

Philosophy of language (PHIL UA-9085)

Saussure on linguistic signs 2

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5 March 2024

Plan for today

Langue, langage, parole

The arbitrariness of linguistic signs

Discussion

Introduction [Ch.II] *Subject matter and scope of linguistics*

- What are examples of forces that are permanently and universally at work in all languages? Rel. with demography and topography?
- Should linguistics be an empirical discipline (like archeology), a theoretical discipline (like physics)?
- This might be surprising but it says a lot about the sort of science FdS thinks linguistics should be:

Everything in language is basically psychological, including its material and mechanical manifestations, such as sound changes... [p. 6]

- **Language** isn't a system of sounds.

The thing that constitutes language is, as I shall show later, unrelated to the phonic character of the linguistic sign. [p. 7]

Discussion (cont.1)

Introduction [Ch.III] *The object of linguistics*

- The linguistic phenomenon is complex:

a sound, a complex acoustical-vocal unit, combines in turn with an idea to form a complex physiological-psychological unit. [p. 8]

Plus, it is both individual and social, and it presupposes an established system which evolves in time.

- A first important distinction: **langue** vs. **langage**.
- **Langue** = Language

is a self-contained whole and a principle of classification. [p. 9]

- **Langage** = Human speech

is many-sided and heterogeneous [...] we cannot put it into any [single] category of human facts, for we cannot discover its unity. [p. 9]

- **Language is a part of human speech**, an essential one.

Discussion (cont.2)

- Is speech natural?

what is natural to mankind is not oral speech but the faculty of constructing a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas. [p. 10]

- The **speaking circuit** as an event between two individuals. It involves phonation and audition. Its individual execution can be identified with **parole** = speaking.
- (N.B.: The brain-side of the story in pp. 11-12 is too simplistic...)
- The sound-image, unlike the sound, is **psychological**. So is a **concept**. “When we hear people speaking a language that we do not know...” (p.13)
- So ... **Langue** = Language is a system of distinct signs which

isn't complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity. [p. 14]

Discussion (cont.3)

- **Langue** = Language is a social institution. Hobbesian point:

it exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of a community

- **Langue** = Language can and should be studied independently of **langage** = human speech and **parole** = speaking.
- Linguistics studies a system, for **langue** = language is

system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound-images, and in which both parts of the sign are psychological.

- Language is **concrete**. Linguistic signs are **not** abstract. They are tangible.
- There aren't just linguistic signs. Other systems of signs are symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc. Semiology would be

A science that studies the life of signs within society...

Discussion (cont.4)

Introduction [Ch.IV] *Linguistics of language and linguistics of speaking*

- Language is not affected by mistakes in performance:

Language is comparable to a symphony in that what the symphony actually is stands completely apart from how it is performed; the mistakes that musicians make in playing the symphony do not compromise this fact.

- Phonetic change (material change) only affects language as a system if changes in **interpretation** ensue.
- **Language & speaking are interdependent but distinct.**
Language has logical precedence, speaking has historical precedence.

Discussion (cont.5)

Part I, Gral. Principles [Ch.I] *Nature of the linguistic sign*

- Language is a system of signs, not a nomenclature.
- The linguistic sign is a double, psychological entity. Neither side pre-exists, a co-constitutive bond.
 - **Signified:** concept.
 - **Signifier:** sound-image (psychological imprint of the sound).
- The bond between signified and signifier is **arbitrary**, unmotivated, conventional. No link or resemblance, no natural connection between them.
- But the one necessitates the other, and vice-versa, in that one cannot be invoked without the other one coming along.
- Plus: the choice is not left to *the* speaker.
- Potential counterexamples: pantomime, iconic symbols (e.g., scales for justice), onomatopoeia, interjections.
- The signifier is linear, it is presented as a succession.

Discussion (cont.6)

Part I, Gral. Principles [Ch.II] *Immutability and mutability of the sign*

- In various respects, the linguistic sign is immutable:
 - The signifier is fixed wrt the linguistic community.
 - Language is inherited.
 - Arbitrary nature of the sign “protects” language from change.
 - Linguistics signs are numberless.
 - Language as a system isn't arbitrary, it is ruled by logic.
 - Collective inertia.
- But the linguistic sign is also mutable: there can be shifts in the relationship between the signifier and the signified.
 - Both sound-images and concepts can change.
 - Change occurs in time, it's never immediate.
 - Change occurs only if it is adopted by more than one member of the community

Discussion (cont.7)

Part II, Synchronic Linguistics [Ch.I] *Generalities*

- Synchronic vs. diachronic study of language.

Part II, Synchronic Linguistics [Ch.II] *The concrete entities of language*

- Signs are concrete entities, not abstractions. A sign exists only if the association of signified & signifier is retained. The concept is a quality of the sound-image, the sound-image is a quality of the concept.
- Delimiting signs in a phonic or written chain isn't easy!

we must be able in comparing a series of sentences in which the same unit occurs to separate the unit from the rest of the context and find in each instance that meaning justifies the delimitation.

- Linguistic entities are not perceptible at the outset and yet we cannot doubt that they exist...

Discussion (cont.8)

Part II, Synchronic Linguistics [Ch.III] *Identities, realities, values*

- When are two signs identical?

The linguistic mechanism is geared to differences and identities, the former being only the counterpart of the latter.

Homonymy (vs. synonymy).

- Signs are used when **speaking** (so it's not so easy to separate langue et parole), they are signs iff they are repeatable.
- Signs are concrete entities, but they are not directly accessible.
- The identity of a sign is given by its **value**.

Although *mouton*, *sheep* may have the same signification in a given context, they don't have the same value!

Part II, Synchronic Linguistics [Ch.IV] *Linguistic value*

- Language is a system of values. As such, thought and sound are shapeless masses.

Discussion (cont.9)

- **Value** differs from signification. Signification is the counterpart of the sound-image.
- But a sign as such stands in counterpart relations with other signs of language (dissimilarity and comparison).
- A sign's value is determined by its environment. Signs stand in opposition. A similar argument can be given wrt signifieds.

A signifier like /bœf/ is what it is by virtue of how it opposes to other signifiers, like /bof/.

- Values are relative. “In language there are only differences”...
- A system of values, like the game of chess.
- Arbitrary and differential are “correlative qualities”. Arbitrary concerns the relation between the signifier and the signified. Differential concerns how a signified relates to other signifieds, and how a signifier relates to other signifiers.

What's next?

Session 13: Thursday 7 March 2024

Topic: Signs: conventionalism vs. naturalism 1

Reading: Plato [360 BCE] Cratylus

Secondary sources: Castagnoli and Di Lascio (2012)

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