

The dialogic structure of signs

Grammar and speech (la langue, la parole)

The phenomenon of language taken as a whole does not constitute a unified field of scientific research. It is not homogenous and, according to Saussure, not even a possible object of knowledge. And he adds: " If we were to study language from all sides at the same time, the object of linguistics would be nothing but a confuse pack of unrelated things" (CLG p 24). Out of this prime chaos, language as system only appears due to a distinction between what he calls "la langue" and "la parole" (speech). He wrote:" It would be foolish to study la langue and speech under the same heading" (CLG 38).

This well known partition of language and the definition of "la langue" is given under the form of a subtraction : "la langue is language minus speech" (CLG p). This formula is repeated in his teaching: "if we take off speech from language, the rest is la langue" (CLG E 171)

$$\text{la langue} = (\text{langage} - \text{parole})$$

One might wonder: what is left of language activity if speech is subtracted from it ? Is "la langue" an activity ? One possible answer is dialogic and goes this way: for subject who is speaking, there is minimally someone who is listening (it could be the same person). Thus, the hearer corresponds to the location and to the function of "la langue". In other

words, speech being discarded by subtraction, the remaining, the speechless part of language activity, *la langue* is on the other side, the hearer. Put differently, “*la langue*” is assuming the silent function of language, that is, understanding speech.

Then, having specified the locus and the function of “*la langue*”, what can be said about its form ? *La langue* is a grammar. In the Saussurian toolbox, *langue*, grammar, system, complex system, algebra, ... all belong to the same technical paradigm. The concept of “*la langue*” as a grammar should be construed in close relation to Wittgenstein's uses of the word “Grammar”. Wittgenstein wrote :” What interests us in the sign, the meaning which matters for us is what is embodied in the grammar of the sign” (Ph G p 87). Wittgenstein opens his *Philosophical Grammar* by a displacement analogous to the Saussurian subtraction. He wrote: “How can one talk about “understanding” and “not understanding” a proposition ? Surely it's not a proposition until it is understood?” (Ph G p 5). A proposition is not given as data to be interpreted, but is the result of the effectiveness of a grammar, meaning, a calculus. So the study of propositions or of signs should not start with propositions nor signs, but by the very grammar that give rise to them.

However compatible the uses of the word “grammar” in Saussure and Wittgenstein's respective theories are, they nevertheless differ on the crucial question of its location (*topos*). In displacing grammar from the speaker to the hearer, Saussure laid down the foundations of linguistics (and more generally semiology) as a science of the human psyche. He wrote: “the linguist who is

only linguist is in the impossibility of elaborating the simplest classifications. With time, psychology will take charge, but only when this discipline will realize that language is not one of its branches but the core (the ABC) of its own activity" (ELG p 39). For Saussure, la langue is the grammar of human memory. He calls it a "virtual grammar", that is to say, not a neurobiological phenomenon, but an autonomous system of pure values. In others words, the system of grammar in its effectiveness is based on neither substance nor on abstraction, but on its differential architecture. In an apparent opposition, Wittgenstein wrote: "An explanation of the operation of language as a psychological mechanism is of no interest to us. Such an explanation itself uses language to describe phenomena (association, memory etc.); it is itself a linguistic act and stands outside the calculus ; but we need an explanation which is part of the calculus" (Ph G p 70). We will see that these two contrasting positions are not in opposition.

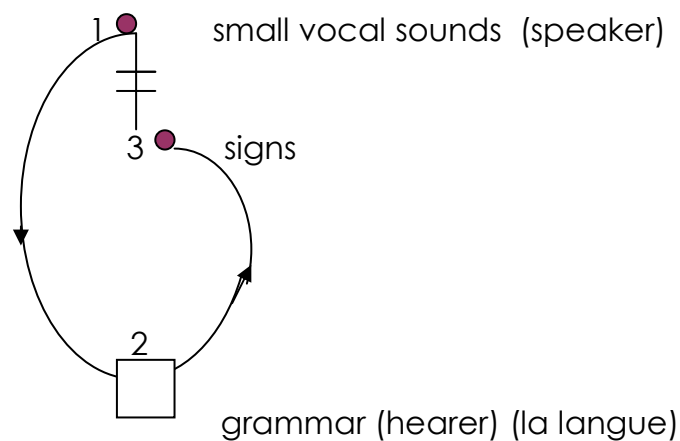
Parallelism between dialogue and signs

My intention in this paper is to show that the partition (parole | langue) outlined above, in its function, location and form, is parallel to the partition of the linguistic sign (signifier | signified). In other words, the pair of functions which defines dialogue (speech and understanding speech), defines also the dialogic structure of signs.

As it stands, this thesis is trivial. Thus, let us suppose for the sake of the argument that the speaker produces the signifier. It remains that the formation of the signified and therefore of the complete sign is the task of the

hearer. What is more, in the act of speech, the signifier is not even given. Emile Benvéniste stresses this point. For him the spoken chain in the dialogue is only "a sequence of small vocal sounds that fade away as soon as they are uttered, as soon as they are perceived, but the whole soul is exalted by them" (PLG I, 29). Clearly the "small vocal sounds" are not signifiers yet and therefore, signifiers are not produced by phonetics. As the signifieds and the complete signs, they appear in and by the function of understanding. In other words, the differential grammar embedded in the hearer's memory is the matrix of signs.

The numbers 1, 2, 3 and the arrows mark the order of the procedure



Saussure asks: « Where is the sign ? He answers: "in the back of our forehead"¹. Then, there is no given linguistic data circulating in the dialogue scene, no words, no signs, no forms, but only complex differences of "small vocal sounds". In Saussure's programme "form means differences with others forms and nothing else" (ELG 49).

¹ Saussure's inversion of perception belongs to a long tradition in philosophy : Berkely : esse = percipi (to be is to be represented) and today with Quine : to be is to be the value of a variable).

Through fragments nevertheless, we hear some elements of the signifier. In a language like French, the acoustic data of speech can be resumed to a few features: syllabic functions, lexical ictus, accentuation and intonation differences², that is all ; the rest is inferred through rules by the hearer. Thus the sign is a product of the system of grammar and not a given object to be interpreted.

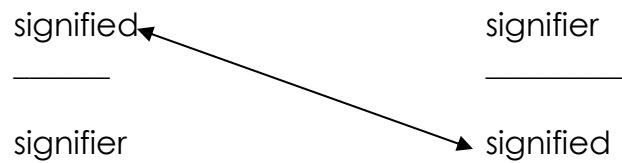
Jacques Lacan – arbitrary and algorithm

In a noted commentary of Saussure, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1960) gives an reversed image of the division of the sign. He places the signifier above the signified. This inversion intends to show that there is not only one but two types of relations in the sign, one arbitrary as shown in the Cours and another in total opposition, which is "algorithmic".

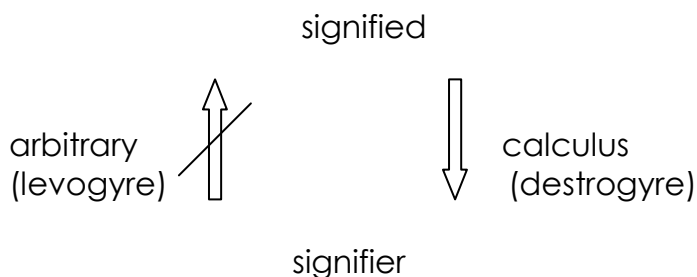
² This list applies to French

arbitrary relation (Saussure)

algorithmic relation (Lacan)



Arbitrariness which means no logical motivation, and algorithmic which means calculus are evidently incompatible. For this reason, some linguists (Arrivé 1986) have come to the conclusion that there were two different types of signs for two different theories, one for linguistics and another one for psychoanalysis, although Lacan strongly denies it. The conclusion drawn by linguists is based on an opposition of terms, but Lacan's analysis is based on the inversion which as a result divides the signs into two orientations: *levogyre* and *dextrogyre*. The relation *Levogyre* is arbitrary; it goes from the signifier to the signified. On the contrary, the relation *dextrogyre* goes from the signified to the signifier; it is a calculus.



Lacan's inversion does not contradict Saussure but completes the structural mono-oriented representation of the sign. This method defines the place of a calculus in the division of the sign.

In Lacan's model, a signifier is the signified of another signifier. In other words, the sign is a signified signifier, and consequently, the signified and the complete sign take always the form of a signifier.³

Benvéniste – arbitrary and necessity

In a well known argument, Benveniste (PLG) criticises the concept of arbitrariness proposed by Saussure. He wrote: "The bipartition of the sign being admitted (and we admit it), it does not follow that this bipartition is arbitrary" (PLG p 50). For Benvéniste, Saussure's analysis relies on a sort of language abuse which associates the prime opposition (signifier|signified) to another (signifier |reality). Benvéniste concludes that the concept of arbitrariness in Saussure is anchored in a metaphysical foundation and should not be retained.

Benvéniste is a strong advocate of holism. He claims that signs are built on a closure principle. In formal words it means that the grammar is a closed system for the determination of all its elements. Thus, "reality" cannot belong to the definition of linguistic signs⁴. But if we look at this argument carefully, we can see that Benvéniste fails to recognize that Saussure's theory of pure values is not "realist" but also holistic. For Saussure, the so-called "reality" is the signified itself as in a closed system, the external world exists only inside. Thus

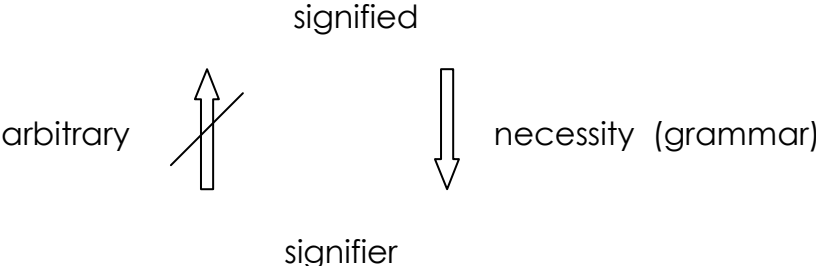
³ The two orientations of the sign by Lacan are originated from the argument known as the Enigma of denomination. Given a name, what characteristic are attached to it ? – Given a descriptive list of characteristics of an object, what's is name ?

⁴ Like anything metaphysical the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language. (p 162)
The connexion between "language and reality" is made by definitions of words - which belongs to grammar. (p 15)

for Saussure signified and reality are equivalent in this context and therefore in his uses of the two terms, there is no contradiction nor language abuse.

Benvéniste for his part, however, is not exempted from subscribing to metaphysics. The concept of necessity which he proposes where “the signifier and the signified are necessarily identical in my consciousness”(PLG) is more phenomenological than systemic. Where does this “consciousness” come from? In an immanent system, consciousness is a state produced by language. As Wittgenstein puts it: “It is in language that it’s all done. (p143)

However, the concepts of arbitrariness (Saussure) and necessity (Benvéniste) are complementary in the theory of the linguistic sign. In fact, arbitrariness in Saussure presupposes necessity, as to claim that a relation is logically empty, presupposes a relation at first. Nevertheless, some adjustments are required here, since if arbitrariness is a formal relation, the necessity in Benvéniste is not. We have to know that the presupposed necessity in Saussure covers the central operation of grammar called integration. He wrote: The phenomenon of integration (postmeditation-réflexion) is a double phenomenon which resumes entirely the activity of language (ELG p 87). In order to show that the signified is integrated in the signifier, we can use the same schema as above :



But to describe what kind of operation this linguistic integration is the grammar needs to be effectively constructed.

Two grammars

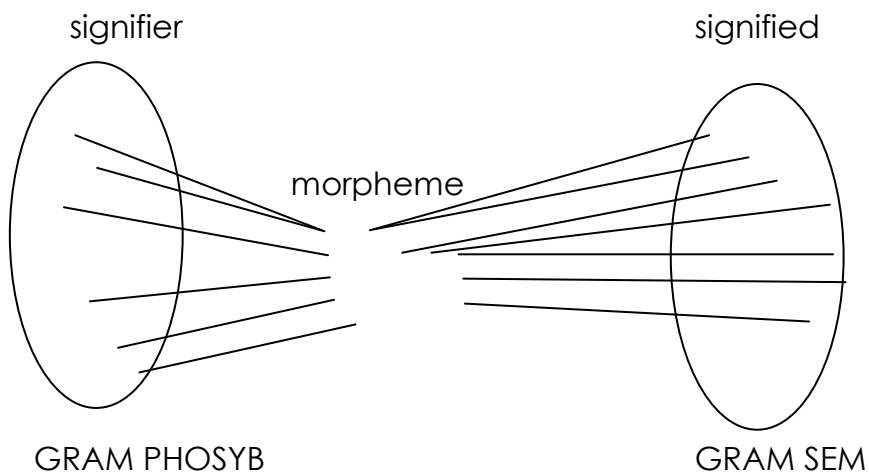
Saussure divides the L-grammar into two grammars: semic and phonosyllabic. Both are systems of pure values and although their categories are distinct, their respective architecture is isomorphic. The semic grammar produces the signified and the phonosyllabic grammar, the signifier.

semic grammar	(signified)
<hr/>	
phonosyllabic grammar	(signifier)

The signified is a contractum of the semic grammar, and the signifier is a contractum of the phonosyllabic grammar. The integration signified | signifier coincides with the integration of these two grammars into signs.

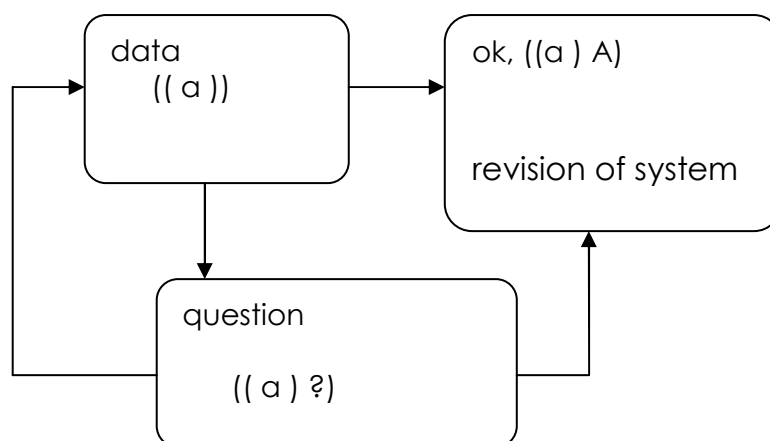
The sign corresponds to a topicalisation of the grammar which is conceived as a system of values. In such a holistic conception where a set of points is contracted into a single one of its points, a sign is an integrated form comprising the entire grammar.⁵ The integration of the two grammars constitutes the morphemic level. Thus, to construct morphemes, which corresponds to sign formation, one has to construct the two grammars, phonosyllabic and semic. It is not my purpose to treat this question here.

⁵ Holism is an old claim. For Wittgenstein "to understand a language" (is) to take in a symbolism as a whole. Before him, Kant calls the sign "contractum summum" in its Logic.



Dialogue

The constitutive duality of signs is not a simple formal structure but corresponds to a dialogical architecture. So when the system fails to find a disposition of values corresponding to a given set of data, it rejects it, or by revision, transforms its state of values to accept it. The diagram below indicates this procedure.



The destabilization of the homeostasis of a system implies its auto-revision. In principle, the system resists its deconstruction and tries to reduce the event to a non-event. As the diagram shows, a sign is a system of questions.

Linguistic signs are dialogical, because they are dualities and because such dualities which are constitutive of the grammar are all dialogical. Language, says Saussure, shows itself as acts and not as substance". (ELG p 127)

Résumé

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