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# Problems in General Linguistics

translated by Mary Elizabeth Meek



University of Miami Press  
Coral Gables, Florida

The original French version, under the title  
*Problèmes de linguistique générale*, was published in Paris.

© Editions Gallimard, 1966

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University of Miami Press

Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 77-102692

SBN 87024-132-X

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Designed by Mary Lipson

Manufactured in the United States of America

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## The Nature of the Linguistic Sign

THE IDEA OF THE linguistic sign, which is today asserted or implied in most works of general linguistics, came from Ferdinand de Saussure. And it was as an obvious truth, not yet explicit but nevertheless undeniable in fact, that Saussure taught that the nature of the sign is *arbitrary*. The formula immediately commanded attention. Every utterance concerning the essence of language or the modalities of discourse begins with a statement of the arbitrary character of the linguistic sign. The principle is of such significance that any thinking bearing upon any part of linguistics whatsoever necessarily encounters it. That it is cited everywhere and always granted as obvious are two good reasons for seeking at least to understand the sense in which Saussure took it and the nature of the proofs which show it.

In the *Cours de linguistique générale*,<sup>1</sup> this definition is explained in very simple statements. One calls *sign* "the total resultant of the association of a signifier [=sound image] and what is signified [=concept] . . ." "The idea of 'sister' is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds *s-ø-r* which serves as its signifier in French; that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among languages and by the very existence of different languages: the signified 'ox' has as its signifier *b-ø-f* on one side of the border and *o-k-s* (Ochs) on the other" (p. 102 [pp. 67-68]). This ought to establish that "The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary," or, more simply, that "the linguistic sign is arbitrary" [p. 67]. By "arbitrary," the author means that "it is *unmotivated*, i.e., arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified" (p. 103 [p. 69]). This characteristic ought then to explain the very fact by which it is verified: namely, that expressions of a given notion vary in time and space and in consequence have no necessary relationship with it.

We do not contemplate discussing this conclusion in the name of other principles or by starting with different definitions. The question is whether it is consistent and whether, having accepted the bipartite nature of the sign (and we do accept it), it follows that the sign should be characterized as

arbitrary. It has just been seen that Saussure took the linguistic sign to be made up of a signifier and signified. Now—and this is essential—he meant by “signifier,” the *concept*. He declared in so many words (p. 100 [p. 66]) that the “linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image.” But immediately afterward he stated that the nature of the sign is arbitrary because it “actually has no natural connection with the signified” [p. 69]. It is clear that the argument is falsified by an unconscious and surreptitious recourse to a third term which was not included in the initial definition. This third term is the thing itself, the reality. Even though Saussure said that the idea of “sister” is not connected to the signifier *s-ö-r*, he was not thinking any the less of the *reality* of the notion. When he spoke of the difference between *b-ö-f* and *o-k-s*, he was referring in spite of himself to the fact that these two terms applied to the same *reality*. Here, then, is the *thing*, expressly excluded at first from the definition of the sign, now creeping into it by a detour, and permanently installing a contradiction there. For if one states in principle—and with reason—that language is *form*, not *substance* (p. 163 [p. 113]), it is necessary to admit—and Saussure asserted it plainly—that linguistics is exclusively a science of forms. Even more imperative is the necessity for leaving the “substance,” *sister* or *ox*, outside the realm of the sign. Now it is only if one thinks of the animal *ox* in its concrete and “substantial” particularity, that one is justified in considering “arbitrary” the relationship between *böf* on the one hand and *oks* on the other to the same reality. There is thus a contradiction between the way in which Saussure defined the linguistic sign and the fundamental nature which he attributed to it.

Such an anomaly in Saussure’s close reasoning does not seem to me to be imputable to a relaxation of his critical attention. I would see instead a distinctive trait of the historical and relativist thought of the end of the nineteenth century, an inclination often met with in the philosophical reflection of comparative thought. Different people react differently to the same phenomenon. The infinite diversity of attitudes and judgments leads to the consideration that apparently nothing is necessary. From the universal dissimilarity, a universal contingency is inferred. The Saussurian concept is in some measure dependent on this system of thought. To decide that the linguistic sign is arbitrary because the same animal is called *bœuf* in one country and *Ochs* elsewhere, is equivalent to saying that the notion of mourning is arbitrary because in Europe it is symbolized by black, in China by white. Arbitrary, yes, but only under the impassive regard of Sirius or for the person who limits himself to observing from the outside the bond established between an objective reality and human behavior and condemns himself thus to seeing nothing in it but contingency. Certainly with respect to a *same*

reality, all the denominations have equal value; that they exist is thus the proof that none of them can claim that the denomination in itself is absolute. This is true. It is only too true and thus not very instructive. The real problem is far more profound. It consists in discerning the inner structure of the phenomenon of which only the outward appearance is perceived, and in describing its relationship with the ensemble of manifestations on which it depends.

And so it is for the linguistic sign. One of the components of the sign, the sound image, makes up the signifier; the other, the concept, is the signified. Between the signifier and the signified, the connection is not arbitrary; on the contrary, it is *necessary*. The concept (the “signified”) *bœuf* is perforce identical in my consciousness with the sound sequence (the “signifier”) *böf*. How could it be otherwise? Together the two are imprinted on my mind, together they evoke each other under any circumstance. There is such a close symbiosis between them that the concept of *bœuf* is like the soul of the sound image *böf*. The mind does not contain empty forms, concepts without names. Saussure himself said:

Psychologically our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no preexisting ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language (p. 161 [pp. 111–112]).

Conversely, the mind accepts only a sound form that incorporates a representation identifiable for it; if it does not, it rejects it as unknown or foreign. The signifier and the signified, the mental representation and the sound image, are thus in reality the two aspects of a single notion and together make up the *ensemble* as the *embodier* and the *embodiment*. The signifier is the *phonic translation of a concept*; the signified is the mental counterpart of the signifier. This consubstantiality of the signifier and the signified assures the structural unity of the linguistic sign. Here again we appeal to Saussure himself for what he said of language:

Language can also be compared with a sheet of paper: thought is the front and the sound 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 abstractedly, and the result would be either pure psychology or pure phonology (p. 163 [p. 113]).

What Saussure says here about language holds above all for the linguistic sign in which the primary characteristics of language are incontestably fixed.

One now sees the zone of the "arbitrary," and one can set limits to it. What is arbitrary is that one certain sign and no other is applied to a certain element of reality, and not to any other. In this sense, and only in this sense, is it permissible to speak of contingency, and even in so doing we would seek less to solve the problem than to point it out and then to take leave of it temporarily. For the problem is none other than the famous *φύσει* or *θέσει*? and can only be resolved by decree. It is indeed the metaphysical problem of the agreement between the mind and the world transposed into linguistic terms, a problem which the linguist will perhaps one day be able to attack with results but which he will do better to put aside for the moment. To establish the relationship as arbitrary is for the linguist a way of defending himself against this question and also against the solution which the speaker brings instinctively to it. For the speaker there is a complete equivalence between language and reality. The sign overlies and commands reality; even better, it is that reality (*nomen/omen*, speech taboos, the magic power of the word, etc.). As a matter of fact, the point of view of the speaker and of the linguist are so different in this regard that the assertion of the linguist as to the arbitrariness of designations does not refute the contrary feeling of the speaker. But, whatever the case may be, the nature of the linguistic sign is not at all involved if one defines it as Saussure did, since the essence of this definition is precisely to consider only the relationship of the signifier and the signified. The domain of the arbitrary is thus left outside the extension of the linguistic sign.

It is thus rather pointless to defend the principle of the "arbitrariness of the sign" against the objection which could be raised from onomatopoeia and expressive words (Saussure, pp. 103-104 [pp. 69-70]). Not only because their range of use is relatively limited and because expressivity is an essentially transitory, subjective, and often secondary effect, but especially because, here again, whatever the reality is that is depicted by the onomatopoeia or the expressive word, the allusion to that reality in most cases is not immediate and is only admitted by a symbolic convention analogous to the convention that sanctions the ordinary signs of the system. We thus get back to the definition and the characteristics which are valid for all signs. The arbitrary does not exist here either, except with respect to the phenomenon or to the *material* object, and does not interfere with the actual composition of the sign.

Some of the conclusions which Saussure drew from the principle here discussed and which had wide effect should now be briefly considered. For instance, he demonstrated admirably that one can speak at the same time of the mutability and immutability of the sign; mutability, because since it is

arbitrary it is always open to change, and immutability, because being arbitrary it cannot be challenged in the name of a rational norm. "Language is radically powerless to defend itself against the forces which from one moment to the next are shifting the relationship between the signified and the signifier. This is one of the consequences of the arbitrary nature of the sign" (p. 112 [p. 75]). The merit of this analysis is in no way diminished, but on the contrary is reinforced, if one states more precisely the relationship to which it in fact applies. It is not between the signifier and the signified that the relationship is modified and at the same time remains immutable; it is between the sign and the object; that is, in other terms, the objective *motivation* of the designation, submitted, as such, to the action of various historical factors. What Saussure demonstrated remains true, but true of the *signification*, not the sign.

Another problem, no less important, which the definition of the sign concerns directly, is that of *value*, in which Saussure thought to find a confirmation of his views: ". . . the choice of a given slice of sound to name a given idea is completely arbitrary. If this were not true, the notion of value would be compromised, for it would include an externally imposed element. But actually values remain entirely relative, and that is why the bond between the sound and the idea is radically arbitrary" (p. 163 [p. 113]). It is worth the trouble to take up in succession the several parts of this argument. The choice that invokes a certain sound slice for a certain idea is not at all arbitrary; this sound slice would not exist without the corresponding idea and vice versa. In reality, Saussure was always thinking of the representation of the *real object* (although he spoke of the "idea") and of the evidently unnecessary and unmotivated character of the bond which united the sign to the *thing* signified. The proof of this confusion lies in the following sentence in which I have underlined the characteristic part: "If this were not true, the notion of value would be compromised *since it would include an externally imposed element.*" It is indeed an "externally imposed element," that is, the *objective* reality which this argument takes as a pole of reference. But if one considers the sign in itself and insofar as it is the carrier of value, the arbitrary is necessarily eliminated. For—the last proposition is the one which most clearly includes its own refutation—it is quite true that values remain entirely "relative" but the question is how and with respect to what. Let us state this at once: value is an element of the sign; if the sign taken in itself is not arbitrary, as we think to have shown, it follows that the "relative" character of the value cannot depend on the "arbitrary" nature of the sign. Since it is necessary to leave out of account the conformity of the sign to reality, all the more should one consider the value as an attribute only of the *form*, not of the substance. From then on, to say that the values are "relative" means that

they are relative *to each other*. Now, is that not precisely the proof of their *necessity*? We deal no longer here with the isolated sign but with language as a system of signs, and no one has conceived of and described the systematic economy of language as forcefully as Saussure. Whoever says system says arrangement or conformity of parts in a structure which transcends and explains its elements. Everything is so *necessary* in it that modifications of the whole and of details reciprocally condition one another. The relativity of values is the best proof that they depend closely upon one another in the synchrony of a system which is always being threatened, always being restored. The point is that all values are values of opposition and are defined only by their difference. Opposed to each other, they maintain themselves in a mutual relationship of necessity. An opposition is, owing to the force of circumstances, subtended by necessity, as it is necessity which gives shape to the opposition. If language is something other than a fortuitous conglomeration of erratic notions and sounds uttered at random, it is because necessity is inherent in its structure as in all structure.

It emerges, then, that the role of contingency inherent in language affects denomination insofar as denomination is a phonic symbol of reality and affects it in its relationship with reality. But the sign, the primordial element in the linguistic system, includes a signifier and a signified whose bond has to be recognized as *necessary*, these two components being consubstantially the same. *The absolute character of the linguistic sign* thus understood commands in its turn the dialectical *necessity* of values of constant opposition, and forms the structural principle of language. It is perhaps the best evidence of the fruitfulness of a doctrine that it can engender a contradiction which promotes it. In restoring the true nature of the sign in the internal conditioning of the system, we go beyond Saussure himself to affirm the rigor of Saussure's thought.

From *Acta Linguistica* 1 (Copenhagen, 1939): 23-29

## Animal Communication and Human Language

TO APPLY THE NOTION OF language to the animal world is admissible only at the price of misusing terms. We know that it has been impossible until now to prove that animals enjoy, even in a rudimentary form, a means of expression endowed with the characteristics and functions of human speech. All serious observations made of animal communities, all attempts to establish or verify, by means of various technical devices, any form of speech comparable to that of man have failed. It does not seem that animals which emit certain kinds of calls are thereby displaying any behavior from which we may infer that they are conveying "spoken" messages to one another. The fundamental conditions for a strictly linguistic communication seem to be lacking even in the higher animal world.

The case of the bees, however, is different. At any rate, it has become apparent lately that it may turn out to be different. Everything confirms the belief that the bees possess the means of communicating with one another—a fact which has been observed for a long time. The amazing organization of their colonies, the differentiation and coordination of their activities, their capacity for reacting collectively to unforeseen circumstances, lead us to suppose that they are capable of exchanging real messages. The attention of observers has been drawn particularly to the way in which the bees are informed when one of them has discovered a source of food. Consider, e.g., a foraging bee discovering on its flight a sugar solution, placed at a certain point experimentally in order to attract its attention. It will drink of it, and while it feeds, the experimenter carefully puts a mark on it. Then it flies back to the hive. A few seconds later a flight of bees arrives on the spot, all from the same hive. The bee which discovered the food is not among them. It must have informed the others, and the information must have been quite precise since they are able to reach the spot without any guide, although it often is at a considerable distance from the hive and always out of the bees' sight. There is no error or hesitation in locating it. If the foraging bee has chosen one particular flower among others which could have also attracted it, then the