Introduction: Saussure today

Carol Sanders

Why, still today, do we find the name of Ferdinand de Saussure featuring promi-nently in volumes published not only on linguistics, but on a multitude of topics, volumes with titles such as *Culture and Text: Discourse and Methodology in Social Research and Cultural Studies* (Lee and Poynton, 2000), or the intriguing *Plastic Glasses and Church Fathers* (Kronenfeld, 1996)? It is to this question that the present volume attempts to bring at least a partial answer, by looking afresh at the intellectual background to Saussure's work, the work itself, its impact on European structuralism in general and linguistics in particular, and its changed but continuing influence today.

The titles above, then, are enough to show that nearly a century and a half after his birth, the ideas of this Swiss linguist and thinker still excite interest. He is best known for his *Cours de linguistique générale*, edited after his premature death from the notes of students who had attended his lectures and first published in 1916. This 'Course in general linguistics' has gone through numerous editions in France, has been translated into numerous languages, and has had an influence far beyond the area of linguistics. This book, however, is far from being the sole reason for his importance as a thinker, the recognition of which has gone through various phases since his death. In his own lifetime, he was regarded – and regarded himself – primarily as a historical linguist who had made his mark with a brilliant and precocious study in Indo-European linguistics. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, general linguistics, as a discipline that examines how language works and how best to describe the current state of a living language (as opposed to tracing the history of past language states), was barely constituted; Saussure was one of the main thinkers who contributed to establishing the principles of the discipline as we know it today. However, although the *Cours*, on first being published, was received with praise by a few, and with a more muted mixture of praise and criticism by others, it was largely ignored in many quarters. In particular, in the English-speaking world references to it were almost non-existent (see Sanders, 2000a). It would only be in the mid-twentieth century that the significance of Saussure's thought came to be realised, initially in the context of the structuralist movement.

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Structuralism was a school of thought (to some) or a method (to others) which for several decades of the second half of the twentieth century dominated some disciplines – linguistics, literary criticism, anthropology, film and media criticism, to mention but a few, and which had a strong impact on others, from psychology and philosophy to economics. The main text that inspired, and was constantly cited by, this movement was Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*, interpreted as a blueprint for describing how the structures of our social and cultural life are constituted, and the way in which once constituted they function as a system of signs. The concepts of the *Cours* thus inspired some of the most interesting and best-known thinkers of the period, in an astonishingly fertile period of ground-breaking work in what were often new disciplines, or radical departures within established disciplines, as well as work that crossed disciplinary borders. Such widespread acclaim for one book (which was not even by the thinker whose ideas it purported to represent) and such single-minded enthusiasm for one approach were bound to provoke a reaction, and towards the end of the last century, so-called Saussurean structuralism was accused, among other things, of ahistoricism, and of promoting a reductionist view of language as a code while ignoring real usage and language in context. These criticisms were to some extent countered by later studies based on manuscripts in which Saussure explores in great detail certain aspects of classical and medieval literature, in particular his claim to have discovered the widespread use of anagrams concealed in Latin poetry. So different was this facet of his work that commentators spoke of the 'two Saussures'. Even amidst the debates, studies continued to appear that testified to the relevance of the *Cours* in various domains (for example, Holdcroft, 1991, for the social sciences). Subsequently, it was partly with more balanced readings of the *Cours*, and partly with the further discovery in 1996 of notes in Saussure's own hand, that the pendulum began to swing back again. Interested readers began to construct a more nuanced view of the incomplete and suggestive work of this fascinating thinker, looking afresh at his original contribution to intellectual history, even to the extent in some cases of seeing in his reflections the embryonic beginnings of a theory of utterance and of speech acts.

There are also, of course, those Saussure scholars who, less swayed by changing intellectual fashions, have continued to work steadily to elucidate and make available his ideas. The purpose of the schematic account above is simply to give an initial overview which enables the reader to situate the subject of this book, and to understand the rationale for the topics that are covered. Specific names and works have not been cited so far, because these will emerge in the chapters that follow. Saussure himself was very aware of the history and epistemological status of linguistics, and an attempt has been made to reflect this. It is perhaps time to reexamine the place in Saussure's thought of the two centres of linguistics in which he spent his early years as a young scholar. In the first

chapter, Saussure's work as an Indo-Europeanist, and its relation to nineteenth-century German scholarship as well as to the rest of his work, is examined. The second chapter focuses on Saussure's years of teaching in Paris, during which he was undoubtedly as much influenced by colleagues as he influenced them, although this mutual debt is not always as fully recognised as it might be. The four chapters of part II concern the *Cours* itself: the complex story of its compilation, and the interlocking sum of key concepts that explain its impact. Part III deals with the delayed 'aftermath' of the *Cours*, its reception and influence not only in European structuralism and post-structuralism, but also in other places and traditions, from Russia to North America. Finally, there is an opening out to the wider impact of Saussure's thought and the elements of it that are under discussion today or which are likely to continue to be of interest tomorrow, such as his contribution to theories of meaning, and to the discipline of semiotics which he foreshadowed in the *Cours*.

Rather than duplicating the numerous studies of Saussure that exist in French, the emphasis of this volume is on providing an up-to-date introduction to, and assessment of, Saussure's ideas to an English-speaking readership. There is thus a two-fold perspective. Firstly, the aim in some of the chapters is to shed a slightly different light on the Swiss linguist by setting his thought in the wider context of English-speaking approaches to linguistics and to contemporary intellectual history (as in the chapter by Norris). Inevitably, many major writers on Saussure publish in languages other than English, and in particular in French, so that a second aim is to try to make accessible to readers the work of certain scholars from other traditions. Chapters may be read individually; although certain key concepts inevitably recur, an attempt has been made to avoid undue overlap. However, because Saussure's ideas are looked at here in a variety of ways by the different authors, most will be gained from (preferably) reading the whole volume, or (at the very least) from following up the cross-references that are given from one chapter to others.

In the context of the above, a comment is called for about the various editions of the *Cours de linguistique générale*, which can be confusing, and also about translation and terminology. The *Cours*, first published in 1916, has been republished in a number of subsequent editions, which from the second edition on have kept the same page numbering. In 1972, an important scholarly edition with substantial notes by Tullio de Mauro (based on an Italian version published in 1967) appeared in French, still retaining the original page numbers for the text of the *Cours*. In this volume, page references to the *Cours* are simply given with the abbreviation *CLG*, and if a distinction needs to be made between the original publication and de Mauro's edition, the abbreviation *CLG*/D is used or the date is given. Manuscript sources of the *Cours* were first published by Godel (Godel, 1957), followed by a masterly juxtaposition of the various student notes available drawn up by Engler (*CLG*/E) in two volumes published in

1968 and 1974. Other works by Saussure are listed under his name and the date of publication in the first section of the final bibliography. The next section of the bibliography comprises a select list of major works on Saussure published in the last two decades, mainly in English, but with some references in other languages; it is hoped that this may prove a helpful reference tool for further reading and research. Finally, there is a consolidated list of references used by the authors of the chapters of this volume. (A small number if items appear twice: for example, Godel's compilation of the lecture notes taken by some students is commonly referred to as Godel, 1957, and it is listed as such in the references as well as among Saussure's works.)

Most of the quotations in the chapters are given in English, with occasional short quotations being provided in French also, in order to give the reader a taste of the original. There are two published English translations of the *Cours de linguistique générale*, and a number of critical volumes in which authors have provided their own versions. The first published translation into English, by Wade Baskin, appeared in the USA in 1959 (and then in Britain a year later). It was subsequently reissued with a useful introduction by Jonathan Culler in 1974, with the same page numbering. Baskin's translation is referred to as *CLG*-B. The second English translation is by Roy Harris and was first published in Britain in 1983 (*CLG*-H). Because each of these translations has its strengths and weaknesses, it was decided to allow authors the freedom to use either of them, or even to supply their own, as they thought fit. The translated quotations to be found in the chapters are not sufficiently different to lead to misunderstandings or inconsistencies; rather, they allow the reader to get the flavour of each, and perhaps eventually to select one or the other in order to read more of the *Cours*, as well, hopefully, as appreciating some of the difficulties involved in translating this text. There are bilingual French/English editions of some student notebooks (see Saussure, 1993, 1996 and 1997 in the bibliography). Some manuscript notes have been published over the years in French, for example in the *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*; the major publication of manuscript notes, both those discovered in 1996 and some older ones, is the *Ecrits de linguistique générale (ELG)*, edited by Bouquet and Engler (Saussure, 2002), which will shortly appear in English published by Oxford University Press. Where no reference is made to an existing English version of a text, the translation is the work of the author (or overall translator) of the chapter.

A translation problem arises with certain of Saussure's terms. The first is the translation of the terms *langue* and *parole*, as used in the *Cours*. Over the years Saussure's own terminology varies, and it develops throughout the three lecture series on which the *Cours* is based. The solution which he adopted, and which has been consecrated by the *Cours* with occasional lapses, was to divide the overarching term for language, or the human language faculty, which he refers to as *langage*, into *langue* and *parole*. The former refers to

the potential linguistic system which resides in the mind of all members of a speech community, and waits to be activated in *parole*, in individual utterances, or acts of speech. To complicate matters, *une langue, les langues*, etc. is used with its non-technical meaning of a language/languages, although this usage poses no translation problem. (See Gordon's chapter, and Sanders, 2000b.) The difficulty with the other three terms *langage/langue/parole* is that English only has two likely contenders: language and speech. Baskin uses 'human speech/language/speaking' for the triad, whereas Harris tends to use 'language' or 'language faculty' for *langage*, 'language structure' or 'linguistic system' (or less happily 'the *langue*') for *langue* and 'speech' for *parole*. There is no ideal solution, but of the English terms, 'language system' for *langue* and 'speech' for *parole* would seem the best in most contexts, as long as another phrase such as 'language faculty' is retained for *langage* where there is any possible confusion between it and *langue*. However, the French terms have now been used so frequently in English in any writing on Saussure or on structuralism in general that another solution is to borrow the French words. In these chapters, we have generally used either 'language system' or *langue* when talking about *langue*, and either 'speech' or *parole* for the latter. There are other Saussurean terms that have become 'naturalised', such as *état de langue* for the snapshot picture that we get of any language at a particular stage of its development. There is also another well-known pair of terms: the linguistic sign is made up of two inseparable parts, the 'signifier' and the 'signified', which are Baskin's translation of *signifiant* and *signifié*, while Harris uses 'signification' and 'signal'. (On the sign, see the chapter by Joseph.) We have used either Baskin's terms, or the French loan-words of *signifiant* and *signifié*.

The adoption of these terms, which will be found in English in a range of disciplinary fields, is just one more indication of the lasting impact made by Saussure's thought. These concepts were to be found embryonically present in other scholars of Saussure's time, but he it was who sharpened their focus and, above all, who wove them all into a coherent system which could be used as a model for us to understand and describe the workings not only of language, but also of other human sign systems. In our age of communication and information technologies, it is not surprising that there is once more interest in Saussure's thought, so that an 'Institut Ferdinand de Saussure' has been set up with the aim of exploring and promoting the relevance of Saussure to linguistics and beyond, for example in cognitive science, and in what the French are calling 'les sciences de la culture'. It is true that at one point, just at the time when it was fashionable to proclaim the death of the author, Saussure's elevation to almost cult-figure status may have owed something to the enigmatic nature of his work, unfinished, sometimes ambiguous and posthumously published by others. However, if since then it has shown that it will stand the test of time in its relevance to a range of disciplines, this is also in part due to the individual

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voice that comes through both the striking cadences of the *Cours de linguistique générale* and the more hesitant tones of the manuscript notes of the *Ecrits de linguistique générale*, despite the different circumstances of their publication. It is to be hoped that the reader of this volume will be motivated to go to the texts themselves to pursue the elusive, foresightful and fascinating thought of Ferdinand de Saussure.

Finally, a number of the distinguished commentators who have written about Saussure have contributed chapters to this Companion. There are inevitably other important names that are very much present, and feature in the bibliography, such as Harris, Koerner and Starobinski, to name but three. Among the 'giants' of Saussure scholarship, however, one name stands out. It is that of Rudolf Engler who, alongside his other works, compiled the indispensable comparative edition of student notes from Saussure's Geneva lectures (Saussure, 1968 and 1974). He prepared a chapter for this volume on the making of the *Cours de linguistique générale* shortly before his untimely death in August 2003. Hopefully, the entire volume would have met with his approval and pleasure.

Part I

Out of the nineteenth century

1 Saussure and Indo-European linguistics

Anna Morpurgo Davies

Saussure as seen by his contemporaries

In 1908 the Linguistic Society of Paris (Société Linguistique de Paris) dedicated a volume of *Mélanges* to Ferdinand de Saussure, then aged fifty and professor at the University of Geneva (Saussure, 1908). A very brief and unsigned preface stated that, since the few years that he had spent in Paris between 1881 and 1891 had been decisive for the development of French linguistics, the Society was happy to dedicate to him one of the first volumes of its new series. The Society also wished to thank the eminent Swiss linguists who had joined Saussure's earlier pupils in paying their respects to the author of the *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles en indo-européen*. Two things are now striking even if they were not so at the time. First, no attempt was made in the preface or elsewhere to distinguish between the two main activities of Saussure: teaching and research in comparative and historical linguistics (*grammaire comparée*) and teaching and research in general or theoretical linguistics. Secondly the articles collected in the volume were all, with one exception, articles in Indo-European comparative linguistics. They include work by established scholars of considerable fame like Antoine Meillet in Paris or Jacob Wackernagel in Basle, but these were historical and comparative linguists rather than theoretical linguists. The one exception is a paper by one of Saussure's pupils and colleagues, indeed one of the editors of the *Cours*, Albert Sechehaye, who discusses the role of stylistics in the theory of language. Yet Saussure's current fame is tied to his views on theoretical linguistics.

Saussure as a comparativist

If Saussure's contemporaries had been asked, they would have simply called him a linguist since historical and comparative linguistics (often identified with Indo-European studies) was the prevailing form of linguistics at the time. Indeed all the work that Saussure published in his lifetime, and which was collected posthumously in a single volume (Saussure, 1922) concerned problems of Indo-European, and fitted in the tradition of historical and comparative work which

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had started at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Saussure, in common with most of his contemporaries, spoke of Franz Bopp's school and of the new science founded by Bopp (Saussure, 2002: 130ff.). The reference was to the German scholar who in 1816 had published a seminal book where he in effect demonstrated that a number of ancient languages (Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Gothic) descended from a common prehistoric ancestor which had not survived; through comparison of the daughter languages it was possible to identify the common features which belonged to the parent language as well as the innovations which each of the descendants had introduced into the common inheritance. Bopp's more advanced work included a comparative grammar of Sanskrit, Avestan, Greek, Latin, Lithuanian, Gothic and German (1833–52) which in its second edition (1857–61) also discussed Old Slavic, Armenian and other Indo-European languages. In seeing himself in Bopp's tradition, Saussure was in line with most of his contemporaries; however, he went well beyond them in having doubts (which he did not express in his published work) about the exact nature of the 'new science' founded by Bopp and about the continuity between Bopp's work and the work of his contemporaries.[1]

Two Saussures?

A number of questions arise for the modern reader trained to think of Saussure as the founder of general linguistics or, more specifically, as the author of that posthumous *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) which is often seen as marking the beginning of general or theoretical linguistics. If Saussure was in fact a professor of Sanskrit and Indo-European languages for most of his life, if practically all that he published of his own volition during his lifetime concerned historical and comparative linguistics, what is the link, if any, between these two sorts of activities? Is it true that there were two Saussures, as the title (though not the content) of a famous paper (Redard, 1978a) may suggest?

The *Cours* is well known, but in its published form it was not written by Saussure. We must focus on the work actually published. What was it about? How innovative was it? How important? How much of it, if any, survived? How necessary is it for the current practitioners of the subject to go back to the original publications? And above all, how did it fit with the contemporary beliefs? An answer is not easy because what in Saussure's time was the obvious subject matter of linguistics is currently the preserve of a small and highly specialised group of scholars. Some background is necessary.

Nineteenth-century linguistics

The very concept of linguistics as a university discipline is a novelty of the nineteenth century. In itself this is not surprising. The nineteenth century saw

the beginning of the institutionalisation of academic disciplines as we now know them, as well as the identification and sometimes creation of a number of new disciplines. In most instances the German universities served as a model and trend-setters, not least because they had introduced the concept of a university dedicated to research as well as to teaching. Research involved specialisation. When Saussure started to study at the University of Leipzig in 1876 he either attended or could have attended seminars and lectures by a multitude of specialists: Georg Curtius (1820–85) was in effect teaching Indo-European and the historical grammar of the classical languages; August Leskien (1840–1916) was teaching Slavic and Indo-European; Karl Brugmann (1849–1919), who was to become one of the major Indo-Europeanists, was in Leipzig from 1873, as *Privatdozent* from 1877 and later (1887) returned as a full professor of Indo-European linguistics. The list could continue. Such a concentration of specialists, each one of whom at the time would have been called a *Sprachwissenschaftler* 'linguist' (and now would be labelled Indo-Europeanist), is remarkable and would have been unthinkable fifty years earlier (it is doubtful that at that stage as many 'professional' linguists existed in the whole of Germany). Even in the 1880s it was probably unthinkable outside Germany, though the new concept of research university was beginning to prevail in Europe and the USA. It may be useful to mention that in their specialised field all of these scholars produced work which is still known and used nowadays (see Morpurgo Davies, 1998; Auroux, 2000).

Textual and linguistic studies

The linguists of the time were not theoreticians but had to have erudition and scholarship. As well as linguists they could be medievalists like Braune and his contemporary Eduard Sievers (1850–1932), who were more than capable of editing Old English or Old High German or Old Norse texts, or they could be classicists like Georg Curtius, who also lectured on Greek and Latin literature. All of them knew Greek, Latin and sometimes Hebrew from their school days and most of them had studied Sanskrit at university as well as the ancient Germanic languages. All of them had to be competent textual and literary scholars because the data that they needed were found in ancient texts (inscriptions, papyri, manuscripts) which made sense only within certain cultural frameworks which the reader had to understand. The study and understanding of these texts could be, and often was, an end in itself, but Saussure's teachers or colleagues in Leipzig mainly wanted to use them as a source of linguistic data. The aim was to understand and explain the development of an ancient language from the period of the first evidence to the period in which it was best known. To explain, in this context, mostly meant to account for the irregularities in the later phases of the language through the reconstruction of sound changes and