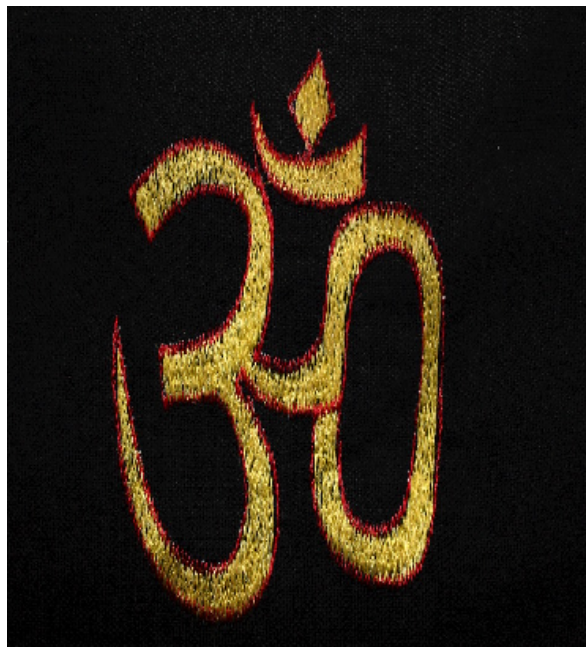




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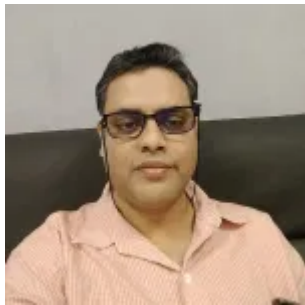
The Refutation of Saussure's Signification Theory as a Foundation for Interreligious Dialogue

📅 July 20, 2021 👤 Team ICM 📁 Biblical Studies

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By Subhasis Chattopadhyay –

The ontic foundations of language have been seen by Western structuralists as being [non-foundational](#) in contrast to the philosophic mooring rooted within the Abrahamic

religions and all branches of Indic philosophies except for the Madhyamikas. But the Madhyamikas, to begin with, do not hold with any foundationalism at all. The Yogācāra school, to find no better word for it, think of cognition at least as foundational. But as Beata Stawarska in her 2015 book, *Saussure's Philosophy of Language as Phenomenology: Undoing the Doctrine of the Course in General Linguistics*, summarises:

“The received structuralist view of Saussure's general linguistics foregrounds the signifier/signified distinction as the single most important contribution made by the *Course*. The terminological complex sign, signifier, and signified has been described as “perhaps Saussure's most influential gift to Structuralism” – this distinction

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Saussure's most influential gift to Structuralism ... this distinction —“once it has been successfully understood”—would provide an unrivalled tool to the many disciplines practicing textual analysis” [References to other authors have been removed for ease of reading]”. The proper understanding goes something like this: by tying the graphic and/or acoustic sign to the signified idea in a manner that is arbitrary or unmotivated by reality, the signifier/signified distinction establishes the autonomy of language with respect to reality ... The autonomy of language with regard to reality is established by the sign's gathering of signification via the mainly contrastive relations of difference from other signs embedded within the structured system. Arbitrariness of the sign is therefore typically received as evidence of the structuralist view that language is a closed and autonomous system of internal relations... Even though a reader of the *Course* can find evidence of the many complications and revisions that befall the initial definitions of the sign: its acknowledged bond to the social world and temporality (“[Language's] social nature is one of its inner characteristics”; “Time changes all things; there is no reason why language should escape this universal law” [Saussure, (in his *General Course* hereafter *GC*; insertion mine) 1986, p. [112], 77]), and its embeddedness within a network of relations to other signs (“in language there are only differences without positive terms” [Saussure, *GC*, 1986, p. [166], 118]) she may be unlikely to perceive them as organic elements of a discussion begun in the better-known sections from part I, ch. I; the reader of the *Course* may therefore miss the ways in which social and



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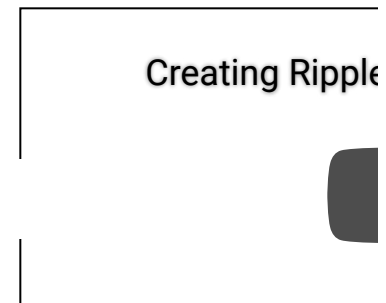
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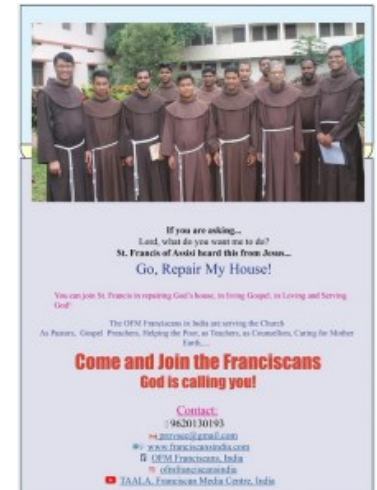
temporal factors bear upon the initial thesis related to “the nature of the linguistic sign” — considering especially that the dominant structuralist reception of the *Course* paid little heed to the social and temporal dimensions of the sign system, difficult as they would be to accommodate within a traditional scientific program of study.” (Stawarska 23 & 24, Stawarska uses a version of Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* which is not the version this author used for this essay. Stawarska’s edition has been edited by C. Bally, A. Sechehaye, with A. Riedlinger and has been translated by Roy Harris; published by LaSalle: Open Court, 1986. [Reissued by Bloomsbury, 2013].)

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) saw language as mutable in relation to chronicity. Therefore, Saussure ignored the foundational claims of language as foregrounded in the following quotations from [Hinduism](#) and Christianity which are all practised in India. Before proceeding with the quotations, it will be worthwhile to quote St. Augustine of Hippo (culled from <https://writingcommons.org/section/writing-studies/semiotics-signifier-signified/> accessed at 4.19 pm, Indian Standard Time on 19th July, 2021). The contributor to *Writing Commons* quotes Stephan Meier-Oeser’s understanding of signs in St. Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana* in two instances which this author reproduces here verbatim:

- *a sign is a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the*

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senses.

- *“all instruction is either about things or about signs; but things are learnt by means of signs”*

St. Augustine’s importance needs to be quoted from the substantially revised 2011 *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s* entry on medieval semiotics. Without semiotics, there can be no religious studies, or for that matter any meaningful exegesis within the social sciences:

‘Word’ (verbum) in its proper sense means — at least for the early Augustine — ‘spoken word’. Writing (litterae), introduced by man in order to impart permanency to spoken language, is just a secondary system of signs, consisting of “signs of words” (signa verborum) rather than of words itself (Augustine, De doctr. chr. II 8, ... De dial. 1975, 86f.).

In close analogy to this devaluation of the written word against the spoken one, Augustine in his later theory of verbum mentis (mental word) is advocating the devaluation of the spoken word and the external sign in general against the internal sphere of mental cognition. It is now the mental or interior word (verbum interius), i.e., the mental concept, that is considered as word in its most proper sense, whereas the spoken word appears as a mere

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sign or voice of the word (signum verbi, vox verbi) (Augustine, De Trinitate XV 11 20, 1968, 486f.) Thoughts (cogitationes) are performed in mental words. The verbum mentis, corresponding to what later was called the conceptus mentis or intellectus, is by no means a 'linguistic' entity in the proper sense, for it is "nullius linguae", i.e., it does not belong to any particular spoken language like Latin or Greek. So we are confronted with the paradoxical situation that linguistic terminology (e.g., verbum, locutio, oratio, dicere, etc.) is used to describe a phenomenon whose independence from any language is strongly emphasized at the same time.

Despite all the internal ruptures and inconsistencies, Augustine's doctrine of sign is based on a definition of the sign that, for the first time, intends to embrace both the natural indexical sign and the conventional linguistic sign as species of an all-embracing generic notion of sign, thus marking a turning point in the history of semiotics. (Meier-Oeser n.p.)

This means that St. Augustine was aware of the numinosity of the speech act as being referential to something more than signs inherent

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within the signs themselves. So according to Augustine, one can call a rose by any name, but the rose-ness of the rose does not disappear because Juliet says so. Augustine, therefore, bound the sign and the signifier within a tight economy of non-arbitrariness. This was unbound within the speculations of Saussure. It is from Saussure that later on, especially French thinkers arrived at the notion of existential absurdity through a misreading of Soren Kierkegaard's corpus. Kierkegaard's scepticism has been interrogated by this author elsewhere. The reader is requested to follow this [hyperlink](#) to understand the problems posed by Kierkegaard's scepticism. So, while Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) knew of the truths expounded and expanded by St. Augustine; Saussure and later, Charles Sanderson Pierce, simply threw Augustine out of their structuralist critiques of language. Saussure and Pierce consciously misread Sanskrit grammar to create their non-foundational understanding of the signifier's relation with the signified. In Ananta Charana Sukla's translation of Saussure's *On the Use of Genitive Absolute in Sanskrit*, we find Saussure making the following absurd claims without sufficient research:

The use of the locative absolute is a chapter of Sanskrit Syntax sufficiently clarified and easy to study, thanks to the abundance of examples.

Such is not the case with the genitive absolute in the same language. You may say that this construction is known only

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by hear say and by mere mention otherwise very laconically by the grammarians of India, so difficult is it to find any precise indication in its regard in European works. A monograph on this subject can therefore be of some use. (Genitive Absolute, hereafter GA, 1)

&


anā dara is not at all de rigneur for the subject as the rule of the grammarians would have us believe. (GA 2)

&

A prime fact, noticed for a long time is the absence of genitive absolute in the monuments of the Vedic period. In the presence of assurances renewed by eminent connoisseurs, I thought it useless, on my part, to verify the accuracy of this fact by special research. (GA 2)

Saussure quotes one Richard Pischel to leave the research to this Pischel and arrives at this conclusion in his endnote 39 to his monograph:

This genitive could, however, not be absolute. (GA 88)

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This endnote is to be found in his annotation (GA 55) of the phrase *paśyataù sarvalokasya* quoted from the *Mahābhārata*, Chapter VII, line 7452.

Endnote 39 is a repetition of his absurd claim negating Indian grammarians and the Church Fathers:

We have in turn considered, as regards the genitive absolute, the subject, the verb, the tense, and on each of these different points we have found it subject to certain strict limits where the usage never confined the locative absolute.

These two syntactic forms do not have equal attributions either as regards the logical relationship with the principal action, a relationship, which, in the normal sentence, would have its expression in the conjunctions of subordination. The locative absolute offers more latitude than the genitive, although constructed in the same way. It replaces subordinate clauses of a very diverse nature. It is true that this last feature perhaps makes up in depth and clarity what it lacks in breadth.

Let us remark in this regard that the construction we are

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studying is never absolutely obligatory, for none of its proper uses falls equally under the same source of the locative absolute. (GA 5)

By imposing more 'latitude' to the locative absolute as proven in the quotation above, over the genitive absolute, Saussure opens the door for a heresy which to date haunts linguistics and in conjunction with our traditional understanding of his *Course in General Linguistics* poses a threat to reduce all our sacred scriptures to metanarratives to be parsed by all varieties of religious studies' quacks. How can one understand the revelations of Allah without knowing Arabic, or the revelations of YHWH without knowing Hebrew among other languages or, for that matter the Hindu shastras Saussure quotes without knowing Sanskrit to begin with, leave alone Pali and Prakrit? So interreligious dialogue in India must engage with Saussure's heresy and then proceed. In this, we, that is those Indians of various faith communities are all united as will be proven in a moment because without this digression the promised quotations would hold no power in displacing Saussure's stranglehold over higher academic in India and one suspects, abroad.

Since this is a Christian and Roman Catholic Indian website, though this author follows the Laws Eternal (the Sanatana Dharma), one has to be respectful of this website's stated purpose of promoting Indian theology. Despite chronological discrepancies, one draws the reader's attention to the textual register Logos in the New Testament. Apart

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from the famous opening of the *Gospel of Glory*:

En arkhêi ên ho lógos, kai ho lógos ên pròs tòn theón, kai theòs ên ho lógos.

(This author copy-pasted this from the Wikipedia entry [John 1:1](#) since he only has a rudimentary knowledge of the various Biblical languages. After much online sleuthing, this author found a brilliant article on JSTOR by Eric May referred to in the *Selected Works Cited* at the end of this essay. May's 1946 essay is one of the most accessible essays on the use of Logos even in July 2021.) Further to illustrate the use of the term Logos in the New Testament, we will quote St. Luke:

So it was, as the multitude pressed about Him [Jesus] to hear the word ([logos](#)) of God, that He stood by the Lake of Gennesaret (Luke 5:1)

Returning to the beginning verse of the *Gospel of Glory*, we note that it is a cliché now within interreligious religious studies' circles to draw the parallels between Aum (ॐ) and the phrase 'Śabda-Brahman':

Thou art in the form of sound (Avalon 109)

&

Śabda is Brahman, and mantra the manifestation thereof.

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From manana arises realization of the monistic truth. Man of mantra comes from the first syllable of manana, and tra from trāna, or liberation from the bondage of the samsāra. That is called mantra which calls forth (āmantrana) the caturvarga, and which is the svarūpa of Devatā. (Footnote 1, Avalon 178)

&

Mantra is Devatā, and yantra is mantra, in that it is the body of the Devatā, who is mantra.

*Yantram mantramayam proktam mantrātmā devataivahi
Dehātmanoryathā bhedo
yantradevatayostathā (Kaulavalīya Tantra).*

*“The substance of yantra is mantra. Devatā is mantra...”
(Footnote 2, Avalon 178)*

The argument with which this essay began is established: Saussure and his followers in a spirit of structuralism willy-nilly played into the traps of colonialism and reduced the Logos or Śabda as being foundationally meaningless. And the correction of Saussure’s theories can be another locus for interreligious dialogue. We end this essay with a reflection from André Padoux’s *Vac: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*:

Suffice it to say, as a general remark, that while from Vedic times speech had a divine quality and a central role, the same is even more true in Tantrism, of which all the speculations about the Word are based upon the identity established between the latter and the divine energy, an energy which, in its innermost nature, is speech and is acting through speech; thereby everything related to articulate sound and language is endowed with an exceptional position and power. Since the energy is all pervading and since everything springs from it, thus will it be with speech; and since efficacy and power are the main concerns of Tantrism, which seeks to tap and use this energy, speech will permeate everything. Such is the case in ritual, every act of which will be accompanied by formulas (mantras), and more specially syllabic formulas (bīja: the phonic "seeds," which will almost entirely supersede the Vedic-type mantra) ... (Padoux 49)

The *Gospel* of John, the *Gospel* of the Beloved Disciple answers and solves this puzzle once for all: in the beginning, was the Word and the Word was *Vac*.

Remember the fuss about the Latin being replaced by the vernacular during Vatican II? The Conciliar Fathers were rightly cautious because

the 'Te Deum' still chanted in Latin has more value than the myriad translations of this plainchant. Why? Because Latin to date carries the significance of the realities of the Christian Faith. So too Sanskrit letters. The word Ishwara denotes the Deus of Christianity. But the word Purusha while foundational is not akin to either a man or any of the types of Abrahamic conceptions of God. Purusha is non-gendered and is *sui generis* but is not God. So words in both our religions have meanings that are eternal and fixed and not arbitrary. Thus, when we study philosophy in our schools and colleges and when we study linguistics we should ensure that our students are not taught the heresies of Saussure; rather we should begin with teachings from Patristics and then move through Acharya Gaudapada, Sri Utpaladeva and then come up to Martin Heidegger; finally leave it to a proper exegesis of the Word as performed by the *Torah* scholar, Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1995). And if one has to teach comparative linguistics without which religious exegetical glossing is impossible; we better show our students the similarities between the mantras of the Holy Syro-Malabar Qurbana, Tantric mantras endowed with Shakti and finally teach Chinese Dharanis to our students. We must stop aping what Saussure and his students felt were truths. The *Upanishads* and the Bible are revelations and thus are not mere narratives that are poetic. Fortunately, they are poetic but the Logos is the most poetic of everything known to man. Evil is not mysterious, it is stupid and banal. The Logos which is the Bindu, which is Vac is the most mysterious qualia in the multiverses which are the logical outcomes of

the yet to be deciphered mathematics of that man who knew infinity:

Srinivasa Ramanujan (1887-1920). Let us ask this Vac to reveal Itself to us as that streak of Shakti which It is.

This is why the Catholic Church uses formulae to deliver all its Sacraments because mantras have power since they mean something not arbitrary but fixed for all eternity.

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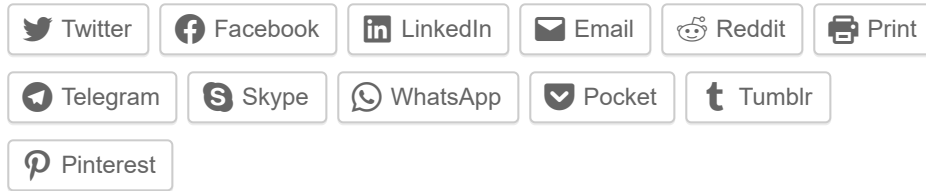
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Subhasis Chattopadhyay started his teaching career at St. Xavier's College, Calcutta, then affiliated to the University of Calcutta. He was interviewed by The Statesman about his record scores during his BA in English. He went on to earn a First Masters in English from the University of Calcutta where later he researched on the relationship between theodicy and the works of Cormac McCarthy and Stephen King read synoptically. His reviews from 2010- to date in the Ramakrishna Mission's mouthpiece, the century old Prabuddha Bharata have won him many accolades. He is not associated with the Ramakrishna Mission in any way and hence, there is no question of any conflict of interest. Most of his reviews have been showcased by Ivy League Presses. He earned his Biblical Studies and separately, Formative Spirituality qualifications through flawless research from the Pontifical Athenaeum, Bengaluru. His studies in Hinduism from the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies were done summa cum laude. He also earned further qualifications in the behavioral sciences. He now reviews books for this website and annotates the Bible here. His blogging career began with Instamedia run from Shimla. For three consecutive years, nearly every week he contributed to The Herald, published from Calcutta. The Herald is the mouthpiece of the Archdiocese of Calcutta. In 2017 he was one of the chief judges at an international literary festival held in the Himalayas. He is now writing his own books apart from teaching at the PG and UG department of English at a non-community college affiliated to the University of Calcutta. He is a recluse and a bibliophile.

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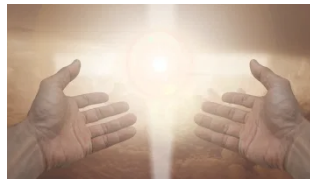
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