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Linguistic Isolation: Ferdinand de Saussure's Linguistic Theory and the Implications for Historiography

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Introduction

In a 1987 New York Times article, Mark C. Taylor described the twentieth-century intellectual attitude toward language and meaning. He said, "Heidegger argued that the totalistic thinking of modern philosophy leads to a form of totalitarianism that represses all difference and also to a system of technology which, in its quest to control the whole earth, threatens annihilation in a nuclear holocaust…Western philosophy represents so many efforts to domesticate every type of difference and master all forms of otherness."[1] Statements such as these depend on the assumption that those who claim that their language games are externally-referential of a common world (in this case, western philosophers) are not motivated by factuality or objectivity but by the repression of difference and, presumably, the need for dominance.

Such a position, however, is merely symptomatic of an earlier and more foundational philosophical and linguistic thesis introduced by the nineteenth-century philologist Ferdinand de

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[1] Mark Taylor, "Descartes, Nietzsche, and the Search for the Unsayable," *The New York Times*, Feb. 1, 1987.

Saussure. In his works on semiotics and semiology, de Saussure challenged the prevailing theories on language, which he redefined as internally-differential, not externally-referential.

Ferdinand de Saussure created a philosophical problem for historiography and its ambition to factually and objectively represent past states via language. Specifically, de Saussure's linguistic theories are problematic for historiography in the following respects: Historical narratives are internally-referential, limited, closed sets of meaning which cannot be compared with other closed sets nor the world as it exists beyond its linguistic description. Historical narratives are limited to extremely restrictive data sets, and Historical narratives must assume differences between signs (such as ideas, groups, classes, events, or institutions), which may not be indigenous to the historical data under observation.

Linguistic Theory Prior to Ferdinand de Saussure

The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century linguists were concerned with the origins of words and with the etymological exploration of their natural and universal meanings. Just as political philosophers and economic theorists of the day articulated systems of natural law, natural economic organization, and natural political administration, linguistic theorists sought the natural foundations of phonetic sounds and their organic correlations to external objects. If all humans were united in their rationality, and if language emanated from universal mental categories, it was reasonable to assume that language *qua* language was (or could be) universal and consistent in its meaning across cultures and times.[2]

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[2] Jonathan Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure* (Penguin Books Ltd, 1976), 57.

Whereas enlightenment philosophers reasoned *a priori*, subsequent theorists conducted their research upon *a posteriori* and historical lines – a methodology thematic of the late nineteenth century. Friedrich Nietzsche, in his work *On the Genealogy of Morals,* argued *a posteriori* that morals do not derive from universal categories but from historical contingencies and according to the power-differentials of the ruling and subservient classes. Because moral terms expressed contingent interests, Nietzsche concluded that moral determinations were arbitrary and self-referential.[3] As Nietzsche did for morals, de Saussure did for language.

Professor of English and Comparative Literature Jonathan Culler notes in his work on de Saussure that the enlightenment theorists "began with mental categories and sought their exemplification in language, as in universal grammar, and based etymologies on conjectures about the origin of language. The latter sought only facts, evidence, demonstration: it divorced the study of language from the study of mind."[4] Thus, decentered from universal mind, language became the malleable expression of *minds* and of competing language games.

Ferdinand de Saussure's Linguistics

Ferdinand de Saussure was among the first to propose the notion that language was not merely a means by which objects were studied; language was itself an object study - one that had nothing definitive to say about any external objects. Jonathan Culler notes that, according to de Saussure's lectures, "Linguistics…never attempted to describe the nature of the object it was studying."[5] To him and his contemporaries, it became clear that even one line of speech was

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[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), 1-25.
[4] Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure,* 57.
[5] Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure,* 08.

unexpectantly complex and could be analyzed from a range of contrary perspectives. Instead of determining the relationship between language and that to which it refers, de Saussure set himself to decipher the range of factors and conflicting points of view *within* linguistic sets. De Saussure accomplished this by redefining the function of signs and their signification.

De Saussure considered language to be an organization of signs. Signs, contra the eighteenth-century theorists, functioned as both subjects and objects within systems of signification and contained two elements, the *significant* (or that which signifies) and the *signifie* (the signified). Importantly, both the *significant and signifie* are elements of the sign and only exist within the sign.[6] Consequently, if that which is signified (the *signifie*) refers to the structure of the sign and not to an external object, and if language is the only means by which that object may be described, then objects as they exist (or are thought to exist) cannot be described meta-linguistically. The relationships between subjects and predicates are meaningful only in relation to the historical and consensual rules of the particular language game in which these are uttered. But just as intertextual meaning can be determined by studying the relations between the components of the sign, so too can intertextual meaning be acquired by studying the relationships between the signs themselves. This is de Saussure's theory of *difference.*

According to de Saussure, the meaning of a sign cannot be determined positively or in isolation from other signs. It is only by analyzing the network of signs and the negations of these that the interpreter can elicit meaning from language. Jonathan Culler states, "It is understood that these concepts are purely differential, not positively defined by their content but negatively defined by their relations with other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is that they are what the others are not."[7] Illustrative of this, de Saussure has emphasized the futility of

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[6] Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure,* 10.
[7] Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure,* 18.

attempting to teach a man the concept of a single color in isolation from all the rest. One cannot, supposedly, learn what blue is by sensing infinite shades of blue but must be shown these in relation to contrary colors.[8]

This method of inner-linguistic analysis (which has notably influenced and been developed by such historians/anthropologists as Clifford Geertz in his text "The Interpretation of Cultures") requires the linguist to first determine the "structures of signification" that determine "social ground and import"[9]; one must "consider the signifying intention of the speaker, the aspects of the world to which his utterance refers, the immediate circumstances of the communicative context which might have led him to produce a particular series of noises."[10] Moreover, one must ask by what convention one speaker listens to another or according to what grammatical and semantical genealogy words are contextualized[11] Without such considerations, the meaning of contemporary historical linguistic sets cannot be determined with any accuracy.

The Implications for Historiography

In one sense, de Saussure's linguistic theory has demanded of historiography (and every discipline) a hesitation in regard to describing as objective or universal those statements which are merely representative of bias or interest. De Saussure's point that "a particular combination of signifier and signified is an arbitrary entity" and that "no one [ought to] contest the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign"[12] is useful for historiography, which must accept that the signs

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[8] Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure,* 19.
[9] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* (Basic Books, Inc. 1973), 9.
[10] Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure,* 09.
[11] Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure,* 09.
[12] Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure,* 09.

by which contemporary historians describe the past may not be indigenous to past states or to all states. The terms and connotations of our own *significants* and *signifies* may be arbitrary and historically contingent (accidental), and there may be important and urgent concepts for which we currently possess no signs. Post de Saussure, one cannot simply ordain any proposition with truth and universality.

Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory, however, does not merely threaten the factuality of this or that proposition; it threatens factuality as such. The threats are manifold and can be expressed as follows:

(1) There can be no meta-historical concepts or realities. Jonathan Culler states that "a language does not simply assign arbitrary names to a set of *independently existing concepts*. It sets up an arbitrary relationship between signifiers *of its own choosing* on the one hand and signifieds *of its own choosing* on the other. Not only does each language produce a different set of signifiers, articulating and dividing the continuum of sound in a distinctive way, but each language produces a different set of signifieds; *it has a distinctive and thus 'arbitrary' way of organizing the world into concepts or categories*."[13] If concepts are determined by language sets, and if different language sets have different concepts, then it would appear that there are no trans-linguistic concepts. This is certainly problematic for historiography, which seems to postulate the trans-historical reality of such concepts as time, change (perhaps causation), and space.

(2) To the extent that history is the description of past states, history is impossible. Put simply, if the signs of which historical narratives are composed do not refer to non-narrative objects (past states), then historical narratives cannot describe past states but

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[13] Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure,* 15.

only the present state to which the narrative belongs. Historiography is restricted to describing the wishes and interests of the historian - not the history.

(3) Any historical narrative cannot (with integrity) describe anything more than an extremely small data set. Universal and civilizational histories (of the kind composed by Herodotus, Gibbon, Toynbee, and others) become physically impossible due to the infinitely multiplying network of signs and differences ("winks upon winks upon winks" in the words of Geertz) which must be analyzed.[14] Consequently, historical narratives must "fly so low to the ground" that they risk describing nothing but trees, blinded to the complicated ecosystems in which trees are meaningful. But this creates a limitation, one related to the following problem of *difference.* Historiographies limited to small data sets fail to define themselves as differentiated from, and therefore meaningful in relation to, other sets of meaning. For example, the historian committed to cataloging the signs, differences, and "winks" of the working conditions of women during the industrial revolution may fail (must fail!) to describe broader social and economic conditions, without which the former cannot have meaning. (Where do the winks end?) Ironically, the condition which necessitates small data sets inevitably requires the expansion of these in search of meaning.

(4) Historical narratives must assume difference and negation where there may not be any. De Saussure's contention that the meaning of signs can only be determined in negative relation to other signs imposes a restrictive and arbitrary historical methodology. Meaning as difference is an *a priori* presupposition that opposition, contradiction, and negation are necessary properties of the ideas, concepts, institutions, classes, individuals,

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[14] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* 9.

events, and data of historical study, whether or not these differences are native to the ideas, concepts, etc.

(5) Historical narratives can no longer function as a vehicle for truth and reconciliation between groups of competing language games. Barring the possibility for historical narratives to equitably describe the common past states of antagonistic people groups, by what method can these groups transcend the particularities of their language game to ascertain historical truth and achieve reconciliation? (This is, admittedly, not a philosophical but a practical implication of the de Saussurean theory.)

Oxford academic and scholar Jane Caplan summarizes, "'Saussure claims…that meaning in language is the product not of reference to things exterior to it, but of a system of difference internal to language as a code...these emphasize the arbitrariness of any system of signification, and to detach it from external reference, whether to the past or to the real, as the guarantee of its meaning or truth.'"[15] If meaning is arbitrary, then histories and the signs of which they are composed are, according to Saussure's logic, arbitrary sets of meaning which do not refer objectively to the data they describe. This, however, introduces a particularly noxious philosophical problem for de Saussure. By what standard are the claims of his linguistic theory justified? Certainly not to an objective, meta-linguistic standard. If they are justified according to his own language game, then certainly it cannot apply to others?

Any historical work which claims (explicitly or otherwise) to narrativize past states in meta-historical, meta-linguistic, meta-narrative terms must contend with the linguistic methodology of Ferdinand de Saussure and the intellectual atmosphere pervaded by his mind. Describing

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[15] Jane Caplan, "Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction: Notes for Historians," *Central European History* 22, no. 3/4 (1989): 271.

languages as arbitrary sets of meaning, defining signs as both subject and object, denoting meaning as *difference* between signs, de Saussure created an intellectual atmosphere inimical to the possibility of historical factualism. Jane Caplan was correct when she said that "there is no way to adjudicate the relative claims of positionalism and metanarrative, and no privileged relation to the real, because theories of what that is are differently premised."[16] If the factuality of historical narrativization is to be reinvigorated among serious scholarship, the linguistic isolationism of de Saussurean theory must be questioned.

About the author

Luke Anthony Neilson is currently in his final year of a BaH in Philosophy at the University of Calgary. He is now completing a research thesis on the historical epistemology of G.W.F. Hegel. He plans to study ancient philosophy or historiography at the University of Oxford following his degree.

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[16] Caplan, *Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction*, 271.

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