

Reading Saussure as a Cultural Sociologist of “Discourse”

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要旨

F. ソシュール (1857-1973) は、言語学者というよりも文化社会学の創始者と見なすことができる。彼は、人間の文化実践や社会システムのすべての基礎である言語の本質を探究することをめざしているのだ。彼の一般言語学は、文化科学 (人文科学) 以外の何物でもなく、その研究対象は、自然現象に対立するものとしての文化現象のすべてなのである。本稿は、彼の記号理論を文化社会学の原理だと考える。彼の記号理論を、西欧の構造主義やポスト構造主義の理解の文脈で、理解することが重要である。新しい文化社会学の可能性を、ソシュールの記号学に照らして追求するものである。

ソシュールは、「ラング」の脱構築可能性を「ディスコース」の中に見いだしていた。彼は「ディスコース」を、「ラング」を脱構築するものおよび新しい価値システムを生成するものと見なしていたのだ。新しい価値システムを生成する言語活動は、「ラング」に対立するものとして「ディスコース」と呼ばれている。「ディスコース」は、「ラング」の内部の現在の諸価値を分化するものなのである。

The Introduction

(Ferdinand de) Saussure (1857-1913) can be regarded as the founder of cultural sociology rather than a linguist, with an aim to explore the essence of language, upon which all cultural practice and social system of people are based. His general linguistics is nothing but cultural science, whose object is all cultural phenomena as opposed to natural phenomena. We are going to see his theory of signs as principle of cultural sociology. It seems important to understand his principle of signs in the context of understanding European structuralism and post-structuralism.

It seems to us that one should draw a fundamental distinction between two orders of phenomena: on the one side the physiological and biological data, which present a “simple” nature (no matter what their complexity may be) because they hold entirely within the field in which they appear and because their structures form and diversify themselves on successive levels in the order of the same relationships; on the other side, the phenomena belonging to the interhuman milieu, which have the characteristic that they can never be taken as simple data or defined in the order of their own nature but must always be understood as double from the fact that they are connected to something

else, whatever their "referent" may be. A fact of culture is such only insofar as it refers to something else. The day when a science of culture takes shape, it will probably be founded upon that chief feature, and it will develop its own dualities on the model Saussure gave for language, without necessarily conforming to it. No science of man will be spared this reflection on its subject and its place within a general science of culture, for man is not born in nature but in culture. (Benveniste, 1966)

The possibility of new cultural sociology is pursued in the light of Saussure's semiology in this essay.

The view of language before Saussure

It seems to be necessary to briefly review ideas of language before Saussure in order to understand the theory of Saussure. There are intellectualists and empiricists in terms of views of language. We are going to see them in turn.

"Intellectualistic" philosophers of language (from Greco-Roman times through Middle Ages to 18th century) regarded language as only names of things. For example, Heraclitean naturalists asserted that the basic sounds of language have values that reflect the nature; there should be natural or necessary relations between things and their names. On the other hand, Democritean relativists asserted that naming of things should be regarded only as social contract; there is no natural or necessary relations between things and their names. Also, logocentrists (such as Port Royalist grammarians) saw language as reflection of (pure) ideas. They all regard language as tools for representing (internal) systems of ideas or things.

"Scientific empiricists" in 19th century (as opposed to Intellectualists), in order to study human beings, reduced human phenomena into non-human models such as physical materials and living things (animals or plants). This founds behavioristic linguistics of Bloomfield in U.S.A. "Natural" scientists of language regard language as living organism; they try to discover the evolutionary "law" of language.

Saussure objected to both "intellectualists" and "empiricists". He tried to surpass both of them in order to grasp the essence of language. This is the starting point of Saussure's semiology of culture (as opposed to nature). He did not think that in the beginning are ideas or things, then language represents them. He did not think that linguistics belongs to "natural" sciences.

The object of Saussure's general linguistics

"Language" and "langue"

Saussure began by strictly defining the scientific object of linguistics. He called the universal faculty and activity of symbolization (or categorization) of people "language".

“Language” is innate, universal and latent ability, which distinguishes people from animals, and that lies behind a transition from the nature to human culture. “Language” made all cultural activity of people possible.

“Langue”, on the other hand, is the social institution (such as a national language), into which “language” turned specifically in each society. “Langue” is the system with a structure specific to the society. “Langue” as opposed to “language” is a (actualized) social product, which enables individuals to exercise “language”. Individuals are born able to have a command of “language”, but it is only a society around them that makes them able to actually use “langue”. “Language” is latent potentials of structuralization of the world: “langue” is actualized social structure of the world.

“Langue” and “parole”

“Langue”, as seen above, is the abstract social system (ensemble of rules) for the individual, for “langue” is above a private individual. Therefore, we cannot identify “langue” with individual speaking acts in practical utterances. This fact led Saussure to differentiate “langue” from “parole”. A series of concrete voices uttered by a specific speaker is called “parole”. Then, from a point of view of distinction between “langue” and “parole”, it can be said that “langue” is latent structure; “parole” is concrete and actualized acts.

“Langue” is realized only through “parole” of individuals. “Parole” of individuals is individual speaking acts, that realize the individual (latent) ability through “langue”. There is dialectical or interdependent relation between “langue” and “parole”: “parole” is regulated by “langue”; and “langue” is reformed by “parole”. Nevertheless, we need both linguistics of “langue” and linguistics of “parole” separately, because of difference in characteristics between “langue” and “parole”, though these two linguistics are not mutually exclusive.

The concept of “system”

“Langue” as a “system”

Saussure regards “langue” as a “system”, that is not based upon the nature (or natural relation), unlike other systems. “Langue” is considered to be the principle of constitution of a culture or a society. That is, “langue” could function as a conceptual device in the other domain than linguistics, too. ⁽¹⁾

It should be noted what Saussure means by “system”. His “system” is totally different from the concept of system that has been used by atomists. Saussure was not the first man that introduced the term of system into linguistics. His “system” is a system of values in which each value is only “negatively” defined, whereas the system in an atomist sense is one in which the whole is composed of individual part

or unit, that can exist substantially or positively. That is, there is no original or objective unit in the beginning in Saussure's "system", where each value only can exist in interrelation with other values. His "system" without units existing at the outset, is only based upon opposition or relation of values, that exist only in coexistence with each other. This "system" of culture doesn't reflect natural systems of the objective world. Values only can be negatively given with relation to each other in the "system". There is only difference in the "system" of values, "langue".

Saussure suggests that the object of study of "langue" or "system" of culture should be, not *en-soi* unit, but a network of relation of values. To be is to be related in "system" of culture. There is non-reality of unit in the "system".

"Rapport syntagmatique" and "rapport associatif"

Saussure found a network of relation of values at two different levels to study "langue" and "system" of culture.

The first relation is called "rapport syntagmatique" (syntagmatic relation) in presence. Spoken (or written) words have a temporally or spatially linear character. It is not until each entity in an utterance is put in opposition to other entities which stand before and / or after it that it has a differentiated meaning. This relation, which determines the meaning or function of each entity in an utterance, can be observed in a given context of the utterance in sequence.

The second is called "rapport associatif" (associative relation). This is a "latent" relation between each entity in presence and other qualified entities in absence, that are excluded from the context of utterance because a speaker or a writer has just happened to choose the one. These other entities do not present themselves in the actual utterance, and have a oppositional relation to the one in a given context of utterance. This relation is not supported by linearity of utterance, but associative rules.

We can find these two types of relation in mental activities of people in general beyond linguistics.⁽²⁾

"Synchronic linguistics" and "diachronic linguistics"

Duality, which is characteristic of Saussure's linguistics, can be found also in various aspects of language itself as well as in linguistics itself. In order to study language as "system" of values that is not based upon the nature, two types of linguistics must be distinguished from each other: synchronic linguistics (statics)—the study of interdependent relation among values apart from action of time—and diachronic linguistics (dynamics)—the study of history or change of "system" of each value—.

Saussure suggests that at first each value should be synchronically grasped in a "system" in a time, and then the change of "system" of values should be diachronically considered. That is, dynamics without relation to "system" is subsidiary. Rather, a

language is at once "system" and history at the moment. It is "langue" as historical, social and non-natural fact. In essence, linguistics is the study of "system" of *arbitrary* values.

Theory of signs

The importance of Saussure's linguistics can be found in his original theory of signs (or epistemology), rather than the definition of the object of linguistics and methodology of linguistics, that has been seen above. We are going to see the theory of signs.

Denying the view of "langue-nomenclature"

Saussure began with denying the theory of language as nomenclature, which had been the traditional view of language since Plato. He thought it wrong to regard language as naming of things; he denied the view that in the beginning are things, and then are signs (or names), that is, signs are based upon their external things (or objects). He considered it to be wrong that 500 words represent 500 things. According to him, words of language do not name pre-existing ideas, facts or things, but on the contrary, it is not until words are that ideas, facts or concepts come into existence.

All phenomena are continua before being seen through the network of language. A language is a view of world, and a "prism" through which continuous realities are made discrete. It is not true that language follows cognizance, but that it is not until language is in existence that events or things are recognized: language and cognizance are an identical phenomenon.

Our common sense regards signs as "what indicates others than itself". Similarly, it is taken for granted that language is the signs of things or ideas that are pre-existing before language. On the contrary, Saussure recognized that language is not the signs in a common-sense sense. He thinks that prior to language, are not ideas or things that language indicates. The view that language is not nomenclature leads to the theory that language is not what indicates pre-existing realities (things or ideas) outside of language, but primarily what refer to itself. That is, linguistic signs, though they are called signs, are different from other signs, that indicate things or ideas pre-existing outside the signs. Linguistic signs are what refer to signification within themselves.

In other words, linguistic signs are, so to speak, dual existence endowed with both expression and signification in themselves. Before Saussure, language was only "expression", that is an instrument by which things or ideas (meanings) that are pre-existing prior to language, are indicated. Linguistic signs with at once expression and signification is reflected in continua almost like chaos, and makes the continuous realities of the world discrete, discontinuous or conceptual realities of the world.

There is no distinctive ideas or realities without language.

The ideas that linguistic signs take on, are values within the "system" of difference or differentia. Ideas are only "negatively" defined in relation to other ideas within the "system" of values. The distinctive feature of these ideas within the "system" is that these ideas are not other ideas.

Linguistic signs are in general understood as referring to extra-linguistic realities, but in fact, what linguistic signs refer to (or referents) are primarily intra-linguistic realities that are constructed by language. That is, reference is a linguistic interpretation or differentiation on the extra-linguistic realities of the world, through language. The existence of linguistic signs is one thing, and reference of linguistic signs is another.

Saussure also denied that these ideas stand in opposition to material (or physical) sounds. Language is not what makes ideas physical. Language or linguistic sign is at once the image of sounds and ideas. Figuratively speaking, language is activity of establishing relations, like waves which are a connection lying between water and air, and that doesn't form a substance. This wave stands for a combination between the two, ideas and a chain of sounds. This combination generates only a "forme", not substance.

Linguistic signs are socially contracting conventions, but not in the sense that the bonds between pre-existing ideas and pre-identified sounds are conventional. If it is the case, then the signification are dependent upon extra-linguistic, abstract ideas or concrete things. This, however, is not the case. The fact is, reference of linguistic signs operates on materialistic objects only through a network of ideas or values constructed by language in a culture.

Saussure stopped regarding linguistic signs as an instrument of expression, that indicates extra-linguistic realities. Saussure made language recapture the signification within itself. This recaptured signification is grounded upon "langue" or "system" of values. We only perceive the signification within "langue".

"Signifiant" and "signifié"

As the linguistic signs are dual existence with at once expression and signification, Saussure called the one "signifiant", and the other "signifié". The point here is that the two are interdependent upon each other within "system" of signs, not that separate two units are united to construct a sign. The two are not *en-soi* units, and not material or ideal substance, either. That is, the two come into existence as soon as signs are identified. Therefore, the two are unseparable. Figuratively speaking, if the water of language are divided into hydrogen and oxygen, chemists can study them, but linguists cannot study them, because the linguistic objects, signs disappear. The two are mental realities within "langue". You must not think that the one is extra-linguistic reality and the other is materialistic sound. The two have only a character of "forme"

"Forme" and "substance"

"Signifiant" and "signifié" are not "substance" but "forme" (that is, network of oppositional relations among values). "Substance" is an oppositional concept of "forme". "Forme" is different from so-called form, that is in contrast with content. "Forme" is a style of existence of language. "Signifiant" is neither physical sound nor form into which the pre-existing content is put; "signifié" is not pre-existing content which is put into form. Both are mental realities within "system" of signs. Saussure places superiority on "forme" or relations or correspondence, as opposed to "substance" (*en-soi* realities). "Substance" doesn't necessarily mean only physical or material stuff. The essence of language is "forme", not "substance".

In perspective of "forme", realities in "substance" are perceived as oppositional relation or difference. This oppositional relation or difference generates values in the "system". That is, the perspective of "forme" generates linguistic objects. In a word, the world of "forme" can be called cultural realities (where the perspective of oppositional relations generates values in the "system"), whereas the world of "substance" can be called natural realities (where things or objects are *en-soi* existing).

Therefore, human "langue" or "system" of values has a distinctive feature that sign can be zero (nothing) without substance, that is, signs do not necessarily present themselves at the level of "substance" as long as this zero (nothing) is opposed to something else. This feature of "forme" reminds us that values of "system" are negative, that is, there is only distinction or difference in "langue". The signification of language comes into existence only from within a mosaic of differences or distinctions.

"Arbitrariness" of linguistic signs

The most important theme of Saussure's theory of signs is on the characteristic of arbitrariness of linguistic signs. (This is a fundamental principle of semiology in relation with all Saussure's theories.) The concept of arbitrariness has been misunderstood; language is arbitrary in the sense that there is no necessary connection between things and their words. This view of language takes the position that language is the name of things; language as nomenclature. This is not the case of Saussure. His concept of "arbitrariness" is a problematic within language. There are two senses in "arbitrariness".

First, the relation between "signifiant" and "signifié" is arbitrary. That is, there is no natural or inherent connection between linguistic signification and expression (acoustic image) in linguistic signs. Secondly, signs are arbitrary in the sense that values are determined only in relation to other values within the "system" of language, not by natural laws. "Langue" is an autonomic "system" in which values do not reflect natural or extra-linguistic realities, but are arbitrarily defined in relation to

other values.

This second type of "arbitrariness" of signs in "system" is different from the first type of "arbitrariness". The first one is the product of signs that have been defined through the second one. Importantly, this second type of "arbitrariness" can be found only in linguistic signs. Other human systems of signs (such as signals) are dependent upon the "signifiant" and / or "signifié" of linguistic signs.

A paradox of linguistic signs

Saussure's linguistic signs are combinations between arbitrarily articulated ideas (signification) and arbitrarily articulated sound-image (expression). Our perception or categorization of realities and things in the external world depends upon this linguistic signs, or "langue", "system" of values.

It is important to point out a paradox that the "arbitrariness" of linguistic signs appears to be inevitable in the constituted "system" of language. Linguistic signs are not arbitrary in the context of the human society in which people are destined to use the linguistic signs. People are tied to the "langue" of linguistic signs. For individual consciousness in a society, ideas and sound-image of signs are undividedly linked with each other. But it is important to know that this inevitability of "langue" as coercion of social institution is one thing; and inevitability of natural law is another.

Saussure's semiology as cultural sociology

Linguistic signs are inevitable for individual consciousness in the "system" of values only as long as the signs are arbitrary (that is, non-natural). Saussure's "langue" seems to parallel Durkheim's concept of "social fact".

However, while Saussure points out strong coercion of "langue" as social institution, he also points out that there is possibility of dialectical relation between people and society. In other words, making sure that the essence of "langue" is an arbitrary "system" of values, he suggests the possibility to deconstruct the "system" of "langue". The principle of "arbitrariness" or non-naturalness makes the "system" of "langue" deconstructable. Saussure's theory of signs is founded upon this concept of "arbitrariness".

Saussure found the distinctive feature of linguistic signs in "arbitrariness" of values. He also found deconstructability of "langue" in "discourse". Saussure regarded "discourse" as deconstructing the "langue" and generating new "system" of values.

Linguistic signs cut off the lived world almost like amorphous chaos and chaotic continua of physical sounds, and generate values through network of "forme" (or oppositional relation or difference), whereas other human signs only indicate or tie the "signifiant" and "signifié" that have already been cut off by linguistic signs. Nevertheless, in actuality, linguistic signs (that could generate values for themselves)

have been forced upon people in a society in the form of inert or unvaried "langue".

With this in mind, Saussure tried to explore the possibility to generate the new "system" of values, by means of making the most of this kind of accomplishedness or restrictedness of "langue" of values. He recognized that a single sign means nothing; the signification of signs comes into being only from a mosaic of distinction or difference of values. Therefore, he thinks that it would be still possible to combine accomplished values into generating new "system" of values, that have never been expressed in the "langue". This kind of linguistic activity is called "discourse" as opposed to "langue". "Discourse" would differentiate the existing values within "langue". This seems to be the only way to generate "new" values in "langue" for people who must stay in the "langue", because people cannot go out of the "langue" itself. From this point, we can go to the study of "discourse" as cultural sociology.

Notes

1. C. Levi-Strauss identified "parole" with conscious and observable social relations, and "langue" with unconscious and unobservable social structure.
2. See works on metaphor and metonymy of Jakobson or Barthes.

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