

Strange Life of a Sentence: Saussurean Doctrine and its Discontents

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ABSTRACT: In this essay, I follow the lead of recent scholarship in Saussure linguistics and critically examine the Saussurean doctrine associated with the *Course in General Linguistics*, which later became a hallmark of structuralism. Specifically, I reconstruct the history of the concluding sentence in the *Course* which establishes the priority of *la langue* over everything deemed external to it. This line assumed the status of an oft-cited ‘famous formula’ and became a structuralist motto. The ‘famous formula’ was, however, freely inserted by the editors of the *Course* who effectively ghostwrote the book after Saussure’s death, and authored a series of early book-reviews of the same text in dedicated scholarly venues. I argue that the editorial success turning their vision of Saussure’s teaching into official doctrine was enabled in part by the dominant social structures regulating twentieth-century European academia.

KEY WORDS: Ferdinand de Saussure; structuralism; poststructuralism; *Course in General Linguistics*; Claude Levi-Strauss.

SAUSSUREANISM AND STRUCTURALISM

Within twentieth-century philosophy and the human sciences, the *Course in General Linguistics* attributed to Ferdinand de Saussure functions primarily as a site of the official doctrine closely associated with structuralism, that is, as a statement of the familiar oppositional pairings between the signifier and the signified, *la langue* and *la parole*, synchrony and diachrony. Barthes argued that a reliance on these oppositional pairings in the process of mapping out the many aspects of human reality (such as kinship arrangements, neurotic symptoms, literary genres) may in fact be a hallmark of structuralist activity, one which distinguishes it from the other traditions of

inquiry (Barthes 1972, 213). Structuralism can therefore be defined as direct application of the ‘Saussurean doctrine’ to the many fields of study dealing with cultural signification in a social context. Considering the hold that structuralism had on Saussure’s linguistics within the twentieth-century European philosophy and related fields, it is usual to consider these oppositional pairings as a distinctive feature and a shared trait of *Saussureanism* and *structuralism*. They figure as the general principles that were applied to linguistic study in the *Course* in the 1910s, and then extended to the broader field of philosophy and the human sciences within post–Second World War French structuralism (and then challenged within post-structuralism, notably by Derrida).

This assumed continuity between a ‘proto-structuralist’ doctrine and structuralism properly so-called can also be rendered by the fact that it is usual in the scholarship to define structuralism proper as an intellectual movement with a distinctive Saussurean lineage, and to exclude the strands of structuralist scholarship that do not share in the Saussurean legacy. Hence, it is usually allowed that the term “structuralism” covers a large and varied territory of knowledge, and arguably one finds structuralist elements throughout the written history of Western philosophy in the many attempts to characterize objects in terms of a combination of structural elements within a system (Culler 2006, 5). However, it is standard to qualify as structuralism in the proper sense of the term the movement that displays a direct lineage to Saussurean linguistics as presented in the *Course* only; a number of scholarly works devoted to structuralism testify to this trend. Culler notes that “the term structuralism is generally used to designate work that marks its debts to structural linguistics and deploys a vocabulary drawn from the legacy of Ferdinand de Saussure. . . . There are many writings, from Aristotle to Noam Chomsky, that share the structuralist propensity to analyze objects as the products of a combination of structural elements within a system, but if they do not display a Saussurean ancestry, they are usually not deemed structuralist” (Culler 2006, 5). Sturrock states that, “The founding father of structural linguistics in Europe, and the man frequently looked on as the patron of the whole Structuralist movement, was the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure” (Sturrock 2003, 26). And Dosse observes that structuralism’s (in the proper sense) “central core, its unifying center, is the model of modern linguistics and the figure of Ferdinand de Saussure, presented as its founder” (Dosse 1997, 43). (The structuralist “return to Saussure” would belong to the period’s prevailing theme of “returning” to foundational figures, like Marx and Freud [Dosse 1997, 43]). In sum, structuralism’s identity is widely recognized as closely bound up with its historical foundation in the *Great Book* authored by Ferdinand de Saussure.

The shared Saussurean/structuralist commitment to the familiar oppositional pairings between the signifier and the signified, *la langue* and *la parole*, synchrony and diachrony was made possible by the production, replication, and reception

of the *Course* as a site of the official doctrine. The emergence and impact of these intellectual ideas is therefore undecipherable without understanding the material and institutional history that led to their production and reception—that is, the editorial production of the *Course* in the early 1900s and the dominant structuralist reception of the *Course* in the 1950s and 1960s. It is therefore important to critically examine the official doctrine not exclusively by way of critical analysis (which bears especially on the logic of violent hierarchies deployed within these familiar dichotomies) but also by reconstructing the material and institutional processes that went into the making and receiving of the text of the *Course* as a privileged textual locus of this dichotomous logic. I contend that the emergence and impact of the ‘Saussurean doctrine’ on the developments within twentieth-century philosophy, rhetoric, and related fields is effectively undecipherable without understanding its relation to the material and institutional history that led to the production and dominant reception of the *Course*. The editors, Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, performed a double duty in this process: they projected their own methodological and conceptual commitments onto the source materials in order to establish general linguistics as a recognizable scientific discipline, and subsequently received and replicated the basic principles of this science in a series of dedicated book-reviews and scholarly accounts of their ghostwritten text. The editors’ role extends beyond the initial inception to a scholarly reception of the *Course* as official doctrine. Considering that it would be especially difficult for an Anglophone reader to access and/or assimilate the materials related to the editorial production (and reception) of the *Course* otherwise, I will reconstitute this process in some detail but limit the scope of the analysis in this essay to just one notable example of an editorial distortion of the source materials related to Saussure’s general linguistics: the insertion (and its subsequent citation by the editors) of the ‘famous formula’ into the concluding lines of the *Course* which established the priority of *la langue* and helped to produce the received notion of a Saussurian doctrine.¹ I will also trace the legacy of this formula within twentieth-century philosophy, notably its role in alienating the structure and subject-based approaches to cultural signification. I will then make the case that the editorial version of Saussure’s linguistics gained the status of official *Saussurianism* in part as a result of the dominant social structures regulating twentieth-century European academia, and the privilege associated with relations of heredity along the male line.

SAUSSURE’S LINGUISTICS REVISITED

The reception of Saussure’s work has been largely based on the posthumously published edition of the *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (Saussure 1916). This volume was ghostwritten and published by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye

in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger; while their edition is typically assumed, in the philosophical circles at least, to offer, in a book format, a simple recasting of the lectures on general linguistics that Saussure gave between 1907 and 1909 at the University of Geneva by the students who attended them, it should be noted that Bally and Sechehaye did not attend any of the lectures, while Riedlinger, who did, may have been co-opted in the editorial process to increase its credibility—and he himself expressed profound disappointment with the final product (I discuss this process more fully in Stawarska 2015). The publication of Godel and Saussure's *Sources Manusrites* (1957) and Engler's *Édition Critique* (Saussure 1989) document in detail the discrepancies between Bally and Sechehaye's 1916 redaction and the students' lecture notes (and other source materials). These critical works give evidence of a heavy editorial hand: Bally and Sechehaye's version changed the order of presentation, and altered the contents and style found in the source materials, possibly according to the editors' own vision of general linguistics as objective science and in response to the expectations relative to a classic academic book format.

Scholarly research on Saussure's linguistics of the last five decades has radically shifted the ways in which Saussure's intellectual heritage is interpreted. In response to the documented discrepancies between the edited version of Saussure's linguistics from the *Course* and the source materials (autographed writings by Saussure, the student lecture notes from his courses on general linguistics at the University of Geneva 1907–1911), as well as the recently discovered and published autographed writings by Saussure (*Écrits de Linguistique Générale* [2003]/*Writings in General Linguistics* [2006]), and in light of the revelations from the recently published correspondence between the main stakeholders in Saussure's estate (the two editors of the posthumously published *Cours de Linguistique Générale* [1916]/*Course in General Linguistics*, and Saussure's students and colleagues), contemporary scholars are shifting from the so-called *first to the second editorial paradigm of Saussure's general linguistics*.² Saussure scholars are gradually abandoning an earlier (the *first*) research paradigm spanning over the five last decades, which compared the official version of the *Course on General Linguistics* from the 1916 text with the source materials. While this approach helped to locate the manuscript sources of the editorial rendering of the lectures (and also to establish a lack of manuscript evidence for some of the claims made in the *Course*), and offered a critical perspective on Bally and Sechehaye's editorial legacy, it inadvertently maintained the status of the *Course* as the central reference in Saussure scholarship, its documented shortcomings notwithstanding. In their passage to the *second* editorial paradigm, Saussure scholars are largely abandoning the *Course* and its structuralist legacy, and working solely with historically authentic texts.

Anglophone scholarship has lagged behind these scholarly developments, in part due to an absence of an English-language critical edition of the *Course*.³ The *Course* continues to serve as the official version of Saussure's linguistics in scholarly publications and college-level pedagogy alike in philosophy, rhetoric, and related fields. However, some recent publications are beginning to break new ground and to offer alternate interpretations and reclamations of Saussure's project based on the *Nachlass*. Consider in this regard especially recent studies on the relation between Saussure's general linguistics and the romantic tradition (Gasparov 2013), scientific linguistics (Bouissac 2010), agency within language (Starobinski 1979), and intertextuality (Thibault 2005). In my own work (Stawarska 2015) I offered a phenomenological interpretation of Saussure's *Nachlass* for the sake of a philosophical understanding of language as an ambiguous sphere which intersects individual expression in the present with the historically sedimented societal conventions, and which is undecidable between consciousness and the unconscious. I consider this ambiguity essential to the situation of a speaking subject, and I regard Saussure's *Nachlass* to be a source of hitherto unacknowledged philosophical insights in this regard.

THE FAMOUS FORMULA

An important element of the Saussurean doctrine consists in the established primacy of *la langue* over the domain of *la parole*. In this section, I will discuss one strategy that establishes the primacy of *la langue* in the *Course*: the editorial insertion of the concluding lines according to which language (*la langue*) is an in-itself objectivity akin to a closed and autonomous system of signs. This insertion was subsequently cited as Saussure's own word by the editors in their writings in linguistics and book reviews of the *Course*. Having gained the status of a "famous formula," the concluding lines of the *Course* functioned subsequently as the structuralist motto—and were also cited as evidence of incompatibility between structuralism and phenomenology.

The contents of the *Course in General Linguistics* are framed by an opening question and a concluding reply. The question is stated explicitly in the *Introduction*: "What is the integral and concrete object of linguistics?" (23; my translation). The response is found in the concluding lines of the *Course*: "*the only true object of study in linguistics is the language system [la langue] considered in itself and for itself [en elle-même et pour elle-même]*" (230; my translation).

This response is said to support the fundamental thesis (*l'idée fondamentale*) of the course as a whole (*ibid.*). The contents sandwiched in between the opening question and the concluding response can therefore be read as accumulated evidence for the basic priority of language construed as an objective structured system over speech and subjective expression (*la parole*).

The closing line of the *Course* has acquired the status of quintessential Saussuranism; it helped to establish the impression of a seamless transition from Saussurean linguistics to structuralism. This line was, however, freely inserted by the editors; there is not a single textual locus in the source materials to warrant this insertion (Godel and Saussure 1957, 119, 181). The insertion serves as one of the most blatant cases of the editors dictating their own commitment to the holistic priority of the language system over everything deemed *external* to it (speech, consciousness, sociality, history) into what later became the Magna Carta of modern linguistics. Unsurprisingly, this line became programmatic in the development of the structuralist doctrine. As de Mauro notes, “the addition of the last phrase is a seal of the editorial manipulation of Saussure’s notes, and bears in part the responsibility for the exclusivist attitude of structuralism” (Saussure 2005, 476). The scholars are now in agreement that if Saussure became lauded by posterity as a pioneer of structuralism, it is greatly in part to such editorial manipulation.

The last phrase may also bear in part the responsibility for the exclusivist attitude of phenomenology; notably Paul Ricœur cites it as principal evidence that classical phenomenology needs to distance itself from the perceived semiological challenge raised by structuralism. As he put it:

We know how far Saussure went along the path thus opened up towards a linguistics of language, which is synchronic before being diachronic: language is henceforth a system of signs defined solely by their differences. . . . As the last sentence of the *Course in General Linguistics* states: “The only real object of linguistics is language considered by and for itself.” (Ricœur 1974, 16)

For Ricoeur, the last sentence of the *Course* expresses in a nutshell the possibility of signification being deployed by a closed and anonymous system, solely in virtue of the opposite relations between signs, which, if realized, would make any reference to a signifying subject null and void. This possibility “presents such a radical challenge to phenomenology that it may justly be said that phenomenology will not survive unless it can properly reply to this challenge” (Ricœur 1974, 14).

It is worth noting that the editors performed a double duty in relation to the last phrase: direct insertion of material unwarranted by the sources into the *Course*, and subsequent citation of their insertion *as if* it came from Saussure’s own hand. In *Linguistique générale et linguistique française*, Bally claims to be effectively following Saussure’s own method: “which F. de Saussure summarized in the last phrase of his *Course in General Linguistics*: ‘the only true object of study in linguistics is the language (*la langue*) considered in itself and for itself” (Bally 1965, 17).

Following the Saussurian method will consist, according to Bally, in teasing out the general traits and internal tendencies of the French language, and considering it strictly from a linguistic point of view (Bally 1965, 17).

As for Sechehaye, he notes that

the fate of *la langue* is completely removed from the speaking subjects' psychology. This thesis is, as one knows, developed in the final pages of the *Course* and this doctrine is summarized in the famous formula found in the conclusion of this work: "the only true object of study in linguistics is the language (*la langue*) considered in itself and for itself." (Sechehaye 1940, 26)

The editors thus combined forces to write their creations into the *Course*, and to obscure their role as the ghostwriters of this book by adopting a stance of a respectable pupil receiving the master's teachings from the book. The editorial insertions now do double duty as inference and evidence. Their self-assigned task of projecting a coherent doctrine onto Saussure's course in general linguistics is pushed to the extreme of *false attribution of fabricated sources* in their later citations from the *Course*.⁴

The apocryphal last line of the *Course* enjoyed the status of quintessential Saussureanism for decades. It is venerably cited by the Danish structuralist linguist Louis Hjelmslev, who developed a discipline of *glossematics*, a reductivist approach to language as a form or pattern independent of usage. The ultimate objective of glossematics is to reduce the phonetic as well as the semantic and referential dimension of language in favor of an idealized algebraic notation. Following Hjelmslev, the final sentence from the *Course* captured the fundamental idea of Saussure's lectures and also provided direct impetus to his own formalist approach (Hjelmslev 1972, 101). When Hjelmslev marginalizes the extralinguistic reality in favor of a presumed underlying structure, he claims to be developing a method of immanent linguistics already found in Saussure. The linguist's task is primarily this: "to simply draw all the conclusions possible from the final sentence of the *Course*: 'linguistics has as its unique and true object language considered in itself and for its own sake'" (Hjelmslev 1972, 106; my translation).

Hjelmslev duly notes that his approach was sanctified by one of Saussure's disciples: "The late Professor Charles Bally, who was the successor of Saussure in the chair of linguistics in the University of Geneva, wrote a letter to me some few months before his death in which he said: 'You pursue . . . in a sustained manner the ideal formulated by F. de Saussure in the last phrase of his *Cours de linguistique generale*'" (Hjelmslev 1972, 101, my translation).

Bally's personal note to Hjelmslev thus serves to institute a logistic program of language stripped of any reference to sensibility, signification and social conventions of usage as loyal Saussurianism. The direct lineage of discipleship is thus extended by Bally to Hjelmslev, it being understood that Bally is empowered to profess a novice into a Saussurean community in virtue of his own privileged standing with the master himself. The bonds of filiation add in Hjelmslev's as previously in Bally's own case to scholarly legitimacy of their projects; Hjelmslev's immanentism ceases to appear as just one out of many possible appropriations of an elusive text—it becomes an instance of direct succession, of writing a post-

script to the master's book as if under his name, picking up the project where he left it off. It would be as foolish to challenge such scholarly filiation as it would be to undermine the legality of the first born son's inheritance rights to the father's property; patrilineal succession determines the passage of ideal and material goods. Bally's endorsement helps Hjelmslev become officially recognized as the legal heir to Saussure's teaching in wider academic circles; another prominent structuralist linguist, Algirdas Julien Greimas, presents Hjelmslev in a preface to his *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* as "The true and perhaps only successor of Saussure who has been able to make his intentions explicit and formulate them definitely" (cited in Dosse 1997, 68).

ELEMENTARY STRUCTURES OF KINSHIP IN ACADEMIA

The appropriation of Saussure's estate by Bally and Sechehaye, and then Hjelmslev, ran along the retroactively constituted lines of direct succession from master to disciple like from father to son. It is therefore enabled (and constrained) by what could be termed, to employ a term of another structuralist scholar, Claude Lévi-Strauss, the *elementary structure of kinship* within the European academia. I propose that this institutionalized kinship structure of patrilineal succession to the post, and the accompanying passage of ownership rights to the inherited property, serve as an enabling ground for the production, reception, and circulation of the Saussurian doctrine, as expressed in the last lines of the *Course in General Linguistics* (and elsewhere in the book).

Let me interrogate this kinship structure in the remainder of the essay. The master-disciple relation sublimates the biological bond of paternity into a cultural bond which preserves the *prima facie* naturalness of such a relation, and produces an expectation of sameness (or at least marked similarity and continuity) between the linked generations and their works. The master-disciple bond in the academic circles is similar to the more broadly established continuation of patrilineal descent through a passing down of the father's proper name and property; this process is legally enshrined in the rights of inheritance of the so-called *heir apparent*—historically, the eldest son, whose right to inherit is indefeasible as long as he outlives the property holder (except by exclusion under a valid will). Such publicly recognized rights of succession need not in principle follow a biological bond between the ancestor and the successor nor be confirmed by the ancestor's will; as long as the relation seems to mimic patrilineal descent, it fits the logic of heredity, and may serve as a channel for the transmission of goods (both material and intellectual property, such as Saussure's 'own ideas'), and the establishment of a legal heir (such as access to an academic post, e.g., a chair in general linguistics occupied by Saussure, and then Bally, and Sechehaye). The privilege of an heir apparent can in some cases be assumed retroactively, after the master's death; so

long as the relation is publicly recognized as being *like* that of a legitimate heir, it may assume the force of direct and indefeasible succession comparable to a birth-right. This process helps to explain why the master-disciple relation retroactively contracted by Bally and Sechehaye, and then extended onto Hjelmslev, established their role as Saussure's direct heirs and legitimate disposers of his ideas.

The mimicry of the order of nature in the academic social structures illuminates at least in part the great value attached to being publicly recognized as a loyal heir; such recognition dispenses with the need to justify one's appropriation of the master's work; in fact, the relation ceases to appear as a case of interpretation and seems to no longer be mediated by texts. This effectively clears the field of any other interpretations and appropriations as being unorthodox. Yet this privilege comes with a price: if the elementary structure of academic kinship follows mainly the line of (adopted) heredity, there is a risk of immanence, self-enclosure, and isolation. I draw on Simone de Beauvoir's review of *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949) to bear this point out.

According to Levi-Strauss, social structures intersect the two distinguishable realms of nature and culture. The prohibition of incest is such a borderline case: "Here . . . is a phenomenon which has the distinctive characteristics both of nature and of its theoretical contradiction, culture. [It] has the universality of bent and instinct, and the coercive character of law and institution" (Beauvoir 1968 10).

The prohibition of building social alliances on the basis of being of the same blood is as universal as a natural fact, and yet it incarnates a cultural norm, and belongs to the set of laws organizing the human society. Its function is not merely negative and constraining; it opens up channels of reciprocity between groups, similar to the ones involved in the offering, receiving, and reciprocating of a gift. The prohibition subserves the positive interest of building alliances beyond one's immediate kin; as such, it is a medium defining the larger structure of the human society which cannot be straightforwardly derived from the (perceived) order of nature. Nature may facilitate these societal relations through the pre-given fact of paternity but it does not predetermine any specific social order (in Levi-Strauss's own case, a patriarchic order where reciprocal relations implicate men as subjects while women serve as an object of exchange).

The ultimate advantage of Levi-Strauss's analysis of the elementary structures of kinship is that it illuminates the social values enacted by exogamy in particular, and of an openness to the other in general. As Beauvoir noted, under Levi-Strauss's analysis, the prohibition serves to "prevent a group from becoming self-enclosed (*se figer sur lui-même*) and to maintain the possibility of exchange through contact with other groups" (Beauvoir 1949, 946). The danger of consanguineous, endogamous and any other in-group relations is not their presumed unnaturalness, but rather the social isolation and congealment they produce. Incest—taken in the broad sense of preference for a seemingly natural, in-group alliance—is prohibited

out of social and not natural/physical considerations; inbreeding harms a society by putting a dam on the circulation and exchange of precious goods.

On Beauvoir's reading, Levi-Strauss's study is not a narrow anthropological analysis of matrimonial preference across a selection of societies but a philosophical case for the vital importance for the self to encounter and form alliances with an other; such openness to alterity is a mark of transcending the order of nature and instituting the order of culture in the human realm. This alterity is in Beauvoir's own work best represented by sexual difference, and the task is then to cultivate relations of reciprocity between women and men, and not, as in Levi-Strauss's account, between men only (Beauvoir 1968). While Levi-Strauss describes the universal order of patriarchy as if it were unchanging because of its presumed universality, Beauvoir exploits its cultural hence changeable status; this opens up the possibility of resisting the dominant order and instituting a different one.

Construed in this broad philosophical sense, the prohibition of incest does not solely regulate sexual desire and prohibit placing the sexual choice on the next of kin; it applies also to social arrangements in the public sphere and prohibits placing the social choice of a legitimate successor on the next of kin along the male line. As a social principle, the prohibition of incest has a bearing on private relations of physical intimacy, and on the public relations such as collegiality, collaboration, etc. It stipulates that both relations cross difference and transcend the realm of sameness by engaging with an other as a relational partner. The danger of social incest produced by the privileging of heredity along the same sex is that this transcendence gets limited, and the related risks of traditionalism in the professed doctrine, elitism and lack of diversity among the members of the group arise. A social order attached primarily to sameness comes with the danger of increasing immanence and isolation. If the dominant lines of force pass along those of quasi-natural descent, and undervalue the line of exchange and alliance between less "naturally" *akin* groups, there is a risk of social and intellectual isolation, an inbreeding of customs and ideas, lack of influx of new blood.

If we can entertain the claim that the elementary kinship structure within the European academic institutions value relations of succession and sameness, then we can shed light on the otherwise perplexing fact that scholars like Bally, Sechehayé and Hjelmslev were successful in becoming recognized as exemplars of faithful Saussurianism despite the manifest falsity of their claims. At the same time, these claims lose their guise of presumed inevitability and naturalness, and become exposed as a mark of an academic culture which values sameness over difference, and filial continuity over exogamous contestation. Such a de-naturalization of the elementary social structure ultimately helps to dismantle the Saussurean doctrine and its structuralist legacy; it also opens the door for alternative readings and appropriations in particular, and for an alternative academic culture in general.

NOTES

1. I discuss the editorial process of ghostwriting the *Course in General Linguistics* (and subsequently reviewing the same *Course* in a series of dedicated book-reviews) by Bally and Sechehaye, as well as other instances of editorial manipulation of the source materials related to Saussure's general linguistics in Stawarska 2015.
2. As presented in Bouquet 1998.
3. Critical editions are available in the French (Saussure 1989) and Italian (Saussure 2005), translated into French ([1967] 2005). English-speaking readers have until recently had access to the Roy Harris's 1972 translation (most recent printing from 2007), which includes the translator's introduction with some dismissive comments about the developments in critical Saussure scholarship (discussed below in *Note from the Translator*). The Wade Baskin earlier translation of the *Course* was reissued by Columbia UP in 2011. Edited by Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy, it contains a new introduction which seeks to both acknowledge the recent developments in critical Saussure scholarship and rehabilitate the edited version of the *Course*. The reissue also contains notes to the edited text, which run just four pages in length, and consist mainly of references to the critical editions by de Mauro and Engler. It does not therefore constitute, nor does it claim to constitute, a critical edition of the *Course* in English.
4. The fallacy of a *false attribution* occurs when an advocate appeals to an irrelevant, unqualified, unidentified, biased or fabricated source in support of an argument. A more deceptive and difficult to detect version of a false attribution is where a fraudulent advocate goes so far as to *fabricate a source* in order to support a claim.

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