

## The Course, of course

### Introduction

Ferdinand de Saussure is regarded as the father of modern linguistics. His child, a Methuselah now, is still not entirely unlike him. There are very many writings to praise the role his Course in General Linguistics

(Ferdinand de Saussure *Cours de Linguistique Générale*. Paris, Payot. 1922.

Ferdinand de Saussure *Cours de Linguistique Générale*. Édition critique préparée par Tullio de Mauro. Paris, Payot. 1978.

Ferdinand de Saussure *Course in General Linguistics* Trans. by Roy Harris. London, Duckworth. 1983.

Jonathan Culler *Saussure* Glasgow, Fontana/Collins. 1976.

Émile Benveniste "Saussure après un demi-siècle" in *Problèmes de Linguistique Générale*. Paris, Gallimard. 1966.)

played in the history of linguistics, there are only a few to criticize its shortcomings. The Course is, indeed, a mixture of ingenious vision, elegant statements and far-reaching, latent confusion. This paper, unjustly and one-sidedly, concentrates almost exclusively on the contradictions.

First, it is worth investigating three distinctions which will lead right into the heart of Saussure's theory of language:

(1.) *Langue* (language-system) has to be distinguished from *parole* (language-behaviour) produced on the basis of the rules of the system.

(John Lyons *Semantics*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 1977. Vol. I. 239. )

(2.) Well-formed utterances, that is, utterances produced according to the rules of the language have to be distinguished from mistakes. (*Cours*, 36.; *Course*, 18.)

(3.) *Fait de langue* has to be distinguished from *fait de parole*. In other words, the language of the community has to be distinguished from the speech of some speakers.

The third distinction may not be so obvious as the second or so well-known as the first. It is, for example, missing from the new English translation:

"Comment s'est effectuée cette substitution de *war* à *was*? Quelques personnes, influencée par *waren*, ont créé *war* par analogie; c'était un *fait de parole*; cette forme, souvent répétée et acceptée par la communauté, est devenue un *fait de langue*." (*Cours*, 138.)

"How did this substitution of *war* for *was* come about? A few people, on the basis of *waren*, created the analogical form *war*. This form, constantly repeated and accepted by the community, became part of the language." (*Course*, 97.)

The function of the distinction is to distance language-behaviour from language-system and to support the statement according to which changes can creep into the latter only through the former. But if somebody makes a mistake, that is, creates the form *war*, it will not follow in any way from this *fait de parole* that the mistake should be repeated frequently. Why do 'quelques personnes' insist on making mistakes? Is it reasonable to suppose that the community has a system of rules that some of the speakers regularly defy? Saussure could have claimed:

(i.) there is no difference between *was* and *war*,

(ii.) *war* does not exist,

(iii.) the speakers who say *was* are not members of the same language community as the ones who say *war*.

Although any of these solutions could have been chosen for various reasons, they would not have been more satisfactory than the distinction between *fait de parole* and *fait de langue*.

It seems necessary to have a look at Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*. There is, on the one hand, the mumbo jumbo, meaningless in itself, produced by the speech organs. Saussure defines *parole* as "the sum total of what people say". (Cours, 38.; Course, 19.) There is, on the other hand, a system of rules with the help of which meaning can be attributed to *parole*. Saussure claimed that *langue* is:

- (1) "necessary in order that speech [*parole*] should be intelligible" (Cours, 19.; Course, 37.)
- (2) "the whole set of linguistic habits which enables the speaker to understand and make himself understood" (Cours, 112.; Course, 77.)

According to Saussure's theory, the noises produced by people cannot be *faits de parole* and cannot be intelligible, unless there is a system of rules behind them. If this is the case, can there be a single *fait de parole* without corresponding *faits de langue*? Is, then, war a *fait de langue* or a *fait de parole*? It is obviously both. In spite of this, Saussure maintained that war was not a *fait de langue* even for those speakers who kept repeating it. He thought that war was a *fait de parole* without any equivalent in *langue*. But whose *langue* are we talking about? Saussure recognized only one *langue*, the *langue* of the community, and thought that each member of the language community had an identical copy of this *langue*. Saussure's theory implies that forms like war can only have the status of mistakes as long as they are not accepted by the whole language community. But the repetition of war is not a sign of some speakers' indulgence in making mistakes or of their capricious behaviour. Would it not be more reasonable to suppose that they follow their own rules?

The first two distinctions are correct but the third has to be modified:

- (3.) The varieties of language have to be distinguished from each other. Language is not homogeneous.

Saussure failed to notice this error, the consequences of which are spread throughout his theory. Accordingly, the present paper will try to detect these consequences in Saussure's views on (a) *langue* and *parole*, (b) identity, (c) deviation, (d) dialects, (e) synchronic and diachronic linguistics, (f) understanding.

## A. *Langue* and *parole*

Saussure thought that "language [*langage*] in its totality is unknowable, for it lacks homogeneity." (Cours, 38.; Course, 20.) Although it is obvious from the context that the sentence refers to Saussure's views that *langage* consists of a mixture of both *langue* and *parole*, what remained after the removal of heterogeneity was a 'pure' *langue*, that is, a system of rules which is adopted by each and every member of the language community. *Langue*, according to him, is:

- (1.) "like a dictionary of which each individual has an identical copy" (Cours, 38.; Course, 19.),
- (2.) "a grammatical system existing potentially in every brain" (Cours, 30.; Course, 13.),
- (3.) "a social bond". (Cours, 30.; Course, 13.)

Saussure does not mention that in his 'speech circuit', when A is talking to B, there is a chance that A and B might associate different concepts with the same image acoustique. (Cours, 27-28.; Course, 11-12.) But even Saussure had to admit occasionally that not everybody speaks exactly alike. "All the individuals linguistically linked in this manner will establish among themselves a kind of mean; all of them will reproduce -- doubtless not exactly, but approximately -- the same signs linked to the same concepts." (Cours, 29.; Course, 13.) This is the reason why he thought that the perfect form of *langue* exists not in the individual speakers' 'brain' but "in the collectivity." (Cours, 30.; Course, 13.) He managed to keep *langue* clear from heterogeneity by abstracting from the speech of some speakers. It hardly needs any emphasis that by ignoring the language of some speakers of the language community, it is impossible to grasp the "conventions adopted by society", (Cours, 25.; Course, 10.) unless the word 'society' means 'a segment of society',

however large this segment may actually be. Saussure's langue satisfies the requirements of homogeneity in more than one way. It is:

- (i.) distinguished from parole,
- (ii.) free from the rules 'quelques personnes' use in their speech,
- (iii.) "both a self-contained whole and a principle of classification. As soon as we give linguistic structure [langue] pride of place among the facts of language [langage], we introduce a natural order into an aggregate which lends itself to no other classification." (Cours, 25.; Course, 10.)

Saussure went as far as to declare: "it is no absurdity to say that it is linguistic structure [langue] which gives language what unity it has." (Cours, 27.; Course, 11.)

## B. Identity

- (1.) "We assign identity, for instance, to two trains ('the 8.45 from Geneva to Paris'), one of which leaves twenty-four hours after the other. We treat it as the 'same' train, even though probably the locomotive, the carriages, the staff etc. are not the same." (Cours, 151.; Course, 107.)
- (2.) "Whenever the same conditions are fulfilled, the same entities reappear." (Cours, 151.; Course, 107.)
- (3.) "The link between the two uses of the same word is not based upon material identity, nor upon exact similarity of meaning..." (Cours, 152.; Course, 107.)
- (4.) "What characterizes each [item in the same system] most exactly is being whatever the others are not." (Cours, 162.; Course, 115.)
- (5.) "If two people from different regions of France say *se f'cher* ('to become angry') and *se f'cher* respectively, the difference is very minor in comparison with the grammatical facts which allow us to recognize in these two forms one and the same unit." (Cours, 249-250.; Course, 180.)

On the basis of the above statements, it does not seem absolutely absurd to raise the question whether it might be possible that the two forms, *war* and *was*, are, in fact, identical. Although the identity in this case would not be "based upon material identity", the two words perform the same syntactic function and they are what "others are not", which means whenever they are used, the same conditions are fulfilled.

In Saussure's theory the entities of the linguistic system gain their identity from the system. They are recognizable as long as there is a system in which they can perform their function. Their existence can be characterized by saying that *esse est percipi* by their own langue. This statement might seem a little far-fetched at first but it is exactly the situation Saussure had in mind:

"Synchronic linguistics will be concerned with logical and psychological connexions between coexisting items constituting a system, as perceived by the same collective consciousness.

Diachronic linguistics on the other hand will be concerned with connexions between sequences of items not perceived by the same collective consciousness, which replace one another without themselves constituting a system." (Cours, 140.; Course, 98.)

"In order to determine to what extent something is a reality, it is necessary and also sufficient to find out to what extent it exists as far as the language users are concerned." (Course, 89.)

"pour savoir dans quelle mesure une chose est une réalité, il faudra et il suffira de rechercher dans quelle mesure elle existe pour la conscience des sujets." (Cours, 128.)

Saussure also mentioned that only by suppressing the past can the linguist investigate "the state of mind of the language users [la conscience des sujets parlants]" (Cours, 117.; Course, 81.) Within the confines of this definition, Saussure relied on more than one type of identity. One of these types could be called the 'identity of the determinate space'

('identity as space' for short). Material, even phonemic differences matter very little within this type. *Se fâcher* and *se fôcher* can be one and the same unit; the train can be the same despite obvious differences; the street can be reconstructed entirely and still be the same; (Cours, 151.; Course, 107.) a knight in chess can be replaced by an object of quite different shape and material. (Cours, 153-154.; Course, 108-109.) The entities of language defined by this type of identity are "whatever the others are not", that is, they are defined negatively. To put it another way, the execution of image acoustique does not belong to *langue*, (Cours, 36.; Course, 18.) it belongs to *parole*. There is a considerable latitude in the way the entities can materialize as long as they are not confused with other entities defined, in turn, by their own function. Each entity is to some extent an empty space that can be filled by very different materials from time to time and each is circumscribed by all the other entities.

War and was can be identical in this way but then it is impossible to distinguish between them on the basis of their being either *faits de langue* or *faits de parole*. Although it is true that they differ phonemically but so do *se fâcher* and *se fôcher*. Which one is the real entity? Neither and both. Both can perform the same role within the system and neither should be considered as more basic. They should not be distinguished from each other. Theoretically the following possibilities seem to be open:

- (i.) they are identical,
- (ii.) they are different,
- (iii.) they are partly identical.

If they are identical what does the form they have in *langue* look like? Did Saussure really manage to get rid of all kinds of heterogeneity if the entities of *langue* are, from the point of view of phonemes, full of opposite possibilities? And would it not be more illuminating to say that deviations also represent the norm, or, to put it more bluntly, deviation is the norm if this seems to be what some of Saussure's statements imply? If, on the other hand, they are not the same, how can they perform exactly the same function within the system, which they undoubtedly do?

The third possibility can be excluded very easily. Saussure did not rely on partial identity. Quite the contrary, what Saussure said was that "The mechanism of a language [*le mécanisme linguistique*] turns entirely on identities and differences. The latter are merely the counterparts of the former." (Cours, 151.; Course, 107.) The expression "partial identity" counts as an oxymoron in the Saussurian tradition. When John Lyons speaks of "slightly different languages" he is relying not on the structuralist theory but on his common sense. Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 1969. 407. From the point of view of the theory, "slightly different languages" are the same as "entirely different languages" or simply "different languages". It is worth quoting Uriel Weinreich who saw the nature of the problem very clearly: "Since in a perfect system all parts are interrelated ('tout se tient'), it is hard to see how systems could even be conceived as partially similar or different; one would think that they could only be wholly identical or different. Considerations of this nature prevented orthodox Saussureanism of the Geneva school from undertaking the study of gradually changing systems, since it was felt that languages could only be compared, if at all, at discrete 'stages'." Uriel Weinreich "Is a Structural Dialectology Possible? *Word* 10 (1954) 388-400. 391. "Linguistic systems in a strictly structural view can only be identical or different." (Weinreich "Is a Structural..." 389.)

It seems quite obvious that whatever solution we may come up with, some contradictions will stay with us -- as long as we are willing to accept Saussure's theoretical framework.

### C. Deviation

Another type of identity could be called the 'identity of the definite norm' ('identity as norm' for short). Some of Saussure's examples can only be interpreted in this way. Within this type the material differences of the linguistic entities cannot go beyond phonemic differences. As opposed to the undifferentiated unity of war and was, *se fâcher* and *se fôcher*, this type of identity explains how one of these forms could be distinguished from every other form.

Saussure could as well have said that war does not exist. Indeed, he should have done so. He made deviation an indispensable part of linguistic theory. His theory allows, what is more, forces the linguist to look upon forms which deviate from the norm as representing the norm: "the execution of sound patterns in no way affects the system itself. In

this respect one may compare a language to a symphony. The symphony has a reality of its own, which is independent of the way in which it is performed. The mistakes the musicians may make in no way compromise that reality." (Cours, 36.; Course, 18.) When linguistic phenomena are viewed from this perspective, every time a form, different from was but having the syntactic function of was occurs, it will be regarded as a mistake, a deviation and it will be reduced to was without any trace. Despite all this, Saussure insisted that war exists, even if only as a *fait de parole*. But the existence of war can only be guaranteed by a subsequent *langue* in which it will perform the function of the norm. This type of identity could be called the 'identity of the subsequent norm'. But Saussure should have ignored war anyway because he declared that "studying a linguistic state amounts in practice to ignoring unimportant changes". (Cours, 142.; Course, 100.) Is war important or unimportant? What are the important changes like? What are the changes like which should not be ignored when one is studying a language state?

If Saussure's *langue* existed, it could never change. Nothing could "compromise that reality". (The word reality suggests that Saussure knew, long before Austin, how to do things with words.) "In social and cultural systems behaviour may deviate frequently and considerably from the norm without impugning the existence of the norm." (Culler Saussure, 9.) *Langue*, by allowing any amount of deviation, permits no amount of change.

Saussure in fact thought that neither the individuals nor the community can change *langue*: "the individual has no power to alter a sign in any respect once it has become established in a linguistic community." (Cours, 101.; Course, 68.) "Nor can the linguistic community exercise its authority to change even a single word." (Cours, 104.; Course, 71.) This is perfectly understandable within this theory. But one of the arguments Saussure offered in favour of the invariability of the sign is rather strange. Language is:

"something all make use of every day. In this respect it is quite unlike other social institutions. Legal procedures, religious rites, ships' flags, etc. are systems used only by a certain number of individuals acting together and for a limited time. A language, on the contrary, is something in which everyone participates all the time, and that is why it is constantly open to the influence of all." (Course, 74.)

"[La langue] ... elle est une chose dont tous les individus se servent toute la journée. Sur ce point, on ne peut établir aucune comparaison entre elle et les autres institutions. Les prescriptions d'un code, les rites d'une religion, les signaux maritimes, etc., n'occupent jamais qu'un certain nombre d'individus à la fois et pendant un temps limité; la langue, au contraire, chacun y participe à tout instant, et c'est pourquoi elle subit sans cesse l'influence de tous. (Cours, 107.)

It would require quite a long explanation to prove how invariability could be a logical consequence of being "constantly open to the influence of all". (The passage quoted is very interesting anyway, because it is here that Saussure explicitly denies the similarity between *la langue* and "les prescriptions d'un code" and "les signaux maritimes".)

There is something paradoxical about how the assumption of linguistic homogeneity makes its presence felt. Homogeneity of language has become a tacit assumption, while deviation, an apparently visible and analyzable consequence of this assumption, has been investigated very often. The theory of deviation, the function of which is to clean up the mess, the material left unexplained by the theory proper, was doomed to success in modern stylistics. Homogeneity has always remained only an assumption but it has the magic power of creation: deviation has acquired the status of fact. But when deviation is severed from the assumption of homogeneity, it is not easy to see how comprehensive the problem is. The assumption of homogeneity implies statements about the language of each member of the community while deviation is a random individual act which may or may not occur. Deviation disperses the overall problem into disconnected, capricious behaviour which has nothing to do with the so-called normal, rule governed utterances of the language community.

Whether Marxism and the Philosophy of Language was written by V. N. Volosinov or by M. M. Bakhtin, it clearly shows the direct influence of Saussure: "At any one period of time only one linguistic norm can exist: either 'ich was' or 'ich war'. A norm can only coexist with its violation and not with another, contradictory norm." (V. N. Volosinov Marxism and the Philosophy of Language Trans. by Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. New York and London, Seminar Press. 1973. 56.) Whoever the author of this passage may be, Bakhtin, one of the most important theorists of linguistic diversity, assumed the existence of "only one linguistic norm" in all his works: "Language -- like

the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives -- is never unitary. It is unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation from the concrete, ideological conceptualizations that fill it, and in isolation from the uninterrupted process of historical becoming that is a characteristic of all living language." (M. M. Bakhtin "Discourse in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination* Austin and London, University of Texas Press. 1981. 288.) Had Bakhtin revised Saussure's and Meillet's views on the unity and homogeneity of language, he could have developed a very different theory of linguistic diversity.

#### D. Dialects

Besides *langue* and *parole*, Saussure also distinguished the internal and the external linguistics of the *langue*. Although it is not without importance, the latter distinction has received less attention by linguists than the former. Why, for example, are problems like the connexion of *langue* "with institutions of every sort: church, school, etc." (Cours, 41.; Course, 21.) more closely related to the -- internal or external -- linguistics of the *langue* than syntax or phonology which Saussure relegated to the linguistics of the *parole*?

The internal linguistics of the *langue* describes the structure of language, its "unique relational structure, or system", Lyons *Semantics*, Vol. I. 231. while stylistics or psycholinguistics can investigate how, when and where the system of rules is used or misused. This is the origin of the 'pragmatic wastebasket'. (Yehoshua Bar-Hillel "Out of the Pragmatic Wastebasket" *Linguistic Inquiry* 11 (1971) 401-407.)

It is also very interesting how Saussure dealt with dialects, the most obvious manifestation of diversity in natural languages. He excluded the study of dialects from internal linguistics, that is, from linguistics proper. His internal linguistics investigates "everything which concerns the system and its rules". (Cours, 43.; Course, 23.) But he had to admit "It is on this point, doubtless, that the distinction between external linguistics and internal linguistics appears most paradoxical." (Cours, 41.; Course, 22.)

Not only did Saussure exclude the study of dialects from internal linguistics but he linked it with historical linguistics. His expression "fragmentation into dialects" (Cours, 41.; Course, 22.) is most revealing. Saussure looked upon linguistic diversity as the result of historical processes which transform the once homogeneous language into heterogeneous dialects. The reason why he refused to investigate synchronically what is brought about by the changes is precisely the heterogeneity of the phenomena which he regarded as "unknowable", although it is not quite clear why or how, in his theory, a homogeneous, unitary, discrete and invariable *langue* could give rise to any kind of heterogeneity.

But why does he say that the investigation of dialects involves paradoxes? Within the confines of his theory it would be understandable if he excluded dialects from the internal linguistics of *langue*. But, as we have seen, Saussure's theory of deviation allows the opposite method as well because it can reduce heterogeneity to homogeneity. Mistakes and deviation cannot compromise the "symphony". Sometimes, as we have seen in the case of *se fâcher* and *se f'cher*, Saussure is certainly tempted to reduce dialectal differences to identity: "the difference is very minor in comparison with the grammatical facts which allow us to recognize in these two forms one and the same unit." (Cours, 249-250.; Course, 180.) It certainly does not show the strength of a theory if it allows absolutely contradicting methods.

A passage from the chapter on dialects deserves closer attention: "those living at any given place will still understand the speech [le parler] of neighbouring regions. A traveller crossing the country from one side to the other will find only slight differences [variétés dialectales] between one locality and the next. But as he proceeds the differences accumulate, so that in the end he finds a language [langue] which would be incomprehensible to the inhabitants of the region he set out from." (Cours, 275.; Course, 199.) What constitutes a *langue* for Saussure? The system of rules of one dialect? Then why did he want to reduce dialectal differences to identity as in the case of *se fâcher* and *se f'cher*? Or the rules of a natural language? Then how is it possible that different dialects of the same *langue* are mutually incomprehensible? He defined *langue*, among others, as "the whole set of linguistic habits which enables the speaker to understand and make himself understood". (Cours, 112.; Course, 77.) There could be no lack of mutual understanding if the different dialects had a common *langue* in which understanding is presupposed.

If *langue* is necessarily bound up with intelligibility, then the slightly different but mutually understandable dialects will require a *langue* in which the dialectal differences are not destroyed or reduced to immediate identity. The *langue* of mutually comprehensible dialects would have to be the object of Saussure's internal linguistics because it

would be concerned with the system and its rules. In spite of this, Saussure adopted the traveller's point of view, which, in turn, created its own object. The account of a journey as a temporal structure can be compared to historical linguistics. The traveller encounters differences one by one, he can treat the heterogeneity of dialects anecdotally. And, in fact, Saussure mentions that one of the methods of historical linguistics "involves simple narration of events." (Cours, 292.; Course, 212.)

As for war and was, they cannot belong to different language communities -- for the simple reason the one is replaced by the other within the same community.

## E. Synchronic and diachronic linguistics

Saussure distinguished two major points of view in linguistics, the synchronic and the diachronic. He claimed that it is the points of view which create the objects to be investigated. (Cours, 23.; Course, 8.) He described the relation of the two points of view as incommensurable. One might think that languages cannot be but continuous in time and the identity of languages, as long as they exist, is never interrupted. It does not seem entirely unreasonable to suppose that there is always some kind of langue to ensure linguistic communication. In Saussure's theory, however, history and system have nothing in common as they are the products of different points of view.

It is not perfectly clear whether a new distinction is introduced beside the all-important one between langue and parole, or the distinction concerning temporality is a continuation, perhaps a consequence, of the one concerning system and behaviour. Synchronic linguistics, obviously, investigates langue. What, then, is the object of diachronic linguistics? Is it, by any chance, parole again? Then the new distinction would merely be another formulation or another aspect of langue and parole. This is not entirely implausible, since "everything which is diachronic in languages [langue] is only so through speech [parole]". (Cours, 138.; Course, 96-97.) The categories fait synchronique, fait statique, fait de langue and fait diachronique, fait ,volutif, fait de parole, respectively, seem to be interchangeable equivalents. War has to be regarded as a fait de parole because it has no status in langue, because, confined to some speakers, it is a fait diachronique. If this is the case, it will be quite natural if system and history are thought to be as incompatible as langue and parole.

The history of language has proved to be an extremely difficult problem for the Saussurian tradition. The diachronic identity of languages was not, to say the least, taken for granted. We have already seen that dialectology, within the limits of Saussure's theory, belongs to historical linguistics, and after a few decades of structuralism Uriel Weinreich had to declare that there was an "abyss between structural and dialectological studies". (Weinreich "Is a Structural..." 388.) Saussure was, in a sense, not mistaken: "it is langue which gives language what unity it has" (Cours, 27.; Course, 11.) -- at least in structuralist theories of language. It is rather difficult to answer the question whether the "state of disunity" (Weinreich "Is a Structural...", 388.), to borrow Weinreich's term, is really inevitable, or it is simply a consequence of the Saussurian theory of language.

Jonathan Culler seems to believe rather sincerely that the only reason to doubt the plausibility of Saussure's solution to the problem of diachronic identity of language could be the acceptance of some kind of "essentialist" position: "then", he points out, "the sign would have an essential core which would be unaffected by time or at least which would resist change." (Culler Saussure, 35.) However, objections to Saussure's theory does not necessarily imply objections to the arbitrary nature of the sign. To put it another way, it does not follow from what Culler says that Saussure's theory is not just a conventionalist theory but the only possible conventionalist theory.

Saussure, according to Culler, "recognized, more profoundly than his critics, the radical historicity of language", although "there is an apparent paradox here which requires elucidation". (Culler Saussure, 35.) He also adds that Saussure had not "deceived himself into thinking that language exists as a series of totally homogeneous synchronic states". (Culler Saussure, 37.) Both statements deserve attention.

Culler takes his example from the Course: "The diachronic identity of two words as different as calidum and chaud simply means that the transition of from one to the other was via a series of synchronic identities in speech [parole], without the link between them ever broken by successive sound changes." (Cours, 250.; Course, 180.) To this Culler adds the following 'elucidation': "At one point calidum and calidu were interchangeable and synchronically identical, then later calidu and caldu, then caldu and cald, then cald and t{alt, then t{alt and t{aut, then t{aut and {aut, then {aut and {ot, and finally {ot and {o (the pronunciation of chaud). When we speak of the transformation of a word

and postulate a diachronic identity we are in fact summarizing a parleyed series of synchronic identities." (Culler Saussure, 39.) This elucidation will hardly prove that the paradox is only an apparent one. Rather, it seems that the elucidation is sufficiently detailed to prove that there is a contradiction here which requires correction.

"At one point *calidum* and *calidu* were interchangeable and synchronically identical". First of all, Saussure did not say that they were synchronically identical but that they were synchronically identical in *parole*, which, in his theory, can be very different from their being identical in *langue*. But identity in *parole* can, at best, ensure the continuity of *parole* and cannot create the conditions which would guarantee the uninterrupted continuity of *langue*. Is *parole* a realm of independent existence? Culler says that *parole* is "actual speech, the speech acts which are made possible by the language"; (Culler Saussure, 29.) the distinction between *langue* and *parole* is a distinction "between the underlying system which makes possible various types of behaviour and actual instances of such behaviour". (Culler Saussure, 33.) It is *parole* that is made possible, or, to put it another way, what is not made possible, cannot count as *parole*. In order to show the extent *parole* depends on *langue*, Saussure once went as far as declaring: "Any words [Un mot] I improvise, like *in-décor-able* ('un-decorat-able') already exists potentially in the language [*langue*]." (Cours, 227.; Course, 165.) What is, then, 'identity in *parole*'? Culler is not mistaken when he says that in Saussure's theory: "Identity is wholly a function of differences within the system". (Culler Saussure, 28.) Wholly within the system, indeed, and not to any degree within *parole*. The identity within *parole* is wholly based on the identity within *langue*.

"At one point *calidum* and *calidu* were interchangeable and synchronically identical". Identical -- in which sense of the word? The identity of *calidum* has to be derived from 'identity as norm', otherwise *calidum* and *calidu* are always, perfectly, indistinguishably identical, and not just "at one point". (Besides, perhaps even *caldu*, *cald*, *tôalt*, etc. would be equally identical and equally interchangeable.) The subsequent norm is also needed in order to establish the identity of *calidu*. But what happens next? If there were two norms, *calidum* and *calidu*, both could always reassert themselves through deviation. Edward Sapir's 'embarrassing question' could be adapted to the situation: if all the individual differences of speech are being constantly levelled out to the norm, why should we ever have linguistic changes at all? "Ought not the norm, wherever and whenever threatened, automatically to reassert itself? "If all the individual variations within a dialect are being constantly leveled out to the dialectic norm, if there is no appreciable tendency for the individual peculiarities to initiate a dialectic schism, why should we have dialectic variations at all? Ought not the norm, wherever and whenever threatened, automatically to reassert itself?" (Edward Sapir *Language. An Introduction to the Study of Speech* New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1949. 150.) Or, as Saussure put it, changes are "merely multiple examples of a single isolated fact." (Cours, 132.; Course, 92.) When *calidum* and *calidu* are already established they have to be considered as given. 'Identity as norm' cannot be dropped but, to make the two words identical and interchangeable, 'identity as space' has to be employed at the same time. When Saussure said that the transition from *calidum* to *chaud* was "via a series of synchronic identities in speech" he presupposed three different and mutually exclusive kinds of identity, which is, undoubtedly, an excellent division of labour.

When is it possible to consider a change (e.g. *calidu*) as a *fait de langue*? Only when it is not a change any longer, that is, when it is accepted by the community. But what has become of *calidum* by then? If anything, a *fait de parole*, confined to certain individuals. Saussure definitely stated that there is a moment when an innovation is "adopted by the community." Here Saussure's translator made another cosmetic change: by stretching the meaning of *moment*, he turned what was in French "moments distincts" into in English as "distinct phases":

"dans l'histoire de toute innovation on rencontre toujours deux moments distincts: 1° celui où elle surgit chez les individus; 2° celui où elle est devenue un fait de langue, identique extérieurement, mais adopté par la collectivité." (Cours, 139.)

"in the history of any innovation one always finds two distinct phases: (1) its appearance in individual cases, and (2) its incorporation into the language in exactly the same form, but now adopted by the community." (Course, 97.)

In other words, this is exactly the same problem as the relation of *war* and *was*. *Langue* could be continuous in time if it contained both *war* and *was* but the distinction between *fait de langue* and *fait de parole* prevents it from containing both. In Saussure's theory one of them must be a *fait de parole*, or a mistake, or an entity of a different dialect. Bakhtin,

as far as Saussure's theory is concerned, was not mistaken: "only one linguistic norm can exist: either 'ich was' or 'ich war'".

Culler is absolutely right when he says: "synchronically speaking, diachronic identities are a distortion, for the earlier and the later signs which they relate have no common properties. Each sign has no properties other than the specific relational properties which define it within its own synchronic system. From the point of view of systems of signs, which after all is the point of view which matters when dealing with signs, the earlier and the later signs are wholly disparate." (Culler Saussure, 40.) This is a very clear exposition of Saussure's views. Is, then, language not "a series of totally homogeneous synchronic states"? And if they are disparate, it will be a mistake to identify *calidum* and *chaud* as they are entities in different languages. But Culler does not seem to realize that by multiplying the intervening forms between *calidum* and *chaud* the number of mistakes will be multiplied as well, unless it is possible to invoke different kinds of identity simultaneously.

John Lyons is also right when he says: "One would be quite mistaken if one were to assume that the language of a particular 'speech community' at a particular time is completely uniform, and that the language-change is a matter of the replacement of one homogeneous system of communication by another equally homogeneous system at some definite 'point' in time." (John Lyons Introduction..., 49.) It is very easy to accept that both assumptions are mistaken, even though Lyons does not mention whether anyone has ever committed either of these mistakes or he is just warning against a possible error.

The first assumption can be regarded as mistaken, although it is not quite clear what the word 'completely' may imply. Would not one be equally mistaken if one were to assume that the language of a particular speech community is uniform? Does it make any difference? Lyons mentions the two assumptions, the two mistakes in the same sentence. The two assumptions are, in fact related: it seems likely that the second follows from the first. Linguistic changes would have to be abrupt, if language communities were uniform and the new words, new rules would have to spread overnight. Lyons mentions these assumptions when he is discussing Saussure's theory of language, so a naive reader might infer that an extremist interpretation of Saussure's views can lead to such a dangerous conclusion. This is not the case, it is the proper interpretation. Weinreich, again, was right when he said: "it is easy for the structuralist linguist to tie himself into a conceptual knot" (Uriel Weinreich "Mid-Century Linguistics: Attainments and Frustrations" *Romance Philology* 13 (1960) 320-341. 329.), while Fredric Jameson thought that these "knots" are inevitable in any theory: "the initial logical problem is grounded, not in Saussure's terminology, but in the thing itself." (Fredric Jameson *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* Princeton, Princeton University Press. 1972. 24.)

The difficulties of diachronic linguistics are only consequences of the problems produced by the distinction between *langue* and *parole*. Saussure thought that as long as some linguistic phenomena "are confined to certain individuals, there is no need to take them into account, since our concern is solely with the language [*langue*]". (Cours, 138.; Course, 97.) Ignoring the language of "certain individuals" necessarily leads to a simplified view of language.

## F. Understanding

The theory of *langue* is, by definition, a theory of understanding: *langue* is "the whole set of linguistic habits which enables the speaker to understand and make himself understood". (Cours, 112.; Course, 77.) Understanding also became the victim of homogenization. "All the individuals linguistically linked in this manner will establish among themselves a kind of mean; all of them will reproduce -- doubtless not exactly, but approximately -- the same signs linked to the same concepts." (Cours, 29.; Course, 13.) The same signs are linked to the same concepts at the level of the community -- as it prefigures in Saussure's 'speech circuit'. Still, Saussure knew that he was investigating "a kind of mean". Half a century after Saussure, Katz and Fodor wanted to create a semantic theory "without information about setting and independent of individual differences between speakers." (Jerrold J. Katz and Jerry A. Fodor "The Structure of a Semantic Theory" *Language* 39 (1963) 170-210. 176.) The expression "individual differences" is somewhat misleading. What they failed to consider was any difference between speakers. It is quite obvious that Saussure's homogeneous *langue* and the language investigated by generative semantics show some of the characteristics of the language of Eden or at least those of the language before Babel when "the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech".

If all the speakers of a language shared the same monolithic language, it would not be very easy to see how any difficulty concerning understanding could be traced back to their language. Saussure's theory may explain successful communication but it has nothing to say about the linguistic resources of misunderstandings which, if they have any status in Saussure's theory, must be brought about by mistakes and explained in the categories of pragmatics or psychology. Only an immediate, perfect and automatic understanding can follow from Saussure's theory. Understanding would be the same as the recognition of forms and the manner of their construction.

John Lyons stated that "Normal communication rests upon the assumption that we all 'understand' words in the same way...Semantics is concerned with accounting for the degree of uniformity in the 'use' of language which makes normal communication possible." (Lyons Introduction..., 411.) The expression "normal communication" implies statements about the nature of language. It implies, for instance, that there can be another type of communication in which we do not understand words in the same way. Is "abnormal communication" communication at all? What are the symptoms of 'abnormal communication'? Which discipline is concerned with accounting for communication and understanding in language, if semantics is reserved exclusively for the uniform use of language?

The expression "normal communication" also presupposes statements which would deny the homogeneity of linguistic phenomena. "Normal" and "abnormal" are obviously of different orders. On the other hand, the function of this expression is precisely to create homogeneity - at the price of excluding some phenomena which are regarded as abnormal. What is odd about it is that the expression "normal communication" can only have meaning within the confines of a theory of language which acknowledges language to be larger than it can deal with. This theory looks upon language as an object obviously given and sufficiently defined by pre-theoretical views and tacitly accepts that the space circumscribed will not be filled with normal language alone. Instances of abnormal language are recognized as instances of language, nor is their meaningfulness doubted, but normal language is seen as displaying the characteristics of language proper. Although the situation is certainly odd, it can be tolerated, if the theory remains what it is: a theory that can discover the homogeneity and order it presupposes, and where it presupposes; a theory of normal language as distinct from a theory of language which should include everything that can be regarded as linguistic. These tacit assumptions, however, tend to be forgotten. When the limitations of normal language are forgotten, the theory of normal language will be thought of as the theory of language. A theory of normal language as a model of language can still be useful for various purposes but one thing is certain: it cannot do justice for what can be considered as its opposite, the rules observed by "quelques personnes". The assumption of linguistic homogeneity could solve all the problems of understanding very elegantly and summarily by presupposing it but is this the way to do it?

## G. Writing

There is another strange consequence following from Saussure's theory of language. If it is true that:

- (1.) "the linguistic sign is invariable", (Cours, 105.; Course, 72.)
- (2.) "writing tends to remain fixed", (Cours, 48.; Course, 27.)
- (3.) "the language [langue] we use is a convention, and it makes no difference what exactly the nature of the agreed sign is. The question of the vocal apparatus is thus a secondary one as far as the problem of language [langage] is concerned", (Cours, 26.; Course, 10.)

then it is not very easy not to draw the conclusion that writing would be a better medium of language than speech. This possibility should be considered even though Saussure emphasized the primacy of speech. Why is language more intimately related to parole than to writing?

"A language and its written form [Langue et écriture] constitute two separate systems of signs. The sole reason for the existence of the latter is to represent the former." (Cours, 45.; Course, 24.)

But it must be noted that 'langue' here has to mean 'langue and parole', that is, language, otherwise writing would represent language, the system of rules. If writing represented language, the task of the linguist would be extremely easy:

writing in itself would constitute a perfect grammar. But it is not possible to replace langue with langage in the sentence quoted. Langage is "unknowable" [inconnaisable]. Neither is it possible to insert parole or langage into the sentence instead of langue for the very simple reason they do not constitute systems of signs. Which word should replace langue? Why is langue more intimately related to parole than to writing?

"a language [la langue] is in a constant process of evolution, whereas writing tends to remain fixed." (Cours, 48.; Course, 27.)

It is not very easy to establish what Saussure meant by langue when he opposed it with writing. Language and writing could be opposed in such a manner only if the two points of view, the synchronic and the diachronic were not incommensurable. The sentence seems to refer to an undivided unity of language and its history. But Saussure also said that "The synchronic point of view never gets to grips with specific facts of language structure [langue]." (Cours, 135.; Course, 94.)

What is, then, the medium of langue?