

Linguistic Creativity

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Abstract

Course in General Linguistics (1916) is an indispensable “Great Book” in the contemporary canon of ideas. This foundational text laid out an innovative research program in contemporary semiotics and it led to the development of structuralist methods in the humanities. Recent developments in Saussurean scholarship offer multiple venues for developing a critical perspective on this programmatic text. Specifically, the materials from the linguist’s *Nachlass* (works unpublished or unexhibited at Saussure’s death, some of them recently discovered) challenge the official doctrine associated with the *Course* (a posthumous redaction published in 1916 and attributed to Saussure who died in 1913) and with structural linguistics (a “return to Saussure” in the 1950s and 60s France). The official doctrine maps language onto a set of hierarchical oppositions between *la langue* and *la parole*, and synchrony and diachrony. According to Saussure’s own writings, language intersects structure with speech, and stability with temporal change (Saussure, 2006; Stawarska, 2020, 2015). Instead of a vertical dualism elevating the synchronous structure (the presumed proper object of study in scientific linguistics) above the evolving patterns of use, we find that language has a “double essence” (Saussure, 2006, p. 144) and it exists equally in the present and in the past; furthermore, duality is a “first and last” principle in general linguistics (p. 3). This inescapable duality is rendered more concrete in this essay by studying linguistic creativity, specifically, innovation by analogy.

***Keywords:* analogy, Course in General Linguistics, creativity, Saussure’s Nachlass, structuralism**

Course in General Linguistics (1916) is an indispensable “Great Book” in the contemporary canon of ideas. This foundational text laid out an innovative research program in contemporary semiotics and it led to the development of structuralist methods in the humanities. While the *Course* is justifiably enshrined within the canon, recent developments in Saussurean scholarship offer multiple venues for developing a critical perspective on this programmatic text and they provide alternative perspectives on cultural signification. Specifically, the materials from the linguist’s *Nachlass* (works unpublished or unexhibited at Saussure’s death, some of them recently discovered) challenge the official doctrine associated with the *Course* (a posthumous redaction published in 1916 and attributed to Saussure who died in 1913) and with structural linguistics (a “return to Saussure” in the 1950s and 60s France). The official doctrine maps language onto a set of hierarchical oppositions between *la langue* and *la parole*, and synchrony and diachrony. According to Saussure’s own

writings, language intersects structure with speech, and stability with temporal change (Saussure, 2006; Stawarska, 2015, 2020). Instead of a vertical dualism elevating the synchronous structure (the presumed proper object of study in scientific linguistics) above the evolving patterns of use, we find a more complex heterogeneous field of cultural signification. Importantly, language has a “double essence” (Saussure, 2006, p. 144) and exists equally in the present and in the past; duality is a “first and last” principle in general linguistics (p. 3). Saussurean semiotics does not therefore map onto a classical scientific study of closed objective structures; it approaches signs in the context of social conventions abiding and evolving over time.

The above-mentioned inescapable duality can be rendered more concrete by studying linguistic creativity. Called “analogical innovation” (or “creation”), linguistic creativity consists in a production of innovative forms of expression on the basis of the established ones. Importantly, while the doctrinal view chases creativity outside of the language system, thought to be relatively autonomous and fixed, Saussure considers innovation an intrinsic feature of language (*la langue*) itself. Linguistic innovation cannot be discounted as a contingent empirical process—it is intrinsic to the functioning language system and it furnishes a cardinal principle of general linguistics. Furthermore, linguistic innovation illustrates how the speakers’ expressions (*la parole*) affect and alter the language system from within, as if rewriting its code. The dual essence of language, the intersection of stability and change, becomes grounded in speech practices that borrow existing linguistic resources and return them in a slightly revised format.

The reader of the *Course* is unlikely to appreciate the importance of linguistic innovation from the redacted text. The placement of sections dealing with linguistic innovation within the architecture of the book suggests that they follow in the order of importance the ones dealing with general linguistics and synchronic linguistics. Specifically, one finds a dedicated discussion of linguistic innovation only in part III, “Diachronic linguistics”, after the influential part I, “General principle”, and part II, “Synchronic Linguistics”. Part III in its entirety is an amalgam of disparate sources: a lecture from the first course in general linguistics (Godel, 1957, p. 61), two lectures, relatively late, from the second (pp. 70, 74), and a lecture from the third (pp. 78, 100). However, the chapters dealing with analogy are based on materials from the *first* lecture course in general linguistics (pp. 57–63). Whereas Saussure discusses linguistic innovation in the first course, prior to differentiating between synchronic and diachronic linguistics, the editors reverse this order of presentation and postpone its discussion to a later stage. They create an impression that linguistic innovation is of a purely diachronic interest and can be treated independently from a presumed static language system and its axiom-like rules (Saussure, 2005, p. 269n). Finally, the English reader of the *Course* cannot appreciate that analogy is “a general linguistic principle applicable to language (*la langue*)” (the title of the relevant section in the first course of Saussure’s lectures). The Harris (1986) translation has “Analogy as the creative principle of languages” and thus glosses over the *general* linguistic character of the principle (suggesting a principle from comparative philology); Baskin’s (2011) translation has “language” in agreement with the French edition but the “general” validity of the principle (as it pertains to language as such) is lost in both.

“Analogy” is derived from the Greek grammar where it is distinguished from a simple “anomaly”. In Saussure’s appropriation of the term, analogy constitutes a principled and reasoned process not to be confused with a random accident resulting

from mere chance. One finds instances of analogical innovation especially in the language of those who are least likely or able to follow a pre-given order of idiomatic expressions and familiar turns of phrase: children and literary writers. Saussure observes “[n]o better idea [of the phenomenon of analogy] is given than by listening to the speech of a three or four-year old child” (2006, p. 107). For example, a juvenile speaker of French may draw on the existing knowledge of verb conjugations to generate a (nonexistent) formation *venirai*: “I will come” (from *venir*; “to come”). This formation is made on the basis of other similar verbs such as *punir* or *choisir* whose first-person singulars are respectively: *je punirai* and *je choisirai*. The connection between *venir* – *je venirai* follows the lead of existing and generalizable grammatical patterns. While the child’s innovation is incorrect (the correct form is *viendrais*), it is not an unprincipled and haphazard anomaly. The child does not simply grasp individual words (like *punir*, *choisir*, *venir*) in isolation and does not consider their phonetic similarities to be of a purely physical kind. The child’s mistake is an “intelligent transformation” that detects and deploys grammatical relations operative in a given conjugational paradigm (2006, p. 107). This transformation is not socially sanctioned nor historically sedimented and it violates surface correctness. However, it is true to the deep generative grammar of language: “There is nothing more consistent, nor more logical and more accurate, than the reasoning that leads to *venirai*” (2006, p. 107).

The unintentional albeit instructive mistake made by a child deploys similar principles that drive linguistic innovation in the creative language of literature. For example, an author writing in French may coin a new term *répreSSIONnaire* (in analogy with *mission*: *missionnaire* = *repression*: X) or an adjective *firmamental/firmentaux* (from *firmament*; in analogy with *fin-final/finaux*) (Saussure, 1996, p. 62). The novel term X emerges here as a result of a deliberate inventive process but it similarly relies on established pathways connecting, for example, nouns for states and participants; nouns and adjectives; singular and plural forms, etc. The creative writer’s innovation and the child’s grammatical violation are equally enabled by an understanding of the language structure as a generative template for experimentation and invention rather than as a finished product.

Analogical innovation is not confined to the literary and young learners’ language use. It is also a motor driving historical change. For example, some currently accepted and superficially “correct” grammatical forms emerged out of a process not unlike that of a child’s mistake. Specifically, the grammatical relation between *poussons* (“we push”) and *pousse* (“I push”) may exercise an analogical impact onto other relations such as *trouvons* (“we find”) and *trouve* (“I find”), and engender, in a process comparable to the fourth proportional, the later form *trouve* (1996, p. 64). Saussure compares this process to a drama revolving around three characters: the legitimate heir (e.g. *trouve*), the rival (e.g. *trouve*), and the collectivity that engendered the rival form (e.g. *pousson-pousse-trouvons*) (1996, p. 61). In the first act of the drama, the rival is installed next to the legitimate heir and the two effectively co-exist; it is only in the second act that the earlier form falls into disuse and eventually disappears (1996, p. 61). Unlike in phonetic change where one and the same linguistic form undergoes change and where the new one automatically displaces the old, analogical innovation supposes a more complex linguistic arrangement involving a relational set of terms. It is not a simple transformation or a *metaplasme* of the old into the new but a creation or *paraplasme* inscribed within an entire generative matrix for producing new

linguistic expressions. The earlier and the newer forms can coexist here as two out of many possible recipes for confectioning linguistic terms (1996, p. 61). Analogical innovation supposes a coherent plan for projecting principled linguistic changes that can be replicated (and further altered) over time.

Following the above analysis, analogical innovation deploys deep grammatical principles of novel formation harbored within the language structure. Saussure insists that it is only on the surface level that analogical change can be viewed as a historical error and a mistake. He critiques his predecessors (from Bopp to Schleicher) for failing to give due attention to “the incessant daily creation within the language system (*la langue*); I mean analogy” (Saussure, 1997, p. 86). For the former linguists, “everything that departs from the primitive order seems not to be proper” (1997, pp. 86). They hold on to an unexamined and ultimately unscientific notion that language was perfect in its original state, while the very notion of a clearly identifiable origin is suspect in linguistics (p. 86). Even though linguistic innovation had been viewed as an infraction or license against a presumed pure and perfect language in its initial state, “it is the normal way for a language to renew itself” (1997, p. 86). Its “continual work of renewal” should be accepted as being both legitimate and universal (1997, p. 93). To convey this point in a maxim: “language always works; this work is analogy” (1997, p. 160). Innovation and renewal occurring within ongoing speech praxis turn out therefore to be intrinsic to the language system itself.

Language as a whole can therefore be equated with the process and the products of analogical innovation:

Any language at any moment is nothing other than a vast web of analogical formations, some very recent, others dating back so far that one can only guess them. Asking a linguist to name some analogical formations is therefore like asking a mineralogist to name some minerals, or an astronomer some stars; I say this at the outset so as to avoid any misconceptions concerning the value given to these facts: they are neither exceptional nor anecdotal, neither curiosities nor anomalies; rather, they are the most clear substance of language everywhere and at all time, its everyday history and the history of all times. (2006, pp. 107-8; translation revised)

If analogical innovation is a normal and permanent linguistic condition then the entire field of general linguistics needs to be rethought. Recall that the “Saussurean doctrine” stipulates that general linguistics can be mapped onto a set of hierarchical dichotomies (*la langue* and *la parole*, synchrony and diachrony); following this doctrinal view, the language system (*la langue*) is relatively closed and autonomous, and so analogical innovation situated at the level of speech (*la parole*) would be qualified as an in principle avoidable accident and anomaly. Saussure’s predecessors considered analogical innovation as exactly such an aberrant event. However, if analogy conveys that language is always at work, then the interrelation between *la langue* and *la parole*, synchrony and diachrony, needs to be remapped in a non-hierarchical and non-dichotomous manner.

Consider the interrelation between synchrony and diachrony first. As demonstrated above, analogical innovation deploys the deep language structure as a model for confectioning novel linguistic formations over time. This raises a theoretical difficulty regarding its exact topological status that can be phrased thus: “Something is new, therefore there has been a change. Here is an embarrassing question: if there is change

are we in the realm of the diachronic? We have indeed to say that this is very delicate point in the distinction between synchronic and diachronic” (Saussure, 1996, p. 58). The complication as to whether analogy should be classified as a phenomenon of synchrony or diachrony does not transpire in the published *Course* but interestingly it reveals a major difficulty of maintaining a clear-cut boundary between them. Analogy co-involves the (synchronic) axis of already instituted linguistic products and the (diachronic) axis of an evolving linguistic praxis. If we posited a definitive break between synchrony and diachrony, we would render the process of analogical innovation undecipherable (or anomalous). However, since analogy continually spins the “vast web” that language is, it turns out that synchrony and diachrony are interwoven in its midst, and may be construed as crisscrossing and nonhierarchical threads or pathways.

Similarly, analogical innovation troubles any clear-cut opposition between *la langue* and *la parole*. In fact, this famed distinction was first introduced in the discussion of analogical innovation in the first lecture course in general linguistics (1996, p. 65). The distinction serves to identity the two facets of the analogical process:

1. the comprehension of relations between engendering terms (such as *nous poussons: je pousse = nous trouvons*)
2. the engendered product, the X of the proportion (*je trouve* [formerly *je treuve*]). (1996, p. 64)

The resulting novel formation *je trouve* is executed within speech (*la parole*); the enabling forms operate within the reservoir or treasury of language (*la langue*) (1996, pp. 64-65). These two distinguishable facets are interdependent, in that it is the act of speaking that drives linguistic change. As Riedlinger’s notes describe it, with a slight tone of mockery, the novel formation “is not created in a meeting of scholars discussing the dictionary”; instead, someone has to have improvised it in speech (1996, p. 65). The speakers’ improvisation in the ordinary context of language use can therefore engender new forms and eventually rewrite the language code. The notes pursue:

If it is true that we always need the fund of the language (*la langue*) in order to speak, reciprocally, everything which enters the language (*la langue*) was first essayed in speech a sufficient number of times for a durable impression to have resulted: the language (*la langue*) is but the sanctioning of what has been evoked by speech (*la parole*). (1996, p. 65)

The distinction between *la langue* and *la parole* drawn in the context of analogical innovation suggests an interdependent setup involving the systemic and the surface levels of language; the system enables linguistic praxis *and* it had been shaped by its emerging products from time immemorial. The distinction cannot therefore be mapped onto a hierarchical dichotomy between the “proper object” of linguistics and its (presumed) contingent and derivate forms. Hierarchies suppose a firm foundation of first principles but neither *la langue* nor *la parole* come first within the innovative and evolving linguistic life.

Furthermore, *la langue* – *la parole* distinction draws a line between the enabling

forms that are “subconscious, in the depths of thought” (1996, p. 65), and the enabled ones that alone are produced in speech and henceforth directly available to consciousness. However, the line separating *la langue* and *la parole* is a blurred and porous one, and Saussure does not really oppose the linguistic unconscious to consciousness. He notes, for example:

...the notion of consciousness is highly relative, such that there are two degrees of consciousness, the higher of which remains that of pure unconsciousness when compared to the degree of reflection which accompanies most of our acts. (Saussure, 2006, p. 106)

The relation between consciousness and the unconscious is approached here from the perspective of language acts (rather than a presumed non-linguistic thought), where the act of speaking involves a degree of automatism even when executed with full awareness. Speaking does not proceed solely from consciously available signifying intentions but is animated partly by the deep language structures lying beyond the individual ken and control. As far as language is concerned, the distinction between consciousness and the unconscious is therefore one of degree and not in kind:

There are many degrees of conscious or unconscious will; furthermore, of all the acts which can be compared, the linguistic act ... is characterized by being the least reflected, the least premeditated, as well as the most impersonal of all. That constitutes a difference of degree, which is so far-reaching as to have long appeared a fundamental difference, even though it is but a difference of degree. (2006, p. 99)

In sum, the distinction between linguistic consciousness and the unconscious is a permeable one, situated on a wide spectrum of gradational differences between *more* and *less* consciously available forms. Similarly, the distinction between the linguistic act and the linguistic structure, *la parole* and *la langue*, is situated within a gradational spectrum of differences of degree and not in kind. Analogical innovation, just like language in general, can be interpreted from either the point of view of the engendering structures or the engendered forms, the underlying praxis or the resulting product, but the distinguished terms crisscross and partially overlap. They should be conceptually mapped as so many entangled dualities rather than as steep ontological dualisms.

The distinction between *la langue* and *la parole* forms an element of the analogical innovation process according to the student lecture notes. As Harris observes, however, in the published *Course* “analogical formations are mentioned as providing historical evidence.... for a distinction [between *la langue* and *la parole*] already established on *a priori* grounds” (Harris, 2003, p. 30). *La langue* – *la parole* distinction is thus presented in the guise of a universally valid law, an axiom within a deductive system, of which specific analogical formations would be concrete and contingent examples. This presentation occludes the fact that the distinction is relative rather than absolute. In agreement with Harris, it is therefore significant that “the majority of scholars who discuss ‘Saussure’s’ distinction between *langue* and *parole* are completely unaware of its original emergence from the doctrine of analogy” (2003, p. 30). Such epistemic ignorance regarding the source of a key linguistic distinction makes it easy for scholars to continually accept the validity of the “Saussurean doctrine” and to confine semiotics to a classical scientific study of closed sign

systems.

Scholars and contemporary readers of the *Course* alike are likely to interpret the discussion of analogical innovation in Part III as a simple illustration of a familiar conceptual apparatus with its hierarchical logic. For example, they will read that even though linguistic innovation occurs at the level of speech, it presupposes an already established hierarchical relation between *la langue* and *la parole*, with *la parole* relegated to “the fringe of the language (*la langue*)” (Saussure, 1986, p. 164; Engler, 1989, p. 375; editorial insertion). They will encounter another editorial insertion in this concluding statement:

Analogy teaches us once again ... to separate the language itself (*la langue*) from speech (*la parole*). It shows us how speech depends on the language, and allows us to put our finger on the operational mechanism. (Saussure, 1986, p. 164; translation revised; Engler, 1989, p. 376)

We have seen, however, that following Saussure the relation between *la parole* and *la langue* involves reciprocal interdependency rather than a unilateral support of a fringe by a foundation. Analogical innovation dissolves any, projected, hierarchical dichotomies. Its close study incites the present-day students and scholars to surpass the “Saussurean doctrine” and expand their view of language—and any other established system of cultural signification—beyond surface correctness in order to capture the creative forces and opened-ended possibilities at work in their midst. The over one-hundred-year long legacy of the *Course in General Linguistics* can thus pave the way for innovative research in semiotics in the 21st Century.¹

Note

- 1 The focus on analogy in this article does not displace the importance of other inter- and intralinguistic relations in general linguistics, such as the relations of value and linguistic arbitrariness. Both are discussed in detail in Stawarska 2015, chapter 1.

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