

# Ferdinand de Saussure in Contemporary Semiotics<sup>1</sup>

## Foreword

Ferdinand de Saussure (b. 1857 Geneva – d. 1913 Vufflens-le-Château, Vaud) was an extraordinary, brilliant Swiss linguist. He is widely recognized to be the founder of modern linguistics (Lyons, 1968) and a forerunner of structuralism influencing a variety of disciplines including philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology and literary studies (Harris, 2002). Furthermore, Saussure is considered to be a classic of semiotics (Krampen, 1979).

Most famous are, of course, Saussure's three courses in general linguistics, which he gave in the years 1907, 1908, and 1910-1911. The three courses, especially the third course, provided the material for the posthumous and ground-breaking work *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916). Hence, using notebooks of the listeners of Saussure's lectures, as well as (a few of) Saussure's own manuscript notes, his students Charles Bally and Albert Séchehaye edited and published *Cours*. Since 1906, *Cours* has been (critically) edited several times in France and translated into numerous languages, for example into English as *Course in General Linguistics* (e.g., Baskin, 1959; Harris, 1983).

The influence of *Cours(e)* within twentieth-century linguistics can hardly be overestimated—as witnessed by the works of, for example, the pioneer of structural linguistics the Russian, Roman Osipovich Jakobson, the founder of modern phonology, the Russian Nikolai Trubetzkoy, or the Danish linguist Louis Trolle Hjelmslev, the father of glossematics (Harris, 2002).

The influence of *Cours(e)* goes far beyond, as is well known of course, the field of linguistic studies (Sanders, 2004). We can mention, just in passing, that *Cours(e)* has influenced, to varying degrees, the work of such prominent and diverse intellectual figures as: Roland Barthes, French literary theorist and cultural analyst, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, French philosopher, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Belgian anthropologist and ethnologist, Algirdas Julien Greimas, Lithuanian-French lexicologist and literary theorist, Jacques Lacan, French medical doctor, clinician and psychoanalyst, Juri Lotman, Estonian literary scholar and culture historian and theorist, as well as Jacques Derrida, Algerian-French philosopher.

In *Cours(e)* we find, a goldmine of abstract ideas and (research) principles, and, seen from the perspective of the twentieth century, a novel approach to linguistic studies, concerning the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, language as a system of signs, the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, value by difference, associative and syntagmatic axes, and, of course, *sémiologie*, as a science which studies the life (and laws) of signs in society.

Even though Saussure himself did not further develop any concrete or direct guidelines concerning the study and understanding of other sign systems than language, his abstract ideas and principles have influenced and still do influence, not only linguistic studies, but also fields of study concerning, for example, semiotics.

Therefore, with this volume we not only wish to honour the memory of the great linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, but also to contribute to the advancement of the

understanding of his indeed excellent work in relation to semiotics.

The thirteen articles in this special issue on Saussure testify, in very different ways, his relevance for contemporary semiotics; and, the articles are organized into three main groups, namely (1) articles offering a fresh look on Saussurian concepts, such as language system (de Angelis, Danesi, Jungk), sign (Bulea Bronckart), arbitrariness, (Gvoždiak), structure, opposition and markedness (Danesi II), value (Bédouret-Larraburu), and linguistic innovation (Stawaska), (2) articles with a focus on mind, thought processes from the perspective of Saussure (Brandt, Bronckart), and, finally, (3) articles in which Saussurian concepts are applied in order to analyse and understand phenomena such as money (Bankov) and visual communication (Rudloff and Kjærboe, Chandler).

Concerning the first group of articles, Rossana de Angelis, in her article “Semiology: A Comparative Science of Institutions”, offers an analysis of how, for Saussure, the language system is a social institution; there are, of course, de Angelis accentuates, important differences between language and other social institutions, but nevertheless, she concludes, semiology can be a framework for the comparative study of culture, and, thereby, a science of institutions. Marcel Danesi, in the article “Saussure’s View of Language as a System of Arbitrary Signs”, critically revisits Saussure’s position concerning the arbitrariness of the sign; involving central points from e.g., embodiment-based theories and Modelling Systems Theory, Danesi sets out to show how Saussure’s position today cannot be sustained, but that does not make it less important as a basis from where to discuss and study semiosis in real-world terms. Isabel Victoria Galleguillos Jungk examines Saussure’s ideas concerning the evolution of language in her article “Evolution and Continuity in Linguistic Systems” and with systems theory (Viera) she argues how the evolution of language is based on open systems parameters, such as permanence, autonomy and sensitivity to flows of information; and where a language, in order to preserve its semiological life, must continuously reflect the purposes of those using it. In the article “Linguistics Grappling with the “Oddness” of Signs” Ecaterina Bulea Bronckart addresses the semiological character of Saussure’s sign; she develops the central arguments that the signifier has a psychical or mental nature (in other words the signifier is not physical) and that thought cannot exist before language. With affinity, Bronckart accentuates, any study of verbal signs must begin with the psychic associative union in its entirety; this is required in order to understand the important theoretical and methodological implications which are involved in Saussure’s “real reversal of perspective”. In the article “Arbitrariness and Rationality” Vít Gvoždiak sets out to work with three closely related themes in Saussurean semiology, namely, how the differentiation between absolute and relative arbitrariness relates to the systemic nature of language, what constitutes the irrationality of arbitrariness and what could be considered its rational counterpart. Gvoždiak argues that an entirely arbitrary system of signs is impossible as well as complete motivatedness; rather, these are limits which do not exist in language; furthermore, the author states that absolute and relative arbitrariness belong to two different orders and absolute arbitrariness must be seen as a precondition of relative arbitrariness/motivatedness. Concerning the topic of Saussure’s “full rationality” Gvoždiak relates this to a causal link concerning the referent; and it is Saussure’s idea of relative rationality, the author notes, which makes the study of rationality possible. With the article “Saussurean Sign Theory in the Human Sciences Today” Marcel Danesi analyses the three concepts so important

to Saussure: structure, opposition and markedness. Danesi begins by stating how these concepts have remained central not only to semiotic and linguistic studies but also in relation to psychology and disciplines such as anthropology and the study of mathematical cognition. The author argues that Saussure has found a veritable niche concerning an overall approach to the human mind today, even though this may not, perhaps, be recognized by the very scientists and scholars who have adopted ideas that are either similar or identical to his. Sandrine Bédouret-Larraburu, in her article “The Concept of Value in Saussurian Semiology”, aims to demonstrate how Saussure’s concept of value had an important consequence concerning the renewal of linguistics, including a reinvigoration of its functioning; the author makes an analysis of the concept of value, whereafter she addresses how value operates in relation to the level of sound, word as well as literature. Finally, Beata Stawaska, as the title of her article tells us, takes up the concept of “Linguistic Creativity”. The author understands linguistic creativity from the perspective of Saussure’s double essence of language; central to her study is analogy in language or what the author calls innovation by analogy. In order to develop her argumentations Stawaska reinterprets Saussure, also criticizing what she considers the traditional understanding of Saussure’s position concerning the interrelation between *la langue* and *la parole* and synchrony and diachrony.

The second group of articles begins with Per Aage Brandt’s “Saussure’s Prolegomena—Toward a Semiotics of the Mind”. Brandt takes his point of departure with inspiration from Saussure’s study of language based on the word as basic units (and not the sentence). Brandt understands words as the essential connectors of language and thought, having extra-linguistic functions related, for example, to the topologies of thought—the author is speaking of this lexical “window” into the thinking mind. Brandt uses this insight offering the hypothesis that certain models concerning the architectures of language, signs and the figurative mind can be connected (synthesized, including Thom, Peirce, Lacan), thereby, also arguing for the possibility of understanding Saussure’s semiological intuitions in the sense of a semiotics of the mind along cognitive-semiotic lines. With the article “Signs as Creators of Thought Processes”, Jean-Paul Bronckart offers an elaboration of Saussure’s ideas on signs, and how signs play a role in the development of conscious thought. Bronckart begins with accentuating three central tenets in Saussure: namely, that language is a system of signs, that language is constitutive of thought, as well as, the foundation of semiology in society. The author touches upon how the philosophical tradition (including Plato, Aristotle and Wittgenstein) has dealt with the relationship between language and thought and he analyses Vygotsky and Piaget, and finds important relations between the two developmental psychologists and Saussure (for example the social background of language) as well as pointing towards how Saussure can be a strong support for the social interactionist position. The article is an argumentation and a highlight for how Saussure adopted the position that it is the sign which guides thought and not thought which creates the sign.

Finally, concerning the third group of articles, Kristian Bankov, in his article “Exploring Saussure’s Analogy Between Linguistic and Monetary Signs”, offers an analysis of the historical development of money as signs; the analysis is based on an analogy between the system of linguistic signs and monetary signs, where the development of the monetary signs, from prehistory to the present day, is seen as involving a higher and higher degree of arbitrariness. Besides arbitrariness,

Bankov also uses the concepts of value and convention in relation to understanding the meaning of the monetary sign. Because Bankov is working with an analogy he also allows himself, at some stages of development, to place the monetary sign in material which is extra-semiotic. Maja Rudloff and Rasmus Kjærboe discuss how the emergence of semiology has outlined a new trajectory for visual and pictorial studies; their article “Saussure’s Legacy and Future in the Study of Art and Visual Communication” involves the central notion that visual communication must be studied as a system and therefore as a language. Rudloff and Kjærboe describe how Saussure’s thoughts on the sign, signifier/signified, langue/parole, etc., have influenced and inspired studies on visual communication, in particular Barthes’ pioneering semiological work concerning the rhetoric of the (advertising) image and the nature of the photograph but also, later, the multimodal semiology of Kress and van Leeuwen. Furthermore, the authors address how Saussurian theory arrived in art theory and history discussing certain challenging implications for commentary and criticism in relation to the concepts “realism”, “anti-realism” and “relativism”. Finally, Daniel Chandler examines the analogy between language and maritime flag-signals; in the article “Un système de signaux maritimes: Saussure’s example of a visual code”, Chandler describes how the system behind the maritime signalling flags works in the same manner as a langue; the flags involved in the system only signify because they are involved in that system; in short, the flags are arbitrary. Furthermore, Chandler explains how the signalling flags can only signify due to syntagmatic and associative relations—just like linguistic units. However, according to Chandler, we must also understand that there are important differences between maritime signalling flags and language; the first mentioned, says Chandler, is a code (Saussure only rarely called language a code) and the signalling flags are more akin to speech than to language.

We should mention that the scholars in this special issue work with text passages from different sources. Some text passages stem from Saussure’s own hand in the form of his documents/manuscripts or lecture notes. The majority of the text passages, however, and not surprisingly perhaps, stem from one of the versions of *Cours(e)*. We are aware that there, continuously, have been philological and interpretative inquiries into *Cours(e)* and its makings. *Cours(e)* is not, of course, the actual words of Saussure; however, most Saussure-scholars seem to agree that the “author-editor-work” by Bally and Séchehaye contains few misinterpretations of Saussure and that these, rarely, means a distortion of his ideas on the nature of language (Joseph, 2012).

It is the ambition of this special issue, in short, to look afresh at Saussure, and, indeed, point toward his relevance for contemporary semiotics.

Finally, we are pleased that a truly international team of scholars have contributed to the special issue coming from the following countries: Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Poland, Switzerland and Wales.

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## Note

- 1 Bent Sørensen – dedicated the memory of my mother Kis Vibeke Sørensen (1938-2021) whose unconditional love I have always felt so surely.

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## About the co-editors

Bent Sørensen (bennometaphor@gmail.com) is, and always has been, an independent scholar. Bent is the co-editor, author and co-author more than one hundred books, special issues and articles on topics such as advertising, branding, creativity, esthetics, forensics, iconicity, information, innovation, metaphysics, metaphor, and technology—and, almost always, from a semiotic perspective (especially Peircean). Sometimes Bent has been invited to give a talk on (some of) these topics—and for that he is, of course, very grateful. Bent works as a special advisor in a municipality department offering services to elderly and disabled.

Torkild Thellefsen (thellefsen@gmail.com). Ph.D. from Aalborg University 2003, Dr. merc. from Copenhagen Business School 2009 with the dissertation *A Semeiotic Outline of Significance-Effect, Fundamental Sign and Knowledge Profiling and Their Use in Knowledge Organization and Branding* (publ. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller). Torkild is an independent scholar but he has held positions in Aalborg University, University of Aarhus and University of Copenhagen. Torkild is the editor and co-editor of eleven books, including *Charles Sanders Peirce in His Own Words* (with Bent Sørensen) and *Semiotiske Undersøgelser* (Semiotic Investigations) (with Anne Marie Dinesen); his numerous articles appear in journals such as: *Semiotica*, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, *Social Semiotics*, *American Journal of Semiotics*, *Sign Systems Studies*, and *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*. Finally, Torkild is a short story writer and novelist; his books centre around themes such as love, desire, death, dreams, erotism and the angel of Stalingrad.

## Abbreviations

In the special issue the following abbreviations are used:

- WGL – Writings in General Linguistics
- ELG – Écrits de Linguistique Générale
- CLG – Cours de linguistique générale
- CGL – Course in General Linguistics