NOTES from a Grad Class on Genre Theory: Helpful to US?


- Basic conceptual tools of structural analysis developed by Ferdinand de Saussure in *Cours de Linguistique generale* (1915)
- Three levels of linguistic activity:
  - *Langage*: the broadest aspect, the entire human potential for speech
  - *Langue*: the language-system that each of us uses in order to be intelligible to others.
    The constitutive rules by which it functions
  - *Parole*: our individual utterances.
- The basic unit of analysis must be the language-system, or *langue*, because they are conventional—happen according to social rules—and are thus social products. But language systems have no tangible existence.
- So you must build a model of the system in order to study it! But the rules you infer about *Langue* come only from evidence from *Parole*.
- So tools for analyzing *langue*:
  - Signs: “a complex whole which links a sound-image and a concept”. Made up of:
    - **Signifiers**: the “sound-image” or referent for a particular thing or meaning.
      Pointing fingers, words, spoken words, pictures, etc.
    - **Signifieds**: the concept, meaning, or thing indicated by the signifier. Doesn’t have to be a real object—could be a concept.
    - A signifier without a signified is NOISE; a signified without a signifier is IMPOSSIBLE.
  - Important: to Saussure, there are no meanings without ways to represent them, and thus “no thought without language”. Does this mean language determines thought?
  - Relationship between signifiers and signifieds is arbitrary.
    - Sound-images for words not dictated by the concepts at all. If not arbitrary, we’d all speak the same language!
    - But arbitrary with respect to NATURE, not CULTURE—we have to call things by certain words or risk not being understood
    - So this relationship (or lack of one) does not mean that concepts are arbitrary, or that they are inadequate images of reality
  - Signifiers unfold over time, which makes signs and utterances linear—elements must be delivered in an order that is itself significant. Thus signs have a narrative element. In terms of the study of language:
    - **Synchronic** versus **diachronic** approaches: examining a phenomenon of language as part of a total system simultaneous with itself (S), or as part of a historical sequence of related phenomena (D). Saussure favored systematizing, unlike Marxists who favored dialectical progress (and thus diachronic)
    - **Syntagmatic** versus **Paradigmatic** relations among signs: The positioning of a sign in any particular utterance, as in word order and relationships among
words; or meaning of a word in reference to all the other words that might have filled that slot: with related meanings, grammatical functions, sound patterns, etc.

Problems with Saussure’s model?

- **Derrida:** writing not a means of representing speech, not an auxiliary form of speech.
  - His long argument that Saussure treats writing as an external accessory or supplement to the act of making meaning via language—and his aside that this makes writing “dangerous” because writing disguises meaning and usurps the role of speech. Writing the “dangerous supplement” to Saussure—and Derrida plays on this and reverses it.
  - Signifier and signified seem to be fused together in this model, which privileges voice as the manifestation of thought. Writing lacks voice in this sense, and thus doesn’t have the presence that spoken words have. Derrida reverses this to argue that the difference between writing and speech is also the condition of signs in the first place—language presupposes absences. Language strives toward meaning through the interplay of signifiers, and this mean not from what they are but from differences relative to other possibilities. So between signifier and signified there is no relation of container and contained, but merely “free play.” Language is always indeterminate.


Other implications of Saussure’s model of speech, language, communication:

- 24 language acts not determined by supervising structures, but are shaped situationally through the concrete character of practical speech acts. To Bakhtin, every effort to impose a structure on the diversity of practical languages is “monologic.”
- **Thomas Kent**
  - Saussure’s model of *langue* constitutes a conceptual scheme that mediates between the human subject and the world
  - To Bakhtin this is an internalist position: the notion that meaning is the internal business of a perceiving mind that may know the world only through the mediation of language (in our minds). If we accept this position, we “find ourselves in what Frederic Jameson has called ‘the prison-house of language’ where we can never escape the problems of skepticism and relativism”
  - Bakhtin’s responses:
    - Utterances mean only in relation to other utterances
    - Utterances exist only within the dialogic and public interactions among people: there is no private language
    - Utterances take place only in the form of a “speech genre”
    - No abstract model can predict the moves we make when we communicate
    - All understanding takes place through response (this is the reverse of Saussure, who argues that the system of rules creates or causes the concrete speech acts).
The utterance thus determines the nature and elements of the language system, not the reverse

- Marilyn Cooper
  - Saussure’s is a model of “abstract objectivism” whereby language exists in individual minds as a system of “normatively identical forms”
  - What enables language use, Bakhtin argues, is not the form of the signal but how changeable, adaptable it is—not recognizing its form but understanding its meaning in the context of the utterance (“its novelty and not its identity”)
  - Recognizing still important, but just as a minimal condition—not as its definitive essence

- Bernard-Donals
  - To Bakhtin, language is material and used to construct subjects (that is, ideas of “selfness” and sociocultural positions of speakers) as much as to construct meaning
  - In this way language affects one’s material conditions since language is already a part of those conditions
  - Thus people’s consciousness (subject formation) is formed in and through language in use
  - Bernard-Donals:

    “In the negotiation of utterances—and through the interiorization and reutterance of them, either monologically or dialogically—language re-interpellates human subjects and through this process resituates them materially. This occurs since language that is uttered in any contexts carries with it the "residue" of various other contexts, and can be interiorized and re-uttered variously (either monologically as "already understood" or dialogically by replacing one "understanding" of the utterance or parts of it with different understandings from previous discourses).”
By way of illustration, consider the following example text, which I believe meets all the Saussurean requirements for signification and value (i.e., meaningfulness) in terms of langue: "This is not a sign." In point of fact, that text can have any number of different significations and values (to use Saussure’s terms), both for individual speakers (or writers) and individual listeners (or readers) and for different communities of speakers (or writers) and listeners (or readers). If, for example, the statement were to appear on the side of a building along chemin de la Côte des Neiges in Montréal (which is where I first saw it), the statement would mean something different to a reader visiting Montréal from Georgia who has no knowledge of the laws against “English only signs” in Québec than it would to an Anglophone native of Québec, who would not likely be very pleased with the law against “English only signs.” It would mean something else again to a Francophone native who sees the law as a way of preserving Québec as a “distinct society.” And if it were to appear (as, in fact, it also did) in St. Albans, Vermont—where a fair number of Québécois from Montréal travel to take advantage of the benefits of “cross-border shopping”—as finger-writing on a stationwagon’s dirt-covered rear window directly above a license plate reading “je me souviens,” the text would mean yet something else. It would mean something different if it were written by a visitor to Vermont from Ontario than if it were written by a native of St. Albans, and it would mean still something else if the stationwagon were owned and driven by an Anglophone rather than a Francophone Québécois. Clearly, whatever meaning the text may represent for a given language user, that constructed meaning would be dependent on the context in which the text appeared and on a host of prior texts experienced by the language user, texts that exist(ed) in both verbal and nonverbal forms.
Structuralism, and Specifically Saussure

a. From Notes
b. *Langage/Langue/Parole*
c. Sign = Signifier + Signified
d. The language system determines language use. An “internal grammar”? An internalized system, for sure
f. But FIXED once the relation becomes stable or culturally normed:

Language can . . . be compared with a sheet of paper: thought is the front and sound is the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language, one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound; the division could be accomplished only abstractly, and the result would be either pure psychology or pure phonology. (p. 113)