"Unde exoriar"? Method and geometrical quest in Ferdinand de Saussure's writings on general linguistics

BOTA, Cristian

Reference

UNDE EXORIAR? METHOD AND GEOMETRICAL QUEST
IN FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE’S WRITINGS ON GENERAL LINGUISTICS

Cristian Bota
University of Geneva, Switzerland

La tendance au système ou à l’ordre ne sera jamais lassée. (ELG: 266-267).

Unde exoriar? - C’est la question peu prétentieuse, et même terriblement positive et modeste que l’on peut se poser avant d’essayer par aucun point d’aborder la substance glissante de la langue.
Si ce que je veux en dire est vrai, il n’y a pas un seul point qui soit l’évident point de départ. (ELG: 281).

1. Introduction

My aim here is to discuss a little explored aspect of Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic thought, namely his particular concern with the form of the theoretical system of general linguistics. In order to draw attention to its importance, I will focus on two points: the first may be said to be internal, for it pertains directly to, and is inseparable from, the understanding of Saussure’s thought. It consists in his geometrical method of exposition (or the manner of taking possession of the object of linguistics), which is an offshoot of his epistemological position concentrated in the problem of point of view and in the notion of system. The other aspect is external (or of a more general character) and it concerns the dynamics of the theoretical system of linguistic theory and its relation to history; Saussure’s geometry, I will claim, is one of the elements that contribute to the constant renewal of his importance. This allows some insight into what I would like to call the dynamics of linguistic theory, a problem that will bring us eventually to a discussion of particular relevance for the comprehension of contemporary linguistics.

2. An epistemology of linguistics

The constitution of a legitimate linguistic science is correlated in Saussure’s thought with a strong concern for the preliminary «travail de définition», regarding the object proper of linguistics. He was highly critical of the theoretical assets of previous (historical) linguists, although he was a historical linguist himself and, as such, took the results of comparative

1 The term thought is not haphazard here, since the one definitive published text on general linguistics that bears Saussure’s name is the Cours de linguistique générale, which, as it is well-known, is an editorial product of Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye based on Saussure’s actual courses. And since in the CLG the coherence of the professor’s doctrine is somewhat misrepresented, the support of my argument is in Saussure’s notes and courses — the clearest indication of his intellectual progression. For lack of space, the thrust of this paper is mainly synthetic. A certain acquaintance with Saussure’s ideas is taken for granted here.
grammar as a necessary basis for reflection and generalization. Of the state of the linguistic science (inaugurated and developed by Germans) he said:

[Elle] n’a jamais eu même la velléité de s’élérer à ce degré d’abstraction qui est nécessaire pour donner d’une part ce qu’on fait, d’autre part en quoi ce qu’on fait a une légitimité et une raison d’être dans l’ensemble des sciences. (ELG: 205).

We find in this criticism the positive core of Saussure’s own orientation. As he put it in a letter from 1894 to his friend Antoine Meillet:

Préoccupé surtout depuis longtemps de la classification logique [des] faits [de langage], de la classification des points de vue sous lesquels nous les traitons, je vois de plus en plus [...] l’immensité du travail qu’il faudrait pour montrer au linguiste ce qu’il fait, en réduisant chaque opération à sa catégorie prèvue. (SM: 31).

«L’immensité du travail» comes for Saussure first and foremost from the need to provide an epistemological foundation for linguistics: «la théorie du langage aura pour plus essentielle tâche de démêler ce qu’il en est de nos distinctions premières» (ELG: 197). The achievement of this primary epistemological project can be condensed in two coextensive movements of thought. One is negative (in the sense of a photographic film), and it proceeds by elimination, namely of the most common assumptions regarding language as the object of theoretical focus; the other is positive for it produces the principle of delineation proper.

As always, Saussure starts from the given, from the ordinary distinctions of ordinary language or from the most common theoretical assumptions in order to analyse their relevance1. Saussure revokes the basic observation that turns language into a pairing of two distinct realities: sounds (which are material) and meanings (which are psychological).

1. S’il est une vérité à priori, et ne demandant rien d’autre que le bon sens pour s’établir, c’est que s’il y a des réalités psychologiques, et s’il y a des réalités phonologiques, aucune de ces deux séries séparées ne serait capable de donner un instant naissance au moindre fait linguistique. (ELG: 103)2.

This procedure corresponds to an analytic grasp of linguistic reality, which is rejected on the grounds that it removes the possibility of delineating an autonomous object for the science of language: «Toute voie analytique n’a […] jamais abouti à rien. Nous suivrons donc une voie synthétique» (SM: 66).

Focusing once again on the misleading representation of language through its immediately perceptible features, he writes: «le langage n’offre sous aucune de ses manifestations une substance», a remark that will undermine another common assumption

2 «La meilleure manière de procéder serait de prendre les expressions dont se servent les bons linguistes quand ils parlent de phénomènes statiques, et de voir les [erreurs et les illusions] qu’elles contiennent» (Conversation with A. Riedlinger, 9 January 1909, SM: 29).

3 Cf. also: «Ni les sons ni les idées ne sont des objets linguistiques» (ELG: 250).

concerning the nature of language: «toutes nos distinctions, toute notre terminologie, toutes nos façons de parler sont moulées sur cette supposition involontaire d’une substance» (ELG: 197). It would be naïve to think that the object of linguistics is to be found in the immediately perceptible features of language3 (FEHR 2000: 113). Linguistics, then, is in the peculiar position of not having a pre-determined object, an objet immédiat offert à la connaissance dans la langue. (ELG: 227). This is what Saussure calls the «fatalité» of linguistics, since in other sciences the object is pre-determined and self-evident.

Where to start then? Indeed, there is no self-evident starting point: «il y a […] véritablement absence nécessaire de tout point de départ» (ELG: 198, italics mine). Here begins his second, positive, movement in which we come to gradually grasp language in its own right. The fundamental awareness of the absence of any given starting point shapes his strong epistemological concern, which is the necessary mediation for the emergence of a definite, autonomous object:

Notre point de vue est en effet que la connaissance d’un phénomène ou d’une opération de l’esprit suppose préalablement la définition d’un terme quelconque; non pas la définition de hasard qu’on peut toujours donner d’un terme relatif par rapport à d’autres termes relatifs, en tournant éternellement dans un cercle vicieux, mais la définition conséquente qui part à un endroit quelconque d’une base, je ne dis pas absolue, mais choisie expressément comme base irréductible pour nous, et centrale de tout le système. (ELG: 34).

I will underline at this point that Saussure’s conception of theory as a system is already perceptible here and appears as the implicit prerequisite for the production of knowledge. As we shall see, in this theoretical process the form that the system takes is crucial, for the actual production of knowledge is largely dependent on it. As a consequence, Saussure will turn method into one of the key-points of his general linguistics.

But, let me return to the previous problem, that of a «définition conséquente». This is itself mediated by an even more central principle, which not only governs the constitution of his epistemology, but also commands his method: the point of view.

À mesure qu’on approfondit la matière proposée à l’étude linguistique, on se convainc davantage de cette vérité qui donne, il serait inutile de le dissimuler, singulièrement à réfléchir: que le lien qu’on établit entre les choses préexistes, dans ce domaine, aux choses elles-mêmes, et sert à les déterminer. […] [En linguistique] il y a d’abord des points de vue, justes ou faux, mais uniquement des points de vue à l’aide desquels on CREE secondairement les choses. (ELG: 200).

What does this mean? C. Meira (1997) has drawn attention to the epistemological tension that subsists in Saussure’s reasoning between, on the one hand, the linguist as observer

1 As E. Bulea (2000: 70) pointed out, if indeed language were a substance, it would be exhaustible.
of an object and, on the other hand, the linguist as an epistemologist who describes the knowledge that a subject has of a pre-existing object. However, she believes that Saussure has not taken this line of reasoning to its last consequence and that, therefore, this unresolved conflict leads one to believe that it is the linguist himself that literally creates the object. In this context, she continues, it would not be possible to study an object scientifically if this object did not pre-exist. Nevertheless, I believe that for Saussure the linguistic object is not a creation ex nihilo, but that, given the nature of language, mere observation is implicitly analytic and leads to theoretical dispersion. Keeping in mind the fact that Saussure sets out to define an autonomous object for the science of language, establishing the point of view as a central principle guiding this definition does not amount to creating an object that does not exist beforehand. Quite on the contrary, the point of view serves as the criterion of a consequent definition, which is theoretical synthesis of an existing reality. As E. Bulea pointed out in her parallel between the Saussurean theory and thermodynamics, «en délimitant le type de regard que l'on doit avoir sur l'objet, [Saussure] délimite l'objet» (2000: 62). Here lies, I believe, the meaning of Saussure's phrase: «Nous suivrons une voie synthétique». The context of this statement is in his second series of lectures (1908-1909), in which he elaborates on the definition of language as a system of signs. This, then, is the point of view.

Moreover, in order to establish in what way the linguistic object thus defined is real, Saussure turns to intuition; I mean that he considers to be real what emerges as significant for the mind of the speaker: «à chaque moment de [l']existence [de la langue] il n’existe linguistiquement que ce qui est aperçu par la conscience, c'est-à-dire ce qui est ou devient signe» (ELG: 45). In this way Saussure means to delimit mere sound from language and establish the linguistic sign as the only apprehensible reality and basis for reflection.

Consequently, the resulting epistemology is characteristic of the human sciences, since it is a unifying theoretical process centred around the speakers' intuition. This, of course, does not refer to what speakers think about language, but to what they know of language. In this manner, «montrer au linguiste ce qu'il faut» becomes also «montrer au locuteur ce qu'il sait».

Since Saussure's synthesis is complete only in the concept of system, the definition of language as a system of signs is, as E. Bulea (2000: 67), among others, showed, «un choix général de départ, méthodologique et épistémologique». J. Feher (2000) also insisted on this particular conception of language as system and pointed out to its major epistemological

---

3. Method and geometry

What, then, is Saussure's method? His conception of method becomes transparent in a series of conversations with some of his students. Consider the following statements:

Ce qui fait la difficulté du sujet, c'est qu'on peut le prendre, comme certains théorèmes de géométrie, de plusieurs côtés: tout est corollaire l'un de l'autre en linguistique statique: qu'on parle d'unités, de différences, d'oppositions etc., cela revient au même. La langue est un système serré, et la théorie doit être un système aussi serré que la langue. Là est le point difficile, car ce n'est rien de poser à la suite l'une de l'autre des affirmations, des vues sur la langue; le tout est de les coordonner dans un système. (Conversation with A. Riedlinger, 19 January 1909, SM: 29; italics mine).

Pour le moment, la linguistique générale m'apparaît comme un système de géométrie. On aboutit à des théorèmes qu'il faut démontrer. Or on constate que le théorème 12 est, sous une autre forme, le même que le théorème 33. (Conversation with L. Gautier, 6 May 1911, SM: 30).

In what sense does Saussure's method—and I refer here to the internal structure of his theory—stem directly from his epistemological principle of point of view? As I have already suggested above, the form of theory plays a crucial role in producing knowledge about the
object language, and this for the following reason: if the object can only be defined in correlation with a point of view, the theory itself can be said to be an elaboration of that point of view and, consequently, the concepts of that theoretical system lend themselves to various points of view. Here is how Saussure put it in his notes for a book on general linguistics:

Il faudrait, pour présenter convenablement l’ensemble de nos propositions, adopter un point de départ fixe et défini. Mais tout ce que nous tendons à établir, c’est qu’il faux d’admettre en linguistique un seul fait comme défini en soi. Il y a donc véritablement absence nécessaire de tout point de départ, et si quelque lecteur veut bien suivre attentivement notre pensée d’un bout à l’autre de ce volume, il reconnaîtra, nous en sommes persuadé, qu’il était pour ainsi dire impossible de suivre un ordre très rigoureux. Nous nous permettons de remarquer, jusqu’à trois et quatre fois sous différentes formes, la même idée sous les yeux du lecteur, parce qu’il n’existe réellement aucun point de départ plus indique qu’un autre pour y fonder la démonstration. (ELG: 198; italics mine).9

The notion of point of view (in the methodological domain), which underlies the above fragment, should be taken, I think, as a heuristic, allowing to reveal different aspects covered by the central concepts. For example, this perspectival method constitutes one of the guiding elements in the structuring of his lectures. It is a matter of evidence that the three series of lectures Saussure taught at the University of Geneva in 1907, 1908-1909, and 1910-1911, differ significantly not only in content, but also in method and form.6 It is in both these ways that the overall structure of the courses is quite consistent with the method of point of view, as Saussure laid it out in his notes. The form of the courses may be said to be fractalic, since he comes, at different times, to the same problems from different starting points. This is the case, for example, with analogy, considered from a diachronic perspective in the first course and from a synchronic one in the second. As S. Bouquet (1997) observed, this movement towards analogy from the diachronic perspective allows Saussure to define the question of linguistic meaning and then, in the second course, introduce on this basis the notion of synchronic system.

A series of authors have indicated that one of the main strengths of Saussure’s theory is the system as heuristics. R.S. Wells writes, with respect to the structure of the CLG:

[In a series of] passages [de Saussure] signalises propositions (that signs are arbitrary, linearly arranged, and independent of individual volition) from which many consequences follow; and it is a good guess — tho'[ugh] one which pitiful meagreness biographical data prevents us from testing—that this patient weaving of the general facts of linguistics into a fabric of premises and consequences was for de Saussure an actual method of discovery which led to many of his apertures and to his grappling with problems not faced, and for the most part not even sensed, by previous thinkers. (1947: 25; italics mine).

Geometry, then, becomes a method of investigation as well.

A.-J. Pérotte (1999: 275) also characterises Saussure’s method as a heuristics of linguistics: «[elle] part de la complexité du système, pour arriver à la complexité de chaque élément qui le compose. La définition du signe et la reconnaissance de sa valeur, deviennent donc l’aboutissement de toute la recherche linguistique et non pas un point de départ».

4. A strong hypothesis

E. Komatsu puts forward a very strong hypothesis concerning the importance of method, of the particular structure of reasoning contained in the CLG. As I have suggested, the form of theory is particularly important in the process of knowledge production and Komatsu manages to throw some light on this correlation by asserting that the structure of the CLG is not only an editorial intervention, but also a result of the particular influence of Husserli’s phenomenology. He writes in his preface to the Troisième Cours de Linguistique Générale d’après les cahiers d’Émile Constantin:

[N]ot that Saussure himself had necessarily read Husserl, but Bally and Seccheyre were in all probability acquainted with the views of the German philosopher [...]. The structure of the published text of the Cours seems to be in some respects significantly Husserlian. In particular, Husserl insists that experience cannot be reduced to a sum of material (hylic) data. Consider the process of visual recognition. The object as hylic data appears on the retina, but this alone does not reveal its meaning. We interpret the data by an act of conscious judgement. For Husserl, the material data, the act of thought and the object as represented by the transcendental ego are called respectively hyle, noesis and noemis The linguistic act follows the same pattern. The ‘linguistic object’ can be recognized by bringing in all three.

The structure of the Cours adopted by Bally and Seccheyre fits in with this perspective. It accounts for why the section entitled Principes de Phonologie is inserted immediately after the introduction. (1993: xx; italics mine).

In the light of the analogy with the concept of open-ended system in thermodynamics, we can say that this reading of the CLG establishes a new balance within the theoretical

9 For similar arguments see also ELG (34, 67, 76-77, etc.).
10 Cf. SM for a summation of the courses in their chronological order.
11 I cannot focus here in more detail on the analysis of the lectures, but I have tried to do so in my M.A. dissertation, La théorie linguistique face au système saussurien. Recherche de méthodologie linguistique, Université de Genève, 2002.
system, by bringing a powerful motivation for its particular conceptual progression, and thus producing new knowledge. The whole system gives way to a new form of comprehension, focused on the three-step constitution (re-creation) of the linguistic object, a process seen as bridging the gap between sound and sense, and between sense and act of thought. Quite clearly, the new balance thus obtained is coherent and, as such, does shed a new light on the doctrine contained in the CLG. However, we should also note that in this manner we come to a different comprehension merely of the editorial intervention, and much less of Saussure’s thought.

R. Godel notes in his Sources manuscrites that the general form of the CLG is an editorial product:

Le plan [du CLG] a été établi sur la base du troisième cours; mais l’ordre des divisions générales, indiqué et motivé par Saussure [dans le troisième cours] n’a pas été maintenu. La raison du changement est donnée par une phrase du chapitre III de l’Introduction, § 1: «Il n’y a, selon nous, qu’une solution à toutes ces difficultés: il faut se placer de prime abord sur le terrain de la langue et la prendre comme norme de toutes les autres manifestations du langage». (SM: 98)13

However, this discussion serves to underline the general importance of method in Saussure’s thought. Thus we come to what I called at the beginning the importance of the internal aspect of method in Saussure’s line of reasoning: the comprehension of Saussure’s thought is, I believe, inseparable from his method of a geometrical system. We cannot come to grasp the full significance of his central theoretical concepts without keeping in mind that they are in a relation of permanent mutual determination, or, as E. Bulea points out, in systemic interaction (2000: 79).

5. Conclusion. The dynamics of linguistic theory

I have tried in this brief survey to point out that Saussure’s epistemological concepts of system and point of view lie at the core of his foundational project in linguistics; and that his method is a direct product of his epistemological thought. This I called an internal aspect of the matter of method, for understanding Saussure’s thought is, I believe, inseparable from taking into account the form of his theory, the methodic progression and interrelation of concepts.

I can now focus on the second aspect, which I called external, for the following reason: I believe that we can fruitfully extend Saussure’s focus on the system of linguistics and the synthesis contained in it to the functioning of linguistic theories in general. The analogy with thermodynamics is particularly helpful here; S. Auroux (1987: 29)14 applied the concept of entropy — albeit in a tentative way, and I do not mean to push the analogy too far either—to the evolution of linguistic theories and their relation to the history of linguistics; he calls this system of references to the past but also to the empirical research of the present, «horizons de rétrospective». The instability, continuous growth, and fragmentation of certain theories seem to be the result of a «défaut de mémoire» (S. Auroux 1987: 31). He writes, in connection with the emergence of a need for the history of science:

C’est [...] dans le fonctionnement même du système scientifique qu’il faut chercher la naissance de son histoire. Une hypothèse raisonnable serait de penser que la croissance s’accompagne de diversification, et par conséquent de perturbations dans la communication. L’histoire serait là réponse à ces perturbations; les systèmes scientifiques en forte croissance auraient tendance à être régulés par l’image de leur propre développement. (S. Auroux 1987: 35).

This is what we find in Saussure’s thought as well:

Il n’y a de «langue» et de science de la langue qu’à la condition initiale de faire abstraction de ce qui a précédé [...]. Il n’y a de linguistique qu’à la condition précise contraire. (ELG: 217).

My point is this: the amnesia of contemporary theories of language15 leads to an ever-growing fragmentation of research, and therefore to perturbations, to disorder. It would be sufficient to think of the transformations of generative linguistics, whose each successive phase cancels out the previous one, or of the cognitive revolution, that permanently-reinvents theoretical problems in what seems to be a denial of history, and forgets that it is itself the result of history. I mean to say that large — but by no means all — portions of contemporary research are affected directly by this relationship with history (or lack thereof).

In Saussure’s thought, we find the synthesis not only as an epistemological reaction to the absence of a given starting point but also the synthesis of history. Saussure represents a moment of synthesis and stability in linguistic theory. I will mention here only two aspects of this continuity: one concerns the arbitrary character of linguistic signs16 and the other the Saussurean notion of semiology, which is re-working of the philosophical notion of semiotics17.

Saussure’s radical importance lies therefore in both aspects — in the epistemological synthesis, but also in the historical one. The Saussurean lesson is historical as well as methodological.

13 Quite ironically, the noi majestatis (selon nous) in the quoted fragment refers to the editors themselves. The source of the italicized sentence is in the third course: «Le meilleur moyen de juger de cette partie parole c’est de se placer dans la langue comme point de départ» (EC: 73). SAUSSURE then clearly takes langue as a starting point and not as a norm.

14 Cf. his article «Histoire des sciences et entropie des systèmes scientifiques».

15 This situation may well be phrased in Saussure’s own terms: «La linguistique est dans une situation fondièrement fausses (ELG: 96).

16 Cf. E. Coste (1967).

17 Cf. J. Fehr (2000).
References


