SAUSSURE'S THEORY OF SIGN

Sreekumar M. “A comparative study of Sphota theory of language and F.D. Saussures theory of sign” Department of Philosophy, University of Calicut, 1998
CHAPTER - III

SAUSSURE'S THEORY OF SIGN

"...I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar..."

Nietzsche - Twilight of Idols - 483.

"..... The concept is real without being actual, ideal without being abstract. The concept is defined by its consistency, its endo consistency and exo consistency, but it has no reference: it is self-referential; it posits itself and its objects at the same time as it is created. Constructivism unites the relative and the absolute ......"

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari - What is Philosophy - p.22.

ONE

In his life Ferdinand de Saussure led an uneventful life but his uneventful life bring so much 'destructive effects' in the modern thought. In language philosophy as a rule, Saussure is held responsible for all the extravagances of the poststructuralist theories that came after him. The famous poststructuralist concepts such as "the fundamental undecidability inherent in language" or the claim that "there is nothing outside of the text" are often traced back to Saussure. Saussure's concept of the Sign or to be
specific, his principle of the arbitrary nature of the Sign is considered to be the perpetual source of all poststructuralist thinking.

Saussure is acknowledged to be the father of modern linguistics. He recognised the language philosophy along the scientific lines. Major work of Saussure, named Course in General Linguistics had a major impact not only on linguistics but on cultural studies too. 'Course' is the basis of structuralism and semiology. Saussure published only one book during his life time, which is named as Memoire (1878). Memoire was a work in comparative philology which investigated the vowel system of early Indo-European languages. His famous work 'Course' was published posthumously by his students, the book is based upon the students notes, which was given by him to his students on 1907-11 at University of Geneva. The primary object of Saussure in the course is to outline a methodology for linguistics. In his 'course' he was searching for the underlying structure of language. The linguistic model developed by Saussure has been adopted and refined by Levi-Strauss and Barthes.

TWO

In the beginning 'course' offers us a compressed vision of Saussure's remarks on the history of linguistics. Comparative philology or comparative
grammar which dates from Franz Bopps work of 1816 has been taken as the first stage of linguistic investigation by Saussure. And the second period began in 1870, and in this period comparative philology became more properly historical and some linguists began asking important questions, about the nature of language and linguistic method. Saussure is interested in the method of linguistic analysis and the definition of linguistic units. So he did not give too much importance to general problems of linguistics.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, linguists assume that linguistics would cast light on the nature of human thought and of the mind itself. At that time it is believed that by studying language one sought to understand thought itself. In 18th century thought the origin of language became a central problem in linguistics. It is essential to note that the origin of language was investigated as a philosophical problem rather than historical problem. Thus 18th century thinking about language came to focus up on philosophic - etymology, the attempts to explain signs and abstract ideas by imagining their origin in gesture, action, etc. The desire to study the mechanism of mind in language led to a search for primitive roots. A root is a rudimentary name, a basic representation of the word. The etymological project assumes that the words of our language are not arbitrary sings but have a rational basis and
are motivated by resemblance to a primitive sign. In the approach the relationship between language and mind conceived atomistically.

The 19th century linguists would reject the 'atomic' picture, they divorced the study of language from the study of mind. According to the 19th century linguistics the word became a form, which was to be compared with other forms so as to establish the relation between the language. In other words the historical evolution of the word is to be traced. In short the object of study of 19th century linguistics was the study of 'sign' as a form whose resemblance and historical links with forms must be demonstrated.

Linguistics generally consider the 19th century development as a great advance, and undoubtedly this was a great leap from the 17th century. But something was lost in this shift, that was the proper use of a methodology in linguistics. Saussure once again returned to the problem of sign. He saw that unless one treats linguistic forms as signs one can't define them. He placed the problem of sign in the context of his methodological enquiry, thus he avoided the atomism of 18th century linguistics. Saussure re-establishes, the study of the relationship between the study of language and the study of mind at another level and in a different methodological context. In Saussure's view the study of language reveals that mind is not a set of primitive conceptions or natural ideas but the general structuring and diffracting
operations by which things are made to signify. When Saussure argues that 'meaning' is differential, based on the difference between terms, his claim concerns not only language but the general human process too. In every human process he sees the creation of meaning by differentiation.

The comparative grammarians had also been criticised by Saussure. He says that the comparative grammarians never succeeded in their attempt to find out a true 'linguistics' because they did not try to determine the nature of the object they were studying. And Saussure accuses them that, they do not try of find out the significance of the relationship in a system, their method was exclusively comparative rather than historical,

"...But the comparative school, which had the indisputable merit of opening up a new and fruitful field, didn't succeed in setting up the true science of linguistics. It failed to seek out the nature of its object of study. Obviously, without this elementary step, no science can develop a method.

The first mistake of the comparative philologists was also the source of all their other mistakes. In their investigations (which embraced only the Indo-European languages), they never asked themselves the meaning of their comparisons or
the significance of the relations that they discovered. Their method was exclusively comparative, not historical...” 1

As Saussure rightly observes, it was only towards 1870, that linguistics began to lay the base stone for a proper study and analysis of language. Two important developments happened at that time. The first one was, a group of linguistics known as neo-grammarians, demonstrated that sound laws, which previously had been treated as correspondence that held in large number of cases but not in others, operated without exception. The second important development was after 1870. In the words of Saussure that was ‘the result of comparative study were brought into historical sequences’. In his works in 1878 Saussure himself made a major contribution to historical linguistics. These works showed Saussure's result of thinking of language as a system of relational items, even when working at the task of historical reconstruction. We can take Saussure certainly as an accomplished Neo-Grammian.

Saussure's contemporaries' fault lie in the point that, they failed to ask themselves the fundamental questions about what they were studying: those questions about the nature of language itself and its individual forms and important questions in methodology, such as the relation between synchronic and diachronic in a system. The Neo-Grammarians could not take the problem in the seriousness it deserved; because they were not thinking about
the signs. The Neo-Grammarians were concerned not with 'signs' but with forms, it was the failure of that school.

The contribution of William Dwight Whitney, who was one of the Neo-Grammarians, linguist, had been praised by Saussure, because he raised the question of Sign. In his work 'Language and the study of language, and life and growth of language' Whitney argued that 'Language is in fact, an institution founded on social convention; a treasure of words and forms' each of which is an 'arbitrary and conventional sign'. The conventional and institutional nature of language has been stressed by Whitney. Saussure's remarks about Whitney shows the importance of Whitney's theory:

"...To emphasise the fact that language is a genuine institution, Whitney quite justly insisted upon the arbitrary nature of sings; and by so doing, he placed linguistics on its true axis. But he did not follow through and see that the arbitrariness of language radically separates it from all other institutions. This is apparent from the way in which language evolves..." ²

Unfortunately Whitney did not realize the consequences and implications of his new perspective. He still specified that the linguistics must be a historical science. He underestimated the task of synchronic
linguistics. His awareness about the problems of definition and identity of the relational nature of linguistic units was too little. However the insights of Whitney prompted Saussure to think about the problem of sign in a new perception.

We have to place Saussure with Freud and Durkheim inorder to understand Saussure's importance in the areas of social science. Sigmaund Freud and Emil Durkheim, the founders of Modern Psychology and Modern Sociology respectively, were two exact contemporaries of Saussure. In social science these three thinkers created a new revolution. And they placed social science in a new epistemological context, which even today offers us a new mode of explanation in social science.

The nature and status of the 'facts' in a society is the initial problem for social science. This was a central problem in the 19th century. The two main streams in philosophy, namely German Idealism and empiricist positivism discussed this issue very broadly. The two schools thought that society is a derivated secondary phenomena rather than something primary.

The positivist tradition of Hume distinguished between an objective physical reality of objects and events and an individual subjective perception of reality. According to this school society is to be taken as the outcome of the action of the individuals. Thus the society is a fictitious body, the sum of
several members who compose it. Definitely this is a utilitarian standpoint; they think that society is the result of individuals and each person in the society acting in accordance with self-interest. On the other hand, for Hegel, who has been the prominent figure in German idealism, laws, manner, customs, and state itself are expressions of a mind. Hegel studied the Human history as the manifestation of primary; the primary phenomena, the spirit.

These views have been strongly and vehemently attacked by Saussure, Durkheim and Freud. Their methods were based upon the 'objective reality of social facts'. According to the methodology of these three thinkers, the individual society is a primary reality, not just the sum of individual activities, nor the manifestation of mind. And if one wishes to study human behaviour one must understand that there is a social reality. These thinkers did not dismiss the social significance of personal action, but they insisted on the point that, meaning of the society cannot be treated as the sum of subjective perceptions.

Saussure, Freud, and Durkheim asked some important questions: what makes individual experience possible? what enables man to operate with meaningful objects and actions? What enables them to communicate and act meaningfully? The answer postulated by them was that the social institution, formed by human activities is the condition of experience. Their
methodology suggests that to understand an individual experience one must study the social norms which make it possible. The social phenomenon is made possible by a system of interpersonal conventions, that is a language.

Freud analysed and interpreted the human mind in terms of this new methodology. In his view the individual in a society assimilates, consciously or unconsciously the collective social system, and the behaviour of an individual is made possible only in a social system or network. Values are the products of this social system. Freud made apparent to us how the culture suffuses the remotest parts of the individual mind. The suffusion of culture makes an individual's sense of identity. In the formation of an individual self, unconscious defence occasioned by social taboos leads a person to repression and displacement. Here what Freud tries to point-out is the importance of a social system, which produces 'culture' just language, which produces 'meaning' in a system. As Durkheim argued the reality which is crucial to the individual, is not the physical environment but a 'social value', a system of rules and norms, collective representation, which makes possible social behaviour.

In his works on suicide, Durkheim gave us a causal explanation. He study the cause of high suicide rate in a society. Suicides in a society in the view of Durkheim are the manifestation of the weakening in social bonds,
which result from particular configuration of social norms. Freud's psychological analysis are also causal explanations; his attempt is to relate actions to an underlying psyche economy. But the linguists do not try to explain the cause of an utterance by a particular person in a society at a given moment. They try to show why the sequence has the form and meaning. Linguists do it by relating it to the system of language.

Farewell to the historical explanation was the significant aspect in the works of Freud, Durkheim and Saussure. They marked move from historical to structural analysis. To them explanation of the social phenomena is not to discover temporal antecedents and link them in a causal chain but to specify the place and function of the phenomena in a system. Instead of conceiving the causation in a historical model, which has been explained by them in a state, in a condition or in structure.

The decisive steps of Durkheim, Freud and Saussure seem responsible for the development of the science of man. Removing the 'origins' from a temporal history and by internalising the 'origin' they create a new space of explanation which has come to be called unconscious. Structural explanation relates action to a system of norms - the rules of language, the collective representation of a society, the mechanism of a physical economy - and thus
the concept of unconscious is a way of explaining how these systems have explanatory force.

The concept unconsciousness arises in the work of Freud, but it is in linguistics that the concept emerges in its clearest and most irrefutable form. Unconscious is the concept which enables one to explain an indubitable fact. In linguistics, for example, we say that we know a language, yet we need a linguist to explain to us what it is that we know. The concept of the unconscious connects these two facts and opens a space of explanation as well as exploration. Linguistics, like psychology and sociology, will explain our actions by setting out in detail the implicit knowledge, which we have not brought to consciousness.

In the discussion of the concept unconscious and conscious, another problem, which is highly polemical in nature, will arise: the problem of 'subject'. Here the subject means the subject of experience, or the 'I' or the self which thinks, perceives, speaks etc. Saussure puts the subject at the centre of his analytical project. Then the 'notion' of the subject becomes central to the analysis of language.

In language we always identify the linguist unit with reference to the subject. In a language, we know that [b] and [d] are different phonemes because for the subject 'bag' and 'day' are different sings. For the speaking
'subject' the bag and day are different signs, the opposition between [b] and [d] differentiates signs for the speaking subject. In the process of 'value' formation in a system the 'subject' takes a crucial role. In the writings of Saussure we can see such a provision to the 'presence' of subject.

In the introduction we have discussed the methodology of structuralism in a general manner and discussed its philosophical implications. The problem of subject is also explained, as we have seen after the structuralism the concept 'subject' have been analysed and deconstructed by Derrida. Before Derrida's attempt to deconstruct the subject, Nietzsche and Heidegger attacked the concept 'subject' which existed in the western metaphysical tradition.

What distinguishes Saussure from the traditional metaphysicians who claimed absolute authority of the 'subject', is that he was highly radical in his approach towards the subject. He does not take the subject as a 'reflection' of the absolute in the traditional sense. In his courses he simply gives us a provision of a 'subject' as a 'knower' of what one does. So we have to draw a sharp line of demarcation between Saussure's concept of subject and traditional concept. We will discuss this issue in the last chapter of comparison.
Today deconstruction of the subject becomes the central theme in philosophy, psychology and in linguistics. The 'subject' is broken down into its constituents. Now the disciplines inaugurated by Saussure, Freud and Durkheim have been chipped away by the poststructuralist thought. Subject has lost its place as a 'centre' or source of meaning. The 'self' or 'subject' comes to appear more and more as a construct. When a man speaks 'he' does not speak through the language, but language speaks through him. As Lacan says, 'I' is not a given thing; it comes to exist, in a mirror stage which starts in infancy, as that which is seen and addressed by others. The problem of the subject and its effects in the 20th century thought will be discussed in the last chapter.

We can sum up this introduction with a question. Did Saussure know anything about the themes of Freud and Durkheim? There is no evidence that Durkheim Saussure and Freud knew anything of each other's work. We are not sure whether Saussure knew anything about the other two or not. We are not sure the methodology in social science brings a new epistemological shift in our life which influences our thought and helps us to bring new dimensions in our philosophical enquiries.
THREE
Saussure's Theory of Language and Sign

As Saussure rightly pointed out in his 'courses', linguists are often baffled by the nature of the object about which they are studying. So Saussure, was very unhappy with the linguistics existed at that time, he wrote "Linguistics never attempted to determine the nature of the object it was studying, and without this elementary operation a science can't develop an appropriate method."

Human language is an extremely complex phenomenon, so it needs a care full examination and explanation. A word, which may be uttered by a person may involve an extraordinary range of factors, which should be considered from many angles. Generally the work of a linguist involves the study of sound, phonemes, hearing mechanism, the intention of the speaker and listener etc. But the linguist confronts another problem, that is, what is he trying to describe, what is he looking for, or in short what is language?

Saussure's analysis and explanations of language are based up on this 'crucial problem'. His approach and method was different from the traditional style. In his analysis of language the concept 'sign' plays an important role. Saussure defined the language as a system of signs. Noises
count as language only when they serve to express or communicate ideas; otherwise they are just noises. For the communication of the idea the words must be a part of system of conventions or part of a system of signs. According to Saussure sign is the union of signifier and signified. Signifier or the 'significant' signify an idea. 'Signifie' or the signified is the idea signified by the signifier. Signifier and signified are the components of the 'sign'.

The nature of the concept 'sign' is illustrated by Saussure is highly different from the signifier, signified relation, propounded by Russel and Moore. In the opinion of Russell and Moore a word signifies a particular thing as its meaning but Saussure's concept of sign is basically different from the analytic tradition. He points out the arbitrary nature of the 'sign'. He criticises the naive approach.

"....Some people regard language, when reduced to its elements, as a naming process only – a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names. For example:

\[ \text{ARBOR} \rightarrow \text{Tree} \]

This conception is open to criticism at several points. It assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words (on this point, see below, p.111); it does not tell us whether a name is
vocal or psychological in nature (arbor, for instance, can be considered from either viewpoint); finally, it lets us assume that the linking of a name and a thing is a very simple operation— an assumption that is anything but true. But this rather naive approach can bring us near the truth by showing us that the linguistic unit is a double entity, one formed by the associating of two terms..."3

According to Saussure the linguistic sign is arbitrary. This is the first principle of Saussure's theory of language. The 'sign' can be taken as an arbitrary relation between signifier and the signified - what is the meaning of the term 'arbitrary' in Saussure's writing? In one sense the answer is quite simple - there is no inevitable or natural link between the signifier and the signified.

In part one of the 'course', he describes the nature of the linguistic sign. He says,

"...The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Since I mean by sign the whole that results from the associating of the signifier with the signified, I can simply say: *the linguistic sign is arbitrary...."*4
Then he rectifies the nature of the arbitrary nature of the sign, and tries to spell out a confusion that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker, he continues:

"..The word arbitrary also calls for comment. The term should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker (we shall see below that the individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community); I mean that is unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with signified..." 5

Here Saussure crystallised the concept very clearly. But it needs an explanation. Since I speak English I may use the signifier represented by dog to talk about an animal of a particular species. Ioldtet, or bloop would serve equally well if they were accepted by the members of my speech community. Here the point is, there is no intrinsic value or reason why one of the signifier rather than the another should be linked with the concept of dog.

Saussure points out some exceptions to this basic principle, in some cases we can see the sound of the signifier seems in some way mimetic or imitative. "bow-wow" can be taken as an example in English. This particular nature of some sign is known as ‘Onomatopoeia’. But in a language we can
see only few such cases, we can separate them as special cases, except this class, almost all of the ‘signs’ in a language are arbitrary in their nature.

"...1) onomatopoeia might be used to prove that the choice of the signifier is not always arbitrary. But onomatopoeia formations are never organic elements of a linguistic system. Besides, their number is much smaller than is generally supposed. Words like French fouet ‘whip’ or glas ‘knell’ may strike certain ears with suggestive sonority, but to see that they have not always had this property we need only examine their Latin forms (fouet is derived from fagus ‘beech-tree’, glas from classicum ‘sound of a trumpet’). The quality of their present sounds, or rather the quality that is attributed to them is a fortuitous result of phonetic evolution..." 6

Saussure then examines the nature of the interjection, which is closely related to onomatopoeia, and conclude that ‘onomatopoeic formations and interjections are of secondary importance, and their symbolic origin is in part open to dispute’7

The linguistic sign, in Saussure's view unites not a thing and a name but a concept and sound image. The linguistic sign is a two-sided psychological entity that can be represented by the drawing.
The two elements, the concepts and sound image are intimately united, and each recalls the other. To avoid the ambiguity related to the word 'sound image' Saussure has given separate names to the concept and to the sound image. He says:

"...I propose to retain the word sign (signe) to designate the whole and to replace concept and sound-image respectively by signified (signifié) and signifier (significant); the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts. As regards sign, if I am satisfied with it, this is simply because I do not know of any word to replace it, the ordinary language suggesting no other..."

Thus we can represent it in another model,

```
Signified

Signifier
```

In a picture it may be sketched as

```
Tree
```
What are the philosophical implications, and significance of this new theory of Saussure, we can summarise them as shown below: language is not a nomenclature and therefore its signifieds are not pre-existing concepts. The concepts are changeable and which vary from one state of language to another. And since there is no necessary reason for one concept rather than other to be attached to a given signifier, there is no essential core of meaning that it must retain in order to count as the proper signified for that signifier. The relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary, which means there are no fixed universal concepts or fixed universal signifiers. Both signifier and signified are purely relational or differential entities. Because they are arbitrary they are relational.

Saussure attaches great importance to the fact that language is not a nomenclature. We can not understand the full ramification of this theory, unless we grasp the importance of arbitrary nature of the sign. A language doesn’t simply assign arbitrary names to a set of independently existing concepts. The language set-up an arbitrary relation between signifiers of its own choosing on the one hand, and signifieds of its own choosing on the other hand. Each language produces a different set of signifiers and different set of signifieds. This choosing of a signifier for a signified in a language is an arbitrary way of organising the world into concepts and categories.
We can clarify the above point with the help of some examples; which already exist in a language system. In French language the sound sequence of *Fleuve* and *Riviere* are two signifiers. River and stream are two English signifiers. The organisation of the conceptual plane in different in English and French. In English the signified River is opposed to stream solely in terms of size whereas a *Fleuve* differs from a river not because it is larger, but because it flows in to the sea. *Fleuve* and *riviere* are not signifieds or concepts of English.

These two languages operate and work perfectly well with different conceptual articulation or distinction. This fact indicates that these divisions are no natural, or necessary, but arbitrary. It is important to note that a language has ways of talking about the flowing bodies of water, but language can make its conceptual distinction in this area in any way or a wide variety of ways; the ways depend upon the size of the flowing bodies, or swiftness of flow, straightness, direction of the flow, depth etc. Language not only chooses the signifiers in an arbitrary manner but it also divides the conceptual possibilities in any manner it likes. This shows that the concepts or signifieds are not autonomous entities, each of which is defined by some kind of essence. The concepts are members of a system and they are defined by their relation to other members of the system. If I like to explain to someone the
meaning of stream, I must tell him about the difference between a stream and
a river, a rivulet and a stream etc., I can't explain the term without showing
the difference between the concepts, thus the concept shows the 'difference'
between the concepts, not the meaning in itself.

The value of the concepts depends on their relation with one another.
Saussure says:

"...But it is quite clear that initially the concept is nothing, that
is only a value determined by its relations with other similar
values, and that without them the signification would not
exist. If I state simply that a word signifies something when I
have in mind the associating of a sound-image with a concept,
I am making a statement that may suggest what actually
happens, but by no means am I expressing the linguistic fact
in its essence and fullness." 9

As he says each of the signified makes the meaning not by the 'value'
that lies in it; but by the difference which makes in a system with other
concepts.

Saussure in his writings uses some analogies to show the relational
identity of the concepts in a language system. The relational identity of the
linguistic units is not easy to grasp. The first analogy of Saussure is the
analogy of a Train, which is named as the '8:25 Geneva - to - Paris Express'. Each day the 8:25 Geneva -to - Paris Express starts from Geneva at 8:25. We consider the 8:25 Geneva -to - Paris Express is same train each day, even though the coaches, locomotive and personnel change from one day to the next. The train gets its 'identity' only by placing it in a system of trains, as indicated by the time table. The relational identity in the determining factors; the 8:25 Geneva -to - Paris Express remains the same train even if it leaves half an hour late.

Comparison between language and chess is another analogy which is used by Saussure to illustrate the notion of relational identity of the concepts in language. The basic units of chess are obviously king, queen, rook, bishop and knight etc. The actual physical shape of the pieces and colour etc. are not important. The king may be of any size and shape as long as there are ways of distinguishing it from other pieces. The two rooks need not be of identical size and shape, so long as they can distinguished from other pieces. If a piece is lost from a chess set we can replace it with any other sort of object; on the condition that this object will not be confused with the objects representing piece of a different value. Saussure makes the point clear.
"...Take a knight, for instance. By itself is it an element in the game? Certainly not, for by its material make up—outside its square and the other conditions of the game—it means nothing to the player; it becomes a real, concrete element only when endowed with value and wedded to it. Suppose that the piece happens to be destroyed or lost during a game. Can it be replaced by an equivalent price? Certainly. Not only another knight but even a figure shown of any resemblance to a knight can be declared identical provided the same value is attributed to it. We see then that in semiological systems like language, where elements hold each other in equilibrium in accordance with fixed rules, the notion of identity blends with that of value and vice versa..."¹⁰

From this above quoted paragraph one point is quite clear. The units of the game of chess have no material identity - there are no physical properties necessary to a king; rook, etc. Identity is wholly a function of difference with in a system. We can understand Saussure's concept of 'difference' well, when we apply the analogy to language. Saussure says:

"....Everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this: in language there are only differences. Even more
important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sound that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system."

We can conclude this study of ‘sign’ with the following observations: Signifier and Signified must be defined in terms of their relation with other signifiers and signifieds. To define the units of language we must distinguish between these purely relational and abstract units and their physical realisations. In language the actual sounds we produce in speaking are not in themselves units of the linguistic system. Linguistic unit is a form rather than a substance defined by the relations which set it off from other units.

Saussure introduced some dichotomies to study the language in general and sign in particular. ‘Langue’ and ‘Parole’ in the first dichotomy. La Langue is the system of a language, the language as a system of forms. Parole is actual speech, or in other words the speech acts which are made possible by the language.
When a person lives in a language community, he assimilates some set of forms in a language, that is known as "langue". It is defined as 'hoard deposited by the practice of speech in speakers who belongs to the same community, a grammatical system, which, to all intent and purpose, exist in the mind of each speaker'. In other words it is defined as a social product whose existence permits the individual to exercise his linguistic faculty.

Parole is the executive side of the language. Saussure says:

"....Speaking, on the contrary, is an individual act. It is wilful and intellectual. Within the act, we should distinguish between: (1) the combination by which the speaker uses the language code for expressing his own thought; and (2) the psychological mechanism that allows him to exteriorize those combination..." 12

In the stage of parole the speaker of a language selects and combines elements of the linguistic system. And then he gives to these forms a concrete phonic and psychological manifestation. These manifestations are sound and meaning.

The primary concern of the linguistics is 'langue'. When a linguist analyses a language, he tries to findout units and rules of combination which make up the linguistic system. 'Langue' or the linguistic system is a coherent
analysable object. As Saussure says langue is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and acoustic image. When a person studies language as a system of signs he is trying to identify its essential features. Primarily he tries to find out those elements which are crucial to the signifying function of language. Saussure writes about importance of langue in his 'course':

"...In separating language from speaking we are at the same time separating: (1) what is social from what is individual; and (2) what is essential from what is accessory and more or less accidental..." 13

In the realm of speech relevance and irrelevance is difficult to determine. So we have to concentrate upon langue to study the nature of language. When we concentrate upon langue, various aspects of language and speech fall into place with in or around it.

The distinction between langue and parole leads to the creation of two distant disciplines, one of the branch named phonetics studies the speech act from a physical point of view. Phonology the other branch at the same time concentrates its attention up on the distinction between the abstract units of the signifier, which are functional with in the linguistic system. Phonetics
would describe the actual sounds produced when one utters a form, but phonology is the study of functional distinctions in a system.

In language two different utterances may be the manifestation of the same sentence, here we encounter the central notion of identity in linguistics. For example if at some time Mohan says 'I am tired', 'I' refer to Mohan and understanding this reference is an important part of understanding the utterance. However that reference is not part of the meaning of the sentence - For George also may utter the same sentence, in his sentence 'I' will refer to George. The important point is, within the linguistic system 'I' does not refer to anyone. Its meaning in the system is the result of the distinction between 'I' and 'You', he, she and they; a meaning which can sum up by saying that 'I' means the speaker as opposed to anyone else. In language pronouns are the best examples of the difference between meanings which are properties of utterance only and meanings which are properties of elements of the linguistic system.

To clarify the above point, we can take an example when a French man says 'Jai uv un mouton' and an English man says 'I saw a sheep' their utterance are likely to have the same signification. About a state of affair they are making the same claim. But, as units of their respective linguistic systems, the meaning of 'mouton' and 'sheep' are different, they do not have
the same meaning or value. For sheep is defined by an opposition with 'mutton', where as 'mouton' is bounded by no such distinction, but it is used both for the animal and for meat. Saussure's point is, he tries to show, that there is one kind of meaning, a relational meaning or value, in language. And signification, which is another kind of meaning, involves the use of linguistic elements in actual situation of utterance in the language.

In linguistics the study of a langue involves an invention of the distinctions, which create signs and rules of combination, where as the study of 'parole' leads us to an account of language use. By separating the langue from parole, Saussure gave us a clear sense of the language. And linguist have got a much clear sense of what he was doing in language.

**Synchronic and diachronic perspective**

Saussure introduced another dichotomy in language studies, that is the distinction between synchronic and diachronic perspective. Study of the linguistic system in a particular state without reference to time is known as synchronic study of language. In diachronic study language will be studied with reference to its evolution in time.

Saussure gave more importance to the synchronic study of language, so he was accused of ignoring the historical nature of language; which is an entity in constant evolution. But Saussure had recognised the radical
historicity of language. He asserted the importance of distinguishing between facts about the linguistic system and facts about the linguistic evolution. Sometimes, in some cases the two kinds of facts seem intertwined.

As we have seen in the section on arbitrary nature of the sign, the relation between the signifier and signified is arbitrary. Saussure connects the arbitrary nature of the sign, and historical nature of language. There is no essential or natural connection between signifier and the signified. If there is some essential connection between signifier and signified, the sign would have an essential core, which would be unaffected by time, and which would resist the change in meaning. This 'unchanging essence' does not exist in language. So the meaning will alter from one period to another by the 'accidental features' of the time. Any aspect of sound or meaning can change. The history of language shows radical evolutionary alteration of both sound and meaning. Neither signifier nor signified contains any essential core which time cannot touch. The sign is totally subject to history. And the combination of signifier with a signified in a contingent result of the historical process.

The above mentioned arbitrary nature of the sign and its connection with time require a historical analysis. Since the sign has no necessary core, it must be defined as a relational entity in its relation to other signs.
The language is a wholly historical entity. It is always open to change. A person must focus on the relations which exist in a particular synchronic state if one is to define its elements.

Saussure shows the irrelevance of historical or diachronic facts to the analysis of la langue. Some examples in the English language show the irrelevance of diachronic information. In modern English the second person pronoun 'you' is used to refer both to one person and to many -you may be either the subject or the object in a sentence. But in earlier stages of the English language, 'you' was defined by its opposition to 'ye' on the one hand and to thee and thou on the other- 'ye' in a subject pronoun, you an object pronoun, thee and thou singular forms and you a plural form. At a later stage of English 'you' comes to serve as a respectful way to addressing one person. Now in modern English 'you' is no longer defined by its opposition to 'ye' three and thou. Today one can speak modern English perfectly without knowing that 'you' was once used as a plural and objective form. In modern English 'you' is defined by its role in a synchronic state of language. We can take another example for Om the French language. In French the noun par (step) and the negative adverb par (not) derive historically from a single sign. But this is not relevant to a description of modern French, where the words function is totally different ways and must be treated as different signs.
Saussure gave importance to the synchronic method, but that does not mean he had taken language only in a synchronic way.

The Diachronic identity depends upon a series of synchronic identities. Diachronic statements relate a single element from one state of a linguistic system to element from a later state of the system. The linguistic units are defined by relations within their own states of the system. Saussure argues that diachronic statements are derived from synchronic statement. Taking an example Saussure asks, what allows us, to state that Latin mare become French mer (sea). Saussure says that 'we are using the correspondence between 'mare' and 'mer' to decide that 'a' became 'e' and that final 'e' fell. At each period in the history, we can see that a change occurred, when there was an old form and a new form which were phonetically different but phonologically or functionally identical. In the example of 'mare' and 'mer', we connect the two forms with the help of intermediate forms, which constitute an unbroken chain of synchronic identities. The forms may of course have had different associations. However they could be used interchangeably by speakers. Some persons stick to the old form and others prefer the new. But the move from one to other would not produce a difference in actual meaning. From the view point of linguistic system there would a synchronic identity between the two forms.
Saussure's remark about the relation between synchronic and diachronic nature of linguistic form is interesting.

"...In any event, we cannot accurately define the unit until we have studied it from both viewpoints, the static and the evolutionary. Until we solve the problem of the diachronic unit, we cannot penetrate the outer guise of evolution and reach its essence. Understanding units is just as important here as in synchrony if we are separate illusion from reality (see p. 110)...."15

As we have seen above language has synchronic and diachronic aspects. These two aspects are important in the study of language. Saussure is aware of the intertwining of synchronic and diachronic facts. For him the difficulty lies only in the separation of these two elements, when they are mixed. When a linguist studies the language he has to separate the two aspects, but the two aspects are mixed. However these two aspects are to be separated because they are facts of a different order with different conditions of existence.

Some linguists offer a panchronic synthesis, or perspective, to study the nature of language. But Saussure rejects that offer. He says that, the arbitrary
nature of the language signs does not allow us to give a place to panchronic approach in linguistics.

A synchronic fact is a relationship or opposition between two forms existing simultaneously. In order to understand the synchronic and diachronic aspects of language and its difference we can take an example from English. In English language some nouns have unusual plural forms like feet, geese, and teeth.

In the Early Anglo-Saxon the singular and plural forms of these nouns seem, as shown below.

Stage I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foot</td>
<td>fot</td>
<td>foti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goose</td>
<td>gos</td>
<td>gosi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tooth</td>
<td>top</td>
<td>topi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Where b =th, pronounced roughly foat, foati)

Stage II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foot</td>
<td>fot</td>
<td>feti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goose</td>
<td>gos</td>
<td>gesi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tooth</td>
<td>top</td>
<td>topi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stage III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foot</th>
<th>fot</th>
<th>fet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goose</td>
<td>gos</td>
<td>ges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tooth</td>
<td>tof</td>
<td>tef</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the first stage plural forms were affected by a phonetic change known as "I" mutation. When 'I' is followed by a stressed syllable, the vowel of the stressed syllable was effected and back vowels were fronted, so that o became e in the second stage. In the third stage the final 'I' was dropped.

Saussure says that these forms are by the English vowel shift, in which o became u and e became i and then it became the modern forms. At the stage one plural was made by the presence of a final i. This is a synchronic fact, because the opposition between presence and absence of 'I' marked the opposition between singular and plural. In the second stage too certain number of plural forms were affected which is due to e, which produces a new synchronic fact in stage two. In the third stage too we can see a synchronic change, the whole process shows that the linguistic system was able to use the difference in the synchronic state as a meaning-bearing opposition.

According to Saussure, diachronic facts are of a different order from the Synchronic. In the history of language we can see the historical evolution of
individual elements throw up forms which the system uses, and study of those systematic uses is the central task. Historical explanation is not required here. Explanation is linguistic in structural: one explains the forms and rules of combination by sketching out the underlying system of relation, in a particular synchronic state, which defines the elements of that synchronic system.

In the view of Saussure as we have seen above language is a form not a substance. A language is a system of mutually related values. Analysis of language means setting out the system of values which constitute a state of the language. Langue is a system of oppositions or difference, it is not positive phonic and signifying elements of speech act or the parole. Nothing is given in linguistics as positive self-defined elements with which we can start. In order to identify two instances of the same unit we must construct a formal and relational entity by distinguishing between differences which are non functional and differences which are functional. Once we have identified the relations and oppositions in a system, we will get the linguistic ‘sign’ which emerges from the net work of differences.

When Saussure talks about ‘signs’ or the linguistic units, it may sound, as though he was referring to speaking of words only. The language consists of grammatical relations and distinctions. But according to Saussure, there is
no fundamental difference between a linguistic unit and a grammatical fact. Their common nature is a result of the fact that signs are entirely differential objects and they constitute a linguistic sign.

For example, consider the word 'took'. What is the sign of the past tense here? It is nothing positive in the world itself, but it is only a relational element. The opposition between take and took carries the distinction between present and past. Thus in the study of the language, the linguist is concerned with relationships, identities and differences. There are two major types of relationship - the first one is - opposition which produces distinct and alternative terms (b as opposed to p) the next one is, there are relations between units which combine to form sequence. The former relation is known as paradigmatic relation and the latter 'syntagmatic'. Paradigmatic relations are the oppositions between elements which can replace one another. Syntagmatic relations define combinatory possibilities: the relation between elements which combine in a sequence.

We can see the paradigmatic syntagmatic relationship at the level of morphology or word structure. A noun is partly defined by the combination into which it can enter with suffixes and prefixes. We can make friendless, friendly, friendliness, unfriendly, befriend. The combinatory possibilities represent syntagmatic relationships. The paradigmatic relationships are to be
found in the contrast between a given morpheme and those which could replace it in a given environment. In this way we will get paradigmatic contrast between -ly-less, and -ship, in that they can all occur after friend and replacement of one by another brings a change in meaning. And at the level of syntax too we can see the same type of relationship. For example take the sentence he frightened. We can replace he by, George, Raman, the man standing on the corner etc. But not by 'stone' 'colour', 'tree', etc. Our knowledge of syntagmatic relations enables us to define for he frightened a paradigmatic class of items which can follow it. These items are in paradigmatic contrast with one another and to choose one is to produce the meaning by excluding others.

Saussure, as a structuralist, claims that the entire linguistic system can be reduced to and explained in terms of a theory of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. In the view of a structuralist, the linguistic system consists of different levels of structure, at each level one can identify the elements, which contrast with one another and combine with other elements to form higher level units. At each level the principle structure is same. Saussure says that language is a form and not a substance; so its elements have only contrastive and combinational properties. The units of elements have been identified at each level of the structure. This identification is done
by the capacity of differentiation. At the level of phoneme, we identify the phonological distinctive features as the relational features which differentiate the phonemes. The same thing happens at the level of morphemes, and at last the words are defined by the fact that they play different roles in the higher level units of phrase and sentence.

In linguistics nothing is given in advance, we cannot start from a word assuming that a meaning is given to that word before the set up of the system. The elements with which one tries to start are defined by both syntagmatic and paradigmatic relation. In the structure the items are defined by their contrast with other items and their ability to combine to form higher level items.

Semiology is another concern for Saussure, but in 'course', Saussuredevotes very few paragraphs about it. According to Saussure semiological perspective is central to any study of language.

As Saussure pointed out in his course language is a social institution, but it is different from political, legal, institutions. Saussure says,

"...Language is a system of signs that express ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of all these systems."
A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; is would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it *semiology* (from Greek *semeion* 'Sign'). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts..."16

Human being always make noises, gestures etc. to convey meaning, but every gesture and noise is always in a system, where there are signs there is a system. An underlying system of convention makes the meaning of the utterance. So to understand the 'meaning' one has to understand the semiological system, and should not treat the 'utterance' in isolation. In this analysis meaning is derived from the system. Saussure says,

"...But to me the language problem is mainly semiological, and all developments derive their significance from that important fact. If we are to discover the true nature of language we must
lean what is has in common with all other semiological systems; linguistic forces that seem very important at first glance..."17

Saussure's remarks about semiology is very brief in 'course', but his proposals concerning semiology were taken up seriously only at the middle of this century. The other disciplines realised the importance of his suggestions only after many years the publication of 'course'. What is now called 'structuralism' is a product of Saussure's insight. Anthropologists, literary critics and the scholars in many other disciplines saw that the 'example' of linguistics could help them to justify what they sought to do in their own areas of study. And then they began to take linguistic as a model of their methodology. Claud levi strauss defined anthropology as a branch of semiology, and paid homage to Saussure.

Semiology is a vast field of enquiry. In semiology every sign has a meaning because every sign is in a network of culture. Semiology would come to include most of the disciplines of the humanities and the social science. Most of the domain of human activity, be it, cooking, architecture, advertising fashion, literature or music can be approached in semiological terms.

In semiological studies we should remember that the signifying phenomena which one encounters in the various domain are not alike. All
signs are not of the same type. So various typologies of signs have been
proposed, but three fundamental classes of signs are important. The icon,
index, and the sign proper. In these three types the relation between signifier
and the signified are different. An icon involves actual resemblance between
signifier and the signified. Portrait is an example. In an index the relation
between the signifier and the signified is causal: Smoke and fire is the best
example of it. In the sign the relation between signifier and the signified is
arbitrary and conventional. Mannerisms in community can be taken as the
element of this type.

The above division is important however signs proper, where the
relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary or conventional, are thus
the central domain of semiology. The signs require semiological investigation
to understand the mechanism of their working. To understand the 'meaning'
of a signifier one must reconstruct the semiotic system, because one can't
understand the meaning in isolation. The reconstruction of a semiotic system
alone help us to do the explanation of the 'system and meaning' in a system.

In the domain of social and natural science, we can't see the 'sign' as in
the languages that they are not semiological in themselves does not mean that
those disciplines are not in the area of 'semiotics'. The objects which these
discipline study are not signs proper, but they may be studied as semiotic
systems. Astrology is an example of it. We do not believe in the prediction of an astrologist, who establishes a relation between movement of the planet and the events of the people's lives. But in astrology they use a system of conventions, which are not an 'essential' character of the planets. In the same way semiology can study the conventions which govern the discourses and interpretation of any discipline. Semiologists do not bother about the truth and falsity of any discipline. To them that is irrelevant. They simply analyses a system and find out the relation between the concepts.

FOUR

The rise of the new science of linguistics is the most fascinating chapter in the history of human race. Linguistics and the semiotics changed the views of philosophers and thinkers. Nobody today argues that he can create a 'new system' without the help of linguistics. The position of the study of 'signs' in the domain of knowledge is not a matter of dispute now. After the Saussurean period our whole concept of language and reality has changed. So nobody can move forward without the influence of Saussure.
NOTES


2. Ibid, p. 76.


5. Ibid, p. 68.


7. Ibid, p. 70.


10. Ibid, p. 110.

11. Ibid, p. 120.


Ibid, p. 17.