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Homework 2
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You have read excerpts from Ferdinand de Saussure [1916], Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* [360 BCE], chapters 1-7 in Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* [350 BCE] (in Greek: *Peri hermeneias*), excerpts from Locke [1690], Book III, and Borges [1942].

You may have a look at sources in secondary literature such as Holdcroft (1991), Castagnoli and Di Lascio (2012), Crivelli (2009), Whitaker (1996), Hanna (1991), and Morris (2007) ch. 1. However, you should be selective with secondary sources: you will not find *your* ideas in there.

And hopefully you have found the time to watch François Truffaut's film *L'enfant sauvage* (1970).

Below you will find six items. Each student in the class will have to pick one of these items, no two students may pick the same. On the basis of the item you pick, **you should formulate a clear thesis and defend it in an argumentative essay of 2500 words**. The essay's word limit includes citations, and it excludes footnotes, and bibliographic references.

1. In Part one, ch. 1, Ferdinand de Saussure [1916] defines the sign, a theoretical entity which does not unite a name and a thing, but instead a double-entity associating arbitrarily a sound-image and a concept. The defining properties of the Saussurean definition of a linguistic sign partly coincide and partly differ from how Socrates, the character in Plato's dialogue, thought of names in the *Cratylus*.
2. We gather from Plato's dialogue the idea that a name is correctly given when it expresses the nature or essence of the thing(s) it names (cf. [422c-d]), or when the letters it is composed of are like the thing(s) it names (cf. [433b]). Thus, correctly or incorrectly given, a name's meaning relates to the nature or essence of the thing(s) it names, or to the thing(s) named. This seems quite incompatible with Locke's view on the "primary or immediate signification" of words:

The use men have of these marks being either to record their own thoughts, for the assistance of their own memory; or, as it were, to bring out their ideas, and lay them before the view of others: words, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them, how imperfectly soever or carelessly those ideas are collected from the things which they are supposed to represent. (Locke [1690], Book III, Part II, §2)

3. In Plato's *Cratylus*, it is suggested that one can say whether a word correctly or incorrectly applies to what it signifies. This seems to be in tension with this passage from Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*, ch. 4, 16b25:

“A sentence is a significant spoken sound some part of which is significant in separation—as an expression, not as an affirmation.”

4. Ferdinand de Saussure and Locke seem to agree in claiming that linguistic signs are arbitrary. However, Locke’s conception of what words mean seems to be in tension with this claim from FdS [1916], Part II, ch. VI, p. 112: “There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language.”
5. Consider this claim by Aristotle:

Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of—affections of the soul—are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses of—actual things—are also the same. (Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, ch. 1, 16a1-5)

From this and other passages in *De Interpretatione*, one can conclude that Aristotle’s idea of the linguistic sign is, in various respects, different from Ferdinand de Saussure’s conception of the linguistic sign.

6. Aristotle and Locke seem to partly agree, but partly disagree, in taking linguistic signs to be “symbols of affections in the soul” (Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, ch. 1, 16a1) or as marks that the speaker uses to “make known his ideas to the hearer” (Locke [1690], Book III, Part II, §2).

It is rather clear, however, that they disagree with respect to what they think are actual things. According to Aristotle, “of actual things some are universal, others particular” (*De Interpretatione*, ch. 7, 17a35), whereas Locke claims that “it is plain, by what has been said, that *general* and *universal* belong not to the real existence of things” (Locke [1690], Book III, Part III, §11).

A few indications about how to write the essay:

- Make sure you **clearly state your thesis**, one (and only one) declarative sentence stating one (and only one) proposition that you will purport to defend in your essay.

Your thesis cannot be a repetition (copy/paste) of one of the prompts above. It has to be a **claim** stemming from your critical and informed reading of the prompt, a claim *you can argue for*.

- Make sure that you **structure your essay so that your arguments clearly relate to your thesis**. The paragraphs in the body take care of defending your claim in a stepwise and clear way. The body of the essay should flow smoothly, no jumps.
- Make sure that you devote the first paragraph of the essay to the **introduction** and the last one, to the **conclusion**.

- The **target audience** of your essay is an undergraduate student who is not taking the course. Thus you cannot assume your audience has read what you have read. Therefore, you have to reconstruct concepts, positions, discussions, and claims so that a reader unfamiliar with the texts can understand your thesis, follow your argument, and be persuaded by your essay.
- **Think for yourself.** Reading secondary literature is useful, but you shouldn't appeal to it as a shortcut.
- Since you will write a short essay, **do not to use section headings**, except for the section in which you list bibliographic references.
- Give an **informative, catchy title** to your essay.

And here are some notes to bear in mind:

- Read the instructions of this assignment. **Task achievement** is a must.
- **Proper bibliographic references** are a must. Failing to handle them properly often amounts to plagiarism. Reread the course syllabus and this page to understand the risks you incur when you commit such a fraud: **Academic Honesty/Plagiarism**.
- **Edit and proofread** thoroughly before you submit your essay.

References

Book chapters:

Ferdinand de Saussure [1916] (1959) *Course in general linguistics*. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye (eds.), in coll. with A. Reidlinger.. W. Baskin (trans., introduction and notes), New York, McGraw-Hill, Introduction, ch. I-V, pp. 4-23; Part 1, ch. I-II, pp. 65- 78; Part 2, ch. I-IV, pp. 101-122.

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Jorge Luis Borges [1942] (1964) "Funes the Memorious." In *Labyrinths*, trans. James E. Irby. New York, New Directions, pp. 148-154.

Films:

François Truffaut (1970) *L'enfant sauvage*, 1h21', available on <https://vimeo.com/215596192>

Secondary sources:

David Holdcroft (1991): *Saussure: Signs, System and Arbitrariness*. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press.

Luca Castagnoli and Ermelinda Valentina Di Lascio (2012) "Ancient Philosophy of Language", in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Language*, Gillian Russell and Delia Graff Fara (eds.), New York, Routledge, Section VII, ch. 7.1, pp. 811-826.

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Michael Morris (2007) *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, ch. 1, "Locke and the nature of language", pp. 5-20.