sounds by analytic procedures of segmentation, classification, extraction of physical features, and so forth, but are established and justified as part of the best theory for accounting ultimately for the general relation between sound and meaning of the I-language. […] The I-language, incorporating the rules that form the representations (II) and the rules that relate them to (III), is acquired by the child by applying the principles incorporated in the initial state S_0 to the presented facts; (Chomsky 1986: 42–43)

According to Chomsky, phonemes in I-language are realized into sounds in E-language. On the other hand, Saussure claims that imprints of sounds (*signifi-*

ants) in *langue* are realized into sounds in *parole*. In this respect, the two linguists' ideas concerning sound structure are quite the same as each other.

Furthermore, for Chomsky, I-language is a perfect system that emerged abruptly, not what can be explained by Charles Darwin's natural selection:

Human language faculty has not evolved since humans went out of eastern Africa about fifty or eighty thousand years ago. About fifty or a hundred thousand years before that time, there was no evidence of language at all, which means, from the archeological point of view, that an extremely abrupt event [emerging of human language] happened to humans between fifty and eighty thousand years ago. These things implies that a perfect or almost perfect system [human language] emerged abruptly. (My translation)

(Chomsky 2015: 129)

The same thing as this is repeated as follows:

[…] there is very strong evidence that there has been no relevant evolution of the language faculty since dispersal from Africa some 50,000 years ago, though undoubtedly there has been a great deal of change, even invention of modes of externalization (as in sign language). (Chomsky 2010: 61)

So Chomsky thinks that Universal Grammar has not evolved since its emergence in the human brain. Also, for Saussure, *langue* exists as a perfect form from the outset as we have seen before.

Conclusion

It is generally thought that Saussure's and Chomsky's ideas on language are quite different from each other. But in a sense, their thoughts are surprisingly similar in some respects although the differences cannot be denied. So it can be said that Chomsky's fundamental ideas on language, whether consciously or unconsciously, are inherited from Saussure's.

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