

Ferdinand de Saussure . . . together with his two great contemporaries, Emile Durkheim in sociology and Sigmund Freud in psychology . . . helped to set the study of human behavior on a new footing. These three thinkers realized that one could not approach an adequate understanding of human practices and institutions if one treated human behavior as a series of events similar to events in the physical world . . . Human behavior is different. When studying human behavior the investigator cannot simply dismiss as subjective impressions the meaning it has for members of a society. If people see an action as impolite, that is a crucial fact, a social fact. To ignore the meanings actions and objects have in society would be to study mere physical events. Anyone analyzing human behavior is concerned not with events themselves but with events that have meaning.

Saussure, Freud, and Durkheim also saw that the study of human behavior misses its best opportunities if it tries to trace the historical causes of individual events. Instead, it must focus on the functions events have within a general social framework. It must treat social facts as part of a system of conventions and values . . .

How does one cope, systematically, with the apparent chaos of the modern world? This question was being asked in a variety of fields, and the replies which Saussure gives – that you cannot hope to attain an absolute or Godlike view of things but must choose a perspective, and that within this perspective objects are defined by their relations with one another, rather than by essences of some kind – are exemplary.

Jonathan Culler, Ferdinand de Saussure (1986: 15).

CHAPTER 1

Ferdinand de Saussure *Course in General Linguistics*

I am starting this book with a person whom most people have never heard of, yet who is now generally recognized as one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century – Ferdinand de Saussure. He was a linguistics professor who was born in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1857 and died in 1913, aged 56. He gave a series of lectures on linguistics between 1906 and 1911 that became his masterwork, *Course in General Linguistics*. This book is a collection of lecture notes from his students in those courses and some notes Saussure wrote before his untimely death. It was published in French in 1915 and in an English translation in 1959.

Saussure on Signs and Relations

Saussure introduced many ideas that have been of major importance: one is that we find meaning in life by seeing things as signs, which can be defined as anything that can be used to stand for something else. He called his theory of signs semiology – from the Greek term for signs, *semeion*. An American philosopher, C. S. Peirce, who founded a different theory of signs, which he called semiotics, said “the universe is perfused [that is, permeated] with signs, if not composed exclusively of signs.” So, for all practical pur-

poses, everything is a sign and semiology attempts to figure out how signs work and how we interpret them. In recent years Peirce's term "semiotics" has become widely accepted as the term to use for analyzing and interpreting signs.

Another important idea that Saussure had was that *language is a system of signs in which the meaning of a term is based on its relations to other terms in the system*. Think, for example, of a sentence. Each word in the sentence affects every other word's meaning, and the order of words is often crucial. Consider the difference between "my husband was late" and "my late husband was." The words are the same but their order makes a great deal of difference. It is in the very nature of language, Saussure argued, that concepts take their meaning from their relationship to other terms, and the most important relationship for a term is a binary one – being a complementary opposite to another term. I will explain this in more detail shortly. But first, let's consider the science of semiology.

Semiology: The Science of Signs

What Saussure was interested in was how meaning was generated and communicated. He described his theory of semiology as follows (1966: 6):

Language is a system of signs that express ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of all these systems.

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable . . . I shall call it *semiology* (from Greek, *semeion* "sign"). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them.

Saussure suggested that signs are made up of two parts: a *signifier* (a sound, an object, an image) and a *signified* (a concept generated by the signifier). What is crucial, Saussure pointed out, is that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and based on convention. That means we have to learn what all signifiers mean, and signifiers can change their meaning over time. As Saussure explained (1966: 67):

I call the combination of a concept and a sound-image a *sign*, but in current usage the term generally designates only a sound-image, a

word use for example (*arbor*, etc.). One tends to forget that *arbor* is called a sign only because it carried the concept “tree,” with the result that the idea of sensory part implies the idea of the whole.

Ambiguity would disappear if the three notions here were designated by three names, each suggesting and opposing the others. I propose to retain the word sign (*signe*) to designate the whole and to replace *concept* and *sound-image* respectively by *signified* (*signifié*) and *signifier* (*signifiant*); the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts.

From Saussure’s perspective, human beings are sign-using, sign-generating, and sign-interpreting creatures – even though we may not be fully aware of the fact that we are doing so. And the world we live in is full of (or “per-fused” with) signs each of which, though we may not think about it, has meaning for us.

For example, consider what we do when we are watching a television show or film. We look at the clothes the actors and actresses are wearing, at their body language, at their facial expressions, at their hair color, at how their hair is combed or styled, at any body ornaments they have, at how they speak and what they say, and so on. Each of these things is a sign and we use those signs to gain some kind of a sense of what the characters the actors are portraying are like. We do the same with people we see in the real world. And, in the real world, people are looking at us and doing the same thing. A person with purple hair and rings in her nose is conveying information about herself with these signs.

Saussure on Concepts

Saussure argued that language must be thought of as a self-contained system whose parts – or, for our purposes, concepts – gain meaning by being part of that system and through their relationship to that system. Nothing has meaning in itself or by itself. The system is all important since it gives words and concepts meaning. Our minds work in terms of relationships and the most important of these relationships is, as I mentioned earlier, being in opposition. As Saussure wrote (1996: 117):

concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.

This is a revolutionary statement that turned conventional linguistics, as it was practiced at the time, on its head, so to speak. Before Saussure, traditional linguists had taken an essentially historical perspective and traced how language use changed over time. Saussure said, and I'm simplifying things here, in addition to historical perspectives, we must look at how language works and how it shapes meaning. In effect, and this is something of a tongue-twister, concepts gain meaning by not being their opposite. It's kind of like the un-cola!

Language, Saussure explained, is a "system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others" (1966: 114). This explains why it is that we always think in terms of opposites, such as rich and poor, happy and sad, beautiful and ugly, hero and villain. Consider this passage from Ecclesiastes here, which shows how our minds think in terms of oppositions:

To everything there is a season
 And a time to every purpose under the heaven:
 A time to be born, and a time to die;
 A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
 A time to kill, and a time to heal;
 A time to break down, and a time to build up;
 A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
 A time to mourn, and a time to dance;
 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
 A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
 A time to seek, and a time to lose;
 A time to keep, and a time to cast away;
 A time to rend, and a time to sew;
 A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
 A time to love, and a time to hate;
 A time for war, and a time for peace.

We think in terms of conceptual oppositions because of the nature of language, which forces us to think that way. Another way to explain this is to think about how the words in a sentence affect the meaning of words. It is the system of words – that is, the sentence – that affects the meaning of words

and concepts in that sentence. We now think of relationships of concepts and the system in which they are embedded to find meaning in things, and it is meaning on which Saussure focused his attention.

A comment made by Jonathan Culler in his book *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* helps us understand the relation between language and mass-media works (1976: 4):

The notion that linguistics might be useful in studying other cultural phenomena is based on two fundamental insights: first, that social and cultural phenomena are not simply material objects or events but objects and events with meaning, and hence signs; and second, that they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations.

Armed with these insights about the nature of signs and how they convey meaning, we can analyze texts, and anything else – since semiotics is an all-inclusive, imperialistic, science.

King Andrew the First

IN
PRACTICE

In this analysis I will take a political cartoon about Andrew Jackson by an unknown artist, done in 1832, and show how it generates meaning by using conventionally understood signs – or, technically speaking, signifiers. Artists use these signs as a shorthand way of conveying their ideas and making allusions to certain political events that would register with people who viewed this cartoon.

In this cartoon we find the following signifiers and signifieds:

| <i>Signifier</i> | <i>Signified</i> |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Crown, scepter, throne | Royalty |
| Ermine cape | Luxury |
| Right foot on Bank Bill | Trampling on democracy |
| Left foot on Constitution | Trampling on liberty |
| Veto scroll | Veto of Bank Bill |
| Robe | Feminization |
| King Andrew the First | Desire for absolute power |



This cartoon suggests that President Andrew Jackson is an effete tyrant, an autocratic ruler who acted like a king. It reflects a certain political bias, like all political cartoons. In actuality Jackson was generally seen at the time as a defender of the common man and a person who attacked privilege and entrenched power.

