

Langue and Parole

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The distinction between the French words, *langue* (language or tongue) and *parole* (speech), enters the vocabulary of theoretical linguistics with Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, which was published posthumously in 1915 after having been collocated from student notes. *La langue* denotes the abstract systematic principles of a language, without which no meaningful utterance (*parole*) would be possible. The *Course* manifests a shift from the search for origins and ideals, typical of nineteenth century science, to the establishment of *systems*. The modern notion of system is reflected in the title of the course: *General Linguistics*. Saussure in this way indicates that the course will be about language in general: not this or that particular language (Chinese or French) and not this or that aspect (phonetics or semantics). A general linguistics would be impossible by empirical means because there exist innumerable objects that can be considered *linguistic*. Instead Saussure's methodology allows him to establish a coherent object for linguistics in the distinction between *langue* and *parole*.

Langue represents the "work of a collective intelligence," which is both internal to each individual and collective, in so far as it is beyond the will of any individual to change. *Parole*, on the other hand, designates individual acts, statements and utterances, events of language use manifesting each time a speaker's ephemeral individual will through his combination of concepts and his "phonation"—the formal aspects of the utterance. Saussure points out that the single word "linguistics" therefore covers two very different kinds of study. The study of *parole* would be entirely focused on individual utterances, using all the available resources of formal and empirical study to analyze actual statements, usually within a specific language. The study of *langue* would be focused instead on generally applicable conditions of possibility. The *Course* thus follows the second route in this inevitable "bifurcation," setting out the groundwork for all attempts to grasp the basic conditions of possibility for language and language use generally. There would be no coherent and meaningful utterance without the institution of norms that Saussure calls *langue*. So it is this that forms the object of study for modern linguistics. Such an object could not

ever be made visible (as a stretch of text can) but one *can* in principle establish the rules and conditions that make it possible to speak and write in meaningful ways. *Langue* and *parole* has been translated by alternative semiotic categories like *system* and *process* (A J Greimas) or *code* and *message* (Roman Jakobson), which interpret Saussure's distinction in specific ways. The main assumptions of structuralism and semiology (or semiotics) would be that for every process (an utterance for instance) there is a system of underlying laws that govern it; and that the system arises contingently (there are no natural or necessary reasons for the relations within it to be as they are).

The scientific approach to systems, inherited by Saussure, assumes that the elements which make them up correspond to organized and integrated unities. Each element in a system should be located in its place on the web of relationships between elements. The elements of the linguistic system are, however, the mental phenomena called signs. A sign is comprised of both a mental image (signifier) and an idea (signified). Saussure's most famous statement concerns how these signs are differentiated in themselves and related to each other. "In language," he says, "there are only differences without positive terms." He distinguishes between meaning and value to get the point across. "What we find, instead of *ideas* being given in advance, are *values* emanating from a linguistic system. If we say that these values correspond to certain concepts, it must be understood that the concepts in question are purely differential. That is to say they are concepts defined not positively, in terms of their content, but negatively by contrast with other items in the same system. What characterizes each most exactly is being whatever the others are not" (CGL 115). The notion of value thus designates a quality that is entirely relative to other values in the system. The concept of a dog or a cat, a virtue or a crime, gets its value as a linguistic unit entirely relative to the values of all the other linguistic units. So no linguistic unit can be regarded as a positive pre-existing entity or idea (whether concept or mark). To define a linguistic unit, rather, is to specify in what ways it is similar to or different from the other units within the system. Two marks *a* and *b* are not, despite appearances, grasped positively by our consciousness. We grasp the *difference* between *a* and *b* etc. It is for this reason, Saussure says, that each sign "remains free to change in accordance with laws quite unconnected with their signifying function" (116). Linguistic items are therefore always based, ultimately,

upon their non-coincidence with the others. This what also allows considerable flexibility in their relations—the *play* between signifiers and between signifiers and signifieds, their *difference*.

Language can be analysed according to two different poles, or axes, which relate precisely to the difference between parole and langue. On the syntagmatic axis are found the visible or audible elements of the utterance itself, e.g., “O time, thy pyramids.” On the paradigmatic axis (from a Greek word, *paradeigma*, meaning “example”) the utterance remains tied to and governed by the system out of which it is generated. An utterance is an example of one of the uncountable possibilities that the system makes possible. The system governs all possible relations between signifiers and signifieds. The linguist Roman Jakobson suggested that the functions of language can be understood according to the way the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of language interact, with the figurative dimension of metonymy operating on the syntagmatic axis and that of metaphor on the paradigmatic one. The syntagmatic axis features contiguous elements, elements found next to each other, related by association (as the Sun is related to Day). The paradigmatic axis features elements that are not present together but may be substituted for each other (as the Sun might substitute for the clear light of Truth).

To the distinction between langue and parole, corresponds a further distinction between the subject of the *énonciation* (the exercise of language) and subject of the *énoncé* (the statement made). To illustrate this, the French linguist Émile Benveniste focuses on the role and implications of the ubiquitous first and second person pronouns, used at least implicitly in every language known to man and woman. The first person, “I,” operates in a way quite unlike other pronouns because it is essentially linked to the *exercise* of language. In other words, the sign *I* links Saussure’s two dimensions of language, the collective intelligence of *langue* and the ephemeral individual acts of *parole*: “it is this property that establishes the basis for individual discourse, in which each speaker takes over all the resources of language for his own behalf” (220). In fact the *I* not only links the otherwise heterogeneous dimensions of *langue* and *parole* but it also keeps its speakers unaware of this profound difference. The signs *I* and *you* are essentially empty of meaning except when they are being used, so the reality to which *I* or *you* refers is solely a reality of

discourse. These signs cannot be misused because they “do not assert anything, they are not subject to the condition of truth and escape all denial” (220). The implications are far reaching. First by indicating the situation of the speaker yet by escaping the conditions normally attributed to language, the pronoun tells us something about the relation of the human animal to the language she speaks. Language is not something the human subject merely *uses* (as is often asserted), but rather, the human subject is something made possible *by* language. An irreducible division emerges between enunciation and statement (*énoncé*) corresponding to that between *langue* and *parole*.

Emphasis on the statement would draw attention to its content, its sense and reference, whether it is true or false, and on what attributes or qualities are predicated of what subject. For instance the statement “this vase is yellow” perhaps predicates some actually existing ornament with a yellow color and can thus be tested against the actually existing ornament for truth or falsity. A shift of emphasis onto the mode of *enunciation*, away from merely what is being said, would instead look at how, by saying it, the speaker is constituted institutionally in some way or another according to value and status. Focus shifts to the *performance* or the *practice* of speaking in *this* way or *that*—the role it plays in constituting or perpetuating a particular world of discourse. The speaker is no longer a subject with autonomous feelings and thoughts but, rather, is constituted *as* this or that according to a repeatable modality of discourse.

Roland Barthes calls the different ways of addressing oneself to others “image-repertoires.” In “From Science to Literature” Barthes uses lessons learned from the failure of structuralism to turn itself into the science of literature, to establish the *enunciative* modality of science itself. In this way he forces science (in his own structuralist hands) to reflect on its own conditions of being a science, thereby taking it outside science (still understood on the model of predicative and cause-effect oriented statements). Science in his hands thus becomes a kind of literature as it begins to more and more rigorously attempt to come to terms with the impossibility of grasping its own conditions of possibility, as a scientist would grasp the identifiable qualities of some object.

In psychoanalytic theory the distinction corresponds to Sigmund Freud's distinction between consciousness and the unconscious. Jacques Lacan argues that since the subject comes into being through language he does so through the *exercise* of signifying articulation. As soon as he comes into being he finds himself not as he *is* (what Lacan would call the truth of his being) but as he *imagines* himself to be—that is, as a representation (at the level of the statement). In order to discover the subject of the unconscious the analyst must focus on the level of enunciation (performance, expression) in order to recognize the *truth* of the subject in the articulation of language, its enunciation. So the relation between statement and enunciation (the said and the saying) actualizes the divided structure of the psychoanalytic subject and helps to clarify the difference between the imaginary (fixed and complete image of person) and the symbolic (the constitutive function of language). The distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary thus maps onto that between *langue* and *parole*. Lacan also argues that metaphor and metonymy, located by Jakobson on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes respectively, correspond to Freud's accounts of the displacements and condensations of dreams, thus providing the analyst a further resource in a kind of literary criticism. A displacement censors a dream by substituting relatively harmless images or objects for those more likely to cause anxiety. Condensation merges images, places them together, confusing them.

The concept of *langue* must ultimately be regarded as a triumph not of nineteenth century science but of the theoretical imagination; that is, *langue* should be regarded not as a reality (an ideality) but as a theoretical fiction, a catachresis that borrows the idea of system to account for the ways in which institutions like languages are established and maintained in quasi systematic ways. Jacques Derrida draws on Saussure's structuralism while at the same time exceeding it. In *Of Grammatology*, and with yet more technical precision in "Signature Event Context," he demonstrates how the notion of *event* (*parole*) exceeds the system (*langue*) that theoretically makes it possible. Every system, ensemble, institution—anything, that is, which brings its elements together under a principle or set of principles—comes about on the basis of certain conditions. And such ensembles tend to produce moments when those conditions are thematized, dramatized or otherwise represented. These are the moments of self-identification, producing myths and fictions as factual narratives. Saussure offers a privileged example, then, by producing a narrative (a *parole*) about

the relationship between langue and parole. Such representations can always be compared with the actual conditions themselves, which are always also readable at the level of an ensemble's performance, as repeatable and even sedimented principles or axioms. A forceful principle of interpretation can therefore be located in what Derrida calls the *deconstruction* of (the disjuncture or gap between) the *statement about* and the *performance of* the relation between the ensemble and the conditions of its own existence.